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Cecilia Vergnano

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From Affects to Contentious Politics. Disruptive Encounters with Migrants Along a Transalpine Route

Cecilia Vergnano

- 1 Since 2015, the reintroduction of controls at northern Italian borders forced asylum seekers to take risky routes to reach their destinations in the European Union (EU). While several deaths have been registered since 2015 along the whole Alpine chain as a consequence of asylum seekers' exposure to risk, some local villagers experienced unexpected encounters with migrants in distress transiting along mountain pathways. Based on six months of empirical fieldwork on the French-Italian border between the Italian Val di Susa and the French Briançon region, this paper explores the role of local supportive networks in co-producing the conditions of possibility for cross-border migration movements. In particular, it focuses on the articulation between local villagers' emotions and affects (generated-by and, in turn, generators-of disruptive encounters with vulnerable migrants) and the rise of contentious politics against the lethal nature of the border regime. Through the heuristic potential provided by the focus on affect and emotions—but without neglecting the methodological challenges that such approach entails—the aim of the article is twofold. On the one hand, it illustrates how feelings associated with the exposure to potential and actual deaths of vulnerable “others” may trigger public demands. On the other hand, it shows the spatial effects of such affective experiences.
- 2 It is a winter night and the snow is gently falling on the moonlit mountainside of the Col de l'Échelle, on the border between Italy and France. This Alpine pass, at 1,762 metres altitude, is unusually populated by human presences, considering that it is the middle of the night. Ali, Mamadou, Ismael, Souleyman and Ibrahim, Sub-Saharan migrants aiming to reach the other side of the mountain, are making their way through the snow in sneakers and jeans, without gloves, thus seriously risking hypothermia. At

the same time, Anne and Didier, a French couple living close by, are sweeping the mountain on ski, on the trail of the five young men, after having been alerted by someone who saw them walking away from the train station of Bardonecchia, on the Italian side. Anne and Didier, indeed, are in connection with other local volunteers engaged in the organization of search-and-rescue operations in the area. Both the migrants and the volunteers are aware of another potential human presence in the night: on those same paths it is actually possible to bump into French police patrolling the area in search of irregular border-crossers. Indeed, the Col de l'Échelle is a strategic cross-border pass between the Italian Val di Susa and the French region of Hautes-Alpes.

- 3 After a long wait, the silhouettes of the five men finally appear in the middle of the snow. A chill runs through everyone's body: "My heart is racing", explains Anne, describing the effect of such an encounter on her own body.¹ After being reassured that Anne and Didier are not police officers, the young men let themselves lie on the ground to rest and surrender to the pain they are feeling in their hands, not protected by gloves, and feet, bare within their sneakers, the snow stuck on their skin. Anne and Didier offer them hats, gloves, socks and appropriate footwear: through the contact of her hands with their feet, Anne realises that the encounter is real; she is not dreaming, as expressed by her words: "My hands feel their feet. It's real". While moving towards the closest village, Anne cannot avoid contemplating the beauty of the starry night above the mountains: "The night is now wonderful. I open the way in silence."
- 4 The story of the encounter, related from Anne's point of view, is recollected in the form of a series of vignettes in a booklet entitled *De l'autre côté... Une nuit au Col de l'Échelle*, published in the early months of 2018 by the association *Tous Migrants*, based in the French town of Briançon, a few kilometres away from the border pass. As mentioned, Anne and Didier were not alone: a network of local volunteers had activated to rescue and shelter dispersed migrants. Indeed, since 2016, this border area was characterized by the transit of (mostly Western African) migrants directed towards France or other EU countries after having crossed the Sahara Desert, Libya, the Mediterranean Sea and Italy.
- 5 Situated at the intersection between research and activism (Grappi, 2013; Hale, 2001), this article draws upon six months of fieldwork between 2017 and 2018 on the French-Italian border between the Italian *Val di Susa* and the area of Briançon. Research findings are based on the researcher's my first-hand participatory experience in rescue practices and 24 in-depth interviews conducted among (pseudonimized) border area residents engaged in different kinds of supportive activities, from search-and-rescue operations at high altitudes (the so-called *maraudes*) to hospitality in private houses and participation in the daily activities of local shelters.
- 6 This paper aims to contribute to the critical scholarly debate on the so-called EU "migration crisis" (discussed below) by bringing into border and migration studies a new perspective on the conditions of possibility for migrants' cross-border mobility. By focusing on local villagers' emotions and affects² –generated-by and, in turn, generators-of disruptive encounters with vulnerable migrants– the aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, it illustrates how feelings associated with exposure to potential and actual deaths of vulnerable "others" contributed to triggering solidarity practices and public demands (Nienass and Délano, 2016). On the other hand, it demonstrates the spatial effects of such affective states: in particular, how emotions

