

**SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE**

# Transgressive Solidarity: From Europe's Cities to the Mediterranean Sea

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In the wake of increasing migrant deaths in the Mediterranean, non-governmental organizations took to the seas to conduct search and rescue operations in 2014. In 2016, this humanitarian fleet rescued 50,000 people in the Central Mediterranean Sea. In the meantime, local solidarity initiatives emerged across Europe, motivated by the arrival of many people in their cities and by deaths and border spectacles in the Mediterranean. Juxtaposing solidarity work in the Mediterranean Sea with solidarity work within the European Union's borders, we examine how the spaces they operate in shape the possibilities and limits of solidarity activism. Despite identifying important differences, we ultimately demonstrate how the solidarity work within Europe and in the Mediterranean Sea fold into each other in complex ways. Moreover, we show how across Europe, people engage in transgressive solidarity work that challenges EU border practices and concomitant categories to reimagine a more welcoming Europe.

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## Introduction

On an unusually warm autumn day in Hamburg, we entered a warehouse along the harbour front, the Elbe glittering in the sun behind us. We had arrived at Hanseatic Help, a grassroots response to the increase in refugee arrivals in 2015 and the EU reception crisis that followed. The initial effort to organize and distribute donated goods, including clothes, toys, and shoes, had grown into a much larger and more sophisticated operation. The group now occupied an enormous warehouse, bursting with the cast-offs of first-world overconsumption. These donated goods were not only destined for refugees and the poor in Hamburg but also to communities in Ukraine, Sicily, Haiti, and Northern Iraq (Fieldnotes, Hamburg, October 2018).

The volunteers spoke with pride of their city. Hamburg is not Germany, they qualified, Hamburg is a 'Free City', an independent state until it joined the German Federation in 1815 and today its own federal state. Hamburg's large harbour has shaped its long cosmopolitan history. Because of this, the volunteers told us, in Hamburg we do things differently. They described themselves as practical, pragmatic, and down-to-earth people. Such characteristics

are often attributed to the type of work that Hamburg's large port generated, bringing together locals and outsiders. The outcome, they claimed, was that Hamburgers value 'helping', and 'we don't just talk about it, but we get down and do it ourselves' (Fieldnotes, Hamburg, October 2018).

Like many of the groups we visited across northern Europe, Hanseatic Help emerged from an almost visceral need to help as many people arrived in the city. A predominantly local effort soon became transnational, moving beyond borders. The diverse group of volunteers spoke of helping but also of the benefits, satisfaction, and newfound community they reaped from the work. As elsewhere, notions of the migration 'crisis' and 'Europe' loomed large in these narratives.

While some residents turned to such local initiatives to welcome people, others were drawn to more spectacular sites of contestation, violence, and death. Indeed, a fleet of humanitarian actors had already emerged in the Mediterranean in 2014 but grew in the subsequent years. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) acquired boats to carry out search and rescue (SAR) and address an increasing death toll and wanton inaction from the EU and its member states. The violence inherent in EU border policies both gave these NGOs their *raison d'être* and also increased the risks to their operations, from criminalisation by EU states to attacks by the Libyan coast guard.

Research has predominantly focused on the form and operations of these sea NGOs (e.g., Cusumano 2017a) and their often-conflictual relationships with states (e.g., Cusumano 2017b; Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018). Recognising NGO search and rescue efforts in the Central Mediterranean as part of a larger wave of grassroots activism that emerged across the EU in 2015, we add to this literature by juxtaposing solidarity work at sea with solidarity work in northern European cities. The initial part of our argument emphasizes how space and place matter, how they shape solidarity work, and inversely how solidarity work simultaneously shapes these different spaces and places. For example, we examine how solidarity work at Europe's external, maritime border is shaped by the sea, as well as by the constructed crisis and the humanitarian and enforcement spectacles performed by states along this border. Operating in this space beyond territorial borders, activists' reference point becomes 'Europe', rather than the city or the nation-state.

We then explore how solidarity work within the EU's borders and in the Mediterranean folds together in complex ways. We draw on Baban and Rygiel's (2017) concept of 'transgressive cosmopolitanism' in order to argue that despite different spaces and places that condition solidarity work, activists across Europe engage in transgressive acts that challenge EU migration and border policies, alongside their concomitant categories of 'refugee' and 'migrant', citizen and non-citizen (cf. Monforte 2016). At sea and in the four European cities where we conducted field workshops, we saw citizens and non-citizens living and engaging with each other, 'not by ignoring or transcending particularities, but by being motivated through one's own particularities to open oneself up to the other and to the experience of being transformed by the exchange' (Baban & Rygiel 2017: 101). In their solidarity work, these activists transgress hierarchal imaginaries of citizenship and the border, from legal requirements of membership to cultural boundaries of belonging. They also engage in transgressive acts by transcending space and time to connect different moments and geographies. Yet this transgressive solidarity is not without limits or challenges—limits that emerge more clearly through our juxtaposition of solidarity within the EU and in the Mediterranean Sea.

