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Guarino, F. (2026) Blurring migrant solidarity: Navigating the troubled regime of 'helping others' from the urban ground of Palermo. *Area*. e70092. ISSN: 0004-0894

<https://doi.org/10.1111/area.70092>

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ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Blurring Migrant Solidarity: Navigating the Troubled Regime of ‘Helping Others’ From the Urban Ground of Palermo

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Received: 27 May 2025 | **Revised:** 28 October 2025 | **Accepted:** 23 December 2025

Keywords: borders | cities | migration | Palermo | solidarity | Southern Italy

ABSTRACT

This paper explores migrant solidarity in the aftermath of the 2015 so-called ‘migration crisis’ from the ground of the Southern Italian ‘solidarity city’ of Palermo, building on ethnographic material collected across 2022/2023. It argues that migrant solidarity both resists and reproduces racialised borders, as it is never entirely and clearly detached from the border regime, but is deeply entangled *within* it. Although this argument is not new per se, this paper adds empirical depth to it following two strands. First, presenting solidarity in Palermo as embedded within the city’s political economy, the paper reflects on how, within a persisting unequal and racialised access to rights, solidarity can allow for multiple extractions to be operated against migrants, while simultaneously providing a ‘safer space’ for existence. Second, drawing on the experiences of migrants who have—at least from a surface level outside perspective—comparatively better positions within the city, the paper defies their portrayals as mere recipients of help, and explores the complex ways in which they navigate the restricted opportunities opened up by solidarity alongside ubiquitous borders. The paper thus shows (1) how in Palermo solidarity has produced several outcomes—moral recognition abroad, local economies, opportunities for a vast array of people involved with migration—in the overall permanence of local shortages and everyday structural racism; (2) how the local solidarity network fills the gaps of a local retreating social care and of the state’s repressive politics; (3) how this network is strategically navigated by racialised migrants to carve out opportunities, social ties and space for political development.

1 | Introduction

After the 2015 so-called ‘refugee crisis’, solidarity initiatives opposing the EU border regime have emerged across European borders and cities. From the ground of the Southern Italian city of Palermo, recognised internationally as a ‘solidarity city’ (Ataç et al. 2021), this paper foregrounds migrants’ complex experiences of inhabiting the city, arguing that solidarity both resists and reproduces racialised borders, as it is never entirely and clearly detached from the border regime, but is deeply entangled *within* it. And yet it is this contradictory

nature that makes solidarity a potentially productive contentious ground (Picozza 2021), where conflict is something to ‘inhabit and remain conscious of, to name, profile, and examine’ (Stierl et al. 2022, 802). This resonates with calls from radical care scholarship to engage in a constant ‘ongoing struggle’ within—not in opposition to—the racial capitalist system (Lancione 2024; Thompson 2024), which the border regime is a function of. If the ambiguity of solidarity is not a new argument per se (DeBono and Mainwaring 2020; Mainwaring and DeBono 2021; Stierl 2018a), this paper adds empirical depth to it from a situated urban perspective, following two strands:

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(1) presenting solidarity as expressed by different actors and as embedded within Palermo's political economy, the paper argues that, within a persistent framework of unequal access to rights, solidarity allows for multiple extractions to be operated against migrants—economic value, visibility, moral recognition, opportunities—while simultaneously providing a 'safer space' for existence. (2) Centring migrants' experiences of inhabiting the city, the paper defies their portrayals as mere recipients of help. It explores the complex ways in which they navigate the restricted opportunities opened up by solidarity alongside ubiquitous borders.

After presenting my positionality and the methods undergirding this paper, I sketch out how borders and solidarity have been explored by critical border studies and urban scholarship. I present solidarity in Palermo as a political stance, a performing imaginary, a composite network of diverse actors filling the municipality's retreating social care. I then explore how racialised migrants strategically navigate Palermo's solidarity spaces/community to access the city. Finally, I reflect on the importance of centring migrants' direct experiences within solidarity discourse to defy representations of migrants' victimhood and white salvation (Danewid 2017), focusing instead on their active engagement.

