



The Black Mediterranean Collective (eds), *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders, and Citizenship*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN: 978-3-030-51390-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-3-030-51391-7 (ebook)

The border walls, surveillance technology, and externalization agreements that European nations have implemented in recent years validate the idea that people making precarious journeys to seek asylum in Europe represent sudden “crises” and pose threats to European national communities. These exclusionary policies and practices also racialize migrants, suggesting that Africans crossing the sea to Europe are categorically either criminal or vulnerable. In particular, anti-immigrant discourse often uses images of Black African migrants to represent migration as a dangerous problem – crowded on boats, sleeping in tents in borderzones, or under arrest for suspected drug trafficking. As the editors/authors of the new interdisciplinary volume *The Black Mediterranean: Borders, Bodies, and Citizenship* note,¹ “Black migrants ... have come to increasingly symbolize the instability and insecurity” of the Mediterranean region (p.10). The “crisis” that Black migrants and Europeans of African descent are seen to represent reifies notions of European and national belonging as white, homogeneous, and stable, situated within fixed borders.

While Europe’s border policies clearly exploit and exacerbate racial hierarchies throughout European nations, challenging these racist, xenophobic discourses and the realities they elaborate can be difficult because of what scholars have documented as a widespread refusal in Europe to recognize race (Goldberg 2006; M’charek et al. 2014; Wekker 2016). Migration is seen as a question of nationality, and largely an issue of the present. Scholars working on race, coloniality, and Mediterranean migration have increasingly drawn on the Black Mediterranean as a framework that helps describe border violence and anti-Blackness in Europe through a re-examination of the relationship between past and present, in particular concerning Africa–Europe

¹ “The Black Mediterranean Collective” consists of Ida Danewid, Gabriele Proglia, Angelica Pesarini, Camilla Hawthorne, Timothy Raeymaekers, P. Khalil Saucier, Giulia Grechi, Vivian Gerrand, and Giuseppe Grimaldi. Following the Preface and Introduction, there are nine chapters, each authored by a member of the Collective.

mobilities. Recalling Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) and its centering of the transatlantic slave trade in the production of modernity, the *Black Mediterranean* calls for a retracing of the mobilities, violence, and alliances that have shaped ideas of the Mediterranean and lived realities in the region. *The Black Mediterranean: Borders, Bodies, and Citizenship* is, to my knowledge, the first text dedicated explicitly to this topic. Representing the work of the Black Mediterranean Collective, a group borne through conversations and collaborations regarding the recent so-called crisis in the Central Mediterranean, the volume illustrates the Black Mediterranean as a critical framework for scholars of Italy, the Mediterranean, migration to Europe, and race in Europe. It also makes the case for the Mediterranean as a key site in global Black studies.

The Preface, Introduction, and nine chapters establish the Black Mediterranean as both an analytical framework for tracing how racial capitalism and colonialism continue to shape border and migration dynamics in Europe, and also a political praxis for responding to this violence. Chapters demonstrate the necessity of this framework for responding to multiple issues, including governments' knowing abandonment of migrants to death at sea; citizenship laws that actively exclude the European-born children of immigrants; and discourses that treat arriving migrants as impossibly European, without acknowledging the African diasporic communities that have long made Europe home. Chapters that retrace histories of race and racialization in Italy illustrate how Italian colonial campaigns in Libya and East Africa contributed to the production of racial hierarchies at play in Italy's policing of African sea crossings today. By taking up grassroots activist movements and drawing on ethnographic research with people on the move, the volume also centers the ways in which border crossers and people of color are speaking back to these narratives, claiming and creating forms of belonging that challenge and expand hegemonic notions of European national identities.

