

VALERIA CAMMARATA, FEDERICA MAZZARA,  
SAMIRA MECHRI

## INTRODUCTION

This volume is conceived in the context of a much bigger academic Erasmus+ Capacity Building MIGRANT Project that was initiated by an idea shared between Serena Marceno, Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Palermo, and Samira Mechri, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Tunis El Manar. The endeavour follows a bottom-up approach and stems from a common interest in the issue of migration since 2015 when the two Universities started a staff and students exchange programme in the context of a double diploma between the Master's Degree in Cooperation and Development, now the Master's Degree in Cooperation, Development, and Migrations at the University of Palermo and the Master's Degree in English and International Relations at the University of Tunis El Manar. The Project was officially launched in November 2019.<sup>1</sup>

The MIGRANTS Project is a consortium of academic partners and NGOs. It consists of the University of Tunis El Manar, the University of Tunis, the University of Manouba, the University of Westminster, the University of Granada, and the University of Palermo as a leader of the Project. The network was selected on the basis of consolidated cooperation and the guarantee of a broader spectrum based on interdisciplinarity and expertise in the field of

---

1 Within this project, another volume is about to be published, edited by Serena Marcenò and Giulia Sajevea, *Migrations: Governance, Policies and Rights*. The goal of this volume is precisely to show the limits and inadequacy of current interventions, and to identify, as in the case of the Global Compact (signed in Morocco in December 2018), inclusive strategies respecting human rights and international law, and safeguarding global security.

migration. Taking into consideration the international dimension of the Project and the global spectrum of the issue of migration, a whole network of associations, NGOs, and international agencies and stakeholders involved with migrants or dealing with migration issues has been involved in the Project. COSPE, UNIMED, and CLEDU are the non-academic partners who have supported their academic partners within the Project by providing expertise and practical know-how.

The main objective of MIGRANTS Project, which will conclude in September 2023, is to integrate the teaching of migration studies and improve the quality of Tunisian higher education and enhance its relevance for the labour market and society in order to support its capacities in local, international cooperation, and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration. MIGRANTS Project's specific objective was to design a Master's Degree in Migration Studies: Governance, Policies, and Cultures in Tunis.

In this degree, students obtain a range of high-level competencies that revolve around multi-dimensional analyses of migration and integration in a wide range of contexts, including the competence to understand the causes, patterns, and effects of international migration, to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as cultural analysis, conflict analysis, management, and administration. It is an interdisciplinary programme, offering students, and researchers, the opportunity to combine study and analysis of critical perspectives on migration studies with practical experience and fieldwork thanks to the network of partners such as international agencies, NGOs, and associations committed to migrants, displaced persons, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Part of the MIGRANTS Project, the Capacity Building and the preparations for the Master's Degree is the selection of six PhD students who work on migration studies to enroll in the partner universities: the Universities of Palermo, Westminster and Granada. The seventeen weeks of training offered by European Professors and experts from September 2020 to May 2021 and devoted to the twenty Tunisian professors, from different disciplines, involved in designing and teaching the Master's Degree in Migration Studies are one of the biggest achievements/challenges of the programme, especially that most of the training was done online due to the

pandemic. Three Summer Schools have also been organized in the context of MIGRANTS: the first one, titled “Connecting coasts, crossing borders: Current trends in migration research and methodological challenges” took place at the University of Granada from 16 to 30 July 2022; the second was held at the University of Westminster from 05 to 13 September 2022, it was a unique opportunity to share ideas and perspectives on issues related to migration, its management and representation; the third one, titled “After the last frontiers”, was held in Palermo from 09 to 20 July 2023. The summer schools offer a very significant practical side through the job shadowing activities: Professors and PhD students visit NGOs who work very closely with migrants and refugees. In this way and away from books and academia, they can see with their own eyes how migrants experience reality. One of the main objectives of the Project has been to address the issue of migration outside the logic of emergency and improve cooperation to face the challenges of international migration.

All these experiences have raised many reflections, discussions and research practices that now converge in this volume. The themes that are central to migration studies and cultural studies are presented starting again from a bottom-up approach. In fact, through observations made both in fieldwork, literary criticism, visual culture and cinema studies, the contributions collected here analyse issues such as representation and self-representation, the agency of the storytelling, the victimization and criminalization of migrants, border crossing and the porosity of borders, the cultural practices of meeting and sharing traditions, nationalities, identities. The main intention is to lead the discussion to a shared debate that brings together in this volume the studies of expert researchers with the work of young and promising scholars in the field.

