Ivan Bonnin is a postdoctoral researcher at the Università di Genova (MOBS Project). His interests of research span from border studies to racial capitalism in Europe and in the Mediterranean, from social theory to international relations 'from below'. Since 2015 he has worked on the borderland of Ventimiglia, where he conducted a variety of ethnographically -embedded analyses.
Contact: bonnin.ivan@gmail.com

Camille Cassarini is a researcher at the IRMC, former postdoctoral research fellow at Università di Genova, associate researcher at the (IRD-AMU) and fellow at the Institut Convergences Migrations. He holds a PhD in Geography from the University of Aix-Marseille and is conducting research at the crossroads of social geography, political anthropology and migration studies, based on fieldwork in North Africa.
Contact: camillefrancois.cassarinihadjkouider@edu.unige.it

Paolo Cuttitta's research interests focus on the socio-spatial processes related to the proliferation and differentiation of borders, with specific attention to the Euro-African migration regime, as well as the role of non-governmental actors in bordering/de-bordering/re-bordering practices. Before joining Genoa University in 2023, he held research positions at Università di Palermo, VU University Amsterdam and Sorbonne Paris Nord University.
Contact: paolo.cuttitta@edu.unige.it

Georges Kouagang once a student in civil engineering at the University of Douala (Cameroon), had to escape from the country due to his democratic political beliefs. After a long 5-year trip crossing Sahara and the Mediterranean, he arrived in Italy where since 2017 he collaborates in all the ethnographic research on borders and migrations at the Laboratorio of Sociologia Visuale of the Università di Genova. In 2023 he was granted a refugee status.

Contact: kouagangg@gmail.com

Ismail Oubad is a doctoral researcher within the SOLROUTES Project. He is conducting a thesis on the solidarity actors and support networks to the journey of unauthorized migrants within and across the Belgian borders, adopting ethnographic methods. Ismail has conducted fieldwork in Morocco, Italy and currently in Belgium.

Contact: ismail.oubad@edu.unige.it

Luca Queirolo Palmas teaches sociology of migration and visual sociology at the University of Genoa. Co-author of *Underground Europe: along migrant routes* with Federico Rahola (Palgrave MacMillan, London 2022) and Boza! with Luca Giliberti (Eleuthera, 2024), he is now the principal investigator of the ERC project 'Solidarities and Migrants' routes across Europe at Large' (SOLROUTES).

Contact: luca.palmas@unige.it

Federico Rahola teaches Sociology of cultural processes and Theory of image at the University of Genoa. He is author of *Zone definitivamente temporanee* (Ombre corte, Verona 2003), and co-author of *Chi decide. Critica della ragione eccezionalista* (Ombre Corte, Verona 2011) with Massimiliano Guareschi, and of *Underground Europe: along migrant routes* (Palgrave MacMillan, London 2022) with Luca Queirolo.
Contact: federico.rahola@unige.it

UNSETTLING SOLIDARITY: TOWARDS A MATERIALISTIC APPROACH TO BORDER TRANSGRESSION*

Ivan Bonnin
Università di Genova

Camille Cassarini
Università di Genova

Paolo Cuttitta
Università di Genova

Georges Kouagang
Independent Researcher

Ismail Oubad
Università di Genova

Luca Queirolo Palmas
Università di Genova

Federico Rahola
Università di Genova

SOLIDARIDAD INQUIETANTE: HACIA UN ENFOQUE MATERIALISTA DE LA TRANSGRESIÓN FRONTERIZA

Abstract

Is it possible to rethink the idea of solidarity beyond traditional and mainstream frameworks of analysis, between humanitarianism, political action, and charity? Can we deprovincialize a concept which was mainly developed in the Global North and re-imagine it starting from cases and situations in the South, non-Western agencies, and worldviews? Can we reinterpret the production of solidarity as a process which is fundamentally enmeshed in the underground informal economy of border transgression?

Based on three ethnographic case studies from North Africa, this article aims to raise new questions about the heuristic dimension of solidarity, fostering our understanding of the relational and political dynamics at work along contemporary illegalized migration routes. More broadly, it will attempt to shed light on the production of solidarity as a fluid situation which is always in the making from a materialistic perspective. This requires us to think about spurious contexts and practices which exceed conceptual binaries such as "smugglers" and "facilitators", "profit" and "not-for-profit", even "donor" and "recipient," by looking at invisible and informal interactions and relations, tactical alliances, infrastructures, mutual aid, and cooperation among people on the move.

Keywords

solidarity; borders; materialism

Resumen

¿Es posible repensar la idea de solidaridad más allá de los marcos de análisis tradicionales y dominantes, entre humanitarismo, acción política y caridad? ¿podemos desprovincializar un concepto desarrollado principalmente en el Norte Global y reimaginarlo a partir de casos y situaciones del Sur, de agencias y cosmovisiones no occidentales? ¿podemos reinterpretar la producción de solidaridad como un proceso fundamentalmente enredado en la economía sumergida informal de la transgresión de fronteras?

Basándose en tres estudios de casos etnográficos del Norte de África, este artículo pretende plantear nuevas preguntas sobre la dimensión heurística de la solidaridad, fomentando nuestra comprensión de las dinámicas relacionales y políticas que actúan a lo largo de las rutas migratorias ilegalizadas contemporáneas. En términos más generales, tratará de arrojar luz sobre la producción de solidaridad como una situación fluida que siempre se está gestando desde una perspectiva materialista. Esto nos obliga a pensar en contextos y prácticas espurios que superan los binarios conceptuales como "contrabandistas" y "facilitadores", "con ánimo de lucro" y "sin ánimo de lucro", incluso "donante" y "receptor", examinando las interacciones y relaciones invisibles e informales, las alianzas tácticas, las infraestructuras, la ayuda mutua y la cooperación entre las personas en movimiento.

