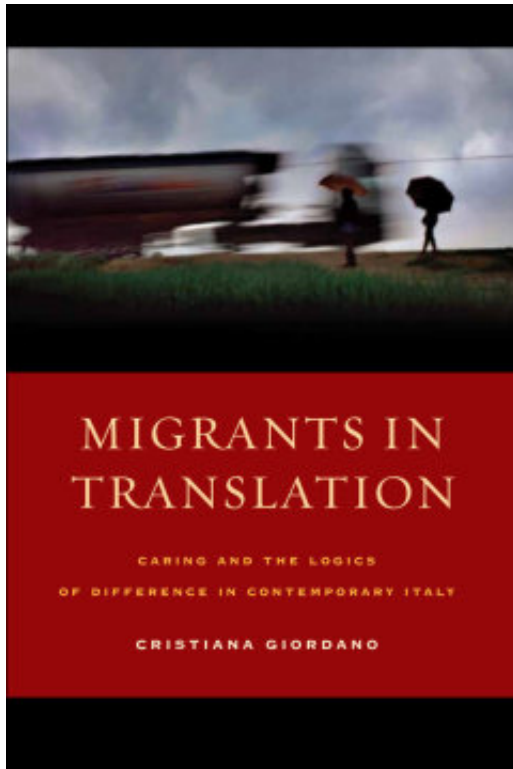


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Cristiana Giordano's Migrants in Translation

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By Shirley Yeung



[Migrants in Translation: Caring and the Logics of Difference in Contemporary Italy](#)

By [Cristiana Giordano](#)

University of California Press, 2014, 288 pages.

Exploring the political entailments of rehabilitating “victims of human trafficking” in Italy, *Migrants in Translation* speaks to the often puzzling disjuncture between recent anthropological and public discourses concerning migrant care and integration: while anthropology’s critiques have led, among social scientists, to a heightened analytic caution or else abandonment of “culture” for its potential to racialize, reify, and de-politicize experiences of suffering, “culture” has conversely found a flourishing after-life in various public domains (most visibly in sensitivity and competency frameworks, and in cultural diversity promotion policies, as well as the backlash against them). Charting new territory, *Migrants in*

Translation critically engages with both the critique and the embrace of the “cultural” register by exploring how Italian ethno-psychiatrists in Turin’s Centro Fanon mediate between migrants, social institutions of rehabilitation, and Italy’s Turco-Napolitano Law which grants legal status to undocumented foreign sex workers as “victims” of global trafficking. Revealing how various social practices of translation make migrant sex workers intelligible to the state’s rehabilitation mission (or not), Giordano aims to interrogate what she terms a “politics of recognition” which reduces migrant difference and suffering to the diagnostic language of recovery. Drawing on Rancière, she sees in ethno-psychiatric practice a promising new modality of both politics and therapy—that of an “acknowledgment” which suspends diagnosis and “listens” to suffering.

Chapter 1 explores the translational work of ethno-psychiatry in the context of consultations between ethno-psychiatrists and three Nigerian patients at the Centro Fanon. In its various iterations, ethno-psychiatry is characterized by both a set of shared principles and local specificities. The first ethno-psychiatric clinic opened in 1979 in the outskirts of Paris under the direction of psychoanalyst Tobie Nathan who argued for the structuring, therapeutic, and womb-like significance of “culture” for migrant patients. In its broadest sense, ethno-psychiatry thus emphasizes the importance of encouraging migrant contact with “cultural material” (p.43) throughout the therapeutic process. In this vein, Centro Fanon ethno-psychiatrists could advise their Nigerian patients to practice devotion to the goddess Mami Wata, visit African art exhibitions, and engage with African literature as part of their therapy. While Giordano adeptly acknowledges current anthropological critiques of such culturalizing practices, she demonstrates how Italian ethno-psychiatrists worked to complicate Nathan’s original (and often-criticized) framework. While Giordano concedes that invoking “cultural material” risks reifying, stigmatizing, and exoticizing difference, diverting analysis from the political dimensions of migrant suffering, she makes a nuanced case for turning anthropological critiques of culture “upside down” (p.67). In her analysis, Italian ethno-psychiatrists treat culture as a “floating signifier” (p.68)—a “reification without mummification” which is essential to a dynamic framework of care. For Giordano, ethno-psychiatry’s invocation of “culture” enables a plurality of therapeutic strategies and invites rather than forecloses attention to the political aspects of suffering.

In Chapter 2, Giordano historicizes ethno-psychiatry’s framework of care. In Italy, this history includes the intellectual and clinical legacy of Franco Basaglia, leader of Italy’s democratic psychiatry movement, who actively critiqued the “institution” and its hegemonic practices of diagnosis. Religious historian, philosopher, and ethnographer, Ernesto de Martino is another guiding figure; his work validated religion and ritual practice as keys to the social re-integration of psychiatric patients. For Centro founder

and clinician, Roberto Beneduce, Frantz Fanon—whose importance is foregrounded in the Centro's name—remains a formative figure. Centro staff contextualize their practice within conditions of (post)coloniality, drawing direct parallels between the colonial situation and the lives of foreigners in present-day Italy, while striving to marry therapy with political engagement.

