

# The emerging of solidarity along unauthorized routes: postcards of migrant encounters

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The aim of this article is to stress the possibility of a specific and innovative gaze on borders and borderlands: one that puts solidarity as an encounter and a fabric among people on the move enacting a relentless dynamism along unauthorized routes, constituting one of the key elements for understanding the journey as a social construction. The turn we propose aims to mark a clear and novel theoretical break by: (i) overcoming the opposition between state mobility governance and migrants' agency; (ii) considering unauthorized movements as a variable social construction that can be originally explored from the perspective of solidarity networks. To deepen the theoretical implications of this hypothesis, we would like to start from our ethnographic notes in different borderlands, along the internal and external European frontiers, where we have been doing fieldwork since 2016, about the everyday deployment of grass-root solidarity.

**Keywords:** solidarity, autonomy of migration, borders, ethnography, undocumented migrants, European border regime

## **Introduction: postcards from the border**

The aim of this article is to stress the possibility of a specific and innovative gaze on borders and borderlands: one that puts solidarity as an encounter and a fabric among people on the move enacting a relentless dynamism along unauthorized routes, constituting one of the key elements for understanding the journey as a social construction. We assume the act of moving and the traces left behind as turbulent, hidden, unpredictable because permanently criss-crossed by contingent power relations among different actors and practices (Papastergiadis, 2000) in a landscape that Maurizio Ambrosini (2021) defines as “battleground”.

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Borderlands have been addressed by scholars according to and underlining several dimensions: violence, surveillance, hostility, containment and, for sure, the agency of unauthorized migrants in overcoming every type of institutional and physical blockage (Augustova, Sapoch, 2020; mEUterei Authors' Collective, 2022; Parker, Vaughan-Williams, 2009). Yet, our point of departure is the theory of autonomy of migration: i.e., we take the everyday practice of freedom of movement as a driving force in shaping migratory trajectories (Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, Pickles, 2015; De Genova, 2017; Mezzadra, 2010; Monsutti, 2018). Within this framework, institutional apparatuses and bordering strategies are conceived as a response to excessive mobilities and to debordering tactics.

In this picture, however, the role of support networks towards migrants in transit has been less under scrutiny. In the broader context of migration studies, scholars investigated and highlighted at a more general level the role of social networks composed by migrants and citizens (Boyd, 1989; Schiller, Basch, Blanc, 1995) and how they affect the forms of settlement in receiving societies, the impact on sending societies, and the consequent cultural and material transformations. If we look at the European context, since the “long summer of migration” in 2015 (Hess, Kasperek, 2017; Mezzadra, 2018), the term “solidarity” has been widely employed directly by the groups supporting migrants in transit. Conversely, these groups and networks have been mostly underrepresented in academic research on migration studies, while becoming increasingly important and prominent actors in contemporary Europe (Fontanari, Borri, 2017; Rygiel, 2011; Tazzioli, Walters, 2019). The very concept of solidarity, despite lying at the foundation of our disciplines (Durkheim, 1933), has often been neglected in social and political sciences (Alexander, 2014; Kymlicka, 2015). Recently, however, solidarity has been the fulcrum of developing scientific interests on migration at the crossroads of anthropology, sociology and human geography: a field that, with Giliberti and Potot (2021), we could call *solidarity studies* (Bauder, 2020; Birey *et al.*, 2019; Della Porta, Steinhilper, 2021; Filippi, Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2021; Schwiertz, Schwenken, 2022).

Scholars highlighted how solidarity networks within Europe have been aiding migrants and refugees on the move through hospitality, spaces of care, practical knowledge sharing, distribution of essential goods, and mitigation to border crossing violence, going beyond the denouncing of dubious institutional practices (Giliberti, 2020). Babels (2019) has shown that this “grassroots hospitality” can reframe the very concept of citizenship, in a interaction between the intimate and the political. Solidarity networks can act in a humanitarian way, trying to compensate States shortcomings (Dijstelbloem, Walters,

2019). Alternatively, they are moved by civil disobedience (Lendaro, 2018), direct social action (Zamponi, 2018), and open transgression, as in the case of the No Borders movements (King, 2016), in a more radical and political frame.