Palabras clave

solidaridad; fronteras; materialismo

The matter of solidarity

In the last decade, a growing body of work by European and Western scholars has used the concept of solidarity to describe various forms and practices, inner intentions and political orientations related to supporting the illegalized movements of migrants toward and through Europe (Agustin et al., 2018; Ambrosini, 2022; Della Porta & Steinhilper, 2021; Rygiel, 2011; Tazzioli, Walters, 2019). Two of the authors of this article suggested conceiving of and reframing the often ephemeral, yet persistent, tactical coalitions among people on the move (either migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers), and groups of activists and civil society actors through the lens of the Underground Railroad in nineteenth-century pre-Civil-War US history (Queirolo Palmas & Rahola 2022). Other colleagues and comrades invited us to re-read the necropolitical Mediterranean "solid sea"—which, despite the many dangers it poses, is challenged every day by hundreds of dinghies and crossed by many disobedient vessels involved in rescue operations—as a space of re-articulation and crossing similar to the "Black Atlantic" explored by Paul Gilroy, thus suggesting the idea of a "Black Mediterranean" (Smithe, 2018). In both cases—as well as in more discrete situations involving direct support to people crossing, inhabiting routes and being hosted while on the move—the fact that solidarity defies the European border regime and its legal order gives it a central and almost implicit role (Schwiertz & Schwenken, 2021; Lendaro, 2018; Ataç et al., 2016), because it is used as an explanatory category. Moreover, it has often been rearticulated as an act of moral and political disobedience, which means it has been over-exposed, criminalized, and persecuted, with activists being charged with aiding and abetting illegal migration and smuggling (Fekete, 2018; Schack & Witcher, 2021). In this respect, the meaning of the term also seems to require a necessary and broader redefinition, an expansion of its semantic reach, and perhaps even a radical re-articulation.

Indeed, appealing to solidarity to define and describe all these specific acts of complicity with illegalized movements has often turned out to be based on a somewhat partial and even Manichean perspective, one that clearly distinguishes between subjects and objects, donors and recipients, profit and not-for-profit actions, the West and the rest. Such perspective implicitly conceives of solidarity as a kind of altruistic and disinterested gesture (Jeffries, 2014), rejecting all other possibilities of tactical alliances, forms of help and cooperation with and among people on the move as impure and unfitting. As we know, solidarity is a concept with a deep-rooted and heavy sociological and political meaning (Kymlicka, 2015). From a political perspective, solidarity is mainly understood through the lens of the Marxian or Marxist notion of class solidarity, intended as a form of awareness of a common exploited and subaltern condition. Its sociological

definition dates back to Durkheim's idea of "organic solidarity," intended as a kind of glue or energy which holds together different interests and functions within the rationalized framework of the modern nation state. Both traditions turn out to be somewhat useful in our case. On the one hand, solidarity toward and among people on the move may be inscribed within a specific political horizon, as a process of (class) subjectivation beyond national boundaries and belongings. On the other hand, the Durkheimian perspective highlights a less substantial or essentialized dimension, a rather impersonal and operational functioning which prevents a general given situation from falling apart. In a way, our understanding here includes both meanings, as it seeks to combine the political dimension of an act of subjectivation (of defiance and disobedience) with a more relational approach to solidarity intended as a form of social interaction and exchange, beyond overdetermining moral judgements and partitions.

Indeed, in the case of border transgression and unauthorized mobility, once we understand solidarity as a peculiar relation whose main outcome consists in producing a route or making it possible, we end up facing a more practical dimension, one which stems not only from moral intentions and ethical-political orientations, but which is also based on actual, material, and effective conditions. As is the case with all conceptual categories, solidarity is defined by both genealogy and translation, which requires us to trace the trajectories that may have been drawn by the concept, its inner movements, and different declinations. In doing so, we start from the assumption that, when moving away from the Western tradition (the Latin meaning related to the idea of a common obligation, *in solido*, of indebted people (Roediger, 2016)) and from a Eurocentric perspective, the concept takes on different meanings and has a different weight (Bauder & Juffs, 2020).

Without pretending to do an exhaustive etymological and genealogical exercise as such, this article is limited to exploring some unconventional encounters and instances of cooperation among people on the move. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, we argue that these could be seen as forms and effects of solidarity in their own right. We, the authors, are all involved in a broader ethnographic multi-site research project whose aim is to explore border transgression practices enacted by people on the move as well as by heterogeneous groups that support their stay and movement. Starting from this fieldwork, our main objective is to generate a new standpoint by decentering the gaze and adopting a Southern perspective as the preferred ground from which the mainstream research narrative founded on political and humanitarian oppositions can be unsettled. Unsettling to us is another way, perhaps a complementary way, of making solidarity "uneasy," to quote David Roediger (Roediger, 2016), both by broadening its geopolitical array—thus provincializing Europe—and by extending

its field of application beyond the conventional distinction between disinterested altruistic gesture and materially oriented practices with a specific purpose. All of this requires a different and more inclusive notion of and approach to solidarity. We could even talk about a relational turn, one that sees it as something that is less embodied in individual moral and political positions and intentions, and more involved in the practical outcomes triggered by it. In this sense, solidarity is conceived of as a fuel, as energy or even, following Gabriel Tarde (Tarde, 1903), as a flow of electricity circulating among multiple nodes and poles.

Accordingly, we could even wonder whether those who are regarded as smugglers, and thus criminalized, might turn out to be active vectors of such energy or electricity, as Khosravi, Keshavarz and other scholars (Keshavarz & Khosravi, 2022; Zhang et al., 2018) argue in their work. By the same token, Tunisian fishermen searching for economic value in the engine of a shipwrecked boat could also be acting as "conductors" for all those travelers trying to reach Lampedusa, regardless of their beliefs on borders and solidarity. Addressing these questions means paying particular attention to the actual and material dimension of a set of interactions which can be referred to as a different, unsettled, and perhaps less comfortable ("uneasy") idea of solidarity. This also suggests a possible critique of the political economy of solidarity. Thus, our intention is to immerse ourselves into the hidden abodes where the modes of production of solidarity can be observed, addressing different material instances and situations characterizing the routes followed by many migrants, wondering whether it is still a matter of solidarity and, if so, of what kind.

1) Navigating unsettling situations

For the reasons outlined above, the article focuses on three ethnographic scenes from North-Africa which are linked with our research fieldworks. The first one (the *Polò* story) was directly experienced by one of the authors and it is related to a blurred location that facilitated movements and encounters in the Algerian city of Tamanrasset, located around 400 km from the Nigerian border. The second one (the *Maquis* story) depicts the economic and social functioning of a multilevel facility for sub-Saharan migrants in the Tunisian port of Sfax. The third one (the digital story) describes an online space, a platform offering different exit tickets to pierce through the borders of the so called "Balkan route" (El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019). Based on these locally grounded dispatches, we aim to open a new terrain for questions and research, bringing up the challenging and somewhat unsettling idea of "solidarity at large."

