

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Eleanor Paynter: *Emergency in Transit: Witnessing Migration in the Colonial Present*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. 286 pages. ISBN 978-0-520-40290-4.**

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Eleanor Paynter's *Emergency in Transit* is a rigorous and intellectually ambitious study of the language through which contemporary Europe has learned to speak about migration. Rather than accepting the familiar formula of the "migration emergency" as a neutral description of an objectively exceptional situation, Paynter argues that emergency is itself a political and cultural technology. In her reading, it is a shifting apparatus of discourse, law, policy, and institutional practice that converts mobility into danger, renders certain bodies highly visible as threats, and naturalizes racialized forms of exclusion (pp. 1–7). The great strength of the book lies in the fact that it does not merely denounce these processes in abstract terms. It reconstructs, with patience and precision, the social worlds through which emergency is experienced, reproduced, and contested in present-day Italy.

The volume is carefully organized. After the introduction, "Emergency Imaginaries" (pp. 1–30), the book unfolds in two main parts. Part I, "Arrivals," includes three chapters: "Strange Grief and Elegiac Possibilities in the Black Mediterranean" (pp. 31–57), "Hospitality as Emergency Response" (pp. 58–83), and "Emergent Practices of Hospitality in the Camp" (pp. 84–114). Part II, "The Right to Remain," contains "Street Vendor as Witness" (pp. 115–139), "Seen and Unseen in the City" (pp. 140–166), and "Oranges and Riot Gear" (pp. 167–190). The study closes with an epilogue, "Mobility in an Age of Emergency, or, A Small and Stubborn Possibility" (pp. 191–198), followed by an appendix (pp. 199–205), notes (pp. 207–230), and a substantial bibliography (pp. 231–254). This architecture is especially effective because it moves from the spectacle of arrival to the longer temporalities of labor, urban presence, memory, and political survival.

One of the most persuasive aspects of the introduction is Paynter's proposal of "testimony as method," a formulation that names not only the use of testimonies as documentary material, but also a broader epistemic commitment to reading migrant narratives, interviews, films, artworks, and public acts of witnessing as forms of knowledge production in their own right (pp. 4–7). This approach allows the author to move between oral history, ethnography, narrative analysis, visual culture, and political theory without losing analytical coherence. The book repeatedly shows that the question is not simply what migrants suffer, but how they narrate, frame, and intervene in the meanings imposed on their movements.

The introduction establishes the stakes of the argument through the 2016 Campidoglio protest in Rome, where migrants publicly declared, "We are not dangerous . . . we are in danger!" (pp. 1–4). That reversal is central to the book's interpretive force. Paynter demonstrates that

emergency discourse does not merely register urgency. It organizes perception. It creates what she calls an emergency imaginary of foreignness in which migrants appear as the embodiment of rupture, risk, and non-belonging. What is represented in media and politics as a sudden border crisis is shown instead to be a protracted regime of management that governs who may be seen as worthy of protection, who may remain visible only as a problem, and who may be denied full political subjectivity altogether (pp. 2–7).

Another major contribution of the book is the way it links migration to the colonial present. Paynter argues that the current management of Mediterranean mobility cannot be understood outside the longer histories of empire, racial hierarchy, and selective collective memory that continue to shape Italian and European public life (pp. 11–20). Through the framework of the Black Mediterranean, she insists that the sea is not simply a geographical threshold but a racialized political space where colonial relations are rearticulated in contemporary form. This perspective allows her to show that the language of emergency works precisely because it obscures historical continuity. By presenting migration as unprecedented, it suppresses the colonial and postcolonial entanglements that connect Africa, Italy, labor, border control, and racialization.

Part I, “Arrivals,” is where Paynter’s argument becomes especially concrete, because the first three chapters show how the emergency apparatus is produced not only through policy and media discourse, but also through mourning, reception, and the unstable spaces of encampment. Read together, these chapters demonstrate that arrival is never a simple threshold moment. It is already structured by racialized visibility, by institutional delay, and by the struggle over who may testify to what migration means. This first section is therefore fundamental to the book’s structure: it moves from death at sea, to formal reception, to improvised forms of hospitality that emerge precisely where the official system fails.