Rather than seeing the humanitarian and the political as two opposed categories to classify these repertoires of actions, we interpret them as two poles of a continuum, with a consistent and multifarious area of overlapping. In fact, as we will show, humanitarian and political practices are coming together: the first, due to their criminalization, are becoming more political, while the latter, forced in a context of emergency, fulfil humanitarian activities. We think that an analytical gaze which combines these two dimensions, bringing together views on civil society and social movements, can intercept often-invisible practices, ideas, imaginaries and futures of a post-national European space which sparkle from the social encounters between migrants and solidarity networks along the routes, despite the violence of the bordering processes.

Elsewhere we have suggested the idea - a real metaphor indeed - of a contemporary *underground railroad* to give an account of the reproduction of mobility and turbulent circulations despite state efforts to contain and filter the flows (Mezzadra, 2020; Queirolo Palmas, Rahola, 2022). The turn we propose in this article aims to mark a clear and novel theoretical break by: (i) overcoming the opposition between state mobility governance and migrants' agency; (ii) considering unauthorized movements as a variable social construction that can be originally explored from the perspective of solidarity networks.

In order to deepen the theoretical implications of this hypothesis, we would like to start from our ethnographic notes (Clifford, Marcus, 1986; Willis, Trondman, 2000) that we have taken in different borderlands, where we have been doing fieldwork since 2016, about the everyday deployment of border control practices and grass-root solidarity towards migrants in transit. In these years we have been investigating the external frontiers of the EU and the development of the hotspot approach in Sicily (Anderlini, 2022; Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2021), and the resurgence of EU internal frontiers at the French-Italian border along the Susa Valley and Ventimiglia (Filippi, Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2021; Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2020). From a methodological perspective, ethnography allowed us to be deeply imbricated in the field, building our knowledge on the direct and intense relations with those who inhabit and shape these social worlds. Ethnography, in its attempt to produce a "thick description" of reality (Geertz, 1973), attentive to the study of minute practices within a structural analysis, implies a true immersion of the researcher in the context studied, exposing herself profoundly to first-person involvement, through unexpected encounters and fruitful hindrances, which can decisively enlighten otherwise hidden elements of a social phenomenon.

Some of the research fields we addressed have not been initially conceived within a unitary project of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 2010) - despite some of them are multi-sited per se (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023) but they become all interconnected explorations on the developments of the internal and external European frontiers, on the turbulent mobility of migrants on the move and on the relentless activity of solidarity networks. In our writing, hence, we embrace the suggestion of George E. Marcus (1994: 46) to «problematize the spatial», when analyzing a social phenomenon emerging simultaneously in different loci and social contexts. To partially detach our ethnographic writing from spatial definitions and fixities, we present, instead of fieldnotes, “postcards”: text pieces able to compose a mosaic of cultural interpretations (Clifford, 2019: 62) around the diffuse practices of solidarity. These postcards will compose the first part of our article, and that will be reconnected in the second part, where we will integrate them into a broader theoretical landscape on solidarity.

## **1. Postcard 1 - Backstage of an ethnographic film in Gran Canaria (winter 2023)**

Mor is one of the main characters in the film we just finished editing. Like tens of thousands of other migrants who departed from the beaches of Senegal, Mauritania, Morocco and the western Sahara, Mor landed in the Canary Islands during the pandemic period on board of a *pirogue*, the traditional boats used by fishermen in Senegal<sup>1</sup>. This is how he recounts the experience of the sea voyage:

when you're on top, on the *pirogue*, there's always something to do. Two people are at the helm, one up to steer and the other down, near the engine to give gas. We had two engines, one 60 horsepower and the other 40, which was better. Then, there are those who prepare the food, those who remove the water that comes in. And you must take shifts, because you get tired, and you have to rest. On the *pirogue* there is always work to be done.

Mor speaks quietly and cheerfully about the voyage, avoiding manifesting any trauma from that experience, nor portraying himself as a victim.

Life on board is a common, cooperative one.

<sup>1</sup> See fig. 1, supplementary materials available for free: [https://static.francoangeli.it/facontenuti/riviste/riviste\\_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf](https://static.francoangeli.it/facontenuti/riviste/riviste_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf)

The trip was supposed to take 7 days, but it took us 15 because of bad weather. We had two thousand liters of gasoline, and food and water for 10 days. We drank seawater. You know, I'm a fisherman, we used to run out of gas, out of food, out of water, or with breakdowns. We knew what to do. Drinking seawater, small sips every day, allows you not to die. We had four deaths. The children on the pirogues always have food, an extra quota is kept aside for them. Then came *Salvamento Marítimo*<sup>2</sup>, and we have been rescued.