Drawing on the methods of Black studies, geography, history, international relations, and cultural studies, chapters bring race to bear on studies of Italian and European cultures, and on the Mediterranean region. As Cristina Lombardi-Diop observes in her Preface, the *Black Mediterranean* challenges the romanticization of the sea as a "unitary" site, interrogating connections between the medieval and Renaissance slave trade in the Mediterranean and the

transatlantic slave trade that followed. This volume orients readers to the Mediterranean as a region defined by entangled and fragmented histories, a transnational, postcolonial space that is simultaneously, as Iain Chambers (2008: 32, 4) has written, “an intricate site of encounters and currents” yet also defined by border policing mechanisms. In this sense, the book can be understood to respond to calls for a critical turn in the field of Mediterranean studies (Elhariry and Talbayev 2018: 4). By tracing the production of racial hierarchies within a site often conceptualized as “the ‘cradle’ of European civilization”, the Black Mediterranean “generate[s] a radical re-telling of ‘Europeanness’” (p.15).

The introductory chapter, co-authored by members of the Collective, presents the Black Mediterranean as a counter-archive and a set of counter-narratives that dislocate the “whitening gaze” that views African migrants as a threat to European nations and cultures (p.12). Individually authored chapters, following the book’s title, are then organized into sections on Borders, Bodies, and Citizenship, though all contributions address geopolitical and social borders, corporeal experience, and forms of belonging to varying degrees. Chapters represent a variety of theoretical and methodological interventions that center race in understandings of contemporary migration in the Central Mediterranean (largely the Libya-Italy route) and its common framing as a crisis. Authors cover topics ranging from the relationship between historical Italian colonialism and present-day anti-Black racism (Angelica Pesarini; Giulia Grechi), to the Mediterranean as a site shaped by both precarity and activism on the part of Black Africans making their way to and within Italy (Timothy Raeymaekers; Gabriele Proglia), to the critical connections linking anti-immigrant violence with the withholding of citizenship for the children of immigrants born and raised in Italy (Camilla Hawthorne; Vivian Gerrand; Giuseppe Grimaldi). While the collection focuses especially on Italy as a cultural site and as a nation shaping Europe’s border regime, several chapters also connect the Italian case and the Black Mediterranean as a whole to global border violence and anti-Blackness (Ida Danewid; P. Khalil Saucier). Collectively, these interventions recognize the Mediterranean as a “postcolonial borderland” (p.121; Raeymaekers) and a site of Black subject-making, world-making, and fugitivity. They also initiate critical conversations on how the Black Mediterranean framework

creates space for a new politics of abolition, one that interrogates the histories of racialization and dispossession that have long facilitated the European policing of African mobilities.

Conceptually, authors engage the Black radical tradition, including the work of Frantz Fanon and Cedric Robinson, returning to the recognition of the Black Mediterranean as a “precondition to the Black Atlantic and the making of Europe itself” (Kelley 2000: xiv). Seen in relation to histories of enslavement and colonialism, the book describes Europe’s ongoing “crisis” of migration as produced through the structures of racial capitalism, which maintains these border crossings and their precarity. These perspectives align *The Black Mediterranean* with work on the necropolitics of European border regimes, and prompted me to return to Robinson’s *Black Marxism* (2000) and to work by SA Smythe (2018) and by Alessandra Di Maio, whose 2013 essay on Lampedusa popularized the term Black Mediterranean. The re-examination of colonial history in light of the present “crisis” is an example of what Christina Sharpe calls “wake work”; Sharpe’s own citation of the Black Mediterranean in *In the Wake* underscores the need for counternarratives that recover historical memory to challenge the actual crisis, the “ongoing crisis of capital in the form of migrants fleeing lives made unlivable” (2016: 59).

Within this volume’s focus on the Central Mediterranean, several authors base their discussions on ethnographic research conducted in Italy from the mid-2000s into the period recently recognized as Europe’s “refugee crisis”. This work grounds the volume in observations at informal settlements and interviews with activists and people on the move. The book thus offers a portrait of the Black Mediterranean as a lived space within Italy and at Italy’s borders, as Senegalese migrants build shelters to work the harvest in Puglia (Raeymaekers); as people attempt to cross from Italy into France (Proglio); and as “Habesha Italians” with heritage in Italy’s former colonies in the Horn of Africa describe their social conditions (Grimaldi).