### **Methodology and Terminology**

Our article is based on ongoing ethnographic research we have conducted separately in the Mediterranean over the last decade. Most recently (2015–2019), Daniela DeBono conducted a four-year, multi-sited ethnographic study of first reception of boat migrants and borderwork

in Malta and southern Italy (e.g., DeBono 2018, 2019a, 2019b). This study included a focus on people engaged in search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean in different capacities, with a significant component of them being SAR NGO activists. The main fieldsites of the study included disembarkation ports, first reception centres, and the main border towns in Sicily—in Lampedusa, Porto Empedocle/Siculiana/Agrigento, Milo/Trapani, Palermo—and in Malta.

Çetta Mainwaring has studied migration across the Mediterranean since 2005 (e.g., Mainwaring 2019, 2016, 2012). She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Malta in particular, having interviewed border guards, detention and open centres officers, policy makers, fishermen, NGOs, migrants, and refugees. She has also conducted participant observation in migrant centres. She continues to conduct interviews and participant observation in Malta with people engaged in migration practices and policies, including with SAR NGO activists.

Our article also draws on collective field workshops conducted across four cities in northern Europe—Copenhagen, Glasgow, Hamburg, and Nijmegen/Kleve—between 2016 and 2018 as part of the Helping Hands Research Network.<sup>1</sup> We learnt about solidarity work and histories of resistance in these cities by walking and talking to residents, migrants, and activists. In particular, these field workshops, organised by local members of the Network, focused on the solidarity work that emerged in response to the large migration flows into the EU in 2015. We supplement this fieldwork by drawing on published research relating to solidarity work within Europe. Our analysis juxtaposes solidarity work in the Mediterranean Sea with solidarity work within the European Union's borders in order to analyse how these sites fold into each other.

In this article, we use the term solidarity work drawing in particular on Agustín and Jørgensen's (2019a: 23–25) definition of solidarity as a relational, spatial, and contentious practice, which generates political subjectivities and collective identities, as well as new imaginaries. Our choice respects the groups' own emic presentation and definition. For example, Hanseatic Help (2019), the above-mentioned organisation in Hamburg, state in their motto, 'we are guided by the universal principles of human dignity and solidarity'. The motto of another initiative we visited in Nijmegen, justPeople (2019a), is 'solidarity, direct action and diversity'. The term 'solidarity work' thus encompasses a broad range of activities, from the more traditional humanitarian work seen at Hanseatic Help to the more radical, anarchist activism of justPeople and Sea-Watch in the Mediterranean.

### **Responding in a 'Crisis': Solidarity Activism and Humanitarianism**

In this section, we draw together the literatures on solidarity activism, humanitarianism, and crisis in order to explore the possibilities of solidarity activism in different spaces. Indeed, we are interested in how people and groups negotiate the failures of humanitarianism as they grapple with what it means to stand in solidarity and intervene in contested and sometimes spectacular spaces. Analysing these literatures together allows us to develop new insights on two fronts. First, we insist on the importance of the critical humanitarian literature when analysing new forms of solidarity activism, especially when considering the ways this activism poses a challenge to the state and its concomitant categories and the ways it reproduces state categories and violence (cf. Braun 2017; Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Turinsky & Nowicka 2019). Second, analysing the literature on humanitarian borderwork, as well as our own empirical material on SAR NGOs at sea, also gives us new insights into solidarity activism, which has thus far focused primarily on activism within Europe, and especially on solidarity work in cities (e.g., Agustín and Jørgensen 2019b; Bauder 2017; Fauser 2019; Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä 2019). Overall, then we argue here that space and place matter and that both their material and symbolic dimensions shape the possibilities of solidarity work (cf. Montforte 2016; Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl 2016).

We start from the position of borders as inherently violent, constructs that maintain the fiction of a territorially bounded nation-state through practices of inclusion and exclusion (Jones 2016; Pallister-Wilkins 2015: 87). Scholars have examined how states have fortified their external borders (Andreas 2009; Geddes 2000) and how the border acts as a biopolitical form of government (Amoore 2006; Bigo 2002). Yet it is not only the state that is present at the border. Rumford's (2008) seminal work affirms the way that citizens and non-citizens also envision, construct, and contest borders, what Rumford calls borderwork.