may help to redesign migratory routes and shape what Doreen Massey calls “geographies of responsibility”: a relational approach to place that gives agency back to all social actors, but also pushes their responsibilities regarding global phenomena back onto them (2004).

- 7 In the following sections, I provide ethnographic illustrations of affects and emotions associated with disruptive encounters in mountain spaces with migrants whose life is at risk. I describe the articulation between the affective dimension of such encounters and the emergence of contentious politics (Ataç, Rygiel and Stierl, 2016; Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016; Tilly 2008) against the lethal nature of the border regime (Agier, 2017; Jones, 2016). For this purpose, I focus on what Demertzis calls the “politics-emotion nexus”; that is to say, the acknowledgement of “the importance of affect as a microfoundation of political action and macropolitical institutionalization” (2013:2). Before this, however, I contextualize the so-defined “migration crisis” within scholarly debates, suggesting that the heuristic lens provided by affect theory may contribute to our understanding of civil society actors’ supportive practices, and I explore the methodological challenges that such a lens entails for the ethnographer.

Affects in the EU migration regime

EU borders between necropolitics, illegalized mobilities and contestations

- 8 In recent years, the labels “refugee crisis” and “migration crisis” have been used in mainstream discourse to frame the arrival of migrants to the EU across the Mediterranean Sea as an exogenous problem to be managed rather than as an endogenous crisis of governance (see, among others, De Genova, Tazzioli and Álvarez-Velasco, 2016, Beauchemin and Ichou, 2016; Campesi, 2018; Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2015; Dines, Montagna and Vacchelli, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2017; Pallister-Wilkins, 2016).
- 9 In this context, and especially since 2016, the route across the Col de l’Échelle has been increasingly transited by illegalized border-crossers. Indeed, Italy is one of the main EU countries to which irregular migrants have arrived in recent years, but is mostly conceived by migrants as just a “transit country” (Belloni, 2016; Brekke and Brochmann, 2015).
- 10 Since 2015 the reintroduction of border controls by Italy’s northern neighbouring countries (France, Switzerland and Austria) has proved to be more effective for diverting, slowing down and temporarily containing migrants’ mobilities than for effectively stopping them (Tazzioli, 2019). Indeed, in a context of increasing border securitization, migrants continuously reinvent practices of appropriation of mobility (Scheel, 2019). However, migrants’ creative, autonomous force (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papastergiadis, 2000) is contrasted by policies aimed at rendering border areas increasingly hostile, perilous and even lethal. Several scholars refer to such politics by drawing on Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi, 2017; Squire, 2016; Tazzioli and De Genova, 2020) or on Roberto Esposito’s thanatopolitics (Vaughan-Williams 2015).
- 11 Beyond migrants’ ability to continuously subvert border regimes and appropriate mobility (Tazzioli, 2017), as well as states’ increasing attempts to discourage their

endeavours through border necropolitics, a recent stream of literature within citizenship studies emphasises the role of civil society actors in challenging the EU border regime, negotiating asylum laws and regulations, and promoting inclusive practices in favour of the newly arrived (Ataç *et al.* 2016; Monforte, 2015; Youkhana and Sutter, 2017). This article hypothesizes that the heuristic lens provided by affect theory (Massumi, 1995; Mazzarella, 2009; Stewart, 2007) offers a compelling focus for understanding civil society actors' individual and collective mobilization against the violence of the border regime.