Multiple chapters examine the histories of colonialism and racialization that are often absent from Italian public discourse about migration. Citing Italy’s geographic proximity to North Africa, Italian discourses of otherness have long used racist, colonial associations of “Africa” with backwardness to discriminate against, for instance, Southern Italians, following the

completion of unification in 1871, and African migrants in the 21st century. While questions of race aren't new to Italian studies, which has long reckoned with the fascist period, the *Black Mediterranean* offers a way of responding to racism within and beyond the national frame, and in ways that center Black voices and Black histories, recognizing the centrality of Blackness and Africanness in the construction of "Italy". Chapters by Pesarini, Grechi, and Grimaldi analyze the place of colonial history in Italian cultural memory, including by describing how processes of racialization have been key in constructing the modern nation, despite not being commonly taught or acknowledged. Opening the section on "Borders", for example, Pesarini traces these histories to address anti-Black, anti-immigrant racism in Italy today, observing how the construction of an Italian polity in the early days of the unified nation used Africa as a point of opposition and contrast.

While authors analyze the racist violence that puts Black African lives at risk en route to and within Europe, they also underscore forms of migrant agency. For example, in ethnographic research with the African residents of makeshift settlements in the Puglia region, Raeymaekers focuses on residents' placemaking practices. Rather than representing exploited African farmworkers in Southern Italy as simply victims, he observes their creation of homes and social networks as "attempts at making a life by re-establishing connections in a situation of increasing global disconnect" (p.122). Focusing on the so-called Gran Ghetto, Raeymaekers discusses residents' development of the area into a "veritable rural town", with its own radio, documentary filmmakers, and union affiliations (p.127).

The final section, on "Citizenship", also underscores questions of belonging and activism. Shifting from circumstances of crossing and arrival to the challenges confronted by diasporic communities, authors highlight grassroots campaigns to expand Italian citizenship, which currently functions as *jus sanguinis*, extending to the descendants of Italians abroad while excluding the children of immigrants born in Italy. Gerrand analyzes political and social media discourse that illustrates how citizenship in Italy functions as a form of normative whiteness. For Hawthorne, the *Black Mediterranean*, in connecting migrant and second generation issues, reveals possibilities for political praxis. Recognizing the potential belonging of border crossers is

not only about saving lives in the present, but about creating space for a very different vision of the future.

Black Mediterranean scholarship has largely developed in relation to the excavation of Italian colonial history and increasing attention to race in the Italian context. The focus on Italy is understandable, with the country in the spotlight as a migrant destination and for its restrictive citizenship laws, and because, as this volume clearly illustrates, Italy and the Mediterranean are sites of globalization and transnational movements. Still, readers may wonder how the Black Mediterranean may apply beyond Italy's borders.

Two chapters in particular illustrate its wider significance for understanding the relationship between race and precarious migration, and for challenging anti-Blackness in Europe. In ““These Walls Must Fall”: The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Abolition”, Danewid recognizes the Black Mediterranean as a necessarily counter-narrative project, upending common narratives of modernity in terms of progress, or portrayals of migration that do not account for racial capitalism. The Black Mediterranean, Danewid explains, invites a retelling of migration to Europe in relation to the development of global capitalism. In the post-WWII era, racialized migration has continued to operate as a key labor source, now maintained by increasingly restrictive immigration laws and the hardening of borders. In other words, today's precarious Mediterranean migration is a continuation of longstanding practices through which Europeans control the movements and resources available to residents of former colonies, maintaining an exploitable labor force. Citing cases across Europe, including underpaid African farmworkers in Italy and asylum seekers in Germany, Danewid makes the case for “a struggle for abolition – and not for hospitality” (p.162) – that is, envisioning a politics that refutes racial hierarchies and systemic labor exploitation. In Danewid's framing, the Black Mediterranean points us to border abolition as the only means for righting these injustices.