Humanitarian borderwork is often premised on universal principles of humanity, the preservation of life, and the relief of suffering. Yet, this humanitarian work also reproduces exclusive categories of life and territorial space, depoliticizes, and contributes to human suffering (Fassin 2012; Lopez, Bhungalia & Newhouse 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2017a; Weizman 2011). Despite the extensive critical scholarship on humanitarian work at the border and beyond, research on solidarity activism has remained much more optimistic, especially scholarship on the response to more than a million people travelling into the EU during the long summer of migration in 2015. For example, della Porta (2018: 6) notes the 'political opportunities... located within a critical juncture that challenged existing institutions', while Agustín and Jørgensen (2019a: 2) examine how crises can produce 'a moment for rupture and for creating new imaginaries and for testing new alternatives for more inclusive societies.'

Following these scholars, while also heeding the extensive critique of humanitarianism, we go on to examine the political opportunities for solidarity work in response to state failures around migration. We are particularly interested in how particular spaces and places allow and limit forms of transgressive cosmopolitanism (Baban & Rygiel 2017; Rygiel & Baban 2019). In this way, the relationship between solidarity work, borders, and crises is important for our work. Alongside the very real deaths occurring at sea, a crisis, with its related enforcement and humanitarian spectacles, had already been constructed around migration in the Mediterranean prior to 2015 (e.g., Cuttitta 2014; Mainwaring 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017b; Tazzioli 2015).<sup>2</sup> The movement of more people into Europe that summer, alongside the re-emergence of borders and border violence, prompted solidarity responses across the continent. Indeed, forms of solidarity activism in the Mediterranean and within Europe are connected by a fluid, vacillating, and negotiated borderscape that extends into and outside of Europe (Balibar 2009; Brambilla 2015: 19; Pallister Wilkins 2017a: 90). Yet, the 'crisis' within the European Union subsided over the next year, while the Mediterranean remains a much more contested space, with mobility and solidarity efforts criminalized and in the public eye. Indeed, 'regarding illegalized migration into and across Europe—the very distinction between (and separation of) what is ostensibly "stable" and "in crisis" is altogether tenuous' (Heller et al 2016: 10).

### **A Humanitarian Fleet**

Death became a regular feature of the EU's external Mediterranean border in the 21st century: in 2014, the Mediterranean became the deadliest part of the world for migrants when over 3,000 people lost their lives, making up 75% of global migrant deaths. In 2016, 5,000 people died (IOM 2019). Nevertheless, EU member states' policies and practices of non-assistance remained steadfast, contributing to the death toll (Heller & Pezzani 2016).<sup>3</sup> In response, EU and other citizens took to the seas, alongside more established organizations, in an effort to save lives and hold the EU and its member states accountable.

In 2014, an American-Italian millionaire couple living in Malta founded the Mediterranean Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and chartered the *MY Phoenix*, the first NGO ship to carry out search and rescue. The ranks of this humanitarian fleet soon swelled, and by 2016, Jugend

Rettet, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Proactiva Open Arms, Save the Children, Sea-Eye, Sea-Watch, and SOS Méditerranée operated vessels in the Central Mediterranean. These groups included well-established international organizations as well as smaller organizations founded expressly for the purpose of search and rescue. For example, four German families established Sea-Watch, describing themselves as 'ordinary people who were lucky enough to be born in Central Europe' (Stierl 2018: 714). Many of the smaller, more radical organisations relied on volunteers, mostly in their 20s and 30s, from across Europe and beyond (Fieldnotes, Malta, 2015–2018).

The NGOs differed in how they framed the 'problem' of deaths at sea, holding 'divergent imaginaries and discursive framings of what [was] at stake in the maritime borderzone and of how they [understood] their own interventions' (Stierl 2018: 715). MOAS, for example, adopted a humanitarian business model, framing the problem as a lack of resources and their intervention as a technical solution to migrant deaths. Describing the work of MOAS and MSF, Pallister-Wilkins (2015: 93) argues that their 'operations do not stand in contradiction to more traditional border policing operations that seek to control movement of people on the move by intercepting bodies and making them legible.' In contrast, other organizations, like Sea-Eye, Sea-Watch, and Jugend Rettet, framed deaths in the Mediterranean as a product of EU policies and practices. Rather than working to fill gaps in the EU's border practices, these groups worked not only to conduct rescues but also to monitor and hold EU actors accountable (Cuttitta 2018; Stierl 2018: 718–719).

