
H-France Review Vol. 22 (January 2022), No. 3

Alexandra Perisic, *Precarious Crossings: Immigration, Neoliberalism, and the Atlantic*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2019. 240 pp. Notes and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8142-1410-7; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8142-5552-0; \$29.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-0-8142-7731-7.

Review by Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, Tulane University.

Since the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* in 1993, the concept of an Atlantic space criss-crossed by human diasporas, cultural encounters, and commercial flows has taken hold across literary studies.^[1] Works such as *Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic* (2007), *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (2008), *The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History* (2009), and *Les Empires de l'Atlantique (XIX-XXI siècles): Figures de l'autorité impériale dans les lettres d'expression européenne de l'espace atlantique* (2012), among others, have crafted reading protocols that escape the narrow strictures of national frameworks.^[2] They have delineated a capacious circum-Atlantic paradigm rife with North-South entanglements—between Africa and Europe, or within the Americas—as well as lateral, trans-Atlantic connections. Building on this expansive foundation, Alexandra Perisic's rigorous study of immigrant narratives *Precarious Crossings: Immigration, Neoliberalism, and the Atlantic* establishes new cross-Atlantic points of contact that extend beyond the aftermath of colonialism and the slave trade to tackle the increasingly pertinent issue of global precarity induced by neoliberalism.

Precarious Crossings promotes a multilingual, multiracial, and comparative approach to the Atlantic, one both attuned to similarities between national frameworks and respectful of idiosyncrasies rooted in gender, class, race, and local contexts. The book productively argues that it is only through their transnational deployment that alliances against the tentacular reach of neoliberalism can be formed and sustained. This tactic performs several important shifts. It examines immigrant literature across multiple national frameworks in a move that downplays the issue of integration within a specific national setting to the benefit of a transnational, shared experience of alienation. It remaps the Atlantic from a triangular space into a multipolar space. It emphasizes the intrinsic plurilingualism of the Atlantic region. It reveals lateral connections to cultural spaces in Latin America, Africa, and Europe that cut across the well-travelled routes of imperialism. It spotlights issues of discontent and precarity across contexts in an indictment of the global spread of neoliberalism.

Precarious Crossings is first and foremost a significant contribution to immigration studies. Building on the work of Christopher L. Miller and adapting Hakim Abderrezak's concept of "ex-

centric migrations,” Perisic proposes new avenues for thinking immigration in a neoliberal age.[3] She focuses on inter- and intra- regional mobility patterns rather than routes between former metropolises and colonies and on new genres of immigration narratives, such as detective fiction. Her innovative approach expands our understanding of key phenomena in migration studies, such as push and pull factors of migration, the intricate connections between immigration and emigration, and the intersections and critical overlaps between various forms of mobility, be it economic migration, business travel, or tourism. One question that is never quite elucidated, however, is the choice of the immigration studies paradigm over that of migration. The latter might have seemed a more natural and generative framework given the avowed emphasis on transnational mobility and the decentering of processes of integration on the national scale.

The book takes the form of a comparative reading of what Perisic dubs “immigrant narratives” penned in English, Spanish, and French across a multifarious Atlantic (p. 2). The writers under study hail from places as disparate as Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. They include authors from the Francophone world (Franco-Senegalese Sylvie Kandé, Marie N’Diaye, and Fatou Diome; Guadeloupean Maryse Condé; Swiss-Gabonese Bessora), the Anglophone world (Saint Kitts-native Caryl Phillips), and Latin America (Chilean Roberto Bolaño; Mexican Yuri Herrera; and Puerto Ricans Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro and Giannina Braschi). The narratives studied in the book question the legacy of *négritude* and Afropolitanism. They shed light on the connection between immigration and emigration in the global economy of debt. They probe the continuities and tensions between the damaging logic of neocolonialism and neoliberal multiculturalism in Africa. They highlight the environmental aftermath of labor exploitation, and, against enduring processes of commodification, they delineate an aesthetic of opacity lying in excess of established regimes of value. Across their diverse origins and possibilities, what these stories share is a deliberate positioning at the intersection of multiple legacies of oppression, which run the gamut from colonial oppression and slavery to contemporary forms of neoliberalization and neocolonialism.

Precairety is defined as “a condition characterized by a lack of economic and social stability and protection” (p. 2). It functions both as a product *of* and as a condition *for* the sustainability of the neoliberal order, in which a lack of opportunities ensures the disempowerment of marginalized groups reduced to competing for unreliable resources in a dynamic preclusive of coalition politics and solidarity. The book successfully reappropriates precarity as the common condition of the devalued classes, one that can form the basis for a rethinking of the processes of subjectivation enacted by global neoliberalism. The focus on migrants’ mobility on a transnational scale illuminates the global distribution of insecurity and death in the name of ever-increasing growth. Perisic here adopts Judith Butler’s dichotomy between “precairety” and “precaireousness,” the former a political concept of vulnerability, the latter its ontological counterpart.[4] “Precaireousness” encapsulates the enduring uncertainty, fear, and anxiety thrust upon subjects. Its unequal allotment across categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nationality places the issue of differentiation at the core of the book’s critical model. Perisic rightly insists that the use of precarity as a conceptual node cannot preclude thorough analysis of structural differences between subject positions. If all lives experience precarity, injury, and violence to some degree, not all of them experience them equally. It is one of the book’s most welcome contributions that it issues a stern warning against any attempt at conflating uneven circumstances into an empty, universalist concept applicable to all and therefore unsuited for differential analysis.

