

Teresa Fiore. *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 264 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-7433-8.

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In *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies*, Teresa Fiore rethinks Italy's spatial history from the perspectives of migrants who departed from and arrived on Italian shores. Fiore's theoretical architecture makes this book a suggestive piece of scholarship—one in which narratives of displacement are superimposed with and pre-occupied by others, intimating a series of complex genealogies connecting past and present. Indeed, *Pre-Occupied Spaces* intentionally allows for cacophonous voices and perspectives. Fiore begins by stating that this book “is above all a space for the analysis of stories” (p. 1). Its three parts are neatly divided into overarching thematic preoccupations; Waters, Houses, and Workplaces. Each part begins with an “Aperture” through which Fiore aims to succinctly capture the theme at hand by interpreting a single or select set of cultural texts. Overall, this format works. Occasionally, however, there is a tenuous or forced distinction between the “Apertures” and the denser chapters, where she interprets a range of works in a comparative and more exhaustive manner.

Fiore draws stories from a wide selection of books, memoirs, films, poetry, and art installations—all of which cross both times and spaces. She explores literary texts able to scrutinize historical paths and “current mores” in order to re-

think Italian society “imaginatively at a more universal level” (p. 3). Through her impressive (and occasionally dizzying) breadth of interpretations, Fiore continuously displaces the reader. But this is her point, for she is also placing Italy within this wider frame. From the *conventillos* of Buenos Aires occupied by Italian emigrants in the early twentieth century to the migrant musicians inhabiting today's Piazza Vittorio, each chapter is its own tapestry of stories past and present, each imagining futures in and beyond Italy. In the suggestive prose of *Pre-Occupied Spaces*, this tapestry aims to capture what Fiore calls the “multi-layered history of migrations” (p. 11), an aspect of Fiore's book that is both intriguing and promising.

The theoretical *linguaggio* of Fiore's book requires unpacking—occasionally the framework of pre/occupation is cumbersome and veils the more interesting problems the book sets out to address. She states, “As unexpected parallels between the experiences of Italian emigrants and immigrants are revealed along the diachronic and synchronic axes at once and within post/colonial contexts, Italy is remapped on a larger space, preoccupied with, rather than by, the richness of human experiences in motion” (pp. 12-13).

To account for this complexity, she has chosen “pre-occupation,” a hyphenated term which contemporaneously draws attention to the “already

occupied” space of Italy’s migration history and to the landscape of tensions provoked by cross-border flows of migrants. Fiore employs the term as “punctuation” in order to “activate connections” (p. 13) that we are told are otherwise absent from (historical) consciousness. We are thus to recognize contemporary Italy’s experiences with migration as *always already* shaped by mobilities.

Indeed, Fiore highlights a key point for any student or scholar of modern Italy: that the tendency to study emigration and immigration as distinct phenomena is fundamentally flawed. She observes that these processes are connected only on the conceptual level in much scholarship on Italy’s migration history and have yet to be understood as deeply interlaced sociohistorical processes. My sense here is that Fiore is correct, then, to look towards diachronic and synchronic “axes” to find new paths around this dilemma.

Yet, I often found myself asking whether this was truly achieved. I ask this for historians and social scientists: can we decipher the historical trajectories that connect and separate the spatiotemporal entanglements suggested in *Pre-Occupied Spaces*? This dilemma stood out most strikingly in chapter 6. Here, “circular” appears to refer not only to the mobility of domestic workers but also to its historical repetition or inversion of the past experiences of “Italian” women, the *Alexandrinke*, who worked in Alexandria (Egypt) as *balie*. These are both tales of the comings and goings of domestic workers, through colonial and postcolonial paths—stories of the past in the present “meant to substitute hegemonic history” (pp. 179-80). Yet, by swiveling and tweaking this historical encounter into a matter of predefined colonial *emigration* and postcolonial *immigration*, Fiore inadvertently puts the nation at the center of a story to which it does not uncomplicatedly belong. We are confronted with a cosmopolitan Alexandria wherein a variety of national subjects intermingled, but we are led astray from the historical context in which nationality

carried yet unformed values.[1] Masked too are the irredentist claims over the territories from which these women departed for Alexandria, when many were not yet *Alexandrinke*, nor *Italian*.