Chapter 1, “Strange Grief and Elegiac Possibilities in the Black Mediterranean,” is one of the most conceptually striking chapters in the volume. It opens with Zakaria Mohamed Ali’s documentary return to Lampedusa and with the image of the boat cemetery, using this scene to establish the Mediterranean as a site of contested witnessing rather than a mere backdrop of catastrophe (pp. 31–33). Paynter’s key intervention here is to show that border deaths do not enter public memory innocently. They are narrated, staged, and filtered through institutions that often transform politically produced deaths into depoliticized “tragedies at sea.” The chapter is especially strong in the way it insists that the sea is simultaneously a material border, a narrative battlefield, and what is called a “liquid archive” in which the terms of remembrance are constantly being negotiated (pp. 32–33).

The chapter’s most original concept is “strange grief,” the form of official mourning through which the state appears compassionate while preserving migrants as strangers even in death (pp. 38–40). Paynter develops this argument through the discussion of the 2003 and 2013 state funerals for migrants who drowned near Lampedusa. These ceremonies, she argues, positioned the Italian state as mourner and witness while displacing its own complicity in border violence. The 2013 commemoration is particularly revealing: survivors were excluded, the ceremony was delayed, and the conferral of honorary Italian citizenship on the dead contrasted sharply with the precarious legal status of the living survivors, who remained in reception limbo (pp. 39–40). What emerges from this analysis is not simply a critique of hypocrisy, but a more precise claim: official grief can function as a technology of depoliticization, severing contemporary shipwrecks from the colonial and postcolonial histories that connect Italy to the Horn of Africa.

Chapter 1 is also notable for refusing to stop at critique. In its later pages, it turns to artistic and memorial practices that attempt to produce more adequate forms of witnessing. Paynter's reading of *Barca Nostra* and of the *Katër i Radës* shows how migrant boats can move between evidence, relic, artwork, and memorial, without ever stabilizing into a single meaning (pp. 54–56). This discussion is particularly persuasive because it demonstrates that memorialization is itself ambivalent: such objects may either deepen public understanding or become aestheticized and detached from the dead they should recall. For that reason, the chapter does not sentimentalize art. Rather, it asks under what conditions elegy can interrupt the emergency imaginary instead of reproducing it. The result is a chapter that combines political theory, memory studies, and visual analysis.

Chapter 2, "Hospitality as Emergency Response," shifts the focus from sea crossings to the Italian reception system and offers one of the book's clearest demonstrations that emergency continues well after disembarkation. Paynter begins by showing that *accoglienza* is not a transparent language of welcome. It is a layered term that joins official procedures, everyday assistance, and the promise of integration, even as these same structures keep migrants legally and socially suspended (pp. 60–61). Her central claim is that reception should not be read as a neutral bridge between arrival and integration, but as a site where foreignness is continuously produced and negotiated. This reframing is particularly effective because it dislodges a common assumption in migration studies, namely that reception is simply benevolent unless it fails. In Paynter's account, the contradictions are built into the system itself.

The chapter develops this point through what it calls the "paradoxes of proximity," especially in the case of Campobasso and its CAS structures (pp. 61–65). Migrants are physically near Italian society but socially held apart from it; they are expected to prepare for life in Italy while being housed in marginal locations and deprived of the very conditions that would make integration plausible. The Campobasso center, situated in the industrial zone outside the city, becomes emblematic of this logic: it is visible enough to generate local anxiety, yet distant enough to minimize meaningful contact (pp. 65–66). Paynter's use of oral testimony is crucial here. Encounters recounted by Sulayman and Bakary show that the rhetoric of hospitality coexists with bus drivers who pass migrants by, employers who tell them to "go back" to their own country, and a general atmosphere in which Black foreignness is treated as a civic disturbance rather than as a social fact to be engaged (pp. 66–68).