By illustrating three different, unsettled configurations of solidarity outside Europe, the following three sketches also reflect the authors' different positionalities. The *Polò* story comes from a longstanding research project along migrants' routes that some of us had been working on since the dismantlement of the Calais Jungle (anonymized, 2022), dealing with different forms of solidarity and cooperation among people on the move and activists. This project also gave rise to the idea of a "third gaze", shifting the subjectivity and the positioning of researchers and informants. The *Polò* story is a case in point, with one of "our" previous informants re-positioning himself as a refugee author and researcher recounting his own experience of the journey. The *Maquis* story is the outcome of a doctoral research project conducted by one of us which was carried out in the city of Sfax between 2017 and 2019. This place, which is central to the creation of social connections among people on the move in Tunisia, was the subject of several lengthy ethnographies in which observation and interviews were conducted with various categories of actors involved in migrant mobility. More broadly, the work on which this second sketch is based described the power relations at work in associations autonomously run by migrants between Tunisia and Ivory Coast. Finally, the digital infrastructure sketch stems from an ongoing observation of four online chat channels run by Moroccan *Harraga* in different locations along the route to Europe. On these platforms, we rely on the exchanges performed in this online social space. We reconstruct the principles and the directions that shape the logistics, the resources, and the facilitation linked with the journeys of Moroccan *Harraga* from Morocco to Turkey, through the Balkans, and to Europe.

Sketch 1: Playing Polò in Tamanrasset

The rigid polarity between understanding solidarity as either a disinterested gift or as an unauthorized transit service (including smuggling) seems to compress a whole set of dense and contingent relations which structure cooperation among people on the move. This simplification also fails to account for the agency inscribed in the small practices of unauthorized traveling, which are thus obscured by external acts of solidarity or by provisions delivered by economic operators dealing with migration, whose proliferation results from the harshening of the border regime. To counter this polarity, we aim to shed light on the dimension of cooperation during the journey by conceiving of it as something which exceeds the gift/market dichotomy, that is, as an expanded and constantly reproduced space, a specific symbolic and material economy in which seemingly antithetical principles are integrated, composed, and enhanced.

Figure 1. Il Polò drawing
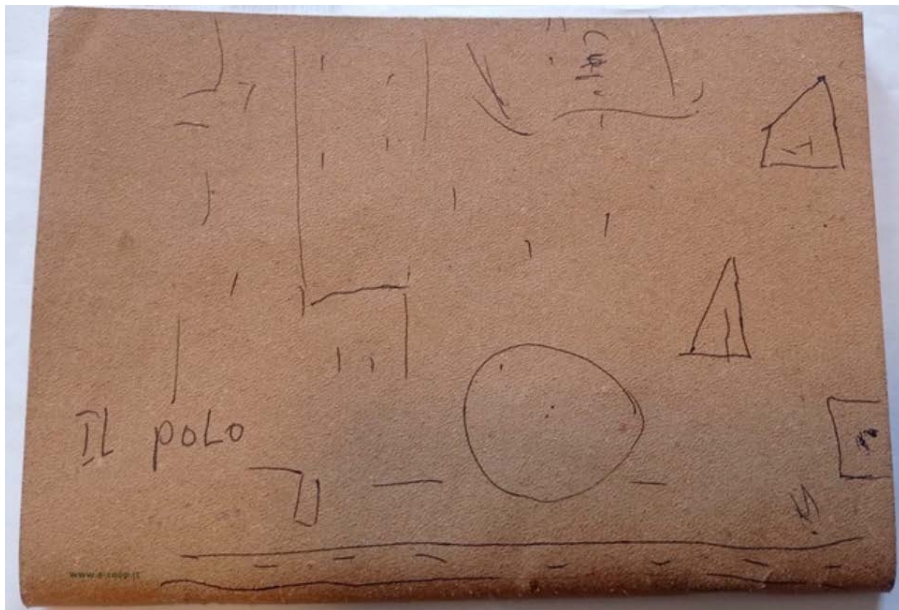
Source: authors' drawing, 2024.

Let us start with a drawing (Figure 1) which is meant to depict the first safe spot after crossing the border between Algeria and Niger and arriving in Tamanrasset, "the gateway to the desert." The author of the drawing is Georges, a former traveler who is now one of us. Suddenly, in an academic conversation about desert passages, we heard him exclaim: "the first thing you do when you get to Algeria is look for the *Polò*. All of us guys look for the *Polò*." In a matter of minutes, we receive two different definitions of this space, a common recurrence in the idiom of Francophone travelers which at first glance seems to refer to a place of hospitality, density, and rerouting: the first definition foregrounds mutual aid, solidarity, and self-organization; the second one is focused on the provision of services which are conventionally associated with smuggling. Despite appearances to the contrary and in spite of the drawing representing the mansion of the *chef* living in the *Polò* and the tents of the travelers camped out in the courtyard as spatially opposed, this is no contradiction, as we will show in the following discussion. Indeed, the place where people have dinner (the circle at the center) symbolizes a community in which various subjects defined by different positions and temporalities are re-united thanks to the communal experience of eating: "we all eat together from the same plate in a circle, taking the food with our hands."

The *Polò* is a place you find while following the flow as you see other "black fellows driving you there." It seems like a passage, a place that changes your experience from a condition of movement into one of rest which makes it possible to take off your perceived migrant *habitus*: "you have to leave your backpack somewhere, so you are not considered a migrant when you walk." The *Polò* becomes a community of suspended travelers which is based on some homogenous features—language and nationality—while still maintaining a certain heterogeneity:

> there were not only Cameroonians, but there were also Christians and Muslims among us. The city is full of *Polòs*, the Nigerian one, the Malian one, and so on. These shelters are run by us, they are located in the backyards of the houses of people who have been settled in Tamanrasset for longer or in abandoned construction sites.

Thus, people on the move can access a network of information and relationships which leads to and establishes the circulation of different goods and services: food, medicines, false documents, tickets, money-transfers for small amounts, phone calls to families, and income opportunities through casual employment. At the center of this exchange network, there is a *chef* who is not so much an actor looking to extract value from it, but rather acts as a guardian, a guarantor for the space and for its social and economic functioning, and may receive a material return: "the *chef* has inherited the *Polò* from a previous elder owner who left and in turn he will leave it to someone else once he gets back on the road." The two words which recur the most when describing the people dwelling in the material and symbolic space represented in the drawing are elders and travelers, both of which establish a specific relationship with space and time as well as with power.