1.1 | Positionality and Methods

This paper builds on ethnographic material collected between February and January 2023 through participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations in Palermo, Sicily. Located within a main external border for Europe and close to one of the most prominent contemporary border spectacles—Lampedusa—today Palermo is crowded with 'voluntourists', that is 'humanitarian professionals, activists, journalists, and scholars' (Cabot 2019, 261), but also artists, students attracted to the border from elsewhere—either in Italy or abroad. Despite being born in Palermo, where most of my close family resides, I was raised in Turin, in the North of Italy, and I pursued my PhD in the UK. I therefore entered the field as one among many white researchers from 'the North'. As I lacked a background of political activism, I felt the initial weariness of activists who described the city as a 'safari' and lamented the extractive practices of people seeking information and leaving. Given the context, I soon realised the importance of getting actively involved within the network and making my stances clear. I started volunteering within a Jesuit refugee centre: this was a pragmatic choice mainly dictated by the ease of access as the centre was always welcoming new volunteers. I started attending a vast array of events across the solidarity network, to make myself seen and heard. Importantly, as my weariness and discomfort grew about my positionality as one of many white subjects interested in black migration, and about the city's loud solidarity discourse as compared to the ordinarily racialised lives of migrants in Palermo, I decided to focus my attention on a specific group of first arrival migrants that I refer to as 'in-between': non-white young men in their 30s, who arrived across the Mediterranean between 2012 and 2016, and have (at least from a surface level outside perspective) comparatively better positions within the city. They are neither newly arrived nor second generation, they either study or have relatively stable jobs

and they are, or have been, involved as volunteers or activists within the solidarity network. All of them have a permit to stay; two of them have a long-term residence permit. This choice allowed me to focus on racialisation more than victimhood and on the opinions of young migrants actively involved with the politics of the city. Also, by engaging with this group I could mitigate unbalanced power relations through some common ground, as I encountered most of these interlocutors as peers during volunteering or during my leisure time. The fragments of interviews drawn upon here date back to the last months of fieldwork when a relationship of trust had been established with the interviewees and there was a mutual understanding of respective views. All names have been changed to protect the interviewees' anonymity.

2 | From Borders to Cities

Critical border scholars have framed the contemporary Western management of migration as an interplay of violent repression—justified by securitization—and a paternalistic humanitarian approach, both co-operating to frame migrants as either criminals to be deported or powerless victims (De Genova 2016; Isakjee et al. 2020; Tazzioli and De Genova 2016). As a counter-manoeuve, scholars have explored how migrants strategically claim space, life and political voice at the borders (Ataç et al. 2016; Tazzioli 2018), as well as forms of solidarity empowering migrants' autonomous journey (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Tazzioli and Walters 2019).

The term 'solidarity' has been variously appropriated with its actors, practices and political scopes varying widely (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). Critical scholars within migration and border studies frame it as an openly politicised grassroots initiative grounded in horizontal alliances with migrants, and aimed at the creation of novel political subjectivities and alternative social patterns (Dadusc and Mudu 2022; Mezzadra 2020). For instance, authors have explored urban squats as radical political laboratories advocating for possibilities of belonging beyond citizenship. Places not of pacified difference, but where divergences and power relations are navigated daily, and alliances between refugees and activists are created over shared struggle (Dadusc 2019; Lafazani 2018; Raimondi 2019). More often, solidarity appears as a much more blurred concept. Authors working on solidarity within the Mediterranean have observed the difficulty in resisting co-optation into border management (Stierl 2018a), but also the risk of reproducing migrants' disempowerment by keeping the attention on the struggle between repressive and solidarity responses towards migration (Mainwaring and DeBono 2021). Other authors suggest the need to focus on migrants' direct experiences of navigating their own struggles and to foreground solidarity as a contentious field (Picozza 2021; Stierl 2018b, 2022). What follows explores the blurriness and contradictory nature of solidarity, and its interplay with racialised borders, from a situated urban perspective.

