

## INTRODUCTION. NARRATIVES OF MOBILITY IN THE CRIME GENRE

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This issue of *Scritture migranti* (15/2021) aims to investigate a phenomenon that is highly characteristic of contemporary crime fiction on a global level: the representation and thematization of multiculturalism, mobility across borders, and transcultural identities. Thanks to its international circulation and its ability to highlight social and political issues throughout the lens of the investigation, crime fiction offers a privileged perspective through which to observe the encounters and the conflicts associated with migrancy and other forms of social and cultural mobility. As discussed in the introduction, the contributors to this issue reflect on notions such as “cultural identity”, “integration”, and “transnationality” while addressing a range of topics that includes genre blending, the representation of multi-ethnic places, expat writers and characters.

### *Keywords*

Crime fiction; Mobility; Cultural Identity; Transculturality.

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# INTRODUCTION

## NARRATIVES OF MOBILITY IN THE CRIME GENRE

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### *Mobility in Crime Narratives*<sup>1</sup>

A famously, or even notoriously, popular genre, crime fiction suffered from a number of preconceptions pivoting on its formulaic patterns and its belonging to a mass cultural market. The critical status of these narratives however has dramatically changed in recent years, and what was once commonly considered as lowbrow fiction is now increasingly recognized as a sophisticated literary field that effectively investigates a whole range of highly topical cultural, ideological and societal issues. A number of scholars has underlined its aptitude to expose the relationship between texts and society (Knight 1980; Vanoncini 1993; Nicol *et al.* 2011; Anderson *et al.* 2012; Allan *et al.* 2020) by capturing and incorporating social and cultural turns, reflecting the anxieties and values of contemporary societies.

To acknowledge and delve into this potential was the main focus of the EU-funded H2020 research project *DETECT - Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives* (2018-2021). In particular, *DETECT* investigated how crime fiction contributes to shaping the European cultural identity intended as a continuous process of metamorphosis fostered by the mobility of people, products, and representations across the continent.

This issue of *Scritture migranti* (15/2021), which stems directly from *DETECT* and its mission, aims to explore the phenomenon of crime fiction through the lens of *mobility*, in the plural shades of meanings this word evokes. Broadly speaking, mobility

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<sup>1</sup> The authors share the scientific responsibility of the present paper. Formally, the first paragraph, «Mobility in Crime Narratives» is to be attributed to Sara Casoli; the third, «Crime Fiction and Transcultural Identity» to Maurizio Ascari; the fourth, «Giving Voice to Mobility» to Silvia Baroni. The second paragraph, «Mobilizing the Crime Genre», has been written by the three of them.

is envisioned here as a widespread circulation of representations, tropes, characters, authors and narrative models. As synonym of circulation, mobility is highly characteristic of contemporary crime fiction on a global level and opens to a range of perspectives. A first significant aspect of this inherent dynamism is genre blending, which interestingly tempers the formulaic character of the crime-and-detection paradigm, energising the evolution of the genre itself. As sustained by Gulddal *et al.* (2019, 1), crime fiction

must be seen as a genre constantly violating its own boundaries. There is an unacknowledged experimental streak to this genre – an easy slippage between affirming the codes and conventions on the one hand, and on the other hand boldly calling into question and venturing beyond its textual, generic and national traditions.

To “mobilize the genre concept” (ivi, 9) means to recognize that the narrative patterns of crime fiction are not fixed and bare-bone formulas, but rather the result of a continuous process of hybridization also resulting from the transnational mobility of themes, tropes and even cultural stereotypes. On that perspective, the contributions to this issue emphasize the “cultural work” (Rohr *et al.* 2000) crime narratives perform in raising questions about national identity by promoting diversity, mobility and transcultural exchange as values.

### *Mobilizing the Crime Genre*

National borders are constantly trespassed by styles, narrative structures and themes that circulate all over the world, even though the academic debate has fully acknowledged this global dimension only in recent times (Gulddal *et al.* 2019; Gulddal and King 2020). Local characters and settings amalgamate with global plot structures and narrative devices in transnational narratives, creating new relations between foreign and native forms.