Exploring affects: Methodological challenges and possible approaches

- 12 According to the affect theory, mainly developed by the philosopher and cultural scientist Brian Massumi who draws upon Deleuze's modern reinterpretation of Spinoza, affects impose themselves as autonomous forces *before* any cognitive operation of categorization. The pre-cognitive character of affects contrasts with the constructivist approach to emotions, which are conceived as cultural and social products that can be categorized, named and narrated through language – and also exploited for political purposes, including in the militant milieu (Traïni, 2011).³
- 13 However, from a methodological point of view, the non-transparent character of affects poses a significant challenge for classical ethnography, namely with respect to how affects can be translated to ordinary, verbal language (Grossberg, 1992). How can the ethnographer investigate affective experiences if they cannot be explained or narrated? How can (s)he “know” what others are feeling?
- 14 One of the most well-established scholarly approaches to investigate affects on the ground, at the empirical level, is based on the use of researcher's own body as a research tool. As Laszczkowski puts it: “Ethnographers need to use their own sensing bodies as research tools [...] to experience and cultivate interpersonal affective links with their collaborators and attend to their own visceral and emotional responses to affect” (Laszczkowski, 2019:505).
- 15 The use of the researcher's own body as a methodological instrument for investigating emotions and affects has indeed a long ethnographic tradition (see for instance the classic work of Wacquant, 2004), as well as the participatory experience in more general terms (Bosco, 2007; Leys, 2011; Zembylas, 2016).
- 16 Describing others' affects is possible by carefully retracing affective resonances and associations in a specific culture and reworking one's own affective system in order to align it to a different one (Leavitt, 1996). Indeed, the quality of a well-written ethnography resides precisely in the ethnographer's ability to convey feeling-tones as well as their meanings to an audience of readers who are unaware of the emotional resonance to which a particular event is associated in a specific sociocultural environment.
- 17 Finally, it is important to be aware that the difference between emotions and affects may prove to be shifting and partly overlapping with grounded analysis. Disentangling “the semantic and the non-semantic, the non-linear and the linear and not least the affective and the discursive realms” may prove to be impossible at the empirical level (Larsen, 2018:25). As argued by a prominent developer of affect theory, William

Mazzarella, affects should not be conceived as completely incompatible with consciousness and signification; on the contrary, there is always an oscillation between visceral intensities and their qualification, pre-cognitive forces and narration, affects and emotions (that are ultimately “qualified affects”) (2009). Mazzarella’s conceptualization is important from a methodological point of view because it softens the rigid distinction between emotions and affects. It is precisely in the oscillation between them that the possibility for the ethnographer to grasp social actors’ affects lies (Laszczkowski, 2019), even if always in an approximate, incomplete and imperfect way (Jansen, 2016), through processes of narrativization and remembering.

- 18 During my fieldwork on contentious politics against the border regime on the French/Italian border I had the opportunity to recollect verbal (even if tentative and fragmentary) descriptions of affective experiences among local villagers when recalling their encounters with vulnerable migrants. Furthermore, when confronted with the task of describing and analysing such embodied feelings through writing, I have been especially attentive, as suggested by Leavitt (cit.), to convey affective resonances and associations that were self-evident to local villagers, but not so obvious to the readers. Last but not least, first-hand participatory experience also proved to be fundamental for showing the role of affect in increasing the permeability of the border to migrants’ movements. It was only through fieldwork (which is always an emotional experience: see Bondi 2005; Kondo 1990) that I better understood the affective impacts of being confronted with the potential death of vulnerable others in geomorphological and climatic conditions rendered hostile (Heller and Del Biaggio, 2017; Pezzani, 2020).

Rethinking supportive practices as affective experiences

- 19 “This is highly addictive... isn’t it?” I asked a friend, a member of the local supportive network, when Blessing, her sister Nasha and her husband Salam got out of our car. We had found the three Nigerian migrants lost on the mountain paths of the Vallée de la Clarée, on the French side of the Col de l’Échelle. Blessing was limping due to a twisted ankle, caused by inappropriated footwear and a lack of experience of the Alpine pathways. We decided to bring them to the hospital in Briançon. It was the first time I had taken part in the well-established practice of some of local villagers, of rescuing migrants on the mountain paths of the Vallée de la Clarée.
- 20 After finding Blessing, Nasha and Salam, I had driven the car with a feeling of adrenaline throughout the entire ride. In case of police checks, indeed, it would have been difficult to prove that the passengers we were transporting had autonomously crossed the border and that we had picked them up *after* the border. Indeed, we could have easily been charged for facilitating illegal entry into French territory, while the migrants could have been subject to a *refus d’entrée* (denial of entry) in France.⁴ “Yes, it’s like a drug,” my friend replied. “Once you start, you cannot stop.”
- 21 “You cannot stop”: I immediately understood the sense of unavoidability in my friend’s words, because I had felt the same imperative urgency run through my own body. An adrenaline rush had warned me that turning my back to those people and continuing my walk, like it was nothing, was not an option.