Cities are increasingly observed as sites where racialized borders proliferate beyond their geography (Dadusc 2019), but also as sites for potential counter-action. 'Urban sanctuaries' are studied across Europe for their potential to oppose/negotiate national repressive politics; promoting inclusive discourses,

policies and alliances between municipalities and grassroots organisations in supporting migrant newcomers (Bauder 2021; Bauder and Gonzalez 2018; Mayer 2018). This scholarship seems mostly interested in how cities behave within multiscale governance. It focuses especially on migration policies and discourses, framing urban solidarity with little appreciation of how it maps onto other urban processes. Conversely, other urban scholars have adopted a more relational approach to borders and cities, exploring how borders intersect with local political economies (Hall 2021) and other forms of dispossession (Georgiou et al. 2022).

Building on these diverse contributions, this paper follows two strands. First, situating solidarity within the ongoing transformations of Palermo, it critically reflects on how solidarity can allow for multiple extractions if not sustained by concrete politics. Second, foregrounding migrants' direct experiences of inhabiting the city, it challenges their framing as passive recipients, focusing on their strategic making of life through solidarity spaces and along ubiquitous borders.

3 | Palermo as a 'Solidarity City': A Complex Stance and Performing Imaginary

Italy has been at the forefront of the EU border enforcement and externalisation, and recursively denounced for the violence of its repressive migration politics. Beyond the 'crisis', belonging and access to rights within the country are tied to a racialised access to citizenship. Non-white migrants have been historically incorporated as exploitable and cheap labour, and subject to racism and xenophobia (Hawthorne 2022). Within this context, the Southern Italian city of Palermo, once portrayed as a disadvantaged inner 'South' and deprived mafia city, has gained international recognition as a 'haven for refugees' (Kirchgaessner 2015). Key initiatives have been crucial for Palermo's shifting place-image: the international promotion in 2015 of the Charter of Palermo, advocating for mobility as a human right; the subsequent Palermo Charter Process in 2018, calling for transnational solidarity across European cities and grassroots organisations (Ataç et al. 2021); recurring actions of civil disobedience from former Mayor Orlando against national decisions on matters of migration. Solidarity stances have intersected with manoeuvres of political economy: the inscription of the 'Arab-Norman Palermo' within the UNESCO WHL in 2014, Palermo's nomination as Italian Capital of Culture and the hosting of the art biennial Manifesta in 2018, all grounded in the city's historical and contemporary hospitality as its main trademark. Solidarity thus appears as a political, cultural and moral value, differentiating Palermo within a repressive Europe, but also an economic driver creating an attractive environment. Importantly, these processes have taken place mainly within Palermo's historical city-centre, today an increasingly contested area due to processes of touristification and increased conflict between old and new inhabitants (Picone 2021), and historically, the first step into the city for migrant newcomers. This part of the city hosts old and new hospitality and solidarity organisations that form a composite network of actors with different statuses and means—associations (catholic, leftist, no border, migrant), social enterprises, research centres. The network fills the gaps of the public administration's retreating social care (Bovo and

Bully 2024), offering counselling, medical help, advice, mediation, help with bureaucracy, projects of inclusion, but also space for gathering.

Recently, authors have observed how Palermo is in line with other realities of a 'post-crisis Mediterranean Europe': attracting tourists, while leaving behind the economically disadvantaged and migrants (Palma 2021). Palermo's discourse of hospitality/solidarity has been addressed as a manoeuvre to reposition the once stigmatised city within the European cultural/economic framework (Wyer 2024); and an 'existential strategy' for the city's economy, with the risk of reproducing the 'migrant spectacle' through the commodification of solidarity (Neil 2024, 551). Despite these critiques, today Palermo is not only a tourism capital, but also an attractive city for people working on migration. The research cited within this section, and my research too, is embedded within this process. During my stay, I regularly crossed paths with foreign researchers, students, activists, journalists and volunteers from elsewhere. I accompanied as a teaching assistant a group of US bachelor students studying solidarity in Sicily; most of the interviewees within this paper had already experienced being interviewed by journalists about their migratory journey. During an anti-racist event, a young man from the Ivory Coast approached me. When I told him I was in Palermo for my PhD, he laughed: 'don't tell me you too are working on migrants'. He jokingly told me that if I wanted to interview him I had to pay him first. Both the city's solidarity discourse and the geographical positioning within a main European border have thus opened opportunities up in Palermo for a vast array of people.