The groups were effective: in 2016, for example, they were involved in over 20 percent of search and rescue operations in the Central Mediterranean and rescued 50,000 people (European Commission 2017: 4). During this time, the NGOs cooperated closely with Italy's Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC), responsible for coordinating rescue, and the Ministry of Transport, responsible for giving permission to dock and disembark. Nevertheless, by the end of 2016, the political tide turned decidedly against them, and their search and rescue activities were increasingly criminalized by Italy and Malta in particular, but also by other EU member states and institutions. Frontex (2017: 32), the EU border agency, characterized their activities as a 'pull factor' that contributed to deaths at sea. The chief prosecutor of Catania accused them of 'colluding with smugglers' to destabilize the Italian economy (Momigliano 2017). By May 2017, courts in Palermo and Trapani were investigating different NGOs and their crew members. Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Lega, repeatedly called for their ships to be destroyed and employees arrested, while the populist Five Star Movement described them as a migrant 'taxi service' (Momigliano 2017; cf. Cuttitta 2018; Mainwaring and DeBono, forthcoming).

NGOs vehemently denied the accusations of collusion, and their defenders pointed to the lack of evidence to support such claims (e.g., Heller & Pezzani 2017). Nevertheless, by March 2018, state attempts to delegitimize NGO activities had had their desired effect and only three groups remained at sea: Sea-Eye, SOS Méditerranée, and Sea-Watch (ANSA 2018). That summer, Italy's national election further entrenched the state's antagonistic position. The new government, formed by the far-right Lega and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, continued to criminalize SAR NGOs and ultimately closed their ports to their vessels in June 2018. Malta followed suit, closing its ports and impounding the Sea-Watch vessel for over three months. As critics had warned, fewer rescue vessels led to more shipwrecks and deaths, as well as forced returns to Libya (Villa, Gruijters & Steinhilper 2018). Indeed, as a result, the rate of death in the Central Mediterranean increased from 1 in 38 in 2017 to 1 in 14 in 2018 (UNHCR 2019).

## Solidarity in the Mediterranean and Europe

In 2015, a year after the emergence of the Mediterranean's humanitarian fleet, there was a rise in grassroots, citizen-led initiatives, characterised as 'welcome culture', across European countries in response to the arrival of many refugees (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Hamann & Karakayali 2016; Povrzanović Frykman & Mäkelä 2019; cf. Sandberg & Andersen, 2020). The image of three-year-old Alan Kurdi dead on a Turkish beach near Bodrum in September 2015 was a significant catalyst, encouraging many Europeans to start volunteering (Proitz 2018). Other factors were also important, including images of the devastation in Syria, people walking along the Balkan route with minimal belongings, and dramatic images of people crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece. The failure of EU states to ensure a dignified reception, with many resorting to violence and border reinforcement, encouraged a humanitarian response by citizens that has been described as 'a new dispositif of helping' (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017). As the border came more clearly into view within Europe, people responded with new imaginaries of citizenship and Europe (Baban & Rygiel 2017; De Genova 2017).

Many of these initiatives began with a strong humanitarian component. People along the Balkan route offered food and lodging, others donated money, clothes, and other material objects. People engaging in this activity were of course not homogenous in their ideological and political views (Hamann & Karakayali 2016). Many said they 'just wanted to help', explicitly distancing themselves from 'being political' (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017: 18; Povrzanović Frykman & Mäkelä 2019). As other scholars have noted, this myth of the apolitical volunteer can reproduce established and exclusionary boundaries of belonging through 'hierarchical and inegalitarian structures of "help"' (Braun 2017: 39; cf. Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017). Yet, their solidarity practices, whether implicitly or explicitly, also reproduced the notion of a society of migration that challenged the idea of homogenous national identities. Their solidarity work thus created spaces of encounter that could transgress traditional understandings of belonging (Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017; Hamann & Karakayali 2016: 84; Rygiel & Baban 2019).

For the initiatives we visited, this was especially true for those that persisted beyond the initial 'crisis'. Our collective field workshops took place between 2016 and 2018, starting over a year after the first wave of 'welcome culture' initiatives. Thus, the original focus of humanitarian action with newly-arrived people had already evolved. For those groups that remained, their work often took on a more politicized form, linking to structural inequalities present in the city and nation-state (cf. Povrzanović Frykman & Mäkelä 2020; Rozakou 2016). Indeed, though we found differing degrees of explicit radical boundary transgressions, with some initiatives following a more traditional humanitarian model, we also found unexpected instances of transgressive spaces of encounter. For example, Hanseatic Help provided material aid, initially to refugees arriving in Hamburg, as well as later to more far-flung places, such as Haiti and Ukraine. This traditional form of humanitarian work often reproduces problematic categories of the giver and receiver, the victim and saviour. Yet, even within this organization, some transgressive acts took place. For example, refugees were involved as volunteers alongside citizens, creating a space where they could meet as equals. Moreover, Hanseatic Help had expanded their remit and now provided material goods not only to refugees but also to the homeless and dispossessed in Hamburg. In this way, they connected the structural violence and dispossession that affected both the citizen and the 'other', thus blurring these boundaries.