Chapter 3 describes the mediating and advisory role of ethno-psychiatrists vis-à-vis other agents of migrant rehabilitation—government officials, bureaucrats, Catholic nuns, and social workers. For Giordano, ethno-psychiatrists are “cultural experts” (p.106) often engaged in critically confronting the ambivalently inclusive residency regimes and rehabilitation practices of a “therapeutic state” which exchanges stories of victimhood for legal status. Citing the influence of international rights discourses which frame sex work according to narratives of human trafficking and modern slavery, Giordano reveals that ethno-psychiatry is often marginal in its radical critique of current psychiatric, legal, and moral regimes of national inclusion. With critical acuity, she discusses the limits of dichotomizing migrant sex workers as either trafficked “victims” or agents complicit in exploitation while addressing the often failed promise of a legal recognition which leaves women's conditions of social and economic precarity unchanged.

Institutional practices of *denuncia* are explored in depth in Chapter 4. For the Nigerian and Eastern European sex workers which Giordano encounters, *denuncia* constitutes the first step in “rehabilitation.” It entails providing legal testimony against one's traffickers by narrating one's victimization. Giordano explores *denuncia* as a testimonial genre and translational regime through which migrant women are “verbalized” (p.138), their fragmented narratives rendered into stable institutional texts used to verify their victim status. Giordano underscores how institutional agents involved in crafting the *denuncia* as text—cultural mediators, the police, interpreters—must ventriloquize women's accounts to produce stories which are intelligible to the state and its rehabilitating optic. In “distilling” the voice of the victim, this bureaucratic genre thus renders untranslatable notions of choice and agency in sex work. Giordano problematizes this paradoxical logic of what she terms “confessional recognition” (p.144) which makes residency conditional upon a limited (and limiting) genre of self-disclosure.

Giordano sustains an engagement with paradox in Chapter 5, which addresses the contradictions of migrant rehabilitation in a women's shelter operated by Catholic nuns. As with practices of *denuncia*, the conditions of shelter-life place migrant women on an idealized trajectory of escape from exploitation, re-socialization, and social re-integration. Giordano illustrates how shelters constitute transitional and liminal sites of

pedagogy where sex workers undergo transformation from “victims” into socially acceptable subjects according to both religious and secular logics of redemption and purification. A key insight of the chapter is that the Catholic logics of shelter-life are consonant with the state’s criteria for successful migrant integration—both render difference into the redemptive imperative of recovery. Nuns working with foreign women are thus engaged in translating their own religious mission, and its universalist logics of conversion, into a secular politics which must relativize alternative “spiritualities.” In foregrounding this contradiction, Giordano demonstrates how Catholic nuns ultimately reproduce Italy’s mainstream politics of recognition through the hierarchical ordering of spiritual practices: while nuns characterize African spirituality as “fertile terrain” (p.194) for its linkages, through missionization, to Christianity (where even “magical” beliefs provide a translational entryway for the Catholic ethos), they characterize Eastern European women as less spiritually malleable, proof of communism’s ostensible legacy of “amorality.”

In a final chapter, Giordano highlights the often irrevocable consequences of migrant translation through the case of Afërdita, an Albanian shelter-resident whose children are placed in foster care after she is hospitalized following a diagnosis of depressive “acute psychosis.” Giordano centers on Afërdita’s struggle to maneuver the various institutional and bureaucratic translations which evaluate her fitness to mother and thus condition her relationship to her children. The social workers, nuns, doctors, and child psychologists overseeing her rehabilitation translate her suffering according to the urgent and diagnostic temporality of finding a “cure”—the imperative that Afërdita quickly re-establish autonomy and regularize her employment and residency. Giordano contrasts “curing” with ethno-psychiatry’s quite opposite temporality of “caring.” “Caring” not only suspends diagnosis, but aims to acknowledge suffering through a “listening” which enables multiple and often disruptive temporalities to co-exist—that of dreams, mourning, melancholia, and repetition. While the ethno-psychiatric mediation of Afërdita’s case provides a potentially radical critique of the state and its unrelenting trajectories of recovery, this chapter reflects on the marginality of “care” within current regimes of migrant translation, and the ultimately tragic consequences for those caught in the state’s bureaucratic webs of meaning.

As a timely and thematically rich reflection on the constraints and possibilities of a culturally sensitive therapeutic practice, *Migrants in Translation* adeptly explores how a constellation of scenes and sites converge upon a shared state project of migrant integration, and how ethno-psychiatry attempts—in its own translations—to mediate these. With nuance and appreciation for the dilemmas of socially engaged clinical work, Giordano positions ethno-psychiatry as both a key node inside this

constellation of care, as well as a site of critical engagement within it. While this text might still further elucidate some of the internal differences between the Centro's various ethno-psychiatrists (who often followed quite different professional trajectories) and thus complexify what it means to practice "ethno-psychiatry" itself, Giordano's multi-sited account ultimately incites a series of important reflections. While questioning the distinction between religious and secular logics of migrant rehabilitation, she offers new and valuable insight into how "cultural expertise" not only confronts (inter)national regimes of immigration and mobility, but how it hits the ground in situated and everyday practices of mediation. Perhaps most essentially, *Migrants in Translation* clears new terrain for understanding how talk of "cultural" difference—rightly the site of caution—might actually destabilize a dominant politics of recognition, both within and beyond the consultation room.

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