- 22 Guido, an inhabitant of Bussoleno (50 km from the border on the Italian side) who used to facilitate the border-crossing of women and children with his car, expressed in the following way the performative dimension of emotions and affects (Butler 1996) as a driver for his actions, beyond any concern for possible legal consequences:

“I am in the right, and I cannot avoid to keep on doing what I am doing. Even if one day a judge would judge me, I would immediately warn him that he should sentence me with recidivism, because as soon as I would get out [from prison] I would do it again. So it would be better they resign themselves because this is what I think, this is what my heart and my emotions tell me that I have to do.”

- 23 The reference to a judge was not casual. In that period, sentences against supportive citizens and trials against NGOs rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean were often reported in news broadcasts (Carrera, Allsopp and Vosyliute, 2018; Cuttitta 2018; Fekete 2018; FRA, 2014; Heller and Pezzani, 2017; Tazzioli, 2018). I was also afraid of possible legal consequences. Before meeting Blessing, Nasha and Salam, indeed, it was not clear to me that I was going to pick them up and drive them to the nearest hospital, with my car. It was the force of affects, risen from such disruptive encounters, that embodied the potential for a “becoming”, in Deleuzan terms (Biehl and Locke, 2010) or, in other words, an unprefigured reconfiguration of my priorities. Indeed, affective experiences can be described as more or less empowering, in the sense that they may increase the body’s capacities to act (or, in contrast, limit them) through interaction (Thrift, 2007). It was the actual encounter with women and men in flesh and bone, the meeting of their gazes with mine in the middle of the forest, that acted upon me as a catalyst for my reaction. Like Anne’s heart in the booklet, my heart started racing, too. The necessity of helping them became self-evident, beyond any cautious consideration.

- 24 Similar feelings, experienced into the body as “visceral forces” (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010:1), were also experienced by some of the local villagers who had become aware of the illegalized transit of African men and women in the mountain spaces close by. “I cannot sleep at night”, Agnès, an inhabitant of La Vachette, told me, “since I know that there are people risking their life out there.” She continued:

“I can only sleep if I know there are marauders patrolling [the Col de l’Échelle]. [...] Now I use to sleep with the light on at night. I hope that they can see my light from far, and find the way to the village. I cannot stand the idea that with the springtime we will find corpses that now lie under the snow...”

- 25 Actually, between 2017 and 2018, five migrants’ deaths were registered in the French/Italian border area between the Val di Susa and the Briançonnais. Among them, and particularly striking, was a man whose body, partly eaten by animals, was discovered by a hunter in the spring after the snow had melted.⁵
- 26 Since the spring of 2016, on both the Italian and the French side of the border, a group of local villagers were troubled by news of migrants’ hypothermia and death in their attempt to cross the border under risky conditions. In March 2016, indeed, individuals and local associations in the Briançon region mobilized in a public demonstration to denounce the violence of police pushbacks, after the news that a Malian young man had his feet amputated in the local hospital due to severe exposure. He had crossed the Col de l’Échelle on a winter’s night, by foot, after being pushed back by French police at the border checkpoint of Montgenèvre. Similarly, on the Italian side of the border, in Val di Susa, a network of local villagers started mobilizing in the autumn of 2017, after knowing that two men were seriously injured as the result of a fall in a 40-meters deep crevasse, to escape a police pursuit in the mountains.