The call to abolition is taken up perhaps most incisively by Saucier in the chapter “Carne Nera”, which opens the book's section on “Bodies”. Saucier begins his chapter with the image of a slave auction in Libya, covered in a 2017 CNN exposé. This image of “Black flesh” (*Carne nera*) prompted widespread humanitarian calls for migrant rights and the arrest of traffickers; yet

for Saucier these anti-racist, neo-abolitionist movements create “a crisis that undermines itself” (p.102). Like Danewid, Saucier challenges work that turns to the history of slavery in order to “bolster the image of a knowledgeable and compassionate abolitionism” (p.107). He argues that abolition in a Black Mediterranean context requires a direct engagement with race, and specifically with Blackness. Centering *Carne nera*, which Saucier relates to Fanon’s (1963) “damned of the earth” (p.102), Saucier cites the Black Mediterranean as a reminder that “Blackness functions differently from otherness” (p.108), and that abolitionist movements (and, we can assume, many humanitarian efforts) that claim to counter anti-Blackness through appeals to universalist notions of “humanity” miss the mark and perpetuate violence. Saucier’s call to abolition is a provocation to confront precarious migration and trafficking not so that Black migrants might gain acceptance into European society, but to abolish the very structures built through the enslavement of Black people and upheld at their expense. He extends this provocation to scholars engaging the Black Mediterranean, challenging us to do this work “in a way that does not reproduce the oppressions we are trying to unmask” (p.113). This is one of the volume’s most urgent claims: that carrying out the work of “re-telling Europeanness” requires that we “position Blackness at the vortex of any and all freedom movements” (p.112).

This call returns us to one of the volume’s core questions: how can we challenge anti-Black violence in the Mediterranean and Europe without reproducing the spectacle of Black suffering or portraying Black African border crossers only through forms of anonymous victimhood? In the volume’s single chapter dedicated to cultural production, Grechi explores artistic collaborations that highlight the violence of state policing of mobility. Artistic interventions, writes Grechi, don’t resolve this violence, but they can “help us notice an impossibility, a contradiction” (p.96). I am reminded of Ethiopian-Italian filmmaker Dagnaw Yimer’s statement in a 2016 interview: “You cannot tell about migration; you can tell migrants’ stories” (Korzhenovich 2016: 111). The crucial work of the Black Mediterranean emerges in its capacity to both describe historical and political dynamics and also to serve as an analytic that creates space for a heterogeneous and changing archive of stories.

In spaces such as Italy, cultural production continues to play a critical role in the work of theorization. As Hawthorne observes, Italy lacks an institutional structure for Black studies (p.191). In this context, cultural texts and literary and cultural spheres constitute critical sites of knowledge production and theorization. As Black Mediterranean scholarship expands, its engagement of cultural texts along with ethnographic and sociological work will further demonstrate the capacity of this framework to inform abolitionist and anti-racist scholarship and praxis, and create space for new works of imagination and connections across borders.

The Black Mediterranean emerges in this volume as a critical analytical framework, a call for abolition, and a form of political praxis. Seen through these interventions, the Black Mediterranean makes visible how historical violence and the racialization of labor and mobility have constructed circumstances in which Black Africans have no choice but to flee conflict, climate change, and extreme economic precarity in their home countries, only to have their movements criminalized and their arrival to Europe prohibited. This framework also makes it possible to trace global connections – for instance, in the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations that took place not only across the US, but around the world, including in Italian cities, where demonstrators chanted names including George Floyd, murdered that year by Minneapolis police, and Soumaila Sacko, a Malian farmworker murdered in 2018 near the camp where he lived in Southern Italy. Activists regularly use #BlackLivesMatter to advocate for increased attention to migrants’ imprisonment and torture in Libya, and their deaths at sea. Moving forward, this volume is sure to inform work that engages the Black Mediterranean along all its coasts and in the many spaces entangled in its histories and mobilities.

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ANTIPODE

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