We wonder what kind of economy and what kind of solidarity the *Polò* fuels.

> Of course, there are fees, a certain amount of money will be earned by the *chef*, for example when he purchases food for everyone. This will allow him to cover the rent. But the *chef* is someone like us. He just came here before and got settled. He works as a bricklayer during the day and then eats with us in the evening. If you don't have any money, no one will turn you away and you can always find something to eat, you are accepted even if you don't have anything. If you really can't get by, it's the *chef* who pays for your ticket so you can go elsewhere, recommending that you call him once you have arrived.

However, the chef does not control all circulation and exchanges:

> when I arrived, I associated with the guys who had a phone, to call my brother in Algiers. I asked him to send me money through their phones, paying a

small fee. Everything happened informally through long-distance transactions. I spent three weeks in the *Polò*. I was considered an "elder" because I was always handing out some money. When I left using a fake student ID—which gives you a better chance of traveling around Algeria without being pulled off buses by the police and dumped out to die in the desert—I left everything I had to the fellows in the *Polò*.

In this case, having access to a certain amount of money (which stratifies the positions of different travelers) helps to build a reputation and a character—that of the elder—which can only be maintained by circulating resources with no fees other than moral ones. Leaving some goods and belongings to those who remain evokes a ritual related to prisons, which underscores the segregated and self-detaining dimension of the *Polò* as a temporary shelter, preventing guests from being captured by the authorities until they can continue their journey.

Inside the *Polò*, order is maintained through simple rules which are communicated by the *chef* to the traveler during the first communal meal: "1) Housework is shared. Everyone must contribute. 2) All violence is prohibited. If anyone causes injuries to others, there is a cash penalty and eventually they will be expelled. 3) No stealing. Anyone who steals will be beaten with a stick." Once they have been defined, both space and time can be narrated. In this sense, the *Polò* is reminiscent of one of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Euphemia, where people just exchange memories and words: "It was nice to stay there. Everyone told their story; you can listen and participate in endless storytelling. You can recover and feel safe, leaving aside the stress, pace, and dangers of traveling." The *Polò* is an inhabited pause, a dwelling along the route, which provides gifts, money, resources, and exchanges in a contingent and variable manner. Thus, it establishes a peculiar and contrapuntal travel economy with its own pedagogical dimension: a learning space which reproduces a fragile, but necessary form of mutual cooperation and complicity since "with fellow travelers you behave like a family, and everyone can often count on the help of others." This specific moral economy and its institutions such as the *Polò* directly counter those put in place by profiteers, professional smugglers, "those who want to profit from our journeys without limits, those who want to turn us into their commodities."

As Georges finishes his drawing, the sheet is filled with abstract dots: fires to provide light, people, and masts with curtains to offer shade, surrounded by a boundary wall

separating the *Polò* from the city. This reminds us of something we have already heard: "My journey was a road to nowhere, with me having nothing and getting somewhere almost by magic." Such magic is not only a matter of luck, but also of efforts, cooperation, encounters, exchanges, complicity, and brotherhood which are built along the routes. All these can be summed up by the word "solidarity" if we are willing to extend its scale and unsettle its scope.

Sketch 2: Maquis' time, tensions, and cooperation

In Tunisia, the city of Sfax is one of the most important places of passage on the way to the Italian coasts and to Europe. The extensive media coverage on Sfax, which is regularly revived by shipwrecks (always attributed to so-called 'unethical smugglers'), makes it one of the quintessential places in the 'border spectacle'. Yet, there are few places in Sfax where movements can be easily observed. However, all the relational configurations leading to movements are embedded in micro-places where relationships are formed and undone based on the need for cooperation. Among these places, the *Poudrière* is probably one of the most fascinating points of observation of this process.

A former residential building, the *Poudrière* has multiple functions. It is useful to those who wish to just pass through as well as to those who wish to stay, find a job, and accumulate various forms of capital. In 2017, Jimmy, a young Ivorian man who had just arrived in Sfax, explained the importance that this place had acquired within the community of adventurers in Tunisia in these terms:

> Before you know this place, we can say that you don't know anything about Tunisia… It's like you're in the dark. I spent five months in the 'bara' on my own before a brother showed me this place, I had even lost the taste of home, of our food. I thought I would be staying in the bush until the end of my adventure … […] Here you can get to know the little plans, the stories, how we do what. You come, you drink your beer, you chat a bit … that's how you learn.

The *Poudrière* is not only a 'recreational' space where some homesick adventurers come to quench their thirst. It is also, and above all, a space where power relations are forged through exchanges which are made all the more crucial by the fact that they take place in the context of constraints produced by the border regime (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Poudrière

Source: author's photo, 2024.

The entire political economy of mobility that adventurers, facilitators, and entrepreneurs with more or less dubious histories put in motion is organized on four floors. The first two floors are simply designated as housing, with leases of different lengths, which are essentially arranged based on criteria of national proximity. While Ivorians were 'dominant' managing this place for a long time, things have now changed. On the third floor, the western half of the building is designated as short-term accommodation for newly arrived people or those in transit. The eastern half is a multimodal space. On the right, a small 'bunker' serves as a shop specializing in African products, such as Attiéké, beauty products, and condiments. These are made available through a long supply chain linking the 'gouro' market in Abidjan to this small room lost in the suburbs of Sfax. This place has been run by 'Maman Nelly' since the beginning of the *Poudrière* history. The fourth floor, the *maquis* of the *Poudrière* is the core of interactions. The western part of this floor hosts the kitchens, which are always managed by the women living here. On the east side, a large room, divided in two by long tables and opening onto a large roof terrace, forms the *maquis* room. A large television stuck to the wall, connected to a sound system, broadcasts the latest Zouglou or Nigerian Afrobeat clips, depending on the current balance of power. They serve beer, fish and Attiéké that would make even the most knowledgeable person wonder what country they are in.

