Routes and Ruptures of the Mediterranean Backway

An ethnography of Gambian men navigating the European border regime

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Gambian men navigate and assert themselves within the political economy of borders through their migration to Europe. By centering their lived experiences, I analyze how they negotiate, respond to, and resist borders along the Mediterranean Backway, with a particular focus on their arrival and continued pathways in Italy. The study highlights various vantage points along the participants' migration trajectories – from their departure from the Gambia and transit through Libya to their interactions with Italian state institutions. Particular attention is given to their encounters with the migration and asylum system, the labor market, and the asylum accommodation system in Italy.

Drawing on critical border studies, critical phenomenology, theories of Black masculinity, and racial capitalism, this study interrogates the European border regime from the perspective of those navigating Its's margins. The concept of border tactics works as an analytical tool to explore how control over mobility manifests in the participants' everyday lives. These tactics are conceptualized as reactive measures employed by states in response to migratory movements. The central border tactics identified in this thesis are containment, categorization, formal abandonment, and temporal control.

Methodologically, the research draws on ethnographic engagements with eight core participants and nine occasional participants over a period of five to six years. This has involved interviews, conversations, participant observations, video documentation, and collaborative, participant-driven methods conducted across five Italian cities. Grounded in an ethnological and decolonial tradition, the research has been guided by participatory methods that center the co-construction of knowledge between the research participants and the researcher, centering the participants' own narratives and experiences of migration.

The thesis studies the participants' use of vernacular concepts in their narratives of the Mediterranean Backway, such as the Babylon system, napse, just sitting, and semester. These expressions become anchor points in the analysis to understand how they navigate various border tactics. In doing so, the analysis situates the European border regime within enduring structures of coloniality, racial hierarchies, and capitalist exploitation, highlighting the production of a racialized, exploitable labor pool of migrant workers. By centering understandings of migration, mobility, and border control from the margins, this study challenges Eurocentric knowledge production and foregrounds alternative knowledge of borders and movement drawn from participants' own narratives. The thesis contributes to an interrogation of the profitability of borders – how borders actively shape the political economy of migration.

Keywords: *Migration, border tactics, vernaculars of the Backway, The Babylon system, racial capitalism, formal abandonment, border temporalities, migrant labor, Mediterranean Backway, migrant masculinities, Black masculinity, participatory methods, Italy, Gambia, European border regime.*

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