This is where literature comes to play a crucial role. In Perisic's nuanced reading, immigrant narratives put the spotlight on modes of resistance and excess weakening the dominance of neoliberalism's productivity model over all areas of human activity. In this respect, these texts are to be read "as sites of a poetics of contestation" (p. 15). Lying at the intersection of immigration, colonialism, legacies of the slave trade, debt, and environmental considerations, the Atlantic narratives under scrutiny unveil complex experiences of global neoliberalism while fostering interdisciplinary conversations around those issues. On a deeper level, they also carve out space for alternative experiences of globalism exceeding the strictures of neoliberal precarity to emerge. The book's well-constructed five chapters provide multiple examples of the rich close readings that Perisic's introduction invites as a remedy against nefarious generalizations.

A first chapter, entitled "The Atlantic Revisited," sets the tone for the book's foundational reevaluation of Atlantic pasts in light of the neoliberal present. Through a comparative reading of works by Kandé, Condé, and Phillips, this well-executed chapter takes to task the legacy of earlier transnational paradigms (e.g., pan-Africanism or the slave trade) as vectors of identity formation. Questioning their current relevance, it highlights present-time, Africa-centric models of cosmopolitanism. Condé's rejection of the paradigm of return to a supposedly homogenous African homeland sketches a discerning portrait of a globalized Africa standing at the crossroads of disparate trajectories. Through a refutation of reified notions of a Black Atlantic (as in Phillips's novel *The Atlantic Sound*, or in the rich ferment of Kandé's transhistoric, African *geste*, which expertly superimposes Malian travel expeditions with contemporary migrant routes), these texts seek to displace the dominance of the Middle Passage as a lens for interpreting present mobility.[5] By so doing, they chart new Atlantic connections that restore a longer arc of African history stretching beyond the legacies of slavery.

Chapter two, "The Indebted Immigrant," probes the multiple resonances of debt as a tool of neocolonial subjectivation. The chapter offers dexterous close readings of two recent novels by Fatou Diome, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) and *Celles qui attendent* (2010).[6] By rethinking the Atlantic as a multinodal space traversed by global flows, Perisic convincingly reframes indebtedness as "an increasingly trans-Atlantic condition" (p. 63). In Diome's zero-sum paradigm, the act of leaving and the act of returning both hold equal weight. Interweaving the "rhetoric of domination and one of aid," the new neoliberal international order fosters dependency on the multinationals dominating the market (p. 72). Perisic shrewdly points out the recalibration of time that this configuration entails: while the men who leave must pay their debt by mortgaging their future, the indebtedness of the women they leave behind is guaranteed by more insidious structures. Through a vigorous critique of the "microloan" model as the only available point of entry into the logic of "development," the chapter complicates the tradition/modernity binary by showcasing the outsized influence of economic restructurings over other obstacles to women's empowerment, such as polygamy, thus contradicting the usual interpretation of this issue as a remnant of anachronistic traditional practices.

A third chapter entitled "'How to get away with murder': Multinational Corporations and Atlantic Crimes," examines Bessora's *Petroleum* (2004) alongside Bolaño's *2666* (2004) to address multinationals' violations of human rights.[7] Through her delineation of a new category of crime fiction, "the neoliberal anti-detective novel," Perisic debunks the rationality of the traditional detective novel by revealing its role in perpetuating precarity and violence over subjects and the environment (p. 89). Laying bare the "neoliberal circuits of corporate power" and their continuation of colonial exploitative networks, the chapter indicts narratives of

“progress” and “development” resting on extractive practices and sanctioned violence (p. 96). By drawing connections between environmental depredation and the objectification of subjects (here in its most extreme form the transformation of female bodies into waste), the argument productively raises the issue of responsibility (or lack thereof) for the staggering violence, which it overlays with that of complicity—of society, of the writer producing desensitizing, crude depictions of the deaths, of the reader consuming them. In this chapter, however, the connection to the Atlantic paradigm of resistance elaborated throughout the book grows more tenuous, and it isn’t exactly clear what the “ethics of precarity [and] collective responsabilization for the human and natural destruction we perform,” which closes the chapter, might encompass (p. 120).

