

Julia Borst / Stephanie Neu-Wendel / Juliane Tauchnitz

(Bremen/Mannheim/Leipzig)

Women's Perspectives on (Post)Migration. Between Literature, Arts and Activism – Between Africa and Europe. An Introduction

The artwork on this volume's cover was designed by Dar Al Naim Mubarak Carmona, a female artist from Spain and North Sudan combining African and European influences in her work (cf. Quiroz 2013). It shows a woman, most likely the artist as she is wearing an artist's smock with color stains, holding a colorful object reminiscent of a child's windmill. Its colors seem to spill over into the woman's ragtag hair and into the abstract painting behind her, blurring the borders between the subject and the artistic object(s) – the painting and the alluded windmill – portrayed on the artwork.

Its most intriguing aspect for this essay collection is not just that Dar Al Naim Mubarak Carmona herself, being born of a Sudanese father and a Spanish mother, is more than familiar with how it feels to belong to different cultures (cf. Quiroz 2013). The artwork's aesthetics also 'put into color' the blurriness of categories in general and raise the imminent question of what influence the artist herself exerts on this collage: is the painter a constitutive part of it? Does this photograph, by partially covering the subject, precisely foreground the latter? Whichever conclusion the beholder deduces from this contemplation, the work, metatextually, tangles the diverging levels of the artistic process, blurring the lines between the producer, the production itself and its effect(s). And by this, it plays with the notions of (not) being seen or (not) wanting to be seen, with the conceptions of being seen *by* someone or *as* someone and the regulation on *what* we are allowed (or made, or want) to see.

All these aspects are of particular relevance to the texts this volume gathers. They are closely linked to a range of challenges and problems an individual (or a community) possibly has to face when confronted with a different sociocultural, linguistic, religious etc. context or, specifically, when having migrated from one to another. When does migration end? Does the subject eventually ‘arrive’ at another place? When does she or he stop being forced to justify and legitimize the (search for an) own position within the so-called “host” society? And what about those who have been born in a society but remain relegated to its margins? Terms such as “host” society or “hostland” (cf. Tölölyan 1996: 30) already condense the (*hostile*) exclusion of an Other, who tends to be reduced to linguistic, perspective, cultural or physical traces of difference. And finally, what does it mean if this Other is female?

These tensions, experienced by Dar Al Naim Mubarak Carmona herself and reflected on in her picture entitled *Inside-Out*, reverberate in the academic, literary and activist texts united in this volume. The notions of not being seen and deciding oneself what one wants to show to the world also play with the fact that most of the female voices dealt with in this publication tend to not been seen or, more precisely, heard by the broader public. Echoing the questions raised by Dar Al Naim’s work of art, these voices are “*unerhört*”¹: a polysemic German term meaning “not being listened to”, not being taken into consideration, not being “allowed” to circulate within the public sphere. Simultaneously, “*unerhört*” conveys the idea of transgressive or even candid and unbridled statements and points of views, as they imply a potential to disturb, to startle, to make readers/viewers feel uncomfortable. Following scholar and feminist writer bell hooks’ notion, these female voices speak from the “margins” as a space of double meaning: not just a space of exclusion and marginality but a chosen “site of resistance – as

¹ This notion emanated from an international Romance studies conference, the *XXXV. Romanistentag: “Dynamik, Begegnung, Migration”* [35th Conference of the German Association of Romance Studies on “Dynamics, Encounters, Migration”] in Zurich in October 2017. Within this conference, the editors of this book, Julia Borst, Stephanie Neu-Wendel and Juliane Tauchnitz, together with Maria Zannini, organized a seminar entitled “*Unerhörte Stimmen aus der Afro-Romania: Genderdiskurse im Kontext von Selbst- und Fremdwahrnehmung ‘nach’ der Migration*”. This volume’s conceptual focus originates from that seminar and its fruitful discussions.

location of radical openness and possibility" (hooks 1989: 23). Thus, the African and Afrodescendant female authors and artists whose voices are echoed in this volume challenge thinking patterns of origin and belonging, overthrow labels that try to classify and categorize someone as the Other. They tell "uncomfortable" stories using subversive discursive strategies to challenge established patterns of communication.

The critical analyses and the interviews and literary texts included in this volume all circle around (post)migratory experiences that include varying perspectives on the departure, the migratory process itself and the situation "after" the arrival – though this "after" reveals itself as illusionary for it is questionable whether the migratory experience can be considered completed once the subject arrives somewhere. The studied texts, documentaries, blogs, photographs, etc. share this focus but simultaneously discuss these lived experiences within varied and heterogeneous geographical, linguistic and cultural contexts, often dealing with structural and institutional conflicts in daily life. Consequently, the prefix "post" reflects a spatio-temporal notion of mobility and describes a transitional process. Accordingly, the term "(post)migration" questions the fixity of concepts such as "departure" and "arrival", which conceptually conceal the zones of transit and transition we want to look into in this volume. Our objective is to explore the unsteadiness, frictions and struggles but also the opportunities that emerge at the various stages of the (post)migratory experience.