The cooperation during the voyage, in his account, contrasts with the moment of departure:

It's a struggle, because you arrive to the big *piroque* with dinghies from the beach. It can happen that those who have paid, get scared and don't want to get on. Then there are the people who swim to reach the *piroque* and try to get in. Often there are fights. They were asking me for 500 euros for the trip, in the end I gave 150, I am a fisherman, you know.

Those who have a professional experience of the sea are always useful on board and Mor often claims during our conversation his professional status - as he has worked for four years as a fisherman in Mbour, even though he is from Touba, the holy Sufi city of Senegal. The *piroque* stays away from the coast, making stops and picking up travelers from the beaches. It is a kind of bus with stops and prices that are permanently contracted and therefore variable. «The sea police? (*laughing*) You pay, and you begin your journey at the time of the night they told you they will not be on patrol».

Upon arrival, after the rescue, it is the turn of the Frontex interview. Thus speaks Ousman, also a Senegalese fisherman and a film's protagonist:

we left Senegal at 11 p.m. and at 11 a.m. we arrived near Yoff, where we found a small boat fishing. There was one guy alone in the boat, he said he wanted to come with us to Spain. "And what are you doing with this boat?" We asked him. So he called a friend who brought his boat back to Senegal and so he got on board. We were lucky, he had a better GPS than us, with a map. That GPS guided us. When *Salvamento* arrived, we threw it overboard. Then once ashore, we said that all the people on the boat were the same, there are no captains here. That's what we said. Why? Because it's for solidarity, if you say who is the captain, they put him in jail. To say that, would be a bad thing.

<sup>2</sup> *Salvamento Marítimo* ([www.salvamentomaritimo.es](http://www.salvamentomaritimo.es)) is a company part of the public Spanish administration linked to the Transportation Ministry, devoted to search and rescue activities at sea.

Ousman now works as a laborer in a hotel. He owes his current status thanks to a Norwegian businesswoman who moved to the Canary Islands and opened the doors of her house to him and other young migrants when they arrive during the pandemic; they still call her “Mama Africa”. Mor, on the other hand, lived for a long time in a solidarity hostel de la Isleta, a working-class neighborhood in Las Palmas. After a few months picking up grapes in *main-land* - as many migrants here call Spain - he returned to the Canary Islands and lives with two humanitarian activists who are hosting him.

We are sitting around a table in a bar explaining the film we just finished: we the researchers, the filmmaker, and a Guatemalan boy who has escaped from the *Maras*. It is a Saturday night, and we are wondering how to continue. We all end up dancing together at the sounds of a punk rock contest of a Scottish band, who arrived here at the invitation of an LGBTQ solidarity collective that enlivens the life of the neighborhood and offers sometimes food, showers and shelters for people on the move. Mor is the only black man at the concert, certainly among the younger ones as the average age is around 60, and he moves with perfect ease in this environment so distant from his own. Perhaps, the idea of solidarity as an encounter lies precisely in making possible these kinds of experiences, these unforeseen deviations from a narrow ethnic and cultural positioning - and therefore detention-like and segregated - on which institutional reception is built here in Gran Canaria, as often elsewhere: a camp, an ID bracelet, an operator, a procedure, a subsidy, a track to follow.

## **2. Postcard 2 - The Jacket, a graphic novel on the circulation of solidarity clothing at the French-Italian border (fall 2021)**

Unlike the Canary Islands, the Susa Valley constitutes an internal border of EUrope. It is one of the routes to escape from Italy and continue the journey north, towards France, as well as Germany, despite Dublin regulation on first country of arrival. It's generally known as the alpine route, in opposition to the southern passage from Ventimiglia to Nice. Like the Canary Islands, thousands of people, mainly arriving from the Balkan Route, have managed to cross this borderland in the last years (Filippi, Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2021). A set of different actors and safe places, from the two sides of the borders, contribute to open the floor for these unauthorized mobilities. Welcome shelters have multifarious background, some more formal, linked to association somehow financed by local institutions or private citizens, some more informal linked to radical social movements. Both situations, despite their differences, deploy a solidarity infrastructure that enacts the possibility, with some degree of

