



Social connections and ethical entrapments: On doing anthropology of and through the border regime

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ant**Viola Castellano** 

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Abstract

The article aims to conceptualize the relational dimension of the border regime and its function in reinforcing and reproducing global inequalities. It does so by analyzing the social connections that shaped my fieldwork on The Gambia's "backway," the illegalized trip to Europe. In particular, the article focuses on what I define as moments of ethical entrapment that my main Gambian interlocutor and I faced while interacting with people in Serekunda. In interrogating those entrapments as simultaneously provoked by and exposing the border regime, the analysis highlights how borderwork and the potentiality of border violence constantly haunt social connections at/in/across borders. At the same time, the article looks at the emergence of such entrapments as a product of the shifting and ambiguous positionalities subjects hold in the different nodes of borders' temporally and spatially scattered assemblages. I argue that the analysis of such social connections and ethical entrapments discloses the implications of doing anthropology of the border regime through the border regime itself. On the one hand, borders' capacity to act on and through subjects—even beyond their conscious will—reinforce the principle of dissimilarity on which they rely and reproduce. On the other hand, the ethical entrapments emerging from the connections that the border regime creates between people illuminate its socially productive, counterintuitive, and fragmented dimensions, potentially opening space for what Povinelli defined as the otherwise.

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Introduction

On 15 November 2019, around noon, I was sitting in the lounge area of a bar at Malpensa Milan airport, drinking a cappuccino while checking emails on the phone. In front of me, sunk into a pouf seat, was Mamadou,¹ absorbed by “The double absence” of Abdelmalek Sayad. We were waiting for our delayed flight to Casablanca, where we were supposed to switch to a plane to Banjul, Gambia. We met almost 4 years before, in January 2016, in the former conference room of a disused hotel-turned reception center for asylum seekers, located a few kilometers from the Adriatic coast of the Marche region of Italy. As the legal aid responsible for the structure, the first conversation I had with him a couple of days after his arrival in Lampedusa was about how the request for international protection worked. Four years after our first encounter, Mamadou was now a cultural mediator working in the Italian asylum system, who was finally enabled by his legal status and economic condition to return to Gambia and meet his daughter, born a few months after his departure. I was a Postdoctoral researcher, going to Gambia to conduct fieldwork on the impact of EU migration policies.

In starting from this frame, I intend to introduce immediately the focus of this article: border encounters (Andersson, 2014) and the social connections they generate (Feldman, 2011a), as well as the shifting and temporary positionalities subjects hold in them, as it is shown by the transformation of Mamadou's and my statuses over a period of 4 years. In the article, I take these social connections as an *object of observation* that strictly relates to the *object of study* (Trouillot, 2003), here, the fragmented and complex assemblage of powers regulating unevenly human mobility. The article aims to conceptualize the relational dimension of such an assemblage and its function in reinforcing and reproducing global inequalities, specifically in the case of The Gambia's “backway,” the illegalized trip to Europe.

Anthropologists (but not only) have developed an analytically crowded theoretical framework in the last two decades to theorize the power assemblage regulating human mobility, populating it with co-existing and in my opinion, not mutually exclusive definitions.² Despite their different approaches, all these various definitions have emphasized how such assemblage plays a crucial role in re-structuring global inequalities, reconfiguring (post)colonial and imperial hierarchies, racialized forms of capitalism, and spatial carcerality (Anderson, 2019; De Genova, 2020; Favell, 2022; Mayblin, 2017; Walia, 2021). In so doing, bordering processes need to constantly multiply social and political relations in order to be established and sustained (Brambilla, 2015; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). This article takes as object of observation the direct connections between subjects within the border apparatus, and looks at how these interactions are embedded in or try to extract from the indirect relations of the border regime itself.

My contribution does not want to propose another definition attempting to encompass the multifarious local manifestations of an assemblage that relentlessly re-appropriates migrants' creativity and ability to circumvent it (Scheel, 2018) and which is in the process of being reshaped in the very moment in which I am writing this article. Instead, it looks at those interpersonal connections which are marginal byproducts of the border regime, to foster a relational analysis of its complex workings and its haunting potentiality of violence and death. As I will discuss, this potentiality percolated even the most intimate connections and attempts of solidarity, revealing itself in what I define as "ethical entrapments" that Mamadou and I, as subjects with mobility privileges, experienced when interacting with those who wanted to embark on the "backway." In the article, I treat ethical entrapments as moments of epistemic disclosure illuminating how the border regime constantly involves, co-opts, and captures subjects, acting *on* and *through* them, sometimes beyond their willful and conscious agency. At the same time, I argue that Mamadou's and my "displacement" from the localized connections of the border regime, our subsequent ethical entrapments, and our interlocutors' adamant willingness to take the journey, could be conceptualized as possible unsettlement of the border regime, allowing the emergence of spaces of "otherwise," where "oscillation and indeterminacy" open up new potentialities within specific social formations (Povinelli, 2011: 10).

