

**The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe. By  
Milena Belloni. University of California Press, 2019. pp. 228**

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## The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe

Shreya Bhat

### BOOK REVIEW

Belloni, M. (2019). *The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe*. University of California Press, pp. 228. ISBN: 9780520298705

**HISTORY** Published 28 April 2022


Milena Belloni's *The Big Gamble: The Migration of Eritreans to Europe* captivates its reader through the Eritrea–Ethiopia–Sudan–Libya–Italy corridor to shed light on the material and non-material resources invested by Eritrean refugee men and their families in their migration trajectories towards North American and Scandinavian countries. Belloni successfully aims to make visible the socio-economic choices available to her research participants at different stages in their migration. *The Big Gamble* synthesizes Belloni's informal interactions with “protagonists” — mostly Eritrean refugee men in Italy, Eritrean men from refugee camps in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Khartoum in Sudan, and those planning their departure from Asmara in Eritrea whom the author met during an intensive multi-sited ethnography conducted between 2008 and 2016. These protagonists, Belloni illustrates, navigate emic perceptions of risks and dan-

gers involved in realizing their migration aspirations and constantly moving onwards from one destination to another.

*The Big Gamble* delivers on two main fronts: first, Belloni introduces the idea of cosmologies of destinations to indicate the hierarchical organization of destination countries as perceived by Eritrean refugee men and their families and to examine how such an organization shapes migrants' journeys. Exploring multiple cosmologies of destinations, she argues, provides an insight into (im)mobility as experienced by migrants, thereby urging the reader to examine the role of aspirations, risk perception, shared moral norms and influence of families on the decision-making process rather than merely attributing refugee movements to emergency and exceptionality. Second, Belloni borrows the concept of **entrapment** from gambling studies to further her argument and to demonstrate that high-risk

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migrants, "not unlike gamblers" (p. 126), become increasingly compelled to take risks on account of cumulative emotional and social costs as they proceed along a journey despite facing obstacles. **The Big Gamble** offers a critical perspective on high-risk migration without falling into the trap of overemphasizing vulnerability.

Between its introductory and concluding chapters, **The Big Gamble** alternates amid unfolding life stories of its protagonists and Belloni's astute ethnographic observations from different field sites. Chapter 1 shows how both positive and tragic aspects of emigration are normalized in Eritrea, where providing for one's family defines Eritrean masculinity and adulthood. Belloni's protagonists demonstrate that becoming a refugee might not always be an involuntary choice, but it might reflect the operationalization of possibilities available to an individual. Chapter 2, based on Belloni's interactions with Eritrean refugees in camps in Ethiopia and Sudan, sheds light on the social, economic, and cultural factors that influence both the desire for mobility and the choice to remain immobile among refugees. Furthermore, the chapter addresses the importance of transnational family networks and diasporas on Eritrean refugees' ability to leave the camps and move onwards.

Chapter 3 seeks to understand why Eritrean refugees, despite having arrived in Italy, persist on moving to North American or Scandinavian countries. Employing a transnational frame, Belloni observes that the decision of Eritrean refugees to move onwards results from a combination of family expectations, peer pressure, and migrants' individual aspirations, all featuring within a cosmology of destinations shared by Eritreans. With Chapter 4, Belloni takes the reader back to her time spent in Ethiopia and Sudan, interacting with both Eritrean refugees and

smugglers. She examines how protagonists of the book claim their right to mobility in the face of lack of safe and legal alternatives of migration through two key means: by either forging transnational marriages or seeking the assistance of smuggling networks.

Chapter 5 sums up the analysis by bringing to the table an analytical framework that draws upon the concept of entrapment from gambling studies to enable further research into developing a nuanced understanding of motivations that drive high-risk migration. While being careful to distinguish between the behaviour of high-risk migrants and refugees and the compulsive behaviour of gamblers, Belloni demonstrates that the risk-taking of Eritrean refugees is a sequential process. Decisions at every stage of migration are influenced by psychological and social pressures that accumulate over the course of a migrant's journey. In Belloni's view, this framework might equip us "to better understand why asylum seekers repeatedly run very high risks in order to reach developed countries" (p. 136), despite tightening immigration controls.

The strength of **The Big Gamble** lies in the personalized manner in which Belloni narrates her findings, impressively condensing reflections, anxieties, and experiences gathered during a multi-sited ethnography, making it an engaging and easy read. She effectively incorporates maps and photo panels into the text, enabling the reader to travel with her along the migration corridor. The structural organization of every chapter remains consistent throughout as Belloni puts forth her claims, introduces key concepts, and goes on to draw from ethnographic research and field notes to demonstrate how the concepts aid the analysis.

As an ethnographer, Belloni acknowledges her shortcomings and reflects on her positionality as a white Western female

researcher on more than one occasion. For instance, despite being intimately exposed to and writing about the social and financial struggles of her protagonists, Belloni spends time self-reflecting on her inability to offer them much support outside of her capacity as a researcher. However, reflections and discussions on the methodology are presented in the appendix rather than being weaved throughout the body of the book. Another crucial issue remains: **The Big Gamble** drives at showing the parallels between high-risk migration and gambling behaviour to provide a new frame through which to assess refugee movements. Yet, the comparison to gambling is addressed in detail at the very end, when this contribution would highly benefit from being unpacked more meticulously earlier on.

Overall, **The Big Gamble** holds the potential to guide young ethnographers interested in studying transnational migrations

to execute a multi-sited ethnography in its truest sense—going back and forth between refugees or migrants in host countries and their families in transit or source countries to draw linkages using information collected at different points in time.

### About the author

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