### 1. *A theoretical framework*

Migration has generally been a concern for disciplines that study the causes and the impact of human movement mainly in economic, political, and ultimately social spheres. It might then come as a surprise that in recent years there has been an increasing

interest in the topic from the cultural studies perspective, where a fascination for the correlation between migration, politics, and culture has been developed, leading to truly interdisciplinary outcomes.

Rather than a historicist approach interested in the origins and development of certain social and cultural expressions, cultural studies are engaged with the analysis of specific sociocultural contexts and their constitution, as well as with a critical sensitivity to what is ‘conjunctural’ and contextual – especially regarding tensions, contradictions, and crises. Within this framework, migration studies – with their interest in forms of regulation and management, control, and resistance practices – have become an essential platform to update the conceptual categories but also to highlight the “contested terrain” of contemporary cultural studies. As a field of study interested in “how power operates through the pores of everyday life” (McRobbie, 2020), cultural studies pose fundamental questions in relation to the “ordinary” (Williams, 1958) experience of people on the move, valuing the importance of representing this ordinariness as part of a larger discussion preoccupied with the management, regulation, economic and political implications of their movement.

The use of language, discourse, and the production of collective meaning has also been crucial to the debate over migration studies that intersects with cultural and post-colonial studies. Here we can include two examples: the first is in connection with the media’s production of negative images of migrants fluctuating between race and security, thus engendering moral panic. The second is related to the politics and policies of exclusion and containment in media and political discourses through the categorisations of ‘migrants’ and ‘refugees’ which “fail to capture these complex and messy social realities” (Crawley, Skleparis 2018, 50), and this is what may happen to the migrants throughout the migration process.

Various publications in the last two decades have engaged with aspects of cultural, artistic, and mediatic implications that relate to the phenomenon of migration. A common denominator of these contributions has been the concern to confront the structural and regimented narratives and gazes around migration, mainly those

performed by governmental and mass-mediatic discourses, through the analysis of practices that aim at reversing the strategies of visibilities/invisibilities, especially at the level of representation.

These practices have been produced through various media including art, social networks, film, literature, and other platforms digging into aspects of the social dimension as these were not deemed able to carry the moral weight of the canon before the establishment of cultural studies (McRobie, 2020).

Applied to contexts of migration, cultural studies have therefore offered an alternative gaze that implies a different look at migratory movements and conflicts in terms that prioritise the subjective practices, desires, expectations, and behaviors of migrants themselves. One important aspect of this new approach to the study of human movement has been the valuing of representations that are not necessarily filtered or adapted by and for a European and more generally ‘Western’ public but rather those that reflect first-hand understandings of the complicated web of securitisation of borders and violation of human rights. This unfiltered gaze comes with a production of discourses aiming at resisting, subverting, and reframing old colonialist patterns that relegate the people on the move to the margins of categories of vulnerability and immobility. The self-determination of migrants, their choice to often breach borders for the sake of affirming their individuality, has been defined by many migration studies scholars as “autonomy of migration” (Mezzadra, 2011; Papadopolous et.al. 2013). This approach sees migration as a creative force and recognises that migrants are individuals capable of resisting control, exerting agency and playing a central role in making borders more and more porous. These counter-narratives have found in cultural expressions their ideal platforms. This idea has been recently confirmed by Marco Martiniello: “The lens of arts and culture acknowledges migrants’ agency. In other words, it helps to “rehumanize” migrants, who are too often “dehumanized” and reduced to statistics in current debates and policies” (Martiniello 2022, 10).

Issues of race, gender, class, space, community, language, memory, and identity are at the centre of this new preoccupation with migration. This volume intends to contribute to and expand this current debate by subverting the logic of representation and

advancing a knowledge of migration that goes beyond the mere management of a crisis. What counts in this act of reframing is all those aspects that constitute culture and the ability to assert acts of citizenship, that put the migrant struggles under a magnifying glass:

We define acts of citizenship as those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggles. (Isin 2008, 39)

Publications resulting from this “alternative” gaze include the collection of essays, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (2007) that investigate the impact of migration on artistic production through the concept of ‘migratory aesthetics’. Coined by Mieke Bal, this concept points to the urgency of initiating a conversation about the aesthetic potential of the migratory experience to inform future contributions on the topic. The study of the correlation between aesthetics and politics had already been at the centre of a series of works by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009, 2010), where he argues that the role of politics should be to reconfigure the distribution and redistribution of places and identities, spaces and times, visibility and invisibility. Rancière defines this as a ‘distribution of the sensible’ that challenges the a priori laws which condition what is possible to see and hear, to say and think, to do and make. The distribution of the sensible is literally the condition that opens up the possibility for perception, thought, and activity, all that is possible to apprehend by the senses. In this context, art is seen by Rancière as an effective way to change existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation, and to build new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.