This unique arrangement, which is a direct consequence of the economy linked to African migrants' mobility in Tunisia, has a singular history. In a way, it is the mirror of the power relations which have developed along this migratory route, of its political balances and tensions. Indeed, the *Poudrière* was born out of a history of cooperation. At the beginning of 2016, several Ivorians who had been kicked out of their homes started looking for a place where they could live collectively, sheltered from the pressure exerted by landlords. It was thanks to the intermediary of a wealthy Sfaxian boss that this group was able to move into this building, in return for a substantial rent and well-paid, albeit relative, police protection. At the end of 2016, the death at work of a young Ivorian man who was close to the group of the *Poudrière* gave rise to the idea that an associative structure, even an informal one, would allow the collective to ensure a form of 'mutualization' of risk. A small spontaneous contribution made it possible to take care of the funeral and start the 'Association des Ivoiriens Actifs de Sfax' (AIVAS). At the beginning of 2017, the association established as the preferred interlocutor of humanitarian actors working on the 'problems' faced by African people who found themselves in an irregular situation in Sfax. The strong demand for support quickly transformed the political balance of the AIVAS office and of the whole place. The constitution of the association and its establishment in the *Poudrière* made it a real testing ground for the tensions arising from the dynamics of cooperation between different actors moving through this space. The two structures were quickly 'decoupled'. Under the influence of various humanitarian actors, the association followed its own principles and chose to exert its influence beyond its place of origin. The *Poudrière* also followed its own history, which is directly linked to the economy of migration it supports. Here, arrangements are financed, information is exchanged for money, and its spatial centrality means that new actors take on roles and fight to control this place.

In September 2022, Jimmy took me to the *Poudrière*. AIVAS was a distant memory. In the meantime, the NGOs and IGOs that had pushed so hard for it to become structured had turned away when they learned that members of the board had 'used' their positions to connect people who wanted to reach Europe with 'smugglers'. The president, who was accused of aiding people smuggling, is now in prison. The face of the *Poudrière* has also changed. While there are still a few Ivorians, now there are a lot of very young Guineans or Cameroonians who have come from Algeria or Libya after long journeys. Jimmy suddenly seemed overwhelmed by this new generation. He, who had been so young and spirited at the time, was regretting a bygone era when the Ivorians used to 'dominate' the place and its economy. Maman Nelly is still there. Her business has not moved, but her products have evolved, too, influenced

by the demand of newly arrived people as well as by new logistics circuits between Tunisia and Ivory Coast.

A strange fate for a strange place. The history of the *Poudrière* tells us something about the creation of solidarity along migration routes. Far from being 'self-produced', the cooperation that has been built here is the result of a unique assemblage of actors dealing with checks, mobility, and specific temporalities which migration and the border regime have helped shape. However, in addition to demonstrating the analytical ineffectiveness of the classic binary differentiation between 'good' actors of solidarity and 'bad' actors of passage, the history and centrality of the *Poudrière* represent, above all, an invitation to think in terms of tactical cooperation. Places of passage and the emerging relational configurations are obviously the result of power relations, but these relations depend to a lesser extent on a struggle between 'good' and 'bad' actors of migration than on the destiny of the routes and temporalities that cross and constitute these places.

Sketch 3: The digital infrastructures of the *Harraga*

The use of digital technologies of connectivity constitutes a prominent aspect of the logistics network put in place by Moroccan *Harraga*[1] along the Balkan Route. Moroccans who do not have adequate resources to obtain a Schengen visa to travel to Europe regularly manage to acquire sufficient means to buy a flight to Turkey, which does not require a visa and therefore becomes the starting point of their journey to Europe. Moroccans in Turkey, those moving through the Balkans, those who have reached Europe, and those who are aiming to embark on the "game" of the Balkan route, but are still in Morocco, produce assemblages of information and logistical infrastructures around the opportunities and constraints shaping this specific route. In the case of the Balkan route, mistrust towards potential scammers and unreliable 'passeurs', the need to find reliable information and to avoid some "smugglers" and their scams are the main reasons behind the production of several private and public cross-platform messaging channels. In these spaces, there are efficient ways of surviving the Balkan route, with people choosing to believe that the information and resources provided by users are reliable (conductors' contact details, digital maps of the trails along the routes, points of passage, raw footage

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[1] Derived from the Arabic root 'h-r-g,' the term 'Harga' means unauthorized migration towards Europe. Literally, the word denotes a burn. Maghrebi Harraga, the plural form of Harrag, thus embodies the notion of one who disregards a red light. Without a visa, they 'burn' through borders, laws, and even their own documents to reach Europe. In the 1980s, a Harrag would attempt to stow away in the holds of a cargo ship towards Spain, Italy, or Canary Islands. Now that migratory routes for the Maghreb Harragas have multiplied, Türkiye, the Western Balkans routes are crossed with similar terms being used for those people attempting to 'burn' through borders.

of river-crossings, jumping onto trains and trucks, location of reception centers in Balkan countries, and so on).

The messaging channels we have observed are a space for logistics and for the detailed organization needed to travel from Morocco to Turkey and through the Balkans, providing information about the operational modes and procedures required to travel along the Balkan route from Turkey to Europe including, but not limited to: reliable travel companies to reach Turkey with fewer complications, travel costs, stations where people can take a break, income opportunities, materials and tools needed. One certain fact is that, even before reaching Turkey, the users of these digital platforms know the details of the journey along the Balkan route, its economy, opportunities, and constraints.

On these digital platforms, knowledge and information about *Isstekshafat* (expeditions); *Khe'rajat* (going out to cross the border); *Rihla* (the journey), and *Taslima* (the delivery) are shared. Prior to crossing, groups of people settled in Turkey carry out 'expeditions' twice a week to detect points of passage around the fences marking the border between Turkey and Bulgaria. Thus, information is produced and updated constantly. This knowledge informs the two types of *Khe'rajat*: (1) the semi-independent one and (2) the dependent one. The former is called *Rihla*. The *Harraga* prepare and share maps of the trails and, in each group, there must be a 'knower' of the points of passage along the fences. When they reach the point of passage, the *knower* interrupts the journey and heads back. They are left to traverse forests and cross rivers in the Balkans relying on the digital maps that are available to them. Here, it is up to individuals to find means of transportation (jumping on trains and trucks), relying on their resourcefulness. While the *Rihla* is for those with limited financial resources, those who have sufficient means can embark on a *Taslima*. In this case, the journey is arranged around different points of passage. To be part of a *Taslima*, people need to contact the *Ribirou* (passage provider) and deposit money through a transfer to specific Turkey-based operators. Once the *Harraga* reach country X, they give the *Ribirou* the secret code to collect the fee for the service provided. If that is done properly, the *Harraga* are further along the way in cars to country Y and then to their destination in the Schengen area.