The authors and activists whose works are dealt with do not shy away from enunciating the clash of self-perceptions and others' perceptions: they are subversive or contentious and are calling on Romance-speaking European societies to realize that hegemonic hierarchies and colonial power structures continue to persist as neocolonial frictions—nowadays not only beyond but also within the respective national space itself. Their voices reveal positionings that frequently oscillate between alienation and belonging, moving between African, European and other (diasporic) spaces. They denounce binary structures of hierarchized sociopolitical categories, as Francophone Cameroonian writer Léonora Miano underlines using the example of Black people in France: "[...] le Blanc et le Noir ne sont que cela: l'incarnation de priviléges ou de leur absence, la représentation du pouvoir ou de l'impouvoir" ([the White and the Black are just this: the embodiment of privileges or of

their absence, the presentation of power or of powerlessness], Miano 2017: 15). The authors, artists and activists who speak in this volume thwart any predetermined roles by unmasking and undermining established concepts that have developed into clichés, such as gender, “race” or binary views on identity and alterity. At the same time, they bring into focus a gendered perspective on (post)migration that emphasizes the experiences of the ‘female Other’ and, not least, their positions as female writers, artists and activists – different areas which, as for instance with regard to Léonora Miano, Melibea Obono and Igiaba Scego, are inseparable and echo each other.

To ensure a plurality of visions and implement an academic approach that we believe needs to be completed by the views of the authors and activists themselves, this volume is meant as a space where all these perspectives engage in a dialogue on several levels. Thus, the authors’, artists’ and activists’ points of view are analyzed by investigating a wide range of different literary, medial and activist formats such as novels, short stories, theatre performances, documentaries or blogs and videoblogs. These analyses are complemented by short and micro-fiction and by interviews with the authors, artists and activists themselves.

Within this volume, we retrace the heterogeneous perspectives on (post)migration exposed by the studied texts and media. These perspectives mirror the different “trajectories of gazes” [traiettorie di sguardi] – to cite the notion coined by Italian writer of Cameroonian origin Genève Makaping – that characterize the situation of the (post)migratory subject: the gaze that travels back to the alleged “homeland” to critically re-evaluate conceptions of a so-called cultural “origin”; the gaze that follows the migrating subject on her or his way to Europe and that critically focuses on (lived) experiences in the “hostland” where the subject frequently faces exclusion and discrimination; and, finally, the gaze that crisscrosses usual or anticipated positionings, a transversal gaze that goes beyond Africa and Europe and that highlights the drifting and oscillation of migrating movements.

In the first academic article, **Juliane Tauchnitz** analyzes Najat El Hachmi’s prize-awarded novel *L’últim patriarca* (2008) in the context (or at the margins) of *Hispano-Moroccan* literature written by women who are living in the Maghreb or have migrated from there to Spain.

She explores the innovational narrative strategies and functions El Hachmi uses in her text to picture the ambivalent situation of the female protagonist after having migrated to Catalonia, who defies patriarchal oppression by writing against her father's authority and, thus, ending the line of her family's patriarchs. However, at the same time, Tauchnitz highlights the literaricity of a novel that goes far beyond any auto-biographically inspired depiction of a migratory reality connecting Spain and the Maghreb.

In his study of Léonora Miano's play *Révélation: Red in blue trilogie* (2015) and its production by Japanese director Satoshi Miyago and his drama group in France in 2018, **Koku G. Nonoa** immerses in the world of African mythology staged in the play and explores the trans-cultural voices and identities evoked in both the text and the performance, relating issues of a (colonial) past with our present world characterized by transnational migration and globalization. Particular attention is also paid to "border" identities of "Afropean" women in a post-migratory context.

In the interview that follows, three Italian women – **Amina Marini**, **Minima Icir Di Muro** and **Aminata Aidara** –, all born in the early 1980ies, evoke childhood memories of discrimination and "Othering". At the same time, they reflect on their relationship with the "Other Continent", all three of them having one parent from Europe (Italy) and one from Africa (Senegal or Somalia). What connects their stories is that they delink belonging from a particular geographical space and conceptualize the (memory of) family as a safe space a subject can fall back on when experiencing exclusion in the social sphere.