- 27 During that period, news of freezing limbs and deaths resonated with daily news broadcasts about migrants' risky travels across the Mediterranean Sea on precarious boats, often resulting in massive numbers of deaths. From the perspective of local villagers, those same migrants the news broadcasts were talking about, who had already faced the desert and the sea, were not just numbers any more: they were risking their life once more at the doorstep of the house. They had a face, an expression, a gaze.
- 28 The first page of the aforementioned booklet *De l'autre côté* explicitly connects the humanitarian emergency taking place in the Alps with the Mediterranean tragedy through an excerpt from a letter sent from an NGO vessel. The first page of the booklet is followed by the words of a local anonymous writer comparing alpine villagers with sea sailors:
- Mountain dweller, you are a sailor without boat, without lifebelt, without life jacket. You look after your brothers so nobody dies along the path...
- 29 Beyond the resonance with the Mediterranean humanitarian tragedy, the experience of meeting vulnerable migrants on the mountain paths and in the narrow streets of the villages was actually inscribed in a wider constellation of significations. Cristina Del Biaggio2020-07-03T16:55:00CDBLocal struggles against high-ecologic-impact infrastructures (embodied by the movement against the high-speed train in Val di Susa, especially charged with highly affective experiences: see Laszczkowski, 2019) had already cemented alliances, constructed local networks, created emotional bonds and stimulated opposition against police practices. WWII Partisans' stories of resistance against the Nazi occupation on those same mountains were still commemorated. Media images of the "jungle" of Calais were broadcast daily on French television. Actually, supportive reactions against the eviction of migrants in Calais were the origin of mobilizations in the Briançonnais, as expressed by one of the spokespersons of the association *Tous Migrants*:
- "Around this issue [the eviction of Calais] mobilizations have arisen and, more importantly, consciousness about the problem raised among many people who volunteered for hosting migrants in their private homes..."
- 30 In this way, a network of emotional resonances was linked to encounters with illegalized border-crossers. Cristina Del Biaggio2020-07-03T16:56:00CDBYet, the experience of meeting them, by chance or deliberately, was still highly disruptive. "Setting off with weather like this is an act of foolishness" was an observation that I heard made more than once among local villagers on the Italian side of the border, referring to young African men and women determined to reach France by foot under severe meteorological conditions. Their enterprise was indeed somehow extraordinary, mostly accomplished at night, without the help of torches or flashlights, and mostly without proper equipment. Their willingness to reach France under hostile climatic and geomorphological conditions was considered reckless and risky from the locals' perspective.
- 31 Ernest, a member of the solidarity network developed in Val di Susa, explained his consternation and astonishment at migrants' readiness to attempt the mountain path to France during a snowstorm:
- "Even if you tell them, 'You cannot do it, you simply cannot', they tell you, 'Well, I am going'. They refuse to listen to reason! They are there, just out of the train station [of Bardonecchia], recouping energy to undertake the 40-kilometre path in the middle of the snow. But they are risking hypothermia, they are... Because even

the clothing we bring them, often it is not proper Alpine technical clothing, and it really makes the difference between life and death on that route. Even if they wear two jackets, three jackets... they are going to sweat while walking, and if they have to stop to hide themselves for a couple of hours because the police are patrolling the path with their torches... and they are sweaty, and they start to get cold... God damn, these people get lost in the mountains!"

- 32 As already mentioned, affective experiences associated with encounters with migrants have contributed to practices such as the *maraudes* and the opening of private houses for migrants' overnight stays. They also ultimately contributed to the development at the end of 2017 of a loose informal network connecting French and Italian villagers and activists from the urban milieu, called *Briser les frontières* (Shatter the Borders). The network is composed of very diverse groups and individuals, both with and without backgrounds in political activism. Thus, solidarity practices provided occasions for further encounters and new affective experiences. Emotional bonds were established not only with rescued migrants; indeed, the practice of the *maraudes* entailed encounters with unexpected comrades, which also proved to be affective experiences, disruptive of conventional meanings (Larsen 2018) and ultimately transformative (Biehl and Locke 2010). As Paolo, a local villager who defines himself as an anarchist, admitted:

"I would have never imagined that one day I would end up collaborating with Waldensian pastors or members of the Alpine Rescue service... who in the end are members of the army, educated with military discipline. I had to reconsider some of my prejudices [...] After this winter I feel I am not the same person I used to be."

From affects to contentious politics and reception policies

- 33 Affects associated with encounters with migrants may have also played a role in shaping public demands that ended up influencing local policies of reception. Indeed, micro, infrapolitical gestures (Scott 1990) such as keeping the light on in long winter nights or opening one's own house to strangers were accompanied by more structured practices such as the organization of *maraudes*, an increasing coordination between activists on the two sides of the border through regular assemblies, and a progressive rise of public demands addressed to both state and local authorities. As Thierry, an inhabitant of the French village of Névache, told me:

"The Mediterranean doesn't stop people fleeing from their countries, and the mountain neither [...]. We refuse to let the Alps, our Alps, become a cemetery. We demand the state let us undertake our duty as citizens. The state should allow us to rescue people in danger. Or, more simply, it should demilitarise the mountains if we don't want more dead or frozen migrants."