Earlier on Edward Said drew on the connection between migratory movements, be it exile, migration, or expatriation, and the constitution of Western cultures. The culture of Western metropolises has been made of the works of exile, émigrés, and expatriates. For Said, exile is not “a condition of terminal loss,”

but rather a “potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture” (Said 2000, 174).

More recent contributions to this debate include *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories*, published in 2015. The book looks at the politicised dimensions of migration and the power of the arts to provide spaces in which identities and meanings can merge and be understood across differences; *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections* (2017) and the more recent *Border Images, Border Narratives* (2022), take as their starting point the interdisciplinary field of border studies to provide a theoretical grounding for an aesthetic and cultural understanding of borders, while *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion* (2019) explores how activist and art forms have become a platform for subverting the dominant narrative of migration, generating a vital form of political dissent, by revealing the contradictions and paradoxes of the securitarian regime that regulates immigration into Europe. This list of contributions is by no means comprehensive and is growing by the hour. Edited volumes, monographs, special issues, journal articles, and less traditional publications on the interconnectedness between migration studies and cultural studies are strengthening the idea that these two fields of studies have much to offer to promote the idea that cultural expressions by and for the people on the move are producing knowledge and understanding that are otherwise lost between and hidden among trivial accounts of crises fuelled by ideas of sovereignty and internal order.

The goal of this volume is precisely to explore the intersections between these two fields of study, opening more cracks and proposing new ideas, themes, and approaches that speak to the varied field of migration studies, starting from the approach of cultural studies and post-colonial studies. By doing so, we will contribute to opening up visibilities and trajectories invisible in other discourses and narratives. The contributions collected here assume, in fact, different points of view not only concerning the disciplines involved and the methodologies adopted but also the addressed spatial and temporal contexts that have much to offer.

## 2. *Structure and Contributions*

The volume opens with a chapter by Valeria Cammarata, *Narrating Palestinian Lives Through Phototexts. The Case of Edward W. Said*. It is dedicated to the concept of “narration” and (self-)representation of the Palestinian question proposed by Edward W. Said in the phototext *After the Last Sky* (1986) edited together with photographer Jean Mohr. Even before this endeavour, the writer and the photographer had dedicated other works to issues related to migration, exile, the diaspora, and their forms of political and cultural representation. Their encounter and the phototextual genre they have chosen allow them to achieve a triple objective. First of all their work demonstrates how experiences of diaspora, forced migration, and resettlement in a land that is both native and foreign, impact people’s everyday life and cultural identity. Secondly, it demonstrates how the Palestinian cause can act as a “laboratory” in which issues such as those linked to citizenship, border crossing, belonging, and return are questioned and re-interpreted in a different paradigm. Finally, they show how the genre of phototext is not only valid as a literary and cultural form but as a real “structural homology” in which form and substance are closely connected and mutually influencing.

Along the path proposed by Said, the second chapter by Hend ben Mansour, *Humanitarian Orientalism and Photography of Migrant Women*, mediates between the cultural studies and the visual culture disciplines, applying the concept of “Orientalism” and the critical approaches to the photographic representations of migrant subjects. In particular, ben Mansour makes a comparison between an “orientalistic” and a “humanitarian” approach to photographic representation. Concerning the first approach, the case of the colonialist postcards representing “odalisques” has been studied, raising questions such as scopophilic pleasure, ethnographic intentionality, otherness, and submissiveness. As far as “humanitarian photography” is concerned, the case of the representation of the Yemeni migrants, situation done by IOM’s Regional Office for Middle East and North Africa on its website on the occasions of some “successful” humanitarian aid projects in the region has been analysed. The photographs used by IOM,



taken by the female photographer Elham Al-Oqabi, demonstrate how an Orientalistic and colonialistic point of view is still adopted, articulating a visual regime of victimisation and feminisation.

The chapter “*Imagined Camps and Constructed Migrants*”: *Biopolitics and Unauthorised Migration in Ivor Rawlinson’s Tunisian Dreams*, by Samira Mechri, applies a cultural studies approach to an examination of Rawlinson’s novel *Tunisian Dreams* (2012). The novel, referable to the genre of nightmare realism, stages the representation of unauthorised migration in Tunisia during Ben Ali’s totalitarian regime from a diplomat’s perspective. Even in this case the “literary pretext” let emerge many of the theoretical questions which “traditionally” occupy migration studies: the camp as a metaphor of sovereignty and violence but also as a heterotopia; the permeability of borders; solidarity and victimisation; unauthorised migration and forced migration. Representation and the denial/right/need to narrate is once again a main concern as far as the migrants remain speechless also because of that kind of humanitarianism that forces them in a protection regime and reduces their political agency.