That is what Cristina Trincherro demonstrates in her contribution, through the case study of the representation of Turin in crime narratives. The paper displays how French, Italian and Spanish crime novelists reinterpret the urban, historical identity

of Turin, emphasizing its connotation as an “esoteric city”, first and foremost in relation to the presence of the Holy Shroud. In this case, crime fiction offers the possibility to think about the “topographic identity” of a city and how this image has been transfigured into a simulacrum by foreign authors of religious thrillers. Following the narrative pattern of Dan Brown’s best-selling *The Da Vinci Code*, the mystic aura of the city has both become a migrant trope and crystallized into a stereotype. As Trinchero highlights, by exploiting the esoteric appeal of Turin foreign authors such as Sébastien Cataldo, Caterine Marret and Julia Navarro have ensured the city a position in the global imagination of crime.

A second perspective on the mobility of crime fiction concerns the transnational character of this genre, a constellation of texts that can be probably best understood today within the framework of world literature due to the «existence of a vast and ongoing dialogue between crime fiction writers, texts and readers across national, cultural, linguistic and temporal borders» (Gulddal *et al.* 2019, 17; see also Stougaard-Nielsen 2020).

Up to this point, we have focused on mobility as a category that helps us understand the production and circulation of crime fiction, but this genre also *thematizes* transnational mobility, as shown by the forms of cultural and ethnic diversity embedded in crime narratives. Indeed, while «foreign characters and foreign settings have a privileged space in crime fiction since its origins» (Anderson *et al.* 2012, 1), contemporary crime narratives intensify this social gaze, shedding light onto a quickly changing and super complex reality, exploring the intersectional dimension of identities as well as the resistance of stereotypes.

In their articles, Federica Ambroso and Sara Casoli analyse the spreading of representational stereotypes associated with ethnicity. The former achieves this purpose by examining the mobility of ethnic figures in a corpus of noir narratives, emphasising the relation between social and spatial concerns, the latter questioning the figure of the foreign in Italian crime television series.

Federica Ambroso tackles the representation of social distinctions between natives and immigrants in a specific corpus of crime novels set in three increasingly

multicultural cities – Bologna, Limoges and Thessaloniki. As assessed by the author, the difficult relationship between citizens and immigrants leads to mutual distrust or outright antagonism, and it is spatially concretized in the presence of ethnic districts. This spatial separation between natives and immigrants can be seen as a physical, tangible embodiment of the cultural estrangement and the stereotyped, biased visions separating these two social groups. As a matter of fact, a large number of European crime narratives seems to react to the challenges of cultural diversity by representing foreigners via the crystallized image of the migrant as a criminal or deviant subject, proving that clichéd representations still display a noteworthy capacity to circulate through different countries.

The challenging of the stereotypes associated with characters representing cultural and/or ethnic diversity is central also in Sara Casoli's contribution, which examines the representational patterns of immigrants and ethnic subjects in contemporary Italian TV crime series. The author outlines three typologies in the characterization of ethnic minority characters according to the narrative role they play: the victim, the criminal, and the detective. Casoli argues that while in classic crime series "all'italiana" (Buonanno 2012) ethnic minorities were portrayed in a very stereotyped way, as victims or villains, the situation has changed in contemporary productions. Thanks to the adoption of the "complex tv" paradigm and the progressive "noirification" of crime series, ethnic characters now tend to be depicted in a more nuanced light. Actually, as a consequence of the complexification of their fictional identities, ethnic characters in TV crime (and noir) series now play narrative roles once precluded, such as the criminal anti-hero and in particular the detective.