The article elucidates first how I use Trouillot's (2003) epistemological discourse on the object of observation and study in anthropology and the conceptual differentiation between relations and connections in the migration apparatus introduced by Gregory Feldman (2011b) to look at social connections in the border regime and their ethical entrapments. I then describe how I entered into the migration apparatus through my work in the asylum system, why and how I developed a closer relationship with Mamadou, and how his and other connections shaped my fieldwork in Serekunda. In the third section, I try to dissect the anatomy of the ethical entrapments we lived in as a product of our shifting positionalities and our partially interconnected trajectories, treating them as moments of epistemic disclosure. These moments signal the "counterintuitive" logic of the migration apparatus (Feldman, 2011b), and the "principle of dissimilarity" (Mbembe, 2021) on which the broader context of the border regime relies and reproduces, signaling simultaneously a potential *otherwise* weaved within its social formation.

The discussion draws from classical ethnographic data collection, such as participant observation and interviews I conducted in Serekunda between 2019 and 2023. As the article takes as an object of observation the social connections in which I am constantly enmeshed, it extends well beyond the spatiotemporal limits of "fieldwork" and its classic methodology and fosters an autoethnographic angle.

Theorizing the border regime through its entanglements

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted 20 years ago, there is always a gap between the anthropological object of observation and the object of study, the latter developing from a theoretical framework "not given to the naked eye" (2003: 96). Trouillot has highlighted how the same object of observation is also an epistemological construction of the ethnographer's gaze, and it is strictly correlated and shaped by the object of study.

According to him, instead of unfolding a self-evident, empirical truth, anthropologists' objects of observation have been historically constructed through the implicit assumption of the "epistemological passivity" of their interlocutors. But what happens when the *object of observation* is not constructed as a particular group of people or entity "out there," but concerns the very relationalities³ enabling and constituting simultaneously the field, in which the anthropologist is caught? And what happens when the *object of study* is the very force structuring the epistemic and ethical limits and possibilities of those relationalities? My *object of study* consists indeed of the heterogeneous, multiscalar, and multi-local assemblage of powers aimed at unequally controlling people's movement, which enabled my *object of observation* to emerge in the first place.

In this regard, Gregory Feldman (2011a, 2011b) defined the "migration apparatus" as the various assemblages of powers resulting from situated practices of technocrats, officers, and policymakers who do not know each other and do not have contacts with those their policies aim to regulate. The apparatus is dominated by "indirect, mediated, and abstract social relations between disconnected actors," while "personal connections formed through particular, localized experiences are discouraged" (Feldman, 2011b: 378). Simultaneously, the work of anthropologists who looked at humanitarian and aid practices towards migrants (Altin and Sanò, 2017; Cabot, 2014; Gazzotti, 2021; Rozakou, 2019) have shown how the indirect management of migrants as "hollow abstractions" (Feldman, 2011a: 19) still needs practitioners that translate those policies into (in)formalized interactions, that is, humanitarian workers and street-level bureaucrats (Eckert, 2020). These interactions work through forced proximities and ambiguous intimacies, producing social connections at/in/across borders (Brambilla, 2015). Keeping the differentiation introduced by Feldman between indirect, mediated relations proliferating in global apparatuses and the more localized connections on which ethnography traditionally relied (Feldman, 2011b), my attempt in this article is to analyze how Mamadou's and my connections unfolded and transformed when moving through the social and geographical nodes of the migration apparatus and the broader border regime. My argument is that even if the reciprocal roles and subjectivities of people interacting "on the ground" are constructed by the mediated relations of delocalized policy-making, the resulting personal connections, which are always located and embodied, exceed those roles but simultaneously remain trapped within the onto-epistemic infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014) of the apparatus. If critically interrogated, they could also unveil the "apparatus specificity, contingent possibilities, and counterintuitive logics" (Feldman, 2011a: 378) based on the apparatus' capacity to bring remote subjects together and simultaneously distance them by radically differentiating their access and conditions for mobility. The entanglements between the *object of observation*—the social connections of the migration apparatus—and the *object of study*—the scattered and counterintuitive assemblage of the border regime and its ability of (re)producing inequalities—become evident through specific ethnographically thick events, like the moments of ethical entrapment that Mamadou and I experienced while staying in The Gambia. I argue that these entrapments emerge from the shifting positionalities subjects hold in the border regime, forcing them to face the "principle of dissimilarity" that borders concretize and function through (Mbembe, 2021). When talking with "potential migrants," as