This also applies to ‘*Symbolic Im-mobility*’, ‘*Semantic Dis-placements*’ and *the Politics of unauthorised migration representation in Moroccan and Algerian mainstream Media* by Khaoula Zitouni. Here the issue of mainstream media representation of unauthorised migration in Morocco and Algeria is studied by means of the discourse and narrative analysis tools, especially in statements by public authorities and media agencies. It is not only a matter involving these two countries’ security concerns but also the much-discussed issue of the EU externalisation of migration control. This chapter particularly addresses the constructions of unauthorised migrants’ immobility, clandestinity and dehumanisation, but also the use of different tropes such as the *harga* (border runners/burners).

Monia Channoufi’s *National Roots and Transnational Routes: A Case Study of the Tunisian Diaspora in Britain* deals with the concepts of communities, homeland, and belonging in diasporic identities. In recent studies these concepts have been challenged by a multiculturalist approach that highlights the negotiation among different affiliations. Participants in the field work, which is at the

base of this chapter, “maintain cultural repertoires and selectively deploy them while they skip from one sphere of belonging to another” (infra, p. 131).

In the final chapter, Rached Khalifa focuses on Tunisian migration film and fiction and the encounters between host and migrant subjectivities. He draws attention to the tensions of these encounters as manifested in images of sexual and gastronomic encounters. Contemporary Tunisian migration cinema and fiction are well aware of the allegorical significations of such issues as food and sex as political and cultural markers of identity and nationality. In his endeavour, Khalifa examines two Tunisian major works: Abdellatif Kechiche’s film, *La Graine et le Mulet* (*The Secret of the Grain*) (2007) and Habib Selmi’s novel *Al-Ishtiyahq ila al-Jarah* (*Longing for the Woman Next Door*) (2021). In *La Graine et le Mulet*, Kechiche subverts the clichéd image of the Maghrebian migrant and goes beyond the binaries of the self and the other, the “us” and the “them” and the French and the North Africans. In *Al-Ishtiyahq ila Al-Jarah*, the erotics of food and sex in a Maghrebian migrant context is centered on the metaphor of “couscous”, a Tunisian traditional dish that has also become a symbol of transnationalism.

### *Bibliography*

- Bal, Mieke, ‘Lost in Space, Lost in the Library,’ in Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, eds, *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics. Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 26–36.
- Crawley, H., Skleparis D. 2018, ‘Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis’” in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (1), 48-64.
- De Genova, Nicholas, Sandro Mezzadra and John Pickles, eds, ‘New Keywords, Migration and Border,’ *Cultural Studies* 29/1 (2014), 55–87. Also available online, accessed 1 November 2018.
- Isin, Elgin F., ‘Theorizing Acts of Citizenship,’ in Elgin F. Isin

- and Greg M. Nielsen, *Acts of Citizenship* (London: Zed Book, 2008), 15–43.
- Martiniello, M. 2022 ‘Researching Arts, Culture, Migration and Change: a Multi (Trans)Disciplinary Challenge for International Migration Studies’ in *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10 (7), pp.1-11. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224> (accessed 04/11/2021).
- Mazzara, F. (2019), *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion*, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- McRobbie, A., What is cultural studies. *The British Academy Blog*: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/what-is-cultural-studies/>
- Mezzadra, Sandro, ‘The Gaze of Autonomy: Capitalism, Migration and Social Struggles,’ in Vicki Squire, ed., *The Contested Politics of Mobility: Borderzones and Irregularity* (London: Routledge, 2011), 121–42.
- Nyers, Peter, ‘Migrant Citizenships and Autonomous Mobilities,’ *Migration, Mobility and Displacement* 1/1 (2015), 23–39 (35).
- Papadopolous, Dimitri, and Vassilis Tsianos, ‘After Citizenship: Autonomy of Migration, Organisational Ontology and Mobile Commons,’ *Citizenship Studies* 17/2 (2013), 178–96.
- Pultz Moslung, Sten, Anne, Ring Petersen and Moritz, Schramm, eds, *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories* (London, New York: Tauris, 2015).
- Rancière, Jacques, *Aesthetics and its Discontent* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).
- , *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010).
- Said, E. 2000. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Granta.
- Saloni, Mathur, ed., *The Migrant’s Time, Rethinking Art History and Diaspora* (Williamstown, MA: The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2011).