Contemporary crime narratives can be regarded as a narrative laboratory that highlights forms of exclusion and segregation while making room also for practices of inclusion and negotiation. The aptitude of crime fiction to present itself as an effective tribune «to deliver usable representations of ethnic "otherness"» (Dobrescu 2013, 44) and to problematise ethnic diversity and its representations emerges also in Barbara Pezzotti's analysis of the works of Sicilian writers Andrea Camilleri and Santo Piazzese. Pezzotti underlines how crime fiction calls our attention to the relation

between social hierarchies (as based on race, ethnicity and culture) and spatial divisions stemming from various kinds of borders. However, by analysing Camilleri's *The Terracotta Dog* and *The Snack Thief*, as well as Santo Piazzese's *I delitti di via Medina-Sidonia* in the light of the concepts of transculturality and "third space" (Bhabha 1994), Pezzotti points out how these crime stories provide a transcultural space of negotiation that insists on the common core of culture and history shared by Mediterranean countries. This idea of a shared cultural heritage is used to fight and problematise the stereotyped vision of ethnic subjects: in fact, in Camilleri and Piazzese's novels migrants and foreigners who arrive in Sicily are not seen as invaders but as homecomers, thus presenting a counter-narrative with the aim to defuse the present anti-immigration rhetoric.

While the representation of the foreign as a criminal and a victim seems still dominant in European contemporary crime fiction for several reasons (Mondello 2010), there also exist other kinds of narratives that try to pinpoint liminal figures characterised as multicultural and multiethnic heroes. On that perspective, Silvia Baroni analyses the literary series Andrea Cotti devoted to inspector Luca Wu, whose very name is revelatory of his transcultural identity, due to his being born in Bologna in a family of Chinese migrants. Baroni's analysis of the detective's culturally-fragmented identity calls into question the labels of "multicultural detective fiction" and of "ethnic detective fiction" as they have been defined by several critics (Gosselin 1998; Pepper 1999; Macdonald and Macdonald 1999; Del Zoppo 2009) to describe works concerning issues of social integration. As an alternative, Baroni proposes the notion of "intercultural detective fiction" to identify those narratives that center on this idea of fracture, exploring the cultural *entre-deux* ethnic characters feel. On the other hand, the paper highlights the narrative strategies adopted by Andrea Cotti to depict the fragmented identity of his detective, which is reflected in the setting of the stories – multicultural cities such as Bologna, Rome and Shenzhen – as well as in the use of a recurring trope in contemporary crime fiction, that is the culinary theme.

The concept of identity is also at the core of Emilie Guyard's contribution, delving into the case of an expat writer, Carlos Salem, who migrated to Spain from

Argentine. If Luca Wu seems stuck in-between two cultural contexts, Carlos Salem's characters appear to have overcome this matter by blurring the boundaries separating national identities. Analysing Carlos Salem's first novel, *Camino de Ida*, Guyard pinpoints the fact that Salem – as a migrant himself – conceives national identities as fluid and “rhizomatic”, and literature as an experience of an itinerant identity that questions the idea of “origin”. Rather than belonging to an “Argentine crime genre”, Carlos Salem's stories are quintessentially transnational, although they also carry – through the use of irony – an implicit criticism of globalization and its erasing of national specificities.

### *Crime Fiction and Transcultural Identity*

As we can see, what emerges from these papers is the crucial role identity plays in a number of contemporary crime fictions. Broadly intended as the qualities, traits, appearance, and/or expressions that characterize an individual or a group, a city or even a region, identity has been increasingly redefined as a volatile heuristic category, whose meaning is constantly negotiated.

Although occasionally crime narratives still solidify identity, one can safely claim that the majority of today's crime stories rather investigate its actual porousness. Far from confirming stereotypical expectations concerning the stability of borders, today's most innovative and ideologically informed crime fictions actually explore contact-zones, liminality and the sets of exchanges that mark migrant realities. As the contributions to this issue highlight, contemporary crime writers are very much interested in transnational phenomena and in the social, political, and cultural challenges of increasingly multicultural and multiethnic societies.

As discussed in studies like Adrienne Gosselin's *Multicultural Detective Fiction* (1998), Andrew Pepper's *Bridges and Boundaries* (1999), Ed Christian's *The Post-Colonial Detective* (2001), Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller's *Sleuthing Ethnicity* (2003), Anderson et al.'s *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction. Transcultural Representations* (2012), the crime genre has progressively questioned the idea of national

identity as simplistically homogeneous to promote a more realistic vision of society. As noted by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (2009, 3), this shift has also been driven

by our increasing awareness of the fact that, from its inception, the detective genre has been intrinsically engaged with epistemological formations that are not simply those of ‘society’ in the abstract—that is, dominant cultural groups and their hegemonic discourse—but those produced in encounters between nations, between races and cultures.