success, of piercing border apparatus. *The Jacket* is an illustrated graphic novel created by a collective of researchers - sociologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, educators and poets - as one of the unplanned outcomes of an ethnographic fieldwork at the French-Italian border of Oulx-Briancon in Fall 2021. The main character is a windbreaker: through the networks and shelters both in Italy and France it swirls around to provide warmth to the people, challenging the mountain. As depicted in Fig 2<sup>3</sup>, migrants dress it in Oulx, they cross the border and then leave it when arrived in Briancon. The same occurs with shoes and any other kind of sport clothing; the activists on the French side of the border bring then all these materials back to their starting point. These kinds of objects circulation represent a concrete contestation of border governance, a way to reduce its necropolitical effects. When migrants leave from their point of departure in Italy, a list is sent to activists on the other side; it allows to check that no one gets lost along the way. The everyday working of this infrastructure reduces the scope for smugglers to operate; at the same time, it blurs the boundaries between the humanitarian and the political.

Is this jacket political or humanitarian? It is not the object itself that embodies a positioning, but the complex of relationships and actions that build it, give it meaning and thus trigger effects within a context, within a field of forces. Behind the jacket, then, the *humanitarian* - helping not to freeze to death - becomes politicized precisely because the border regime plays the mountain and its dangers as a weapon, as an enormous area of deterrence, of dissuasion; but also the *political* mingles, merges with the humanitarian, because to violate the border regime, to contest it practically, it is necessary to take care of the bodies on the move and protects them. The encounters along this route often take on the tinge of conviviality and domesticity. For example, let us listen to the words gathered among activists in a squat that functions as a safe place:

we do the assemblies all together, often they are multilingual assemblies... depending on who is there we speak in Italian, French, Arabic, Farsi, and translate. It is very tiring, but for us it is fundamental. We don't divide the house into occupants and migrants, we are all together people who go through or live through this house... We support the self-determination of those who are traveling, and the house is completely self-managed, by all the people who go through it. When someone comes, we show them the house and tell them to put themselves where they want, where they find a place. We don't cook for them; on the contrary, those who are passing through often start cooking for everyone.

<sup>3</sup> Supplementary materials, available for free: [https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste\\_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf](https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf)

Clothes also play a double role of exposure and concealment that operates on several, even conflicting, levels. On the one hand, dressing up with the shelter's solidarity garments to cross the mountain at night in small groups exposes bodies on the move to the visibility of surveillance; in fact, often those arriving on the other side early in the morning strip off these clothes and wear in an urban style trying to gain a greater right to indifference and opacity. It is no coincidence that activists, who are also imbued by an environmental habitus, complain that they have to organize teams in order to clear the paths of everything that has been abandoned. On the other hand, clothes and sports equipment allow people on the move to fit inside the tourist streams and thus go unnoticed during the day: pretending to be skiers or hikers thus becomes an effective tactic against the border regime. In this case, a specific theatrical performance is enacted in which activists and people on the move collaborate, helping to construct masks that have the aim to cover the label of undocumented migrant. Once more, also in this case, solidarity encounters appear as a driving factor in explaining the possibility and the very reproduction of this types of unauthorized mobilities.

### **3. Postcard 3 - Negated and neglected solidarity and the hidden state grasp in Pantelleria (fall 2022)**

Pantelleria is one of the main Italian islands in the middle of the Sicily strait, in the Mediterranean Sea, closer to Tunisia than Italy. We can look at the island, metaphorically, from the shores of another one, crucial in contemporary migrant mobilities crossing the Mediterranean: Lampedusa - as we did, the other way around, during our last ethnographic journey in September 2022 (Anderlini, Fravega, 2023). An exercise in dichotomy could represent these islands as two poles of a continuum: Lampedusa is under the spotlight of mainstream media, politics and general public attention for migrants' arrivals as much as Pantelleria is removed from the debate; the first is one of the popular destinations of mass vacation industry in the Mediterranean, the second is the discreet location of more elite tourism; one has a disproportionate border apparatus and the industry it generates, the other has an almost hidden presence of Frontex operatives that sum up to a small local Carabinieri station and a command centre of the Italian coast guard and the *Guardia di Finanza*.

However, the shifting and complex scenario characterising Pantelleria escapes rigid dichotomies. Looking at the material dimension of migrants' movements and border operations, the island has seen in the last few years an increase in arrivals: from 2012 to 2019 from 200 to 400 people per year



disembark in the island; the situation changes starting from 2020 with 1858 arrivals, then 2021 with 2555, and 2022 where at the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 3718 people had reached the island's shores<sup>4</sup>.

