

**Lucht, Hans. 2011. *Darkness before Daybreak. African Migrants Living on the Margins in Southern Italy Today*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 306 pp. Pb.: \$24.95 / £16.95. ISBN: 9780520270732.**

*Darkness Before Daybreak* is a powerful multi-sited ethnography of migration, suffering and meaning-making among Guan fishermen from the Ghanaian coastal town of Senya Beraku, who work as casual labourers in Naples. The book is structured in seven chapters, which move between multiple ethnographic sites (Italy, Libya, Niger and Ghana) and analytic registers. In the opening section, Lucht takes the reader to the high-rise outskirts of Naples, where Guan migrants struggle to survive and create a meaningful, hopeful and connected life in an environment marked by exploitation, overt racism and legal precariousness. Some migrant workers are fortunate to have a regular employer, or *capo*. A very few “tycoons” have papers and documented employment. The vast majority of Guan migrants are dependent upon soliciting irregular construction work early in the morning from an informal roadside market place. This is a cut-throat environment of competition and collusion, with workers subject to the mercy of employers in a context in which ‘there’s no law’ (p. 35). As in other settings of deportable (and hence readily exploitable) labour, Guan migrants have to reconcile the realities of survival wages, long hours and constrained mobility, with their prior imagination of their setting as one of wealth and opportunity—and the need to support family members left behind.

Lucht vividly conveys the daily suffering that characterises West African migrant life in Naples, whether on the unregulated construction sites or the city’s overcrowded early morning buses. Central to his analysis is the concept of existential reciprocity: the belief that, through one’s time, effort, attention and hard work, one is able to act upon the world and to receive from it. Life in Naples can be seen, in this context, as marked by a kind of truncated reciprocity, in which hopes of reward are serially undermined. But it is also (at least as a potentiality) an environment in which it is possible to reconstitute connections and reinvent the self in the face of a home environment perceived as stagnating: to become a *burger* in the idiom of Guan migrants. Suffering in such a setting is seen as an accumulation of “good things waiting to happen”: the “darkness before daybreak” of the book’s title gestures to this hope of reclaiming a rightful reciprocal relation between human effort and external reward.

The second section takes us from destination to journey, by land and sea, from the migrants’ home village of Senya Beraku to Naples. If perilous (and frequently fatal) journeys by sea are the stuff of Western news bulletins, much less is known about the process by which migrants cross the Sahara desert from the West African coast to reach Tripoli. An important contribution of the ethnography is this focus on crossing and the political economy of moving and smuggling. After crossing by lorry or on foot across the Sahara, many of the Senya Beraku men make their own journey from Tripoli to Naples as captains of open wooden fishing boats (the latter often smuggled from Tunisia), their skill as fishermen seen as an advantage when navigating the seas. This is a tragically perilous journey, in which detention in Italy is the least bad outcome in an environment where many captains and their crews never make it to their destination. Drawing on the

philosophical contributions of Giorgio Agamben, Lucht explores this illegalised space of crossing, in which deaths are unrieved and unprosecuted, as a state of exception, where juridical procedures and the deployment of power ‘merge to deprive human beings of their rights and prerogatives’ (p. 156). It is a state that contrasts starkly with the professed humanitarianism of much European discourse. Indeed, with recent shifts in Italian policy towards detention of illegal migrants “at source” in Libya, one could ask, ‘whether the EU is pushing a state of exception deep inside the African continent and, therefore, in the face of legal and political protections for migrants, actually facilitating the criminal activities, dangers, and deaths that it purports to combat’ (p. 175).

The final section of the book takes us to the migrants’ hometown of Senya Be-raku. Here, too, we observe how emergent forms of political and economic rationality serve at once to normalise and illegalise migrant labour from the global south to the north. Lucht unpacks the destructive consequences of structural adjustment and the contradictions of internal and external EU policy, with Guan men and women increasingly having to resort to farming or work abroad because the sea no longer provides for them. Ironically, the primary reason that one-time fishermen are abandoning this source of livelihood is the over-fishing of West African waters, itself exacerbated by unequal agreements that allow use of the waters by foreign (including EU vessels). Following Ferguson’s attention to the differentiated production of global connections through emergent forms of prohibition and regulation, Lucht takes the example of EU fisheries agreements as an instance of policy-making that pays little attention to its detrimental effects on livelihoods (or ultimate consequences for ‘illegal immigration’ into European nation-states): as in earlier eras, ‘the EU [...] seeks continuous access to African resources while incurring little or no obligation to Africans’ (p. 104).

The final chapter couples this political economic critique with a poignant portrait of attempts to grieve the lives of those lost at sea. News of lost husbands and sons is often conveyed by cassette tape, with mourning for the dead delayed or aborted by the uncertainty of whether a loved one might just, one day, return. In an account otherwise focused primarily on male experience, this chapter draws upon detailed ethnographic interviews with the wives and mothers of captains lost at sea to explore the embodied, visceral dimensions of grief as it colonises thoughts and dreams. This, too, is a story of truncated reciprocity, in which the desire for ontological security rubs up against a political economy that devalues “illegal” migrant lives to the point of invisibility.

Lucht’s book is a valuable contribution to literatures on migration, illegality and emergent spaces of exception. Drawing on detailed participant observation and ethnographic interviews, it is at once a rich and nuanced portrait of survival at the margins of Europe, as the subtitle suggests. But it is also much more than this: the force of the ethnography works through the movement between individual lifeworlds, political-economic analysis, and sophisticated theoretical critique, interrogating the dynamics through which “the global” is differentially constituted through the unequal movement of people and capital. It provides a sharp critique of emergent dynamics of exclusion at the limits of Europe, and of the role of exceptional spaces of a-legality in shoring up territorial and symbolic boundaries. In so doing it provides an important counter to celebratory narra-

tives of cosmopolitan sensibilities and transnational attachments in contexts of radically precarious labour. Guan migrants, Lucht argues, ‘often appear less as agents of change and travel, working both sides of the border, than as stuck in a negative zone, recognised neither legally nor socially’ (p. 17). The burdens of living along a highway, the promised mobility of which is, in fact, constrained through the arbitrariness of inadequate public transport and the whim of racist bus drivers is a powerful metaphor for this condition.

Its timeliness, readability and theoretical scope mean that the book deserves to find a place in advanced undergraduate and graduate-level courses on globalisation, north-south migration and the political economy of migrant illegalisation. Its value as a teaching tool would have been extended by the inclusion of an index, and the bibliography is sometimes frustrating for readers keen to follow-up references, with the occasional missing references and some alphabetisation awry. Nonetheless, these do little to detract from the book’s scholarly contribution to literature on migration, nor its relevance for policy debates in Europe about the unbidden consequences of border securitisation.

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