Our fieldwork in European cities also revealed the mundane nature of much solidarity work, the ways in which it carried on after the 2015 'crisis' or was less affected than one might expect. In Glasgow, many groups discussed how '2015 was not their crisis' and instead the

city's designation as a top dispersal site in 2000 had shaped the migrant landscape more fundamentally as large numbers of people in the asylum process were relocated to Glasgow. They also pointed to ongoing structural inequalities that existed before and after the so-called 'crisis'. Indeed, throughout European cities, the ebb and flow of 'crisis' allowed for reflections on continuity and change. While some activists were almost nostalgic for this time of 'crisis', where opportunities to help and to transgress were more immediately evident, others came into their own out of the spotlight, with time and space to reflect on more egalitarian models of 'help' (Fieldnotes 2016–2018; cf. Mainwaring, Mulvey & Piacentini, 2020; Sandberg & Andersen, 2020).

In contrast, SAR NGOs enter a space that continues to be made spectacular by the EU, its member states, and the media. By March 2019, arrivals across the EU's external border were just 10% of their peak in 2015. EU officials cast a reassuring tone: Europe was 'no longer experiencing the migration crisis we lived in 2015' (European Commission 2019). Yet, the emphasis on migration control in the Mediterranean and beyond remained steadfast. The European Commission (2019) affirmed that 'the fact that the number of irregular arrivals has been reduced is no guarantee for the future, considering the likely continuation of migratory pressure.' The threat of migration thus forms the basis of the continued construction of crisis in the Mediterranean, with its associated violence and death.

The SAR NGOs that remain at sea—after sustained criminalization by EU member states—are those that frame the issue of migrant deaths as not merely a humanitarian problem but one that is a product of EU border policies. Moreover, their work is conditioned by the legal geographies that shape the Mediterranean space, which have allowed NGOs to take to the high seas and allowed for their subsequent criminalization. NGO vessels have a right to free movement on the high seas, yet they rely on states for a flag, as well as permission to dock and disembark. Similarly, although the duty to rescue those in distress is unambiguous in international law, the lack of clarity regarding disembarkation has led to disputes between Malta and Italy, justified the closing of ports to SAR NGOs, and encouraged their criminalization (Fink & Gombeer 2018; Klepp 2011). Thus, although the criminalization of solidarity work has also taken place within the EU's borders, the legal geographies of the high seas create an exceptional space where criminalization is made more possible (Mainwaring & DeBono, forthcoming).

In this context, SAR NGOs employ a discourse of solidarity, social and global justice, and humanitarianism. Yet, it is the latter that they emphasise in their official communications and on social media. It also underpins their claims to legitimacy when accused by states of rule breaking. Indeed, contrary to the solidarity work we encountered in Europe, SAR NGOs continue to emphasize the 'emergency' nature of their work and the moral imperative of humanitarian action in the face of death in the Mediterranean. For example, Sea-Watch's (2019b) website describes their motivation: 'We have decided to fight for the humanisation of politics. Hospitality should once again be the norm. A civil sea rescue service must be created. The EU is not willing to do so. Therefore, we are taking the initiative.' EU border policies and practices shape their work, especially the increased criminalization of their activities and the EU's ongoing cooperation with the Libyan coast guard in order to contain people in a country not considered safe by international actors. For example, Jugend Rettet's (2019) mission states:

Europe does not accept any responsibility for the indescribable suffering at our external borders, and neither allows safe escape routes nor state rescue programs. Instead, the European states are now financing the people who were ruthless smugglers yesterday, so that they can stop those fleeing over the crossing today. Meanwhile, we are

prevented from documenting the humanitarian catastrophe with our rescue missions and from saving human lives. However, we will not stop criticising the deadly logic of European migration policy.

The work of SAR NGOs continues to be scrutinized and criminalized as they resist and reproduce tropes of death, tragedy, enforcement, and humanitarianism (cf. Stierl 2018; Mainwaring & DeBono, forthcoming). Their work is at and beyond the European Union's external border, at a frontier and in a liminal space. In this regard, they differ from the groups we met in European cities, who were embedded in and informed by a locality, with its history, myths, and memories. For instance, activists in Glasgow discussed the city's long tradition of resistance from Mary Barbour leading a rent strike in the 1930s for better housing to the Clydeside labour activist Jimmy Reid. Maryhill Integration Network emphasized the neighbourhood they operated from as an area of 'multiple deprivation' and how their work tried to create a community space of joy and creativity that was inclusive, building on long-standing resistance to deprivation in the area (Fieldnotes, Glasgow, June 2018).