The focus on memories and relationships thus echoes **Maria Kirchmair**'s observations on contemporary novels. Kirchmair tackles the diasporic condition in *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) by Igiaba Scego and *Madre piccola* (2007) by Ubah Cristina Ali Farah. These novels show that the question of arrival is not only about negotiating transcultural identities in contemporary Italy; it is also tightly linked to the past, as both texts travel back in time to shed light on the situation that made the characters leave their homes in the first place. Kirchmair asks how both novels transform a traumatic experience into a survival strategy that opens up a "space" of becoming and allows the migrated subject to come to terms with the ambivalence of pre- and postmigratory contexts, defining

“arrival” and “home” not as a concrete place fixed in space and time but as a relational concept, a “network” of memories and affections.

With **Clara Schumann**’s contribution, we revisit Léonora Miano’s writing and, more precisely, two of her novels, *Tels des astres éteints* (2008) and *Ces âmes chagrines* (2011), which are analyzed with respect to gender and intergenerational relations. Schumann shows that both novels are characterized by a nuanced engagement with migrant masculinities situated differently in relation to male-dominated white majority society. Furthermore, she studies how Miano modifies the recurrent trope of family relations as a symbol for transatlantic and colonial histories from a female perspective and challenges male traditions in African literatures.

The question of male and female genealogies and traditions is also one of the topics dealt with in an interview with Italian writer, filmmaker and scholar **Kaha Mohamed Aden**. Focusing on several short stories of her anthology *Fra-intendimenti* (2010), Aden brings together her memories of Somalia and her experiences in Italy. She not only focuses on matrilineal relationships as a positive counter-model to male-dominated patterns but also evokes episodes of racist stereotypes towards women in Italy’s contemporary society.

Marita Rainsborough’s analysis of two novels written by Ken Bugul and Fatou Diome, female writers of Senegalese origin who migrated to Belgium or, respectively, France, is dedicated to cultural conflicts between Africa and Europe that arise within the process of migration and their effects on vulnerable female characters under constant threat of exploitation. By discussing the struggle for recognition depicted in *Le baobab fou* (1982) and *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003), Rainsborough explores the potential of literature and language to disclose silenced stories and to help the subject “heal” from the painful wound of being both fascinated and rejected by the other (culture).

In her article on Khadi Hane’s *Des fourmis dans la bouche* (2011) and Igiaba Scego’s *Adua* (2015), **Hanna Nohe** draws from Appadurai’s notion of *ethnoscapes* and examines how both texts stage a simultaneity of spaces and culture, creating a post-migratory universe. Moreover, she discusses how the two novels unsilence racism in contemporary Ita-

ly and France and reveal intersectional discriminatory regimes that affect female migrants in particular. Thus, as Nohe points out, both texts can be read in terms of feminist positionings.

In her micro stories *Medea e Amir* and *Sandra*, Italian writer and artist **Ubah Cristina Ali Farah** also tackles daily racism in Italy and its stereotypes, especially the stereotyping of women, which stem from Italy's colonial legacy. She also discusses the ongoing struggle for a birthright citizenship and the discrepancies between inclusion and exclusion in Italy's society.

In *Sandra*, Ali Farah directs our view to migrant communities from Cape Verde, a matter echoing the academic article written by **Joana Passos** that introduces Cape Verdean writer Orlanda Amarilis, whose literary work has been influenced by her own migration experience. In the short stories studied by Passos, Orlanda Amarilis draws a critical balance of discriminatory colonial practices that persist in a (post)migratory space connecting Portugal as a place of longing and the Cape Verde islands as an affective place of belonging. Passos shows how Amarilis depicts female characters as particularly vulnerable to a marginalization of African migrants as outsiders “in transit” or second-rate citizens and reflects on the fragmented identity of the migrant subject oscillating between “home” and “hostland”.

In their article on Afrofeminist blogs written and coordinated by members of the African diaspora in France, Spain and Italy, **Julia Borst** and **Stephanie Neu-Wendel** explore to what extent the internet can turn into an empowering space where otherwise marginalized individuals and collectives are able to stage their own narratives and self-images to gain visibility as a community suffering from every-day racism and stereotyping in European societies. They investigate how these blogs discuss Afrodescendance as a marker of shared experiences of both exclusion and belonging. Elaborating on the notion of aesthetic activism, Borst and Neu-Wendel pay particular attention to empowering (self-)representations of African and Afrodescendant women and their bodies to study the discursive strategies aimed at decolonizing those bodies.

In the following conversation, Italian writer, journalist and literary scholar **Igiaba Scego** discusses problematic “labels” such as “literature of migration” and “second generation”. She also focuses on the question of “Italianness”, its implications for Italians with an Afro-European

background and the impact of Italy's colonialism. Scego also sheds light on experiences of discrimination and violence, especially of women, as reflected both in her own works and in (autofictional and autobiographical) texts by "Afro-Italian" authors.

