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The big gamble

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The big gamble: the migration of Eritreans to Europe

by Milena Belloni, Oakland, University of California Press, 2019, x + 228 pp., £27 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0520298705

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queer students to nurture and sustain their lives and studies. Brim maps how and with whom students are living; whom are they responsible for caring; why they chose that College and how they travelled there; what kind of work they do; how they study; what they eat; and how they create relations -however, this is not like an external or neutral observation. Brim is also trying to understand his own precarious position, for teaching, writing, researching, travelling to work, and accessing health care. Students and professors are in distinct positions, but the CSI has effects on them both, and the college is also the reason they are brought together. Universities are not immune to that; they also try to divide and capture forms of queer work and resistances and of queering classroom, home and workplaces. Therefore, critiquing prestigious and meritocratic systems, as Brim does, is as fundamental as it is urgent. Finally, this book is also a manifesto to resist against these forms of division and inequity.

Interestingly, Brim exposed me to an unknown field of relations, productions, and pedagogies in the Global North through Poor Queer Studies. They were, somehow, very familiar with the Brazilian under-funded public universities where I received training, whose scholars are producing Queer Studies in peripheral and precarious but also very creative ways. Therefore, as stated before, this book is useful for analyzing inequities and hierarchies of knowledge and HE rankings. However, they exist between deprived and prestigious institutions in the USA, with their racial and class divisions, as well between Northern and Southern global positions. Brim also shows how Poor Queer Studies could (and should) interrogate, critique, imagine and disturb these current conditions. He suggests how to imagine and reinvent the future of queer studies and queer pedagogies considering class, race, and gender effects.

Finally, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* is an invitation to a trip, as Brim does by ferry to arrive at the CSI. Moreover, he invites you to travel to another island and see things from a different perspective. This is a huge theoretical, methodological and political contribution to Queer Studies and in particular, Queer Pedagogies. Finishing this book leaves an uncomfortable doubt about how much and for whom are we allegedly queering academy and universities.

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The big gamble: the migration of Eritreans to Europe, by Milena Belloni, Oakland, University of California Press, 2019, x + 228 pp., £27 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0520298705

The puzzle that motivates Milena Belloni's impressive study of Eritrean migration is vividly introduced by her friend Alazar. After surviving war, crossing

the Mediterranean Sea, spending years juggling between jobs and places, Alazar had finally obtained asylum and a stable job in a Rome's restaurant. In his brother's view, however, this was no time to settle down. Instead Alazar had to think about the next move: joining him in Canada, possibly illegally crossing the Mexico-US and US-Canada borders. Why would anyone wish to run such risks?

For Belloni the key to understanding migrants' choices is their "cosmology of destinations". Migrants share a world-view which orders places in a hierarchy of desirability, with Eritrea at the bottom, southern Europe in the middle and northern Europe and America at the top. Over and beyond material returns, the migrants' sense of self-worth crucially depends on how well they fare in this migration game, giving rise to a sense of "entrapment", whereby the more resources they invest in the migration project, the higher the desire to keep on playing, no matter how high the risks. For Belloni, the migrant is like a gambler, who keeps on betting to recoup her loss until she wins big. This condition is reproduced through cultural exchanges within kinship and transnational networks, as well as reflecting the all too material constraints that migrants encounter along their journeys.

Belloni's book is based on her award-winning doctoral thesis. The breadth of her field-work is truly impressive. Belloni follows up the trajectory of migrants from their home country into Ethiopia and Sudan, their first ports of call, and to their arrival in Italy, the Eritrean migrants' gateway into Europe. Along the way, Belloni interviews also family members, agents involved with people's smuggling, humanitarian agencies' officials, carries out field-work in refugee camps in Africa and shares in the daily lives of Eritreans by living with them in flats in Asmara, Addis Ababa and Khartoum, as well as in a squat in Rome.

Belloni begins by questioning the distinction between refugees and economic migrants, in an effort to recuperate migrants' agency. In her view, Eritrea aptly illustrates the limits of the dichotomy: due to continuous tensions with Ethiopia, the country has been in a situation of chronic emergency for decades and migration has become part of a normal life strategy to escape hardship, rather than a forced reaction to exceptional times of crisis. The nature of this existential condition is further explored in Chapter 1, which looks at Eritreans in their home country. Belloni portrays young Eritreans as being trapped in a condition of perpetual adolescence, as indefinite national service prevents them from earning a decent salary and starting a family in a place of their choice. Deserting becomes a pre-condition to escape this trap. Migrating represents the logical continuation: a very risky but potentially highly rewarding vehicle of upward social mobility. Successful migrants periodically return showcasing their status with gifts and money. Investments in real estate offer visible illustrations of the opportunities opened up by migration also for the families benefitting from remittances. Chapter 2 shifts the gaze to Ethiopia and Sudan. Belloni highlights that not all migrants share in the aspiration to keep on moving: the majority of the persecuted Kunama ethnic minority refused resettlement in the US, amidst political pressure and a sense of unfitness for urban life,

particularly amongst the elderly. Those who wish to carry on their journey do so not only because of cultural and legal barriers to internal movement and access to the local labour markets, but also because of families' expectations and the lure of a new life in the first world, though not all of Belloni's informants had the resources to act upon this impulse. The same two types of desire, pleasing the family and reaching a more desirable destination, characterized the migrants that Belloni encounters in Italy (Chapter 3). In spite of historical links, Italy is not seen as a very desirable destination for most Eritreans: in 2016 just over 1 per cent of the Eritreans arriving on its shores sought asylum there. The others preferred to move on. This decision, in Belloni's view, is only partly the result of loose connection with the old diaspora, who often sees with diffidence new arrivals perceiving them as opportunistic, and of institutional and economic marginalization.

Chapter 4 zooms on the moral underpinnings of two strategies employed by migrants to circumvent legal barriers to mobility: smuggling and marriage. Belloni argues that migrants see legal barriers as unjust and thus reliable people's smugglers often enjoy a high status amongst them. Belloni also highlights how marriages mixing convenience and other more conventional motives are not necessarily perceived as fraudulent by Eritreans. Chapter 5 develops the analogy between migration and gambling. In the conclusion, Belloni reflects on the implications of her results.

Belloni's book offers an incredibly rich and insightful analysis, highlighting the importance of analysing migration as a cumulative process, rather than a one-off decision. Yet the analogy of the gambler entrapped in the imagination of the Eritrean transnational community does not entirely convince. Migrants' hierarchy of places in their "cosmology of destinations" closely mirrors that of social scientists studying well-being, and intra-European migration is much less risky than migration into Europe. From this perspective, the decision to keep on moving looks more like the calculated risk-taking of the entrepreneur than the reckless risk-taking of the gambler. The drama of the Eritrean migrant is thus not so much the particular one of her aspirational family, who pushes young generations into taking superhuman risks. Rather it is the widely shared condition of the modern poor, who is at once stimulated to improve her station as a pre-condition for self-realization and frustrated in this desire by a myriad of obstacles undermining her capability to do so.

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