# WRITING AGAINST BORDER IMPERIALISM: EPISTEMOLOGIES OF TRANSIT

**ELEANOR PAYNTER**
**(Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University)**

> *A decolonized approach commands us to show sensibilities towards migrants' fundamental right to opacity, that is, that* not *everything* should be seen, explained, understood, and documented. As a migration scholar, I ask myself if my focus on migrants'/refugees' experiences of border crossings, journeys, camps, or asylum processes does not contribute to othering of them?
> Shahram Khosravi, 2020

> *Language is always a political choice.*
> Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, 2022

'I am not an economic migrant', Yousef told me. 'Because [migration] is something with you – it must *have* to be in my life and I have to travel in life'[1].

It was June 2018: anti-immigrant sentiment had propelled right-wing parties to victory in Italian national elections, and newly appointed Interior Minister Matteo Salvini was launching the #PortiChiusi campaign that would hold rescued migrants stranded at sea. Yousef (pseudonym) and I were sharing mint tea under the shade of a tarp at Piazzale Maslax, a camp operated by activist collective Baobab Experience near Rome's Tiburtina station. Yousef, who was waiting for his humanitarian visa to be renewed, could legally work and move freely throughout Europe. But because renewing his papers every two years was both time-consuming and costly, he lived in the improvised camp and worked odd jobs to save for his legal expenses.

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[1]     Oral history interview, Rome, June 2018.

As a Gambian man who had crossed the Mediterranean and applied for asylum in Italy in the mid-2010s, Yousef fit the pervasive image in Europe of 'economic migration' – a category with no legal bearing, yet one which has come to define the national and European migration debate. As such, this term also exemplifies the kind of language I have been compelled in my own work not simply to avoid, but to challenge.

Yousef and I first met while I was conducting ethnographic research to better understand how emergency responses to migration operate beyond Italy's external borders. In the interview I quote from here, we reflected together on the ongoing politicisation of migration. In addressing popular discourses about who 'migrants' are and whether they deserve legal protection or to live in Italy, Yousef rejected the economic migrant/refugee dichotomy. Rather than uphold that problematic binary by opting for one label over the other, he instead suggested people shift their conceptualisation of border crossing and the right to move.

I hear Yousef's words as a challenge to scholars and activists – especially those of us from or based in the Global North – not to approach the study of migration strictly or primarily in terms of predetermined categories of mobility. More broadly, this is a call to recognise that scholarship on migration always reflects a conceptualisation of movement and borders, whether implicit or explicit, and to reckon with the resulting ethical implications. Widely accepted labels are not naturalised categories but social constructs, and our work can uphold or subvert them. We've seen this play out in the 2015 debates by media organisations about whether to describe people on the move as 'migrants', as the BBC declared, or 'refugees', as Al-Jazeera opted to do (Ruz, 2015). In Italian media, regular use of *migranti economici* assumes people's motives – details that we simply cannot know as they disembark on Italian shores and which, as Khosravi suggests in the epigraph, a broader 'we' perhaps have no right to know.

To study and write about migration necessarily means participating in an ongoing, multifaceted discussion of representation, rights, racialisation, and the politics of memory and belonging, and it is therefore never a neutral endeavour. This work emerges in contexts shaped by border imperialism, or "the processes by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created

as well as maintained" (Walia, 2013:5), and how we put our questions and thoughts into language is "always a political choice" (Ali Farah, 2022)[2]. In ethnographic and narrative research, this compels me to engage epistemologies of transit, rather than of states and of stasis – an ongoing process, and one I attempt through oral history and other methods that encourage a questioning of power dynamics and an acknowledgment of silences[3]. If language can reify borders and legitimise institutional violence, it can also disrupt and reimagine these structures. Think of the power of discourses that criminalise those crossing the sea, as politicians like Luigi Di Maio refer to rescue ship operators as taxi drivers; or of how terms like *clandestini* racialise precarious journeys rendered necessary by Italian and EU policies. The move by some migration scholars to shift framings from 'illegal' to 'illegalised' is one example of language calling attention to relations of power (De Genova, 2002).

What does this mean in the context of Italian Studies? The field's inherent interdisciplinarity and its current turn towards the transnational mark a crucial opportunity to embrace "a change in perspective and methodological approach that pays greater attention to the circulation of people, languages and artefacts" (Burdett et al., 2020:228) in order to question the assumptions of cultural homogeneity and fixity that uphold national borders as racial borders (Achiume, 2022)[4]. What ethical practices and more just understandings of belonging are enabled when we bring the post- and de-colonial lenses of transnational Italian Studies into conversation with the critical migration studies charge to "research migration without reinforcing the migrant as a problematic subject" (Anderson, 2019:5)?

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[2]   Ali Farah's words recall Black feminist scholarship on challenging hegemonic language as crucial for working towards justice (cf. Lorde, 1984).

[3]   Here I have in mind, for example, the understanding that memory "is not a depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings" (Portelli, 2006:37), recognising meaning making as itself a process in flux, and the interviewee as an active creator in the interview process.

[4]   In Italian literary studies, the debate about *letteratura migrante / della seconda generazione / italofona / postcoloniale* offers an important example of grappling with lexicons as an entry point for deeper epistemological questions and consideration of the ethical implications of work that aims to document and challenge marginalisation without reifying it (Romeo, 2011:381).

Let me pose the question slightly differently: what does it mean to study migration within an Italian Studies context, given pervasive anti-Black racism in Europe and the ongoing criminalisation of Mediterranean migration and solidarity efforts? To what extent are scholars ethically obligated to respond to these injustices in our work (not to mention beyond) – for those of us who, through whiteness, class, or citizenship status, can afford to choose?

The answer is not, of course, *only* language. As Sara Ahmed (2017:90) observes in the context of diversity work in institutions, "using the language [of justice, diversity, equity, etc.] does not translate into creating diverse or equal environments". But hegemonic language enacts border imperialism and working with that knowledge is crucial – and is a process with which I continue to wrestle in my own work.

# References

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