Joanna Boampong's analysis of various media such as blogs, YouTube videos, online news sources, interviews, music and anecdotes describes the challenges African and Afrodescendant people have in dealing with in contemporary Spanish society. Her specific focus is exploring the ways by which "Afro-Spanish" women negotiate their survival and what coping mechanisms they use to face (micro)racism that denies them a place in a space they call home. She also examines the effects of these coping strategies and asks about their impact on these Afro-Spanish women's future actions and interactions as well as on the "Afro-Spanish" experience as a whole.

The question of how one can cope with racism and marginalization and of the empowering role hair can play in this context is also dealt with in the subsequent article. Addressing Javier Sánchez Sacedo's documentary *Afro, así es mi pelo* (2013), **Danae Gallo González** offers a close reading of the discourses on race and blackness articulated by four Spanish women of African descent, who are interviewed in the film. Furthermore, Gallo González's study relates the approach of the documentary to other audiovisual discourses about Afrodescendance that circulate in Romance-speaking European countries, such as "Négritude", to gain new insights into and new impulses for the ongoing debate in Spain.

The topic of Eurocentric beauty standards and stereotyping of African and Afrodescendant women is also dealt with in an interview with **Desirée Bela-Lobedde**, led by **Joanna Boampong** and **Julia Borst**. In this interview, the Afrodescendant Spanish writer and online content creator engages in a conversation about antiracist and Afrofeminist activism within and beyond the digital space. She reflects on the particular situation in Spain, a country lacking a long tradition of Black activism, and explains why aesthetic activism plays a crucial role in empowering racialized women in Spain.

Laura Büttgen ties in with the *Afropean novels* written by Léonora Miano, but from a different perspective: she studies the subversive potential of female Afro-Europeans' voices, which confront us with a

conflictive search for identity in contemporary France. By analyzing *Tels des astres éteints* (2008) and *Blues pour Élise* (2010), Büttgen shows that the identities depicted in the novels are shaped by different family tragedies connected to historical wounds caused by colonialism and slavery. She also explores how literature and its linguistic and cultural subversion techniques could culturally emancipate and empower the Afro-French community.

Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger's article addresses both a different historical time and a different geographical space than the works explored so far in this volume. She turns to Brazilian writer Ana Maria Gonçalves's novel *O defeito do cor* (2006), which deals with the female protagonist's journeys to the Portuguese colonies (as an enslaved woman) and back to the African continent (as a free woman and migrant) and, once again, back to Brazil to find her lost son. While the (post)migratory situation is a dominant topic in migrant writing in Romance-speaking Europe, Phaf-Rheinberger shows that slavery is a prime concern and omnipresent narrative in texts from the Americas such as Gonçalves's. At the same time, Phaf-Rheinberger's analysis relates historical slavery and "modern slavery" as phenomena that frequently characterize the experience of present-day migration.

In her short story "Mberbí: el llanto más grande de las mujeres", Equatorial Guinean author, feminist and LGBTQ+ activist Melibea Obono redirects our gaze to the African continent or, more precisely, to the patriarchal society of the Fang people of Equatorial Guinea. Obono writes from a country strongly entangled with Spanish history and culture. Her texts mirror the ubiquitous traces of colonial oppression in the present that, combined with so-called traditional values of the Fang culture, particularly affect women and female children whose bodies are subject to disciplinary actions – a multiple and heterogeneous regime of oppression the short story's female narrator subversively defies.

Finally, Roxane Pajoul has our gaze travel to the Caribbean as a marginalized French territory characterized by particular tensions and ambivalences of Caribbean identity amidst French assimilation. She explores the silencing of Francophone Afro-Caribbean writers Michèle Lacrosil and Jacqueline Manicom, whose respective novels *Cajou* (1961) and *Mon examen de blanc* (1972) deal with Afro-Caribbean

female characters who have mixed-race relationships and face multiple oppressors. Pajoul elaborates how these female writers were silenced because of the intersection of their race and gender and of those of the characters they portray.

Works Cited

hooks, bell (1989): “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”, in: *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 36, p. 15-23.

Makaping, Genéviève (2001): *Traiettorie di sguardi: e se gli altri foste voi?*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino.

Miano, Léonora (2007): “Noire hémoglobine”, in: idem. (ed.): *Marianne et le garçon noir*, Paris: Pauvert, pp. 9-34.

Quiroz, Sandra (16.4.2013): “Dar al Naim Mubarak: ‘En Sudán hay quien piensa que las mujeres artistas no pueden tener ideas’”, in: *Afribuku*, in: www.afribuku.com/daralnaimart/ (accessed 6 July 2021).

Tölöyan, Khachig (1996): “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment”, in: *Diaspora*, 5(1), p. 3-36.