

REVIEW ARTICLE

## Migration, Voices, and Methodology

### *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*

edited by The Black Mediterranean Collective, Cham, Springer  
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### *The Voice of the Rural: Music, Poetry, and Masculinity among Migrant Moroccan Men in Umbria*

by Alessandra Ciucci, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022,  
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If the ‘colour line’ was prophetically defined as the issue of the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century the concern of many scholars is with the research methodology that the attention on the colour line has generated. Migration, postcolonial, and blackness studies focusing on Italy have all asked fundamental questions on how to reframe history, memory, and culture. Charles Burdett (2018) has posited that migration and mobility are vital for the repositioning of the discipline of Italian Studies and Modern Languages as a whole. Critics have argued that Italian Black literature is redefining Italian literature (Romeo 2017) and its reception (Patriarca 2018). Alessandra Ciucci’s recent monograph *The Voice of the Rural: Music, Poetry and Masculinity among Migrant Moroccan Men in Umbria* (2022) and the volume *The Black Mediterranean: Borders, Bodies and Citizenship* (2021) edited by the Black Mediterranean Collective contribute to this discussion. Both books offer new approaches to analyse migration and deconstruct Eurocentrism. They both emphasise the migrants’ agency and theorise the researcher’s position as a tool for the decolonisation of culture.

The choice of *The Black Mediterranean*’s authors/editors to work as a collective is already evidence of their desire to counteract established forms of power. A source of inspiration for their collective is the British collective of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, author of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982). They are also influenced by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, echoed in the book title and cited throughout the volume. The collective’s project aims to reframe the contemporary migrant crisis through race and Blackness, given that a significant number of migrants and refugees to

Europe come from sub-Saharan Africa. The Black Mediterranean is for the collective not only a physical place denoting 'the act of being in diaspora' (p. 13) but a practice of decentering power and illuminating resistance. Critical of the contemporary dichotomous representation of the migrants as charitable victims or criminals and invaders, the collective aims at giving space to their voices and agency. In so doing, they intend to create an alternative narrative that destabilises the Eurocentric gaze on the Mediterranean.

The volume is divided into three sections: 'Borders', 'Bodies', and 'Citizenship', each of which contains three essays. The first section opens with Angelica Pesarini's contribution that traces the development of the discourse and politics of whiteness from the Unification period to contemporary memories of the 1970s, when Black mixed-race Italian refugees arrived in Italy from Eritrea. In Pesarini's reading, there were two crucial moments in the development of a racist consciousness in Italy: the nineteenth-century anxiety over the racial identity of Southern Italians, which became problematic during the Unification period, and Fascist colonialism in East Africa, which racialised the African populations to 'whiten' Italian national identity. Contrary to this dominant discourse, the experience of the first mixed-race Italians reaching the shores of Italy from Africa, and their mastery of the language and culture, are interpreted as expressions of agency able to challenge and subvert hegemonic concepts of national identity. In the following chapter, Gabriele Proglia examines Franz Fanon's theories to underline, as Pesarini has also done, that racism must be seen as a continuum given the many similarities between the colonial and postcolonial experiences. Proglia questions research methodology, and in particular the impersonal writing of history. The personal 'I' as a form of narration that does not universalise history, and the acknowledgement of the emotional and cognitive transformation of the researcher engaged in working with the migrants' experience are all elements of his methodology. Proglia reflects on his fieldwork in Ventimiglia on the France–Italy border, illustrating how his use of oral interviews and drawings as well as his empathic attitude made him realise the multidirectional structure of history and memory.

The subdivision in sections is not always clear in this volume. The third chapter of the 'Borders' section, by Giulia Grechi, focuses much more on the body than on borders. It theorises the body as a producer of meanings, able to acquire racist behaviours through a variety of habits and performances. Grechi reads the performance *As Far as My Fingertips Take Me* by Tania El Khaury and Martina Melilli's film *Mum, I'm Sorry* as forms of art that awaken empathy to contrast society's cultural indifference to the relationship with the Other. The second section, 'Bodies', features an interesting analysis of migrant ghettos by Timothy Raeymaekers, that might have been better placed in the first section. Raeymaekers argues that migrant ghettos established along the main routes of migration, following the increase of border controls from European countries between 2011 and 2014, have often been transformed by migrants from spaces of displacement and marginalisation to places where 'new forms of rootedness through webs of dependencies and relationships' (p. 119) are created. Raeymaekers analyses the story and dynamics of Casa Sankara, in Northern Puglia, one such 'grey zone' of settlement. It was set up in 2013 after a fire in the so-called 'Gran Ghetto' near Rignano Garganico, Italy's largest migrant ghetto. The inhabitants of Casa Sankara interviewed by Raeymaekers made clear that they do not see themselves as victims waiting for help but rather talk of their sense of rootedness in Casa Sankara as fundamental for their 'claim to territory and belonging' (p. 130). Yet, already in 2018, the author observed a neoliberal transformation of Casa Sankara that raised questions on the autonomy of the project. Raeymaekers's analysis shows that we still need to investigate what structures would better accommodate human mobility and the new communities emerging from it. The following chapter by Ida Danewid argues that migration control is linked to global capitalism and theorises the Black

Mediterranean as a new counter-narrative that posits racial capitalism, instead of migration, as the primary issue.

