

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

## An Unseen Side of our Global Migrant Crisis

Review by: Mohamed Kamara

March 29, 2021

ISABELLA ALEXANDER-NATHANI, 2020, *Burning at Europe's Borders: An Ethnography on the African Migrant Experience in Morocco*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 288 pp., ISBN 9780190074647.

Keywords: Human Rights, Refugee Crisis, Race, Africa, European Union

*Burning at Europe's Borders* addresses what is now universally known as the African migrant crisis from a perspective that is not often given voice. A long-standing problem first brought to the world's attention by the tragic April 2011 shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa, Italy, the crisis is only expanding in North Africa and across the Mediterranean region. Much has been said and written about the crisis and from multiple disciplinary and policy perspectives in recent years. Cetta Mainwaring's *At Europe's Edge: Migration and Crisis in the Mediterranean* (OUP 2019), which focuses on European migration policies and the maritime *danse macabre* unfolding off the coasts of small countries like Malta, is one good example. But regarding the oft-ignored experiences of black Africans on *terra firma* in the Maghreb, no study is as thorough, sustained, or intellectually rigorous as Alexander-Nathani's book.

Years of ethnographic fieldwork, during which Alexander-Nathani embedded herself in smuggling rings and forest camps and had prolonged interactions with diverse groups of migrants and Moroccans, allowed her to obtain a panoramic view of the issue. Acknowledging her own privilege as a white American working in North Africa, even if she is not always immune from police harassment because of her gender and foreign status, Alexander-Nathani writes with deep compassion for her subjects as well as a keen sense of what makes a compelling story. Through a careful and theoretically sophisticated analysis of data that does not obscure the human story behind it all, Alexander-Nathani presents us a holistic account of the lives of so-called sub-Saharan Africans trapped on the fringes of Moroccan society—a liminal space where they wait and prepare for a crossing into Europe that may or may never happen.

An engaged writer, filmmaker, and human rights activist, Alexander-Nathani problematizes interconnected notions and realities of race, class, citizenship, identity, gender, legality, home, and liminality as they play out in Morocco in both time and space. She characterizes African migrants as “quintessential postmodern subjects” (192) thanks to their uncanny ability to constantly remake themselves by adapting to their precarious circumstances. The organizing principle of the book is *‘hrig,’* a Moroccan Arabic word for ‘illegal immigration,’ which also means ‘burning.’ The term is used to refer to the literal burning of identification papers that link migrants to their past. But as a metaphor for the ardent desire to forego one’s past for a better future, the term could also denote the symbolic burning of oneself so as to be reborn. The author uses the derivative *‘harraga,’* a Maghrebine word that can be translated to mean those who burn: “A burner is one who has sacrificed himself or herself in the hopes that their family may someday know a better world” (117). The meaning of the word could be expanded to include the idea of burning or yearning for justice or for the recognition of the burner’s humanity in a world that constantly dehumanizes him or her.

Even though the why of migration (its push and pull factors) is not a central concern of *Burning at Europe’s Borders*, it looms large on every page of the book. Indeed, Alexander-Nathani acknowledges this when she wonders “if, among some migrant groups, researchers should begin thinking about the collection of ‘oral futures,’ or imaginaries of what lies ahead, as equally important as ‘oral histories,’ or memories of what was left behind” (160). Additionally, she encourages the adoption of “visual life histories” wherein artifacts like photographs are used to elicit from respondents “different kinds of narratives about their experiences of mobility, belonging, liminality, and identity in transitory spaces” (146). All the same, the author’s intentional focus on the migrants’ present in Morocco allows the reader to tune out distractions created by the ubiquitous media images of despondent Africa and tantalizing Europe.

If the book gifts us a composite picture of migration by privileging the unmediated voices of the migrants themselves, it also offers a searing indictment of Europe’s dereliction of its much trumpeted enlightenment values. European politics of what Alexander-Nathani calls “border externalization” (xxxiii)—modeled by Australia and also practiced by the United States under President Donald Trump—is reminiscent of the practice of ‘extraordinary rendition’ which, among other things, allows one country to circumvent its own laws and international conventions by outsourcing to less powerful counterparts practices of abduction, detention, interrogation, and torture. This Western creation of ‘states’ of exception in the global south demonstrates the flagrant willingness on the part of countries like Morocco to serve as implementers of new barbaric policies from former colonial powers.

*Burning at Europe’s Borders* is a gripping ethnography told in language as beautiful and poignant as the strivings of its subjects. Long after the reading of the book, readers will hear the complaints of Phino, Khadija, and the teenage Bambino as they seek a safe crossing to tomorrow. They will feel the angst of the Senegalese exchange student, Ousmane, and of Adil, the black Moroccan marginalized in his own country. They will also remember the voices of ‘white’ Moroccans and others who align themselves alongside and against the embattled migrants. In this sense, *Burning at Europe’s Borders* is a social justice handbook anchored in an uncompromising adherence to scientific research and the pursuit of truth. An important addition to the annals of Anthropology, African Studies and the global study of contemporary migration, no curriculum on the topic will be complete without this book. More generally, it is indispensable reading for anyone interested in understanding the largest humanitarian crisis of

our time, one that is rendered all the more urgent by the deleterious effects of climate change and the alarming resurgence of nationalisms globally. We (politicians, policymakers, academics, students, and ordinary citizens) ignore it at our peril. “At the very least,” Alexander-Nathani exhorts us, “it is our global responsibility to ensure that migration journeys do not trap individuals in places as dangerous as – or even more than – those they are fleeing” (xxxiv).

This book comes with a companion website [insert link: [https://learninglink.oup.com/access/alexander-nathani-student-resources#tag\\_all-chapters](https://learninglink.oup.com/access/alexander-nathani-student-resources#tag_all-chapters)], including chapter-by-chapter discussion questions and other teaching resources, created by Oxford University Press. Another useful companion to Alexander-Nathani’s debut book is her forthcoming documentary film, *The Burning* [insert link: <https://www.smallworldfilms.org>], which chronicles the incredible journeys of three families from across the African continent as they move toward the promise of safer shores.

#### Bibliography:

Mainwaring, Cetta, 2019, *At Europe's Edge: Migration and Crisis in the Mediterranean*, London and New York: Oxford University Press.

**Mohamed Kamara** is an Associate Professor of French and Africana Studies and is the Program Chair of Africana Studies at Washington and Lee University. A refugee from Sierra Leone, he earned his B.A. from Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone), his M.A. from Purdue University, and his Ph.D. from Tulane University in 2001. His research and teaching interests span African history, French and Francophone literatures, post-colonialism, race, migration, and refugee studies. In addition to his academic research, he is also a poet, fiction writer, and editorialist.