Benefit-oriented services for a fee are not the only form of support provided by "passage providers." The *Ribirou* also share the location of places they found during their activities along the Bulgarian-Turkish border and beyond. By doing so, they help to expand the maps covering the trails along the route (Figure 3).. In addition to that, they form groups of people and supply them with the necessary tools and materials (shoes, coats, sleeping bags, and inflatables to cross rivers) in exchange for a symbolic fee.

Figure 3. Merged maps of trails around the Balkans
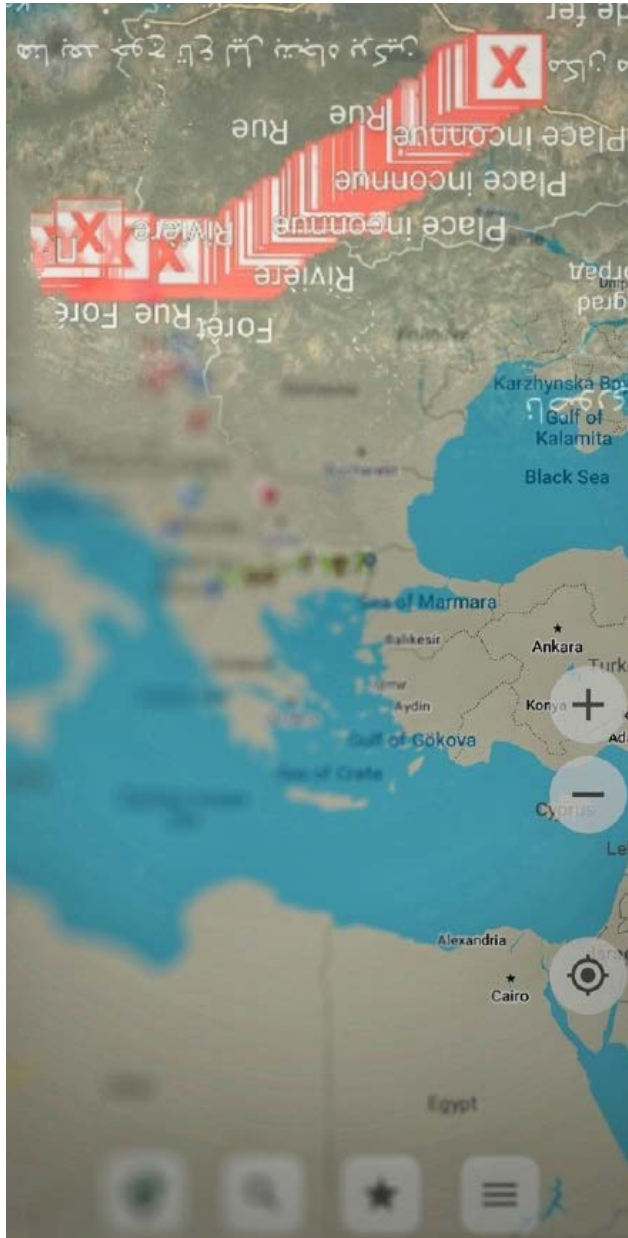
Source: author's screenshot from one of the chat channels.

Note: blurred by the author to prevent the identification of locations on the map.

Nevertheless, in this context, the contours and the connotations of the *passeur* and of the "person on the move" are blurred, as most users provide information, tips, contacts, and services. Similarly, a person who is waiting to start their journey from Turkey across the Balkans can be a *passeur* one moment, leading *Harraga* to specific points along the Bulgarian-Turkish border fence, and then be conducted by others at different steps of their border transgression process. To better grasp this context, it is worth considering that being a "conductor" or being "conducted" is not an ontological condition, but rather a situation which arises from complex relational dynamics at different steps along the route. Even the term *Harraga* is used interchangeably in Maghrebi culture to refer to both the "conductor" and the people being "conducted". In the cultural narrative, they both burn borders and former identities to acquire new ones after reaching the other side, beyond or across borders. To understand this context, it is useful to suspend the rigid Western polarity which implies a clear-cut division of tasks and connotations (provider/beneficiary, smuggler/smuggled, and so on).

On these platforms, scams are strongly contested and collective intentionality is built to "bring back the rights" of those who have been victims of scams. The author has witnessed occasions in which people organized to share pictures of contested 'smugglers' and even provided information about the places where they could be found. People contributing to the platforms are located in different places. Those based in Turkey search for, spot, reach, denounce, and often punish 'smugglers' who have been contested by many. Peer-justice is shaped by the users of this digital space in which actions spill out of the digital dimension into the real world, where 'smugglers' known to have scammed people receive the punishment they deserve. With no pretension to romanticizing these chat channels, scammers may be present even on these platforms. However, their users cooperate to denounce and defame the scammers. Above all, this collective exposure aims to counter those who seek to monopolize resources to cross the border through disinformation and scams, which would jeopardize the journey of the *Harraga*.

If the act of facilitating border transgression can be understood as the provision of information and resources meant to help people circumvent the violence of border control, these digital platforms are autonomous infrastructures offering information about the underground trails in the Balkans – like the Underground Railroads in North America. These digital platforms support border crossings and promote mutual aid among the people involved in journeys along this route. In addition to this, they provide information about the daily functioning of the logistical infrastructure supporting border crossings and about its economy.

The 'counter-datafication' of border transgression through the *Isstekshafat* (in contrast to the official datafication performed by Frontex and border police), and the fact that the *Harraga* need to leave digital traces of their passage have opened up new spaces for communication, enabling reliable exchanges between people based along the routes to Europe and people aiming to complete their journey. These mobile commons (Trimikliniotis et al., 2017) allow for autonomous forms of digital expression on how to cross borders beyond narratives based on tragedy or control. Border transgression is facilitated through information and knowledge prioritizing a digital space for its *ad hoc* collective intentionality. The facilitation of border transgression in this context is a position without a specific identity, an action without a clear-cut status and connotation. Instead, it is shaped differently depending on the situation. When looking at this infrastructure, we are faced with the difficulty of identifying its status and connotations, as in the case of trail maps with feedback and modifications circulating on these platforms. However, the ties and the underground knowledge circulating in this digital space spill over, beyond the digital. Encounters, offers of accommodation in border towns, direct contacts with trustworthy conductors, materials, tips and tools for the journey are actually acquired in real life through face-to-face meetings.