Solidarity work in cities is contextualised in the community, rooted in a locality, with its particular histories and myths. For example, Hamann and Karakayli (2016: 83–84) demonstrate how volunteers in Germany are motivated not only by the state's ill-treatment of asylum seekers, but also by a desire to counter the right-wing, anti-refugee mobilizations in their towns and cities. In our own fieldwork in Glasgow, Hamburg, Nijmegen, and Copenhagen, activists were informed by local histories, and their reference point was often the local community, city, or nation-state. For example, in Glasgow, people explained their work in the context of and as a challenge to the UK's restrictive national immigration policies (Mainwaring, Mulvey & Piacentini, 2020). Hanseatic Help (2019) proudly state on their website, 'Thousands of helpful Hamburgers opened their wardrobes and hearts and continue to support them with donated goods and pragmatic tackling. This solidarity of the Hamburg population and companies is impressive'.

Activists at sea on the other hand are unmoored from territorial space. Although the volunteers who make up a large part of the humanitarian fleet are rooted in and informed by processes taking place in their localities or countries, once at sea they engage in a space cast by many politicians and the media as empty, where alternate spectacles of enforcement and humanitarianism are produced (Mainwaring 2019; Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017b; Tazzioli 2015). At sea, theirs is a different, de-territorialised community bound by common principles of equality and the right to life. In this space, the reference point for their solidarity work is Europe, and in particular the EU's external border policies. For example, Sea-Watch's (2019a) Giorgia Linardi commented on the launch of a new initiative, 'The Mediterranean project wants to save lives—and European society from the dehumanisation of our time. We want to return to the idea of a society based on equal rights for all'.

Similarly, Philipp, the chief of operations on *Sea-Watch 3*, said, 'we will not give up for the rights of people and for our European values' (Sea-Watch 2019e), while Kim, a 37-year-old Sea-Watch (2019c) volunteer from England, explained:

The problem is not the fact that there are people floating in the sea. We can fix that. The problem is very clear; it's that there is this idea of segregation, this idea that we are protecting ourselves in some way, when we enforce our borders. The E.U. was founded on the idea of stopping war, of stopping suffering, but as a continent we are waging war, and creating suffering. We are waging war against people who, right now, are held in detention centres in Libya, being tortured, being raped, forced to watch murders



and other unspeakable things. We are creating suffering through our inaction. We are killing them by letting them drown, and that goes against everything that Europe is.

In these activists' words, the migration 'problem' is laid squarely at the feet of the EU and its member states. Europe and its ostensible values are evoked in order to signal a more progressive and humane alternative to current violent border practices.

Their words also reveal the limits of solidarity work within a spectacular borderscape. Some of their statements reproduce romantic notions of the EU and its values, obscuring for instance the EU's colonial history (Hansen & Jonsson 2014) and the long history of violence at and within its borders. Calls to 'save Europe' re-centre an imagined geography of Europe as a liberal space. While many activists at sea call for more open borders and freedom of movement, their work also simultaneously reterritorializes the Mediterranean as a European space for intervention (Jones 2011; van Reekum 2016) and a humanitarian zone (Debrix 1998; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b). Although many of the more radical groups at sea have been careful not to use depoliticized discourse (cf. Stierl 2018), their work can reproduce an 'emergency imaginary' in its focus on the imperative to act in the face of deaths and suffering at sea (Calhoun 2008; Lopez, Bhungalia & Newhouse 2015).

Indeed, for those at sea, their transgressive solidarity work is both spatially and temporally circumscribed. Although they embrace less hierarchal forms of solidarity, such as identifying those they save as 'guests' rather than victims or aid recipients, their interactions with them are temporally and spatially circumscribed to hours, days, or weeks at sea. They must disembark their 'guests' on land, where they are re-captured by the state and where further violence, detention, and deportation await them (cf. DeBono 2019a; Pallister-Wilkins 2017b).

### **Solidarity along the Folds**

Despite differences outlined above, the solidarity work within Europe and the Mediterranean fold together in a multitude of complex ways. Here we focus on these folds—the entanglements, connections, superimpositions, partial links—to explore the way activists overcome physical geography and time to connect places and moments. As David Featherstone (2012: 6) writes, '[Solidarities] produce new ways of configuring political relations and space'. They can challenge methodological nationalism and imagine new, more inclusive societies (cf. Agustín and Jørgensen 2019a: 2). We turn first to the ways that similar structures and strategies connect solidarity work in Europe and in the Mediterranean, before turning to how solidarity work across this space folds together topographically.