In the following, I focus on migrants' experience of navigating this context to reflect on the importance of the solidarity network and its community, beyond service provision, to navigate access to the city that remains profoundly racialised, despite the solidarity discourse.

4 | Navigating Racialised Borders and Solidarity Within Palermo City-Centre

Bai, from Gambia, arrived in Lampedusa in 2016. From there, he was moved to Agrigento's train station where the police left him with a notice of expulsion to leave the country autonomously—with no explanation about either the notice's contents or Bai's right to appeal (he could not read Italian at that time). A volunteer in Lampedusa had given him a phone number, which led him to Porco Rosso in Palermo, two hours and a half by train from Agrigento. Porco Rosso is a cultural association belonging to the leftist national network ARCI. It has a small space on the ground floor of a residential building within Palermo's city-centre, a few minutes' walk from the main train station. In 2016, it started operating the Sans Papiers Desk, with volunteers providing free legal counselling. Bai recalled his first encounter there:

They explained everything that was in the expulsion notice, but told me that I could appeal. [They said] 'We take a lawyer, [...] and then you have to ask for asylum'.¹

Bai had left Gambia to study in the UK. He initially refused initiating the asylum request in Italy. He slept for three months in an overcrowded all-male dormitory, where he could stay for free and without being checked for documents, then he asked for asylum, as he considered reaching the UK illegally too risky. After three months more in the dormitory, Bai obtained asylum and was sent to a reception centre close to a small town one hour away from Palermo, where he stayed for almost one year, suspended in the countryside and without schooling.

We would go to the field to play football, then back [...] I am here because I didn't find what I looked for [...] to study [...] I came back to Palermo through Porco Rosso and [name].²

For Bai, the social ties he developed in Porco Rosso counterbalanced the police's violence, providing information and counselling. They also provided a fundamental way out of his suspension, and back in Palermo where he started studying and working. Still, the solidarity actors Bai engaged with hardly had the means to empower his migratory choices. Their actions were strictly focused on making him 'legal' within the current system of migration management. During a seminar, lawyer volunteers from CLEDU, Palermo's legal clinic for human rights, explained how they need to craft bulletproof histories of violence in order for migrants to be granted asylum by the Territorial Commission—a commission formed by different institutional representatives with decisional power over asylum requests. As requesting asylum has become today the only, and increasingly hard, legal way to access Europe (De Genova 2016), these lawyers craft the 'perfect story' in supporting many people to remain as possible. Still, in doing so they also contribute to flattening migrants' stories to one where only violence and victimhood can surface.

Awa arrived in Lampedusa in 2013 and was sent to a reception centre in Piana degli Albanesi, a small town in the province of Palermo, while he waited for the outcome of his asylum request.

But we don't have anything. It's just food. Sleep. Food. Sleep. [...] Me, I've not come here for food. [...] Why not school here? [...] we just waited every day, every day, every day, every day.³

His account of suspended existence in-waiting, echoing Bai's experience, is in line with other accounts of the Italian reception system, marked by dysfunctional management that does not look beyond emergency (Avallone 2018). Awa's recounting of first reception is counterbalanced by his arrival in Palermo, where he recalled gravitating around places like Porco Rosso, Moltivolti—a social enterprise and restaurant, whose brand builds on solidarity—and the Senegalese Association, as entry points to the city, both in terms of social and job opportunities.