This trend in the island determined a further development and expansion of the local border apparatus: in the mid of 2020 a Frontex team has been deployed, also with a supporting vessel, and a new facility called “crisis point” - what we would call *hotspot* - has been opened in an anonymous structure, behind a former military barracks, with gates and fences and no signs identifying it, as the Fig 3 shows<sup>5</sup>. Before this facility, people disembarked were kept in the local Carabinieri building, waiting to be transferred to Sicily for identification and further border operations. From 2020, a new border procedure has been implemented, a sort of “mobile hotspot” where are fulfilled part of the screening operations. People disembarked are brought in this facility for the first identification and registration, some of them are interviewed by Frontex as “witnesses” to provide information on human trafficking networks: fingerprinting operations are however fulfilled in Trapani, Sicily, in the “mainland”. The transfer usually occurs between three and ten days from the arrival. What we observe is then a fragmentation of border procedures. As a law enforcement officer tells us: «if they bring here fingerprinting machines, we are done, we become like Lampedusa», implying in his perspective that the island will effectively become another “fully operational” hotspot and the border industry will move there too. In this context, the actors themselves evoke this comparison with Lampedusa, represented as an example of a disproportionate border apparatus.

This development in the border operations has transformed also how solidarity is enacted. Clelia, an old woman linked to the local catholic church and the Caritas organization<sup>6</sup>, is one of the pillars of solidarity towards migrants in the island. She recounts us when it all began: the shipwreck of the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 2011. In this occasion a small fishing boat with two hundred migrants arriving from Libya drifted out of its route and reached the rocks close to Pantelleria: while being escorted by a unit of the Italian coast guard, the ship ran aground, people panicked and jumped in the water, and three of them drowned. The event shocked the island community, which mobilized itself to help the castaways in the following days. In the following years, the support for

<sup>4</sup> The source are raw data from the Italian Ministry of Interior.

<sup>5</sup> Supplementary materials, available for free: [https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste\\_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf](https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> A former charitable organization linked to the Catholic church acting for vulnerable people.

disembarking migrants faded and only Clelia and few other volunteers continued to provide support. Their activities varied:

when they were kept in the Carabinieri barracks after being disembarked, I was always bringing them clothes, a word of comfort and a smile. I was the “person of the clothes”: if someone needed them, I was called to bring or gather them in the local Caritas office. I was asking the officers to open the doors where they were kept. We were trying to teach some words of Italian and do some drawing together.

From our conversations with Clelia, it emerges that her perspective on solidarity activities is strongly tied with the encounter and the relationship: to build a relation of proximity with the other, to “humanize” an apparatus that tends to anonymise the people captured in it.

Then, for Clelia, there is a shift: with the opening of the new facility - that we can call detention centre - her activity is no longer allowed. «The new centre is managed by *Guardia di Finanza*, the municipality provides for the food, but they don't even look people in the eyes. I am not allowed anymore because I am not officially “registered” as a volunteer. But I did this for years before!» We can assume this as a shift in the relationship between humanitarian activities and governmental operations. The institutionalization and bureaucratization of arrival procedures and first reception has excluded spontaneous and unregimented practices of solidarity. From a situation in which it was deeply needed for the functioning of border operations while not officially recognized, solidarity now becomes neglected. In the context of the transformation of border management, Pantelleria is shaped as a transit space devoted only to fulfil first border procedures - following a logistics rationality as in other hotspot sites such as Pozzallo and Lampedusa - and where migrants are systematically excluded and kept hidden from the public space. Hence, grassroots solidarity practices appear to have been neglected because for their material contesting of this apparatus, creating a connection, a relation, between migrants and the island.