The disregard for migrant lives drives many of the activists at sea and on land (cf. Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017). Some seek to break down hierarchies between citizens and non-citizens, good citizens and bad. For example, in Hamburg, the promotional stickers of the Poliklinik Veddel, a health centre serving the needs of the local community, read: 'Karum leber die Reichen 10 Jahre langer?/Why is it that rich people live ten years longer?' Open Arms (2019) states on its webpage: 'It all started with some pictures of children that drowned on a beach. We thought: if we dedicate ourselves to this and we do it on our beaches, why are they dying there and why is nobody helping them?' In the Mediterranean, activists are faced with the sharp end of EU migration policies and inherent violence of the border, bearing witness to the loss of life and the trauma of those who endure violence in Libya before making the sea voyage. Meanwhile, those within Europe grapple with less spectacular, but no less deadly, inequalities and injustice (Fieldnotes: Hamburg, Malta, 2015–2019).

Groups at sea and on land also both rely on creative improvisation in the face of a simultaneously aggressive and retreating state. Activists across these geographies fill gaps in the state's provisions, from rescue to health care to legal aid, while also being increasingly

criminalized by states (Fekete, Webber & Edmond-Pettitt 2019). In these narrow spaces, activists improvise. In Glasgow, Milk Café is a social enterprise and community space to empower migrant women. The two women who established it spoke of how they saw a need, wanted to do something, and improvised. At the beginning, they didn't have any business or food skills, they assured us, but learned on the job (Fieldnotes: Glasgow, 2018). NGOs at sea also improvise. Captains, like Carola Rackete of *Sea-Watch 3*, have defied state orders and sailed into European ports in order to disembark people (Povoledo 2019). The organizations have also battled multiple European states on minor technicalities that kept them in port. For instance, Sea-Watch, flagged in the Netherlands as a pleasure craft, was informed in 2019 that it could no longer operate because the Dutch government was reviewing their flag policies and they would henceforth have to adhere to stricter requirements. Sea-Watch challenged the ruling in court and won the right to return to the sea (Bathke 2019).

NGOs at sea and on land have ambivalent relationships with the state. In many cases, they are filling gaps in services they believe the state should carry out (cf. Povrzanović Frykman & Mäkelä 2019, 2020). By doing so, some worried they would absolve the state of its responsibility and reinforce the very structures they opposed. In this way, they echoed Fleischmann & Steinhilper's (2017: 20) argument that the new dispositif of helping 'provided the necessary relief for governmental actors and thus presented a way out of the "crisis" which at the same time guaranteed the survival of the migration regime'. NGOs also noted the challenges of accessing state funds while also opposing it. Indeed, many initiatives in European cities were at least partially funded by the state. Similarly, NGOs at sea have worked closely with state institutions like the MRCC and port authorities to rescue, dock, and disembark people (Fieldnotes: Malta, Hamburg, Glasgow, Nijmegen 2015–2019; cf. Hamann & Karakayali 2016: 79–81).

Along with these similarities in structures and strategies, solidarity work in Europe and in the Mediterranean also fold into each other topographically. Like those at sea, the people we met in European cities were implicitly and explicitly working against migrant discrimination. These activists revealed an understanding of the Mediterranean as an important and spectacular space in the refugee 'crisis'. There was regular mention of deaths in the Mediterranean, of dramatic sea rescues, and of how images of children, such as Alan Kurdi, spurred them into action. In this way, the activists reproduced the Mediterranean as the front line of the crisis and an important symbolic space in the fight for migrant and refugee rights (cf. Fleischmann & Steinhilper 2017: 19). The border thus became a political resource, a 'staging post by means of which to connect to the wider world' (Rumford 2013: 170).

Others had started their work locally and extended it towards the Mediterranean. Westwind Hamburg, a bicycle cooperative set up to support refugees, participated in an aid convoy to Greece in 2016, alongside Hanseatic Help. In Nijmegen, justPeople (2019b) emerged in response to a refugee camp established in the city in 2015, yet one of their current projects is a documentary on Lesbos.

SAR NGOs also work to connect 'northern' member states to the Mediterranean. Sea-Watch (2019b), for example, write:

While the German government is discussing about helping refugees...there are no proposals *how* to transfer those in dire need of help to Germany. "Willkommenskultur", or "welcoming culture" is praised by the same people that want to shut down the borders the other day: German Chancellor Angela Merkel criticizes the cold-heartedness of the people, condoning the death of countless women, children and men trying to cross the Mediterranean in hope of a life worth living.