The digital infrastructures of border transgression enlighten us about how the act of crossing borders is organized and communicated along migration routes. In this context, different locations, statuses, and actors overlap and become blurred. The resulting assemblage is the result of the frictions and tensions caused by mistrust, by the need for collective resourcefulness in order to face a challenging journey. When we look at this digital infrastructure from the standpoint of Moroccan *Harraga*, we see a complex set of situated frictions and tensions, an *ad hoc* collective intentionality, and tactical cooperation, all of which contribute to shaping a reliable channel of information and knowledge on a prominent migration route used by Maghrebi *Harraga*.

An impure process?

Before moving on to our provisional conclusions, we would like to briefly reflect on methodology because, for us, it was the real key to unsettling the concept of solidarity. As Sandro Mezzadra argued in a recent article, "we should privilege and foster those forms and understandings that acknowledge the constitutive relevance of migrants' agency and take it as an indispensable and fully material basis for action and discourse. It is against this background that the very notion of solidarity has to be rethought" (Mezzadra, 2020). Thus, the development of our materialist position on solidarity did not arise from an abstract philosophical concern, but rather it was and is continuously being inspired

by ethnographic findings on the actual border crossing practices of people on the move. Their stories – if we give them the attention they deserve – reveal to us other possible ways of interpreting and conceptualizing solidarity, which surely are closer to the subalterns who directly experience the violence of the bordered world we live in. These stories provide a migrant perspective that changes an understanding of border transgression which, in today's racialized world, is filtered by white privilege. What we have found is that the more we abandon our Western, subject-centric epistemology (Samaddar, 2022) and classifying state-like gaze (Keshavarz & Khosravi, 2022), the more we develop our ability to see – perhaps a bit more like an illegalized migrant? – how solidarity develops as an impure process, being both collective and impersonal.

Firstly, let us address the theme of solidarity as an impure process. In the cases we are dealing with, impurity is the condition whereby solidarity is mixed with and contaminated by other social occurrences. Indeed, the three stories we have presented in this article can all be interpreted as edge manifestations of solidarity, as real-life situations found along migration routes which, on the one hand, cannot be defined in terms of mere altruistic assistance (pure solidarity) and, on the other hand, cannot be dismissed as the mere result of the social combination of individual economic interests. We find them interesting and think that they fit our aim to unsettle the concept of solidarity insofar as they describe spurious practices in which the boundaries between solidarity and informal economy are blurred to the point that it is hard to fully distinguish them as different domains. The term 'mixture' is key to understanding these practices. Is it actually possible to tell whether the people running the *Polò* or the *Poudrière* – who often happen to be migrants themselves – are primarily motivated by self-interest or moral concern for illegalized people on the move? Would it make any sense to separate the way people share practical knowledge about the Balkan route using the digital infrastructure built by the *Harraga* from the *Taslima* taxi services provided by some *passeurs* in exchange for money? Drawing on the rather ambivalent character of the three stories, it seems that we find ourselves in a conceptual zone characterized by a lack of distinction, where the very idea of solidarity is not anchored to a clear moral principle built in opposition to self-interest, but rather it operates more fluidly, deeply enmeshed within actual border crossing practices as they are experienced by people on the move. The impure materiality of the Underground Railroad suggests that between mere profit and pure gift there is a whole set of heterogeneous social logics which, by virtue of their 'edge' nature, challenge the dominant concept of solidarity in migration and border studies. Solidarity is to be found not only in the 'clean' actions of disinterested supporters of migration, but also in the 'dirty' practices shaping the economic underworld of illegalized border crossings.

A significant objection that could be raised against our attempt to re-conceptualize solidarity as an impure process might be that, if any form of interaction and exchange taking place in the underworld of unauthorized border crossings is to be interpreted as solidarity, then even the most brutal, exploitative, and hazardous among such forms are somehow redeemed, gaining moral and political legitimacy. Impurity is a dangerous theoretical and political category, there is no doubt about that. But let us be clear. We refuse to get bogged down in the simplistic and cynical logical zone where 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. On the contrary, we want to clearly state that being against the official national border regime is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for claiming solidarity with people struggling to assert their autonomy as migrants. It would be at best naïve – and at worst insincere – to depict the underworld of illegalized migrant mobility as a place where fair cooperation, collective care, and respect for the individual always prevail. In addition to the root problem of national border enforcement, the additional suffering inflicted on people on the move by human traffickers, scammers, speculators, and all sorts of infamous characters ought not to be underestimated. In this respect, it is important to recognize that the social field emerging against the national border regime is a very plural and contradictory space, it is a battlefield in and of itself. The constant process of construction and maintenance of the Underground Railroad –which is a metaphor indicating the material and political possibility for unauthorized migrants to move as free subjects across a bordered world– is what is at stake in such a heterogeneous space, it is not a given or something which has already been established *a priori*.

In light of all this, how and where can we detect the conceptual limits of solidarity? How can we politically appreciate the impurity of actual practices of underground cooperation without falling into the trap of complete amorality? We do not have an exact blueprint for such a complex theoretical operation and, to be honest, we believe that probably there cannot be one. In most cases, the contours of solidarity are inherently blurry and confused, therefore each concrete situation ought to be assessed considering all sorts of relevant contingencies and positionalities and, even if we do this, there is no guarantee that a general conclusion can be reached. For instance, we do not feel that we can say – and surely not in abstract terms – whether 100 EUR is a legitimate price for a ride with a *passeur* given the risky service provided, which would therefore justify including it in the domain of solidarity, or whether it is just speculation on the lives of people on the move. In the border town of Ventimiglia, we have heard migrants praising *passeurs* as honorable facilitators on some occasions and defining them as nasty opportunists on other occasions, completely reversing their judgment based on changes in specific contingencies and positionalities. However, even in the extreme relativity of dif-

ferent eventualities, there is one major ethical principle which we would like to propose: there cannot be solidarity with people struggling to assert their autonomy as migrants when another border regime, unofficial but similarly effective, and as harsh as the official one, is de facto being imposed.