Equally important is the chapter's attention to temporality. Time in the CAS appears undefined, administratively managed yet existentially empty. Residents wait for documents, for hearings, for decisions, while legal work remains largely inaccessible and everyday life is reduced to meals, classes, and boredom. Paynter captures this suspended temporality with precision, and Salvatore's comment that the CAS contract contains a start date but no end date gives the chapter one of its sharpest institutional insights (pp. 64–65). The broader analytical achievement of Chapter 2 lies in showing that reception is not simply insufficient hospitality. It is a form of conditional hospitality, even "hostipitality," in which care and control remain inseparable (pp. 60–61).

Chapter 3, "Emergent Practices of Hospitality in the Camp," extends and radicalizes the previous chapter by turning to Piazzale Maslax and the Baobab Experience in Rome (pp. 84–90). Here Paynter studies the informal camp not as a residual or accidental space, but as a constitutive part of the emergency apparatus. This is a major strength of the book. Rather than treating the

camp only through the familiar language of exception and bare life, she argues that such improvised sites are generated by the failures and exclusions of formal reception itself (pp. 88–89). In other words, the camp is not outside the system; it is one of the forms the system produces. That argument is both analytically strong and politically consequential, because it forces the reader to see encampment as a routine outcome of migration governance rather than as a regrettable anomaly.

What makes the chapter especially compelling is its attention to visibility. Piazzale Maslax appears as a place where residents and volunteers must constantly negotiate whether being seen is a protection or a danger (pp. 86–88). Paynter shows that the camp is crossed by multiple gazes: the surveillance of the state, the voyeurism of outsiders, the advocacy gaze of volunteers, and the self-representations of the camp's residents. Out of this unstable field of visibility emerge practices of what she calls “emergent” *accoglienza*. Emmanuel's testimony is exemplary here: his account of being left in the street, losing his documents in police raids, and being pushed to start the bureaucratic process all over again condenses the administrative cruelty that turns survival itself into an emergency (pp. 102–103).

At the same time, the chapter insists that the camp is not reducible to abandonment. Baobab's assemblies, multilingual translation practices, shared decision-making about tents and risk, and the collective diary kept by residents and volunteers reveal forms of hospitality that are practical, political, and inventive (pp. 102–104). Paynter therefore frames the camp as a site of radical or abolitionist hospitality, one that responds to immediate needs while also challenging the border regime that created those needs in the first place (pp. 103–104). This is perhaps the strongest of the first three chapters in ethnographic terms, because it captures both fragility and agency without romanticizing either. Taken together, Chapters 1 through 3 provide a powerful opening movement for the book: they show that the so-called migration emergency is narrated through death, administered through reception, and contested in the improvised social worlds migrants and their allies build in order to survive it.

Part II, “The Right to Remain,” is where Paynter most fully demonstrates that the migration “emergency” does not end with disembarkation. Instead, it continues in the ordinary geographies of work, circulation, housing, tourism, and public visibility. This second half of the book is especially effective because it refuses to treat arrival as the decisive analytical moment. What matters just as much is what happens afterward: how migrants try to remain, to work, to narrate themselves, and to claim a place within Italian social space. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are therefore crucial to the architecture of the volume, because they show that emergency is reproduced not only by borders and reception centers, but by the everyday structures that regulate who may be seen as legitimate within the city and the labor market.

Chapter 4, “Street Vendor as Witness”, is one of the most original chapters in the book because it reconceptualizes ambulant labor as a mode of testimony rather than merely a symptom of marginality (pp. 115–139). Paynter focuses on Senegalese vendors in Tuscany who sell books, especially Bay Mademba's 2011 memoir “Il mio viaggio della speranza: dal Senegal all'Italia in cerca di fortuna” (pp. 118–119). This choice is highly significant. The vendor is not only a precarious worker circulating through tourist areas; he is also a mediator of narrative, someone whose livelihood depends on repeated acts of conversation, persuasion, self-presentation, and autobiographical identification. In this sense, the memoir does not circulate as an inert object. Its meaning is activated in the testimonial exchanges between vendor and passerby, and Paynter is

especially persuasive in showing that those exchanges occur in spaces saturated with the symbolic capital of Italian cultural heritage.