Thanks to its intrinsic tendency to engage with the complexities of social formations, notably in contact zones, where frictions are more easily produced, crime fiction helps us recognize the composite, heterogeneous nature of European societies, resulting from increasing social and cultural mobility. As synthesized by Thomas Morsch (2020, 15),

(a) the notion of identity (singular) is to be investigated through the many contradictory representations of gender, ethnic, national, and class identities (plural) in contemporary European crime fiction, and the assumption that (b) identity is inherently fluid, unstable, shifting, and because of this European identities are inevitably ‘unfinished’.

### *Giving Voice to Mobility*

In addition to the aforementioned papers, the thematic core of this special issue comprises two interviews and two creative contributions, which round up our investigation into the theme of mobility in crime fiction.

Anna Baldini’s conversation with Tom Benjamin and Silvia Baroni’s dialogue with Andrea Cotti delve into the relationship between crime narratives and transcultural identities in order to uncover the experiences and worldviews from which the social and cultural inquiries of the two writers actually stemmed.

The author of a trilogy devoted to inspector Daniel Leicester, a detective of English origins who happens to be “stuck” in Bologna, Tom Benjamin explains in his conversation with Anna Baldini how important describing Italian culture from «an outsider/insider perspective» is to him. Through his Italianate character, Benjamin manages to illustrate his own experience as an “expat” living in two cities that appear so different to him, London and Bologna. While foreign writers are used to imagining



Italy as encapsulated in the stereotyped formula “la dolce vita”, Benjamin’s narratives aim to depict the real Italian life, and in particular the evolution attained by society. Coherently with his creator’s stance, detective Daniel Leicester is an attentive observer of the social scene, who ultimately manages to turn his unbelonging into an asset, also thanks to the complimentary perspective his father-in-law – formerly a senior officer of the Italian police – provides when needed.

By creating his Italian-Chinese detective Luca Wu Andrea Cotti likewise reaffirms the importance of in-betweenness and of a transnational/transcultural “gaze”. Moving from the belief that crime fiction must take into account the complexity of nowadays reality, Andrea Cotti creates a character who, being at the same time «Italian and Chinese, neither Italian nor Chinese», experiences in the first person the cultural fractures that characterise contemporary societies.

Embracing the notion of mobility from a transmedia perspective, one of the most appreciated illustrators of Italian crime fiction, Onofrio Catacchio, has gifted us with the image of Luca Wu thanks to a previously unpublished sketch he made on purpose for this issue of *Scritture migranti*. The *entre-deux* lived by the character is represented in the oriental traits of his visage, stigmatising how Luca is generally seen from others, while his «Italianness», that is the hidden core of his identity, is substantiated in the urban décor, the Due Torri behind him.

In conclusion to this special issue of *Scritture migranti*, two creative texts evoke other related aspects of mobility. Inspired by several *faits divers* that occurred in Livorno, Veronica Galletta’s short story *Non nel mio cortile* poetically expands – against the backdrop of the city’s polluted waterfront – on the legal and *illegal* traffic of people and goods that has always characterized Livorno as a seaport. Galletta’s story, moreover, highlights how fictions have always stocked up from current news, thus establishing a seamless circulation between reality and narratives.

Ugo Fracassa and Giulio Carlo Pantalei likewise shed light on the factual mobility of texts and the way they circulate in the cultural market by translating an excerpt from *A Grave for a Dolphin* (1956), a novel Duke Alberto Denti di Pirajno – an Italian writer and doctor – originally wrote in English. The recent rediscovery of

this text is due to no less than David Bowie, who declared in *Bowie's Bookshelf: The Hundred Books that Changed David Bowie's Life* that this text had inspired one of his most famous songs, *Heroes*. The truth is Denti di Pirajno was once appreciated by critics and writers such as Karen Blixen and Eugenio Montale, although *A Grave for a Dolphin* has never been translated into Italian before. Rooted in the author's colonial experience in Africa, the book provides a curious perspective into the physician's cultural encounters with alternative treatments and foreign traditions.

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