policies of the migration apparatus define them, Mamadou and I indeed battled between warning our interlocutors about the dangers and scarce opportunities of a journey to Europe and sharing with them the information and resources we knew in terms of humanitarian or activist support. In other words, we were caught between the rock of participating in borderwork and the hard place of potentially catalyzing border-related harm and suffering (Vaughan-Williams, 2008). These tensions and those concerning the social connection between Mamadou and me via the humanitarian apparatus express both the paradoxes and ambiguities inhabiting the border regime and its core function of (re)producing inequalities. This is why I look at these moments of ethical entrapment as moments of epistemic disclosure, which unearth that “back and forth movement” between empirical observation and preliminary conceptualization (Trouillot, 2003). They unveil the conditions of the object of observation and fieldwork and highlight certain crucial features of the object of study.

In the discussion, I conceptualize the conditions and politics of fieldwork as the result of evolution of border encounters (Andersson, 2014) generated by the forced interactions Gambians on the move had within the institutional web regulating the right to asylum, so the only juridical framework where their unauthorized presence in the EU could be temporarily regularized.⁴

In so doing, I intend not to exercise reflexivity as the “academic backstage” of migration, mobility, and border studies (Aparna et al., 2020), but instead to give it a central stage in knowledge production. Methodological, epistemic, and ethical questions are strictly intertwined with theoretical analysis, as social connections did not simply constitute the condition of possibility for “the field”; they were simultaneously “the field” itself. They resulted and changed according to the border regime’s shifting social, professional, and geographical locations, requiring continuous anthropological work of re-contextualization and ethical reassessment. As a consequence, my “burning questions” (Trouillot, 2003) were continuously revolving not around “Who are you?” but “What is this that surrounds us, differentially making us, with such vast implications on our life trajectories?” (Povinelli, 2013: 238).

Of course, the fact that inequalities shape anthropological knowledge production on migration and borders has already been widely acknowledged. Western academics, using their privileges to access and talk about the mobility regime, carry the burden of epistemological complicity with the very phenomena they seek to scrutinize (Rozakou, 2019). Nevertheless, instead of stopping at this observation, I chose here to dissect the conditions of possibility of the ethnographic encounter (De Genova, 2013; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2003) and report on how these complicities come alive and are articulated. In the network of direct and indirect connections I describe, I envision myself as a node, doing and making things within broader bordering processes that exceed my self-possessed subjectivity and act through my social identities and relations in ways that I cannot always foresee or control. I look at Mamadou’s experience in a similar fashion.

Social connections and ethical entrapments in the border regime

I entered the personal connections of the border regime abruptly when I worked for 10 months in a reception facility for asylum seekers in Central Italy during the very peak

of the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. In my workplace, asylum workers were a scarcely trained, precarious professional category, left to face the everyday consequences of a system that was institutionally abandoned and which operated as a machine of illegalization (De Genova, 2016; Karakayali and Rigo, 2010; Scheel and Ratfisch, 2017). While these conditions participated in the construction of gray zones where migrants' rights were further abused, they also fostered personal connections that exceeded and deviated from the regimented relations envisioned by reception facilities. Asylum workers and seekers developed spontaneous and informal strategies to relate to each other and their every day, which constantly crossed the boundaries of asylum categories and were instead the result of non-standardized and contingent dynamics. As a result, some of these social connections turned into more stable relationships after the forced interactions in the reception center, such as the one I have with Mamadou, a former French teacher from Serekunda. In this case, the relationship was particularly border-induced because Mamadou's post-Libya critical physical and psychological conditions required the additional attention and care of social workers, which resulted in more time spent together in knowing each other. His condition resulted from the health issues he had in the so-called ghettos; houses where migrants live while waiting to embark and where they are exposed to violence and exploitation by governmental and informal predatory economies profiting from their illegalized mobility (Achtnich, 2022)

Because of his vulnerability, attested through medical and psychiatric certificates, Italian asylum authorities granted him a 2-year humanitarian permit.⁵ When his period in the asylum system ended (a year after I quit my position in the reception center and moved abroad), Mamadou needed to find accommodation and a job. As he thought he could work in the asylum system as a translator, I recommended him to an acquaintance running another reception facility for asylum seekers in my hometown. He was initially hired as an intern and then transitioned to a full-time contract, converting his humanitarian visa into a work permit. Since 2017, he has worked and lived in my hometown, and he is one of the few people I regularly see when I visit my family. My relationship with him and other former Gambian guests of the reception center brought me to develop an interest in the functioning of the migration apparatus with a specific focus on EU–Gambia relations. In other publications (Castellano, 2023, 2024), I describe how these and many other social connections that emerged from “the messiness of borderwork” (Sinatti, 2023) altered life trajectories on both sides of the Mediterranean, expanding the spectrum of borders' social productivity.