An unofficial border regime is imposed through the effective control exercised over the socio-material means of production of underground routes. For people on the move, in fact, not only is it vital to be able to move, but it is also crucial to know where to and how. This is 'the game', in their jargon, and it is a very social and material affair. The more available resources for players, the higher their chances to complete each level. If we follow William Walters and assume that "materials, infrastructures, knowledge, economies and authorities that both facilitate and constrain, sort and shape, accelerate and impede movement" (Walters, 2015) are key for grasping the concrete reality of underground border crossings, then those who control the above-mentioned and other elements, which are the necessary material conditions for mobility, have the power to regulate the very likelihood of mobility itself. When certain actors on the ground, no matter who they are and what their aims might be, subtract resources from migrants and privatize them, such actors cannot, in any way, be considered to be acting in solidarity with people struggling to assert their autonomy as migrants. On the contrary, we argue that they embody the logical opposite of this, like a sort of grassroots prohibitionist movement. For instance, on the Italian-French border, where people heading to France try to circumvent French police checks by taking isolated trails across the Alps, some of us have noticed that wall graffiti made by migrants to provide information to people trying to cross autonomously had been deleted by professional smugglers who did not want to lose potential customers. We believe that this is one of the worst possible actions. Even if those passeurs might be considered to be effectively operating against the official border regime, what they are also doing is artificially creating a regime of scarcity upstream, which is profitable for those who, like them, control the means of production of migration routes. These people are not abolitionists, but rather they are just other prohibitionists among the prohibitionists, showing no complicity at all with people on the move, but only an instrumental, exploitative relation. Subtracting and privatizing socially produced knowledge is the radical opposite of solidarity.

The other significant theme emerging from the three stories presented is solidarity as a collective, yet impersonal process. This is particularly evident in the case of the digital infrastructure of the *Harraga*, a peer-based and anonymously fed knowledge sharing system, but also in the other two cases. In both the *Polò* and the *Poudrière*, the real protagonists seem to be the not-fully-discernible micro-interactions and relations

weaving the digital space into an actual place of solidarity rather than specific identifiable actors. As far as we can tell, the typically Western ontological primacy of subjects over processes is definitely unsettled by our understanding of how things actually work in the reality of the Underground Railroad. This leads us to take distance from the concept of solidarity as property or an attribute of a defined and coherent subject, as a moral virtue that individuals or groups either possess or do not possess because, unless we do this, the trans-individual character of solidarity seems to fade away. What remains, as we can deduce from most migration and border studies literature, is the canonically good 'solidary subjects' (NGO volunteers, religious missionaries, political activists), rather crystallized figures that emerge as distinct entities from a background social environment that, conversely, is either unexplored or misunderstood, if not simply negatively judged. On the other hand, we believe that focusing on the tumultuous relationality and materiality of informal practices of underground cooperation allows us to re-conceptualize solidarity in radically different terms.

A promising line of research would be to think about solidarity in terms of circulating energy. Indeed, what we typically see in the Underground Railroad and what we wanted to highlight in this article are the multifarious processes of cooperation among various agents, leading to the very possibility of a route. Is there still solidarity even when there are no clearly distinguishable 'solidarity actors' left, but only informal practices? We definitely believe so. Taking the cue from Foucault and Deleuze's reflections on the concept of power (Deleuze, 1988), we argue that solidarity is not the product of already given subjects, but rather a relation that produces subjects; it can only be exercised, not possessed; it is built action by action; it cannot stand still, it must circulate; it is movement that opens up new possibilities. Even police officers, which by definition are the enforcing agents of the national border regime, can help solidarity circulate if they desert their pre-established role and enter another configuration of assemblage. For instance, when border agents 'turn a blind eye' on a person who is illegally crossing a border, no matter why they do it, no matter what identity they are trapped in, they are acting in solidarity with people struggling to assert their autonomy as migrants. Then, we no longer have people 'showing solidarity', people 'not showing solidarity', or people who are 'not showing solidarity yet', but only assemblages of solidarity. Like electrical current, solidarity is fundamentally mobile, diffused, flowing, unstable, operating at the level of microphysics. It flows through, it cuts through molar sets, individuals or large organizations, it flows through micro-connections. It takes the form of people supporting and sustaining border crossings, making them more or less easy or probable. It is the

collective production of an environment – or a sub-environment, a milieu, an underground, the Underground Railroad– that increases the autonomy of people on the move.

Solidarity at large

This article revolves around a basic, fundamental question. It is a question that is central to a research project founded on two words, solidarity and routes, wherein the former is assumed to be the relational fuel producing the latter in terms of spaces that are crossed and inhabited by people on the move within a bordered and hostile landscape. Is solidarity an effective concept, one which can still help us make sense of and shed light on, for instance, the three situations we have presented here? Or rather, do we need to resort to another word to interpret them? Do we have to get rid of that word or rather adapt its meaning to those specific situations, thus re-articulating it? It is likely that the Western theological-political burden of that concept, if still necessary, is not enough to explain these blurred dimensions. Yet, it is exactly because of the political meaning conveyed by the word solidarity that it is worth keeping it and, rather than dismissing it, extending its array of meanings. After all, recognizing that solidarity is at stake in all the three "stories from the South", that they are still and will always be about solidarity, might prompt us to broaden its scope and semantic reach. Perhaps we could speak of "solidarity at large".

Through a materialistic approach and a critique of the moral and political economy of solidarity, we propose the unsettling dimension of "solidarity at large" as a way of both exceeding and provincializing Europe, including its historical genealogy and the (post)colonial legacy hanging over its political and theoretical concepts. Suggesting a blurred and impure concept of solidarity is not a matter of cynicism or (cruel) optimism, nor is it about transgressing and betraying a historical and political heritage. Rather, it means offering a broader and more capacious concept, which can encompass both a political action and the particular/practical dimension of an exchange that goes beyond being a gift, once we recognize that there is no inherent contradiction between the two, because a gift is always a form of exchange with strings attached, much like an exchange is more than just an economic relation or transaction.

We believe that this broadened, blurred, and somewhat uneasy concept of solidarity could be thought of as the energy and fuel needed to produce what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten refer to as the Undercommon (Harney, Moten 2013), which we suggest conceiving of as an underground railroad made of multiple hidden routes, as a communal dimension that is always found after, beneath and under the apollonian surface of Western political categories and the selective, murderous geography of a

borderland. Both in the concept of the Undercommon and in the idea of an Underground Europe, in relation to multiple forms and practices of desertion and escape exceeding an established order, solidarity must always be conceived of as an implicit abolitionist stance, a drive against the necropolitical and racialized prohibitionism that characterizes border regimes.

Acknowledgments

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NOTAS Y DISCUSIONES