In the last section, Camilla Hawthorne reconstructs the interconnection between concepts of citizenship and racial identity. Hawthorne too interprets the concept of the Black Mediterranean as a space for agency, able to sustain Black activism around the world. The chapter by Vivian Gerrand argues that new discourses on Black Italian citizenship have the power to redefine concepts of Italian identity. The volume concludes with Giuseppe Grimaldi's analysis of the changing meaning of the term Habesha among Italians of Eritrean and Ethiopian origin to confirm the socio-racial underpinnings of Italian national identity.

Migrants' agency is also central to Alessandra Ciucci's well-crafted book, *The Voice of the Rural*. Her research focuses on Moroccan men living and working in Umbria, mainly in the tobacco fields of which the region is rich. The study of a region of central Italy is very welcome, given that studies of migration often focus on main cities or border regions. As a music ethnographer, Ciucci studies a particular set of traditional song and poetry treasured and practised by the Moroccan men in Umbria. This music is *sawt l-'arubiya*, the 'voice of the rural' of the title. The rural is intended as the Atlantic plains and plateaus of central Morocco associated with Bedouin history. It refers, then, to an Arab identity that destabilises the urban/countryside divide implemented by French colonialism and aimed at categorising the Arabs as poor and dispossessed. Ciucci's analysis examines the different meanings of the fundamental concept of *sawt*, the voice, which in Arab culture has been widely explored in terms of vocal timbre, acoustic properties, and the ability to appropriately enunciate texts. All of this is crucial, as Ciucci shows in her book, to understand the sense of self and manhood attached to the evocation of the rural. Her book is also about the voice of the unheard, as it gives visibility to the stories, traditions, and cultures of Moroccan male migrants in Umbria. The pictures of the Moroccan men interviewed as part of this project and included in the book seem to complement the author's objective to make these men visible and heard.

Ciucci's investigation is fascinating as she weaves together colonial cultural history, close textual analysis of songs, music and voice interpretations, perceptive and empathic interviews with Moroccan men, readings of masculinity, and a clear picture of the social, historical and cultural dynamics of life in Morocco and Italy. Like Proglío in *The Black Mediterranean*, Ciucci interprets her role as a researcher as a position from which she can decolonise culture. From the concept of *l-'arubiya* to the musico-poetic genre of *'aita* and the *'abidat r-rma*, an all-male ensemble, the book is dotted with transliterations of Moroccan terms, which she consciously uses – applying a technique shared by many authors of contemporary Italian literature – as part of her decolonisation project, that is as a process of contamination of the English language. The descriptions of her meetings with her interviewees are insightful sections, thanks to her empathic attitude that allows her to represent the stories she is being narrated and to perceive what is not said. In this sense, Ciucci finely puts into practice the recommendation for empathy that Proglío has also found central in his fieldwork.

The book comprises four chapters and an introduction. From the first pages, beautifully written ethnographic passages which function as preparatory pieces to points of discussion, the use of Moroccan terms, and a clear focus both on Italy and on Morocco signal Ciucci's narrative style. The first chapter delves into the history of *l-'arubiya* and *l-'arubi*, the rural person of the Atlantic plains and plateaus, showing the long-term impact of French colonialism on the perception of the concept of the rural. Ciucci shows that colonial translations and interpretations of the works of the Arab intellectual Ibn Khaldun constructed a dichotomised distinction between the nomad Arab Bedouins and the cities, and hence between the civilised urban French government and the poor and

degraded *'arubi*. These ideas persisted through the decades and modified the evaluation of music, distinguishing between the rhythmic phase connected to nature and the nomadic, and the melodic phase linked to urban civilisation. At the turn of the third millennium, a different interpretation of *l-'arubiya* was possible. It 'came to embody a political, cultural, and moral struggle' (p. 52).

Each of the remaining chapters discusses a song. Chapter Two analyses *L-harraga*, a song about the crossing of the Mediterranean by undocumented migrants and the tragic death of a young man. It becomes clear how the harsh vocal timbre associated with the rural and the concept of migration linked to masculine identity combine to make the song an opportunity to also experience *l-'arubiya* at a transnational level. In Chapter Three, Ciucci contrasts the sense of proud masculinity represented in a song by Abdelaziz Stati which evokes *l-'arubiya* with the stereotype of Moroccan men as rapists, according to her sedimented in the Italian cultural imagination after the rapes committed by Moroccan 'Goumiers', irregular troops of the French Expeditionary Corps, during the Second World War. To this reader, this is a less convincing section of Ciucci's book, as it is difficult to understand how the stereotype of Moroccan men as rapists could be constructed on the basis of violence that was silenced for many decades after the war. Historians have already established that both the British and American commanders were aware of the resentment of France towards Italy for the 1940 invasion of their country and preferred to ignore the violence perpetrated by the Goumiers (Williams 2013; Frezza 2006; Ellwood 2018). This makes the story of the wartime rapes particularly complex to untangle. The last chapter focuses on the importance of the vocal timbre in the representation of nature and the environment, which Ciucci analyses in two commercial songs.

Both *The Voice of the Rural* and *The Black Mediterranean* have much to offer to the understanding of migration. They are also good examples of how the deconstruction of power, intrinsic to the research topic of migration, is shaping research methodology.

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