What gives the chapter its particular force is the way it links the local circulation of testimony to broader questions of race, legality, and public perception. Mademba's memoir, as Paynter notes, remains outside the mainstream circuits through which migrant writing is usually canonized, even though it speaks directly to Italian readers and is sold through face-to-face encounters in public space. The result is a layered form of witnessing: the memoir narrates migration, while the act of selling it becomes a second-order testimony about life in Italy. Paynter thus turns the vendor into a critical observer of Italian everyday life, not simply its excluded object. The later pages of the chapter, marked by the memorial display for Idr Diene and the demonstration following the murder of Soumaila Sacko (pp. 136–138), further widen the frame. Street labor appears not as an isolated economic practice, but as part of a wider field of racialized exposure in which work, vulnerability, mourning, and protest become inseparable.

Chapter 5, "Seen and Unseen in the City", is equally rich and arguably the most spatially elaborated chapter in the book (pp. 140–166). Here Paynter turns to Rome and asks what it means for migrants and Italians of African descent to claim a right to the city not only through physical presence, but through cultural authority over its histories and meanings. The chapter is organized around three cases: the "Guide Invisibili" soundwalks, the work of Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego, and the occupied site of Metropoliz with its museum project MAAM (pp. 142–143). This structure allows Paynter to move between central, monumental, and peripheral spaces while keeping in view a single analytical concern: the politics of visibility. Her point is not simply that migrants are unseen; rather, they are seen selectively, often as strangers, intruders, or humanitarian subjects, while their interpretive authority over urban space remains denied.

The discussion of the "Guide Invisibili" project is especially compelling because it reverses familiar assumptions about expertise and belonging. Migrants become guides through Monti, Trastevere, and other emblematic Roman neighborhoods, mixing personal memory with urban history and thereby repositioning themselves as narrators of the city rather than as objects within it (pp. 143–145). Amadou Doumbia's commentary on everyday infrastructures, such as the Caritas mensa in Via delle Sette Sale, is particularly important because it inserts migrant life into areas otherwise consumed through the glossy lens of tourism. Paynter shows that these soundwalks are acts of citizenship in a strong sense: they do not beg for sympathy so much as they redistribute cultural authority. This argument becomes even richer when the chapter moves to MAAM and Metropoliz, where a former factory is transformed into a living museum and political space through collective curation (pp. 158–160). The rocket mural, the "Rane infinite", the boats made from migrant-vessel remnants, and the dense visual language of the site, all exemplify how precarious subjects create forms of history, art, and residence that challenge the whitewashed urban narratives of the nation. In this respect, Chapter 5 is not simply about invisibility; it is about the production of counter-visibility.

Chapter 6, "Oranges and Riot Gear", is perhaps the book's most openly political chapter, because it brings together border studies, labor analysis, anti-racist critique, and ethnographic testimony in a single, sharply focused account of agricultural work in southern Italy (pp. 167–190). The opening scene with Ousmane Sangare demonstrating how to cut oranges is memorable not only because of its concreteness, but because it condenses the entire logic of exploitative labor: even the smallest gesture is already governed by a system in which incorrect work means unpaid

work (pp. 167–168). Paynter uses Sangare’s testimony to enter the world of the “bracciante”, showing how this historically internal Italian labor category has become increasingly racialized and associated with foreigners, especially African and South Asian migrants who arrive through precarious routes. The chapter’s key concept, the “refugeeization of labor,” is especially powerful because it makes visible the connection between legal precarity and economic exploitation. Migrants do not become vulnerable workers by accident; they are placed in that position through the temporal delays, document renewals, blocked housing markets, and administrative uncertainties that structure their lives.

The chapter is especially strong in demonstrating that this exploitation is systemic rather than exceptional. Paynter shows how the “caporalato” system, informal settlements, lack of contracts, and racialized housing exclusion trap workers in cycles of dependency and movement from one precarious setting to another (pp. 173–177). Yousef’s testimony is central here, because it illustrates how even a migrant with papers may still be pushed into exploitative harvest work while waiting for renewal procedures and searching for formal residence arrangements. The discussion of Rosarno, the killing of Soumaila Sacko, and the deaths of Becky Moses and Suruwa Jaithe gives the chapter a cumulative force, reinforced by the statistics from MEDU showing how many workers were technically legal yet still uncontracted and exposed to serious physical and psychological harm (pp. 176–177). Paynter’s larger claim is unmistakable: the “emergency apparatus” operates not only in the Mediterranean Sea, but in orchards, camps, transport vans, and informal housing, where migrant labor remains indispensable and yet disposable. By linking these recent deaths to the earlier murder of Jerry Essan Masslo, the chapter also provides a long historical arc, demonstrating that Italy’s racialized labor emergency is not new, only newly reframed. For that reason, Chapter 6 gives Part II its strongest political conclusion and confirms the book’s central argument that mobility, labor, and racial injustice must be read together rather than separately.