Because in Porco Rosso before [...] I have a possibility to work there. [names], they called me there [...] I go there [to Moltivolti], take a coffee: I'm always sitting down and meeting someone 'Awa, do you want to join

us? [...] You speak many languages [...] Can you come and help us?⁴

Porco Rosso, CLEDU, Moltivolti, are all a few minutes walking from each other and close to other important actors within the network—Centro Astalli, the refugee centre I volunteered at; the catholic institution of Santa Chiara, historically a main reference point for migrant newcomers; the Senegalese Association, hosting several events such as the community dinners during Ramadan, together with the Gambian Association and the Bayefall. Importantly, some of these spaces host leisure activities and events that also attract young people not necessarily involved with the network, making them spaces of potential encounter (Ataç et al. 2021) and sociality. Talking about his job as mediator, Saro, from Tunisia, would say: 'This is how my career started',⁵ explaining how engaging with the tight solidarity network, comprised of people, places and events, opened opportunities for finding jobs as intercultural mediator and making friends.

So, the good thing is that the more people you meet, the more possibilities of finding a job you have, the more friends who can point you to many things. As I said before, when I went to an event I met a person for another job, always related to migration, and I found this small job.

Saro's CV was a long list of positions as intercultural mediator—paid positions within cooperatives/organisations involved with reception and volunteering activities within the city's different solidarity organisations. Saro, as well as Khaled, another Tunisian young man, recognised how in Italy reception was 'a big business'.⁶ Khaled would explain how 'if you do something for migrants, Europe will give lots of money'.⁷ Within Palermo's reception system, migrants' experience and language provide fundamental expertise while also allowing relatively better job options than those offered by the city's precarious economy, where, in line with elsewhere in Italy, migrants usually find jobs in low-paying, high-fatigue positions and often without a contract. In this sense, both Saro and Khaled were strategically navigating a system they understood as problematic. Bai had also experience as mediator and, as well as Khaled, would highlight how they used their role to push migrant newcomers to ask for their rights—for instance access to education, leveraging on their own past experiences. Still, Adama, a mediator working for MSF, was thinking about moving to the north of the country: he did not want to work with migrants anymore and felt that in Palermo there were very limited opportunities for him beyond that.

Beyond restricted job opportunities, the social ties developed within the network had helped Bai, Adama, Awa and Saro with accessing housing in Palermo. All had found at least their first accommodation through local activist friends, acting as housemates or guarantors, and all agreed on how finding a house in the city as migrants was hard, even with a good job contract. Owners are 'untrustful'; getting a legal contract—fundamental for permits renewal—is difficult. Adama explained that he still had his residency in Catania, two hours and a half by train from Palermo, as his landlady would not allow him to change it,

forcing him to continuously commute for bureaucratic reasons related to his permit.

Migrants in Palermo are increasingly protesting for their conditions in the city, especially in the aftermath of the local right-wing electoral victory in June. Migrant associations in Palermo are active with organising protests, solidarity actions, events and educational activities to raise awareness on migrants' rights. Most of them do not have their own space—both for a lack of resources and difficulties in reaching out to the local administration—therefore using the spaces made available by their supporters' associations for their meetings and events. Accounts of migrant activism often point to at least perceived unbalanced relationships between migrant-led groups and potentially patronising supporters/advisors—in terms of voice, visibility, decisional power, gains, which is often recognised by work on migrants' struggles (Picozza 2021; Stierl et al. 2022). Speaking about the association he is part of, Adama explained:

It was born because we thought about something to take the 'situazione straniera' [foreign issue] in our hands, first person, so that there is not always the need to start from an Italian, then calling foreigners. The most absurd thing is that Italian people find themselves talking about the 'cosa africana' [African matters], the 'cosa straniera' [foreign matters] with no foreigners. They say 'we want to do, we want to help', but with no foreigner.⁸

While Adama was positive about the association, Bai had a different opinion, explaining how 'in the end it was run by Europeans'.