#### **4. Postcard 4 - Fragmented agricultural labour and social cooperation through solidarity in Cassibile (spring 2021)**

Cassibile, in Sicily, is one of the nodes of circular mobility of seasonal agricultural labour in southern Europe and at the crossroad of different migratory trajectories, linked to changing informal labour markets and the filtering of the border apparatus, which shape contemporary forms of

illegalised mobility in Europe (Anderlini, Queirolo Palmas, 2023). For three months from March to June, hundreds of migrant workers arrive and stay in this location near Siracusa, living in an informal temporary camp and working in degrading conditions, as represented in the Fig 4<sup>7</sup>. In the last fifteen years, in different location often within the large property of the Marquis of Cassibile, an informal camp sprung up: it could be in a cluster of abandoned houses or in a partially hidden field in the middle of the countryside, remote, a few kilometres away from the town. This place, over the years during the harvest season, was populated by seasonal labourers looking for shelter. The camp has been described to us both as a place of precarious rest after a day's work, and as a place of sociability and relationships, of shared knowledge, of forms of mutual support and exchange. Small and rudimentary service activities were also present, despite the absence of electricity and running water. The support of solidarity networks and of part of the local associations from Siracusa - such as Father Carlo of the Bosco Minniti church and ARCI<sup>8</sup> - contributed, over the years, to the camp's sustenance by creating a point of contact between local civil society and the labourers, which went beyond the mere production relations.

Moussa, an agricultural worker from Mali which has come in Cassibile for the seasonal work for the last eight years, recalls that in the past, the associations and Father Carlo always contacted him to collect the camp's needs - food, clothes, etc. - since they wanted to help migrant workers in a continuous way. He was one of the bridging figures of the old camp with solidarity actors, collecting the needs of each one. «In the camp we could cook, each group cooked: Sudanese, Arabs, Senegalese. We took water from a fountain in the village. Other things were brought by Italians who wanted to help».

Despite being a temporary camp linked to the seasonal harvest, this self-organized settlement allowed people gravitating around these circular labour routes to stop by and rest, momentarily changing them from “guests” of a territory to inhabitants of a dense social world.

In March 2021, before the starting of the harvest, a newly created squat of few dozens of agricultural labourers within abandoned buildings at the fringes of Cassibile has been cleared out by the municipality, leaving the people without a shelter. An act that opens a new phase in local labour relations and a new fragmented configuration of space. We have witnessed a multiplication of camps which, is argued, has reinforced the harnessing of

<sup>7</sup> Supplementary materials, available for free: [https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste\\_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf](https://static.francoangeli.it/fa-contenuti/riviste/riviste_allegati/sur/10.3280-sur2024-135006.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> An historical association linked to workers' movement in Italy and now involved in advocacy and mutualism linked to social rights, cultural life and migration.

the labour force by keeping it constantly on the move and making inhabitable the nodes of the route (Anderlini, 2023). A scattered camp, composed of small groups of tents, has appeared in remote places of the rural area, constantly chased by local law enforcement. Other labourers have been “guests” of the bosses and landowners directly in the fields where they work, evoking the idea of the plantation. Others have accessed an institutional camp, created for the occasion in April 2021, which hosts only a certain fraction of the labour force: those who possess a valid residence permit and work contract. Others find refuge in the church of Bosco Minniti, Siracusa, headed by Father Carlo. This is a context where the labourers manage themselves, organising and sharing space and meals in the communal kitchen. The place can host up to a hundred people inside the church. Every time we visited the church, especially during the end of the Ramadan fasting, we were cheered by collective meals where everyone was contributing to the overall organization. This space, well known in other nodes of these circular labour routes, represents a place not only to rest - it is not only a shelter - but a lively social context where practices, information and a general knowledge on migratory circulations are shared and where initiatives and relations flourish. On this account, solidarity networks and refuges contribute to strengthen social cooperation along migratory routes transforming inhabitable contexts in places of dwelling.

## **5. From corridors to routes: spaces of encounter and dwelling**

In each of these postcards, we see depicted a bundling of spaces: cities, public spaces, islands, vessels, mountain passes, railway stations, and churches. They epitomize social and temporal spaces of transit across the routes that exceed the mere geographical dimension and in which different and contingent assemblages emerge and overlap. We define these spaces as *nodes*, assuming them as pivotal points for investigating the complexities and multiplicities of migratory routes. They represent the core unit for a research agenda able to grasp comprehensively the changing reality of solidarity towards migrants in transit.