The epilogue is appropriately restrained and reflective. Rather than offering a triumphant resolution, Paynter returns to the question of what mobility might mean in an age saturated by emergency discourse (pp. 191–198). The phrase “a small and stubborn possibility” is particularly apt, because the book’s political horizon is neither naive nor fatalistic. It acknowledges that the emergency apparatus intersects with climate change, racism, economic precarity, and conflict, while still insisting that migrant testimony may open other ways of imagining rights, belonging, and collective responsibility. This ending fits the larger intellectual ethic of the book: critique is inseparable from the effort to make alternative futures thinkable.

The documentary apparatus of the volume reinforces its scholarly seriousness. The appendix (pp. 199–205) assembles data on Mediterranean arrivals and deaths, Italian emergency measures, and reception structures, but it also reflects critically on the incompleteness and politics of such data. The notes (pp. 207–230) are extensive, and the bibliography (pp. 231–254) confirms the breadth of the research, bringing together work on migration, race, colonial memory, visual culture, hospitality, labor, and border politics. This is not a merely decorative scholarly apparatus. It supports the central claim that numbers, legal categories, and policy chronologies require interpretation, context, and testimony if they are to illuminate rather than obscure migrant realities.

The book’s discussion extends outside the Italian context, and Italy is never presented as an isolated or unique example. Rather, Paynter presents it as a crucial site from which broader questions can be asked about asylum, race, empire, and belonging in contemporary Europe. The

study shows how a nationally specific archive of colonial memory and migration policy can illuminate wider debates on emergency governance and border externalization. This comparative reach increases the value of the book considerably.

The book stands out for maintaining an ethical approach to criticism while avoiding excessive sentimentality. The chapters are attentive to mourning, racial violence, administrative limbo, and precarious labor, yet they do not convert migrants into passive symbols of suffering. Instead, Paynter repeatedly foregrounds narration, protest, creative production, urban presence, and political action. This is why her readings of film, visual art, demonstrations, and everyday practices are so effective. They reveal migrants not merely as victims of a border regime, but as producers of meaning who interpret the spaces through which they move. In this respect, the book's interdisciplinary texture is one of its major strengths. The combination of ethnographic observation with literary and visual analysis enables Paynter to trace the afterlives of the border well beyond the shoreline, into camps, reception centers, city streets, informal economies, and artistic forms.

One of the strengths of the book lies in its sustained attention to language itself. The prefatory "A Note on Language" (p. xvii) is not a marginal clarification, but an important methodological statement. By moving between Italian and English and by retaining terms such as *accoglienza*, Paynter refuses the illusion that migration can be described through a neutral administrative vocabulary. Translation becomes part of the argument because words carry the institutional, affective, and historical sediment of the worlds that produce them. This sensitivity matters especially in a study centered on witnessing. Testimony is never detached from the language in which it is uttered, translated, mediated, or authorized. Paynter's lexical care therefore reinforces the book's broader claim that emergency is not only a political instrument, but also a linguistic frame through which migrants are made visible in certain ways and inaudible in others.

Overall, *Emergency in Transit* is an original, carefully researched, and deeply persuasive contribution to contemporary migration studies. It shows that emergency is not simply a response to movement, but a way of organizing law, perception, public feeling, and political legitimacy. At the same time, it insists that migrants are not reducible to figures of vulnerability or abstraction. They are witnesses, interpreters, workers, organizers, and makers of meaning. Through its sustained attention to Italy, the Black Mediterranean, and the colonial present, the book deserves a wide readership among scholars of migration, postcolonial Europe, Italian studies and human rights studies.