Chapter four, “Trans-Atlantic Opacity” engages Édouard Glissant’s *Relation*, a core model of Atlantic connectivity oddly missing from the book’s inaugural theorization, to query the nature and function of opacity in the context of migratory solidarities.[8] Here Perisic excavates “a mode of aesthetic and ethical cross-cultural thinking that refuses to presume that the other is accessible or knowable in one’s own terms” (p. 125). In an analysis resonant with Victor Segalen’s precursory writing on impenetrability and with postcolonial theory’s reflections on the irrepresentability of the subaltern—yet without direct reference to either intervention—the argument anchors trans-Atlantic subjecthood in the foundational act of “withholding,” which is defined as a “necessary flight and a refusal to return to transparency” (p. 125).[9] Referring to Jacques Rancière, Perisic explains that reclaiming one’s unknowability breeds a form of solidarity premised on common acts of fugitivity and disidentification (p. 125).[10] In the chapter, Arroyo’s focus on the sensible and the sensory aspects of migration, Herrera’s “arid” (p. 137) performance of the *frontera* (border) as a space of perpetual flight, whether along the US-Mexican contact zone or as far away as Iraq, and Ndiaye’s blurry characterization of her protagonists all conspire to unseat the readers from a position of knowledge. Perisic’s powerful final reflections on the dialectical tension between the stranger and the citizen brings the chapter to a welcome theoretical conclusion by highlighting the limits of citizenship as the sine qua non condition for political subjectivation and recognition. In her incisive reading, narratives pave the way for a form of “transnational...responsibility” generative of a novel political space marked by interconnectedness, disidentification from institutionally defined solidarities, and a shared refusal of structural precarity (p. 196).

The last chapter, “Atlantic Undercommons,” extends the reflection on the potential of trans-Atlantic migrations to redraw neoliberal power relations. Drawing an analogy between immigrants and prisoners of the war on terror, Perisic reveals the continuities between the decline of U.S. supremacy and the establishment of an enduring state of emergency. The chapter probes modes of living and speaking that emerge when “the normative conceptual framework that upholds the Empire breaks apart” (p. 160). Perisic’s reading of Braschi’s *United States of Banana* (2011) stresses the potential of creative processes to devise “non imperial ways of relating” (p. 165).[11] The linguistic improvisation that Braschi dubs “foreign-speaking English” coalesces multiple, fugitive modes of being inhabiting a space of disaffection. Against any empire-affirming possibility of repair, Perisic demonstrates how these subjectivities create an “undercommons” cutting across automated modes of thinking and speaking to promote a poetic idiom of dialogism and collective mourning.

One of the most valuable interventions of this book is its relentless interrogation of the kind of comparative thinking needed to challenge the ruthless, all-encompassing logic of neoliberalism. With constant rigor, though a bit heavy-handed on occasion, Perisic’s book illuminates the

multiple pitfalls besetting any attempt at ordering a corpus spanning three continents, three languages, and a myriad of conflicting subject positions--the same pitfalls it itself so skillfully eludes. Comparison as it is delineated in these pages is a momentous practice rife with ethical complexities and political responsibilities. Perisic's detailed exposé offers a clear picture of the risks incurred by careless comparativism--among them, cultural conflation between locales, homogenization of the experience of precarity, and a lack of attention to the specificities of various forms of subjection and marginalization. This witty, elegantly penned, meticulously researched book is bound to spark stimulating conversations around the limits of neoliberalism and the kind of defensive response that literature can mount against it. It is a consummate, insightful argument that should be mandatory reading for anyone interested in Atlantic studies, migration studies, comparative literature, and globalization studies.

NOTES

[1] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

[2] Nancy Priscilla Naro, Roger Sansi-Roca, and David H. Treece, eds., *Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Bill Marshall, *The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009); Yves Clavaron and Jean-Marc Moura, eds., *Les Empires de l'Atlantique (XIX^e-XXI^e siècles): Figures de l'autorité impériale dans les lettres d'expression européenne de l'espace atlantique* (Bécherel: Les Perséides, 2012). Clavaron and Moura's volume has the added benefit of a comparative, plurilingual approach through its inclusion of literature written across the Atlantic in Portuguese, Dutch, Spanish, French, and English.

[3] Christopher L. Miller, "The Slave Trade, *La Françafrique*, and the Globalization of French," in Christie MacDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). This new trend of criticism has been formalized through the concept of "Afro-European" or "Afropean" literature. See, for instance, Dominic Thomas, *Afro-European Cartographies* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas, eds., *Francophone Afropean Literatures* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014). Hakim Abderrezak, *Ex-centric Migrations: Europe and the Maghreb in Mediterranean Cinema, Literature, and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

[4] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

[5] Caryl Phillips, *The Atlantic Sound* (London: Vintage, 2001).

[6] Fatou Diome, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* (Paris: Éditions Anne Carrière, 2003); Fatou Diome, *Celles qui attendent* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010).

[7] Bessora, *Petroleum* (Paris: Denoël, 2004); Roberto Bolaño, *2666* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2004).

[8] By “Relation,” Glissant means a “*relation [...] totale, c’est-à-dire immédiate et portant immédiatement sur la totalité réalisable du monde*” (in *Poétique de la Relation (Poétique III)*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 40)).

[9] Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme: une esthétique du divers (notes)* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1978).

[10] Jacques Rancière, “La Cause de l’autre,” *Lignes* 30, no. 1 (1997): 36-49.

[11] Giannina Braschi, *United States of Banana* (Las Vegas, NV: AmazonCrossing, 2011).

Edwige Tamalet Talbayev
Tulane University
etamalet@tulane.edu

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172