In every case presented, we have seen solidarity practices and actors as deeply interlinked with migratory movements and their management and policing. In these accounts, we tried to represent some crucial elements which crisscross the variety and multifarious aspects of solidarity activities and networks. The first postcard recounts us of solidarity practices enacted by migrants themselves, for themselves. In fact, migrants in transit enact mutual aid and cooperation during their journeys and may rely on kin or ethnic

solidarity networks, both in their countries of origin and in the countries of arrival to support their journey. This form of cooperation can also question previous social hierarchies, constantly reshaping the boundaries of the group while on the move. Mutual aid does not necessarily flatten social hierarchies based on different forms of capital - who can pilot a boat is more socially “valuable” in a pirogue crossing - but helps in making use of them for a shared - while ephemeral - common good. While the literature has focused on the forms and structures of migrant social networks in countries of arrival or departure (Massey, 1988; Portes, 1998), including their transnational dimension, there is a lack of studies covering practices of support among migrants in transit. The second postcard highlights the co-presence and overlapping of the humanitarian and political repertoires of action and discourse which involve solidarity networks and their activities. While academic research has mainly investigated such repertoires through a binary polarization between the political and humanitarian dimensions, recent scholarship underlined an ongoing hybridization process of these two dimensions (Agustín, Jørgensen, 2019; Gerbier-Aublanc, 2018; Siapera, 2019) due to the persecution of humanitarian practices within so-called “solidarity crimes” (Fekete, 2018; Taylor, 2020). In fact, NGOs, associations, and activist groups all over Europe have faced hostile institutional and juridical responses to their attempts to provide rescue and assistance to unauthorized movements (Mainwaring, DeBono, 2021; Mitsilegas, Moreno Lax, Vavoula, 2020; ObsMigAm, 2020; Schack, Witcher, 2021). Such practices are increasingly conceived by law and public discourse as akin to smuggling, despite scholars having stressed the ambivalent role of intermediaries and facilitators among migrants along routes (Ambrosini, 2017; Hänsel *et al.*, 2020; Patanè *et al.*, 2020; Zhang, Sanchez, Achilli, 2018). In this context, criminalized humanitarian practices shift closer to political ones, while the latter, forced to exist in an emergency context, become closer to the former. In this intertwining, the humanitarian posture is no more “stuck in the present” (Brun, 2016) but gains from the collective political action the possibility to draw different social imaginaries on the future of borders (Delanty, 2021), in an attempt to “de-presentify” how human mobility is understood (Anderlini, Pellegrino, 2025) - i.e., to contest discourses and practices on migration founded on the logic of emergency and crisis (Jeandesboz, Pallister-Wilkins, 2016). Many solidarity groups experience processes of “*ad hoc* federalism” (Giliberti, Potot, Trucco, 2020), as they coalesce into broader advocacy coalitions to support migrants in transit. These experiences and encounters, analysed through an emerging framework that combines civil society and social movement studies (Della Porta, 2020), may produce collective action and position

migrants and solidarity networks within a public sphere that is increasingly European and post-national. Support groups can be endogenous - run by local inhabitants - or exogenous - built around the intervention of activists, associations, and NGOs gathering in transit spaces (Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2020). At the same time, certain groups develop transnational ties across EU borders and can bring citizens and migrants together (Ataç, Rygiel, Stierl, 2016).

As shown in postcard 3, the spaces of unauthorized movements have been filled with specific devices, tools, and apparatuses (hotspots, hubs, checkpoints, digital platforms, and relocation centres), and are thus crisscrossed by several forced and channelled flows (Tazzioli, 2020). We conceive such transit space as a *corridor* (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Kasperek, 2016), stretching across and connecting different countries. Corridors are punctuated by multiple institutional camps whose functions are control, confinement, classification, and selection - as exemplified by the EU hotspot approach (Anderlini, 2020) - often justified through “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2012). Such functions are also emphasized by insularity as, both on remote islands - as in the case of Pantelleria - and in entire countries at the fringes of Europe, unauthorized migrants are stuck in offshore camps (Ticktin, 2009), stranded in a mechanism of delay and temporal unpredictability (Andersson, 2014), and constrained by a politics of geographical and social distancing (Mountz, 2015). This process is clearly exemplified by outermost regions as the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean which, following Benoît (2020), can be considered as the outermost “walls”, linked to a persistent colonial past of the EU and a crucial testing ground in the experimentation of a smoother and more effective management of mobility (Santos, 2022).