Projecting categories of national identity onto historical narrative risks reifying those very units that we know were in flux and formation, particularly in this Adriatic corner of the Mediterranean. [2] Are the paths of these women and today’s domestic workers *comparable* cases that change our understanding of Italy’s migration history? Or rather, are they part of a historical, patterned continuum of female migration that needs to be studied and understood with greater distance from politicized national narratives? Perhaps in part both. I fear that in molding our scholarship on this kind of de-temporalized comparison, which takes “nationalized” pasts and presents as its centers, we cloud our sense of history for the sake of a presentist politics (indeed, this is the kind of maneuver which has made anti-immigrant rhetoric such a compelling political tool in Italy).

One conjuncture at which the spatiotemporal complex to which Fiore alludes is in fact beginning to surface is in scholarship on the links between Sicily and Tunisia. Here, a wealth of emerging research demonstrates the interconnected trajectories extending from the central Mediterranean to challenge our knowledge of national histories (of sending and receiving, of emigrants and immigrants), especially in relation to conceptions of geopolitical change.[3] It would have been nice to see this body of scholarship in dialogue, for example, with Fiore’s interpretation of Vincenzo Marra’s 2001 film *Tornando a casa*, in which the “blurring of emigrant and immigrant desires and failures ... [is staged] in a Mediterranean that functions as a pre-occupied space” (p. 50). Indeed, in this case, *north* and *south* themselves are multiplied, encouraging the reader to see the racial dynamics of Italy’s Southern Question in conver-

sation with its colonial and postcolonial encounters.

The “activation” of connections in the gap between “pre-occupation” and “preoccupation” sometimes misses the point. Acknowledging that there are vital relations among Italy’s past colonialist and imperialist projects (and its nationalist and racist policies) and the present inflow of migrants (not ignoring of course continual emigration across Italy’s borders), the effort to fill gaps with “imaginaries” distracts us from seeing how these gaps themselves are historically and ethnographically navigated. In other words, the leap between reading literary texts and making broad claims about society seems to leave yet another gap to fill. In Fiore’s conclusion she points to the “obvious reverberations” of the past in the present (p. 184)—but, I wondered, obvious to whom? For if these histories were so strikingly obvious, would we have witnessed the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the reconstituted *Lega* gain strong backing throughout rural Italy?

I want to end by noting that *Pre-Occupied Spaces*’ greatest strength is how imaginatively Fiore portrays contemporary Italy and Italian history. Fiore does, in the end, demonstrate that Italy’s spatial history is one always already shaped by mobilities. She leaves us asking: what develops in that spacetime between departures and arrivals? This, I believe, will be useful for scholars in the humanities and social sciences to use as a conceptual springboard, to throw themselves into the empirical gaps that Fiore helps to unveil. Fiore invites her readers to reread Italy’s history (and its present) of emigration and its present (and its history) of immigration in light of ongoing debates about citizenship and nationality. As the 2018 elections revealed, this is more necessary than ever. I leave wondering about the book’s audience: when will an Italian translation will appear?

Notes

[1]. Will Hanley, *Identifying with Nationality: Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[2]. Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, eds., *Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[3]. Some examples include: Naor Ben-Yehoyada, *The Mediterranean Incarnate: Region Formation between Sicily and Tunisia since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Leila El Houssi, *L’urlo contro il regime. Gli antifascisti italiani in Tunisia tra le due guerre* (Rome: Carocci, 2014); Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and Daniela Melfa, *Migrando a sud. Coloni italiani in Tunisia (1881-1939)* (Rome: Aracne, 2008).

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