[...] and if we ask for money, if me and you [pointing at me with his finger] [...] ask for European fundings and then money comes and you manage the money, and even what is my thought about what to do, you don't give me this chance?⁹

Talking about their activist experiences, Adama and Bai use the language of their supporters: they talk about projects and European fundings: they are not articulating radical visions, but the desire to 'carve out a space' within their own struggles (Stierl 2018b) and to advocate for themselves. Still, migrant activism is developing steadily and becoming larger and translocal in scope. In May 2023 Right2Be was born in the aftermath of the national refugee and migrant protest 'Not on our skin' held in Rome in April 2023, with the clear intent of pulling together migrant communities across the city beyond the single associations.

For Bai, Adama, Awa and Saro, Palermo has been at first a forced, restricted option. The way they have strategically navigated the city and its solidarity network speaks both of the importance of the network itself and simultaneously of how the same network exists as 'an exceptional entry point' to the city, filling the gaps of a systemically and ordinarily racialised access to it, despite the narrative of solidarity. The ties developed within the network are fundamental to access basic needs such as housing and jobs, but also

for social contacts. Importantly, these experiences do not represent the majority of migrants in the city. They all belong to single young healthy men, with no children or family to care for in Palermo, who had to be constantly resourceful, strategic and tenacious both before and in Palermo. That is, migrants cannot afford to be 'average', leaving the question open of what happens when the migrant status intersects other vulnerabilities.

5 | Blurring Solidarity

From the ground of Palermo, this paper expands on the contradictory role of solidarity from a situated urban perspective, and by foregrounding racialised migrants' experiences of inhabiting the city. I explored how Palermo's solidarity stance has intersected a path of urban regeneration and cultural enfranchisement. Within a capitalist framework that sustains itself on racialised hierarchies, value can be extracted from the 'migrant other' in more subtle ways than those preoccupied with its institutional management. In the context of solidarity, the risk is that of sustaining tales of white saviourism, while migrants are kept in the position of needing help. While Palermo's solidarity stance has been certainly important, it has produced several outcomes—moral recognition abroad, local economies, opportunities for a vast array of people involved with migration—that coexist with the overall permanence of local shortages and everyday structural racism.

Shifting the focus from solidarity practices to migrants' experiences of navigating them, I reflected on Palermo's solidarity network not as advancing radical imaginations, but as practically providing (1) an important step into the city for migrant newcomers, counteracting border violence, though within the framework imposed by border management; (2) a fundamental socio-spatial network beyond arrival, strategically navigated to carve out opportunities, social ties and space for political development. The network is thus oriented to practical actions filling several gaps, from a local retreating social care to a state's repressive politics that does not frame migration beyond emergency.

Focusing on migrants who have comparatively better lives I shifted the narrative from homogenised victimhood to the persisting racialised borders accompanying them, that solidarity makes more bearable. The young men speaking within this paper show awareness of the extractive system they inhabit. They too participate in its contradictions while advancing resisting practices, as shown by migrants working as mediators. Migrant activists are not advancing radical visions, but manifesting a desire to advocate for themselves, also claiming back their political voices and choices from their supporters. Still, their supporters' space has been invaluable for the development of many migrant activist groups. Also, despite the inevitable power relations, migrants' political claims in Palermo are processually developing and broadening in scope. This speaks back to the potential of solidarity as a contentious ground.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Prof. Michele Lancione and Prof. Ryan Powell for their tireless support and to the Area editorial board and reviewers for their

precious feedback. This work was developed also with the support of a Publication Scholarship granted by the University of Sheffield.

Funding

This paper has been written with the support of a publication scholarship from the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Sheffield.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

- ¹ Recorded interview, 30/12/2022.
- ² Recorded interview, 30/12/2022.
- ³ Recorded interview, 21/12/2022.
- ⁴ Recorded interview, 21/12/2022.
- ⁵ Recorded interview, 15/12/2022.
- ⁶ Recorded interview, 15/12/2022.
- ⁷ Fieldnotes, not recorded, 22/04/2022.
- ⁸ Adama, recorded interview, 30/12/2022.
- ⁹ Bai, recorded interview, 30/12/2022.

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