In this way they echo the sentiments of migrant groups in Europe, like Lampedusa in Hamburg, a collective of refugees established in 2013 to claim their right to the city and to resist the stipulations under the Dublin Regulation that would see them returned to Italy. Their initiative collapsed the distance between Lampedusa and Hamburg, pointing to how the EU's borderlands reverberate around the continent and how EU policies shape the Mediterranean space and the people who move through it (Fieldnotes: Hamburg, 2018; cf. Odugbesan & Schwiertz 2018).

The imperative to connect these spaces is not lost to activists who demand the right to mobility. In 2018, facing closed ports in Italy and Malta, rescue NGOs joined forces with civil society organisations, activists, and representatives of European municipalities to launch the Charter of Palermo, a call for safe harbours, sanctuary cities, and the right to mobility. With their slogan 'From the Sea to the Cities!', they insisted on new imaginaries: 'From sea rescue to solidarity cities, from access to housing to medical care and fair working conditions, from legal counselling to protection against deportation: we prefigure and enact our vision of a society, in which we want to live' (Alarmphone 2018). These groups continue to come together, most recently in Bologna in November 2019, and in doing so fold together the space between Europe's internal and external borders.

A similar initiative also emerged in Berlin in the summer of 2018. SEEBRÜCKE, meaning 'sea bridge', was founded in response to the closing of Maltese and Italian ports to rescue NGOs. The group applied pressure on German cities and municipalities to declare themselves 'safe harbours' and welcome people rescued in the Mediterranean. They thus bridged Germany and the Mediterranean, explaining how 'the closure of the ports in Malta and Italy is directly related to the fact that countries like Germany are not willing to take in more refugees and thereby are effectively contributing to the deaths on the Med' (ECRE 2019). They also referenced the emergence of 'welcome culture' in Germany in 2015: 'many people who helped in 2015 today share their lives with people who arrived in 2015. They realize that, if the same people tried to cross the Mediterranean now they would be likely to die' (ECRE 2019). In this way, the group not only transgresses time and space, folding together these moments and geographies, but does so in order to transgress static state categories of insider and outsider.

### **Conclusion: Troubling Europe**

Juxtaposing solidarity work in the Mediterranean with solidarity work within Europe reveals how space and place matter. As we have seen, they shape the possibilities and limits of solidarity, while solidarity work simultaneously shapes the spaces and places these activists operate within. The Mediterranean Sea and its legal geographies provide opportunities for rescue NGOs while also conditioning their work. They enter a space that is made spectacular by governments and the media. They remake the sea into a less deadly space, while also running the risk of reproducing emergency narratives, tropes of victimhood, and the sea as a European space. Solidarity initiatives within Europe are also conditioned by the histories, myths, and identities of their cities and nation-states. While some may reproduce exclusionary hierarchies of deservingness, framing migrants as passive victims, we also found instances of people working to dismantle hierarchies of citizenship.

Indeed, while our analysis explores the differences between solidarity work at and within the European Union's borders, it ultimately argues that across these geographies, people engage in transgressive acts of solidarity not only in spectacular borderzones but also within Europe in unexpected, everyday spaces. They resist state categories of the citizen and its other, of linear borders that separate us and them. They transgress boundaries and challenge categories upon which European migration and border policies are constructed. Activists also transgress space and time in creative moves that fold together different moments and geographies. For

example, activists within Europe have extended their work towards the Mediterranean as well as activating the Mediterranean as a spectacular space of death and border controls in order to justify and promote their work. Meanwhile, activists at sea connect the reality of migration in the Mediterranean with member states in 'northern' Europe, collapsing the space between the two. Collectively, both forms of solidarity work contest EU border policies and their concomitant migrant/citizen categories. In doing so, they reveal the violence and injustice at and within the EU's borders, troubling notions of a progressive Europe and reimagining a different society, one more welcoming and equal.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Danish Research Council for Independent Research funded the network, entitled 'Helping Hands: Research Network on the Everyday Border Work of European Citizens' (DFR/6107-00111).
- <sup>2</sup> The spectacles reveal only a fraction of reality, whereby for instance the saving of brown bodies by white Europeans is made visible, while the detention, violence, and deportation that await them is hidden from view. Similarly, the enforcement spectacle makes hyper-visible the state's role in containing the 'illegal migrant', reifying states' sovereign power and their abilities to refuse entry, while making invisible the contributions that migrants make to European societies.
- <sup>3</sup> For example, in 2014, the EU replaced Mare Nostrum, Italy's year-long 'military humanitarian mission' that saved over 150,000 people, with a much smaller Frontex mission, despite warnings that this would result in more deaths at sea. The EU expanded the mission only after numerous shipwrecks and migrant deaths (Heller & Pezzani 2016).

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## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## Authors' Contributions

DeBono and Mainwaring contributed equally to this article.

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