- 34 Such demands were articulated from different perspectives, ranging from a merely humanitarian one to radical activism. Transversal to most of them, however, it was possible to retrace a postcolonial awareness. As Gilbert, an inhabitant of Susa and a member of the solidarity network with no previous experiences of political activism, told me:

"I know that these things are bigger than me, even bigger than my intelligence: these kind of things such as macro-economics, such as despoiling a whole continent, I mean, supplying with arms their dictators, getting their resources for free for increasing our economy, Western economy. [...] Even if I didn't study, I can

understand, I can read the news and understand what's going on. We should beg these black boys' pardon..."

- 35 While sheltering activities addressed to migrants rescued in the mountains were at first completely informal, with migrants hosted each night in different private houses before continuing their travel, in the spring of 2017 an increase in cross-border transits collapsed the network of private shelters. Supportive residents therefore multiplied their demands to local authorities until they obtained the concession of an abandoned building in Briançon to be converted into a formal shelter. Since July 2017, the *Refuge solidaire* (Solidarity Shelter) hosts up to more than one hundred persons per night. It is managed on a voluntary basis by locals, who contribute in different ways (cooking daily meals, providing food, washing sheets and blankets, providing legal guidance and first aid, teaching French, among other activities), while electricity, gas and water costs are borne by the municipality.

Mountain boots available for border crossers. *Refuge Solidaire*, Briançon

Credit : Luigi d'Alife

- 36 As I already mentioned, since 2017, with the birth of *Briser les frontières*, greater coordination was developed between the Italian and the French sides of the solidarity network. One of the most important consequences of the direct intervention of Italian volunteers at the Bardonecchia train station (the last Italian train station before the border, the starting point for the route towards the Col de l'Échelle) was the shift of the migratory route from the Col de l'Échelle (especially dangerous in winter) to the Col du Montgenèvre (open to car traffic also during the winter, and less dangerous). Indeed, once they understood the impossibility of stopping newly-arrived migrants aiming to reach France, the members of the network engaged in persuading them to divert their route and undertake the border-crossing under safer conditions. This achievement was the result of conflicts and negotiations within the supportive movement.⁶ As Martin, one of the members of the network, explained to me:

"At the beginning in our assemblies someone insisted that we have to convince them not to cross. But I said, 'who do you think you are for telling these people what they have to do? Who are you for stopping them after they have already crossed the desert and the sea?'"

- 37 Similar considerations were expressed by Ernest, who explained the origin of the idea of suggesting a less risky alternative route:

"I saw those boys, you cannot even imagine the mistrust that I saw in their eyes, probably because they are not used to solidarity, they just got their ass kicked from the desert to the sea. [...] I used to be very pragmatic, so that I said, 'What do we do? These people want to go to France but, God damn, there are two metres of snow. And they've only got sneakers. [...] Try to understand, the only thing that we can do is to show them the route of Montgenèvre.'"

- 38 Around this time, institutional and non-institutional shelters were established along the route, through negotiations with public authorities and more radical practices of occupying empty buildings. In Briançon, *Chez Marcel* was occupied in the summer of 2017 by a group of local activists. On the night between the 21st and the 22nd of March of 2018, some *maraudeurs* also occupied the parish hall of the church of Clavière (the last Italian village before the Col du Montgenèvre) in order to host several asylum seekers who were unable to cross the mountain pass due to harsh meteorological conditions. Originally aimed at hosting migrants just for one night, the occupation of the parish hall continued over the following months, under the humorous name of *Chez Jésus*.
- 39 Until the group was evicted in October 2018, *Chez Jésus* had progressively become the main shelter for migrants attempting to cross the border or who had been pushed back by French police, and an important point to provide them with information about mountain paths. Prior to that, in December 2017, a local medical NGO had contacted the mayor of Bardonecchia to make free emergency healthcare available to migrants on the move. Similar to the *Refuge solidaire* of Briançon, the municipality of Bardonecchia provided the NGO with a space within the train station for reception and first aid. In October of the same year, a formal shelter was also opened in the nearby village of Oulx. In short, the inauguration of several shelters along the route, both formal and informal, largely replaced the informal network of private houses, thus giving rise to more structured forms of reception, improving safety along the route and directing migrants towards safer routes.