Postcard 4 enlightens a scenario characterised by non-linear migratory mobilities with different trajectories linked to labour markets, the border assemblage and migrant agency. In this context, wherever there is an institutional camp, encampments and makeshift settlements may arise, producing sites where surveillance exerts a minor influence on lives in transit and other types of encounters may develop. Such locations are not only temporary stations or springboards for debordering that enable subsequent steps of mobility, but they are also places of sociality and creativity, filled with schools, churches, and small businesses of all kinds, where new forms of citizenship and reinvention of cities can arise (Agier, 2002; Sigona, 2015). These encampments/refuges are often enabled by solidarity networks, which bolster them with basic goods and infrastructures. These sites contribute to shape what we call *lived-in routes*, spaces of autonomous mobility, where the pace, the ability to stop, rest, dwell or to accelerate, divert and change direction is

the shifting outcome of the encounters, shared knowledge and practices emerging from the relation between migrants and solidarity networks.

Overall, along corridors it is common to find gathering points, check-points, and gateways whose function is to accelerate or block movements. Yet, these spaces are always originally produced by the same movement of migrants and are usually located on the edge of political/national borders, as in the case of the Alpine or the Balkan route (Filippi, Giliberti, Queirolo Palmas, 2021; Tudoroiu, 2017) and of the maritime routes that crisscross seas and oceans. Following Benjamin's concept of *Passagen*, these are ambivalent, as they identify both the act-moment and a specific place of crossing. They are ephemeral - lasting just for the time that is needed to get across - and contextual, based both on objective conditions (a path that is, in a particular moment, easy to take) and on subjective conditions (the types of capital available to the people that want to get across). They are often the outcome of the knowledge and encounters between migrants and solidarity networks. The activities occurring on these sites range from smuggling and trafficking to police patrolling, sea guarding, anti-migrant and racist raids. Yet, solidarity networks, on land and at sea, may actively contribute to transforming these gateways into possible passages (Schwartz, Schwenken, 2020).

Assuming the multiplication of borders (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013), we comprehend the constant and shifting transformations of irregularized human mobility within Europe *as a crossroad of corridors* - in which circulation is filtered and forced by internal border dynamics and the externalization of EU borders to non-EU countries - *and lived-in routes*, which are the result of the encounter between unauthorized movements and solidarity networks.

## **Conclusions: pinpointing solidarity and its nexus with unauthorized movements**

Moving from these reflections, we reframe solidarity as a complex time/space setting of interactions revealing and generating porosity/impermeability and shifting hierarchies and boundaries (Barth, 1998) across and within different social groups in transit spaces. This, therefore, entails a dimension in which the singularity of the journey and the social identities of migrants are continuously transformed by the multiple experiences and encounters along the routes, as well as by the visions of the future generated within solidarity networks (Vandevoordt, Fleischmann, 2021). Drawing on the rich aforementioned scholarship which highlights specific dimensions of supporting activity focusing on political claim and humanitarian support, we

rather suggest stressing a gaze on solidarity as a situated, multifarious set of practices and forms of cooperation which - differently from the case of other facilitators like smugglers - are enacted by multiple actors driven by different non-economic motivations (humanitarian, political, religious, and ethical)<sup>9</sup>. This, combined with the agency of migrants, can transform a forced corridor into a lived-in route: a space of dwelling, hospitality and care. This encounter and its outcomes within and across multiple spaces of transit is what we call the nexus between solidarity and unauthorized movements. This particular encounter depicts the materiality of a different form of governance, emerging from below, where grassroots solidarity becomes a crucial third space in the battleground of mobility, enacting the possibility of rethinking the dichotomic opposition between state flows' management and migrants' agency. In this sense, putting at the centre the space of grassroots solidarity allows to further analytically enlighten the concrete functioning and opaque aspects of borderlands and unauthorized movements.

Overall, what emerges from this perspective on unauthorized human mobility and its contingent allies, is the subversion of the representation of an inexorable border regime in which any form of movement appears to be captured and filtered. It materializes, instead, the projection of a different image of Europe as a fluid ensemble of trajectories and crossroads able to stress the very concept of border and to prefigure post-national futures (Delanty, 2021). A research perspective, hence, that we find particularly fruitful to investigate, adopting a gaze that goes beyond and exceeds the European territories.

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<sup>9</sup> We recognize the ambivalent and shifting role of economically driven actors in connecting different social contexts and enabling other forms of capital (Achilli, 2015) and the institutional use of the label "smuggler" to criminalize migrants in transit (ARCI Porco Rosso, Alarm Phone, Borderline Sicilia, 2021).



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