Conclusions

- 40 Throughout this article I have illustrated the performative dimension of affects among Alpine villagers confronted with migrants' vulnerability; that is to say, how affective experiences associated with disruptive encounters triggered a series of reactions ranging from individual initiatives at the infrapolitical level (Scott 1990) to public demands aimed at contesting the lethal nature of the border regime. Adopting a performative and participatory approach (Brambilla, 2015:28), I have investigated the articulations between affective experiences and the rising of contentious politics against the necropolitical impacts of the border regime. In doing so, I argue that affects, with their autonomous force and pre-cognitive, pre-subjective dimension, should also be considered among the factors that contribute to shape the messy space of the border and the ultimate outcomes of borderwork. My analysis of grassroots reactions to the humanitarian emergency in the Alpine region between the Val di Susa

and the Briançonnais shows that affects may contribute to mould, to a greater or lesser extent, border permeability in conjunction with other factors, already explored in classical border studies, such as the geomorphological characteristics of the border area, power relations between neighbouring states and states' infrastructural capacities of undertaking border functions (Campesi, 2018; Kasperek and Wagner, 2012; Marenin, 2010).

- 41 In the border area around the Col de l'Échelle, affects and emotions became catalysts for grassroots political actions within a wider constellation of emotional resonances, including the echoes of the news from the Mediterranean and Calais, the affective impact of parallel social struggles in the same valleys and the significance attributed to mountains as a space of resistance since at least WWII. Within such a constellation, individual practices of solidarity at the micro-level gradually gave rise to more structured collective responses and contributed to shape local reception policies.
- 42 Local villagers' affects also produce spatialities. By explicitly bringing into play a postcolonial awareness, local villagers' actions contribute to shape what Doreen Massey calls "geographies of responsibility" (2004); that is to say, they highlight the connections between the privileges associated with living in a developed region of the world and dynamics of dispossession enacted in others. Moreover, Cristina Del Biaggio (2020-07-03T17:06:00CDB), local villagers contribute to the redesign of migratory routes at the local level by establishing shelters through radical practices of occupation or negotiations with local authorities, and producing shifts in the route itself (from the riskier Col de l'Échelle to the safer Col of Montgenèvre) through negotiations with migrants themselves.

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NOTES

1. All the quotations reproduced throughout this article, from documentary sources, informal conversations and in-depth interviews, have been translated into English by the author.
2. In no way does the choice of focusing on local villagers' affective and emotional states imply that migrants themselves are not subjects experiencing emotions and affect in turn. A focus on their affect, however, would exceed the limits of the present article; this topic would rather constitute the subject of another paper.
3. In this sense, it is important to note that this article does not focus on the emotional register strategically mobilized and exploited by a movement of citizens for a political cause. Quite the opposite: it aims to show how affects associated with unexpected encounters may give rise to a variety of practices ranging from individual actions to collective mobilizations or, in other words, how affect may become political.
4. According to French law, any person who facilitates or tries to facilitate, directly or indirectly, the irregular entry, circulation or stay of a foreigner in France can face five years in prison and a 30,000 euro fine (article L622-1 of the Code for Entry and Residence of Foreigners and Right of Asylum). This does not apply in three situations (art. L622-4): (1) if the person has family ties (parent, child, sibling) to the migrant; (2) if the person has marital ties with the migrant; or (3) if the action has been done in a situation of real or imminent danger to protect the life and physical integrity of the foreigner (unless there is a disproportion between the means used and the seriousness of danger, or if there is direct or indirect compensation).
5. See Rainews 2018, June 7, "Migranti. Sulle Alpi si scioglie la neve e affiorano i corpi degli uomini morti in cammino" (<http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/media/Migranti-Sulle-Alpi-si-scioglie-la-neve-e-affiorano-i-corpi-degli-uomini-morti-in-cammino-7aa17ed7-77b1-474f-88b5-f5c13dee51a2.html#foto-1>)
6. Internal tensions within *Briser les frontières* may be explained as a result of the diversity of backgrounds and outlooks among the network members and, last but not least, the distinction between those firmly rooted in the Val di Susa or in the Briançonnais and those connected with urban radical milieus. See also Laszczkowski (2018).

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AUTHOR

CECILIA VERGNANO

Amsterdam Institute for Social Sciences Research (AISSR) - University of Amsterdam