In the case I describe here, Mamadou's and my intertwined and simultaneously independent trajectories brought us to embark on the flight to Banjul I mentioned in the introduction. Once in Serekunda, he, his wife, and his daughter stayed with me in an apartment I rented because of the several tensions they had with their respective families. I was immediately involved in the difficulties the three of them had in (re)connecting with each other while witnessing Mamadou's careful management of his public image as a “successful migrant” and last but not least, of my very presence there with them, which posed an enigma to many. During my first stay, Mamadou activated his network to put me in touch with various friends and former colleagues and the families of the Gambians he knew from Italy and with whom he worked in the reception system.

I reached out to the Gambians living in Europe I knew to tell them I was in Serekunda, while others spontaneously got in touch as the word of mouth of my trip circulated and many of them asked me to visit their families. The social connections I inherited from my asylum work, entered in what Paolo Gaibazzi (2019) called the intersubjective mobility of Gambian citizens, who often move together with those who stay put because of the broader collective goals connected with mobility, and allowed me to have a privileged “access” to the field.

In following these connections, I found myself sitting on sofas in the living room of compounds where fathers and mothers talked affectionately about their distant sons, with their pictures of the graduation day or in traditional clothes in some festivities peeking from the walls and the cupboards. They asked how they were doing, how the situation was with their documents, and if their sons were fine as they told them. Mamadou and I had evasive answers, noticing how little they knew about their lives in Italy.

The silences surrounding people’s lives in Europe because of the extreme precariousness and marginalization it often implies or the shameful dependency on humanitarian actors it entails, was also reflected in the case of the public management of Mamadou’s relationship with me. He never introduced me to friends, relatives, and acquaintances as his former social worker but simply as a former colleague, avoiding mentioning his previous status as an asylum seeker and the fact that I was charged with his “assistance.” He also avoided talking too much about his work in the asylum system. He intermittently perceived it as a form of betrayal of other migrants and cooptation into an oppressive system.

But the embedded ambiguity of the apparatus’ social connections exploded for me one particular day when I visited Fofana, the youngest brother of Tijan, whom I had also met in 2016 in the reception system. Together with colleagues and activist lawyers, we proved Tijan’s lung fibrosis, which granted him a humanitarian visa. He considered my effort as the main reason he got a temporary permit, despite the fact that I had just collaborated with his lawyer to get him through medical testing. When I quit the job, he sent me a gift that was assembled partially in The Gambia and in Italy as a goodbye present, and we remained in contact. He was thrilled by the news of me going to The Gambia and told me that his family would love to meet me. I got in touch with his young brother Fofana, and we took a *gelele* together from the center of Serekunda to his family compound. While sitting on the porch with their elderly and partially blind father and another younger brother, Fofana told me Tijan spoke about me as the “humanitarian” who helped him get documents in Italy. While we were talking, Fofana told me he wanted to take the “backway” (the local name for the illegalized trip to Europe) as all his siblings had done. I froze, smiling awkwardly at this sentence, and felt the urge to warn him that since the Italian–Libyan agreement,⁶ the journey had become much more challenging and dangerous and that European authorities were even less prone to give Gambians asylum. Still, he smiled back at me, saying he would just have to find another nice person like me who would help him get papers as I had done with his brother.

At this sentence, my discomfort understandably grew, wondering what the young boy would have to go through on the journey, and I felt misplaced, as I was accidentally helping advertise a life decision that could have a deadly outcome. I found myself in

the same conundrum multiple times, to the point that it became an element engrained in my Gambian fieldwork. My knowledge of asylum and migration policies, my critical stance on the border regime, and my alignment with the principles of mobility justice solicited people's questions: What happens when I arrive in Europe? Is it true that services are available for me to "integrate"? Is it complicated to get a document? As was the case with Fofana, I was always confronted with what I define here as ethical entrapment. On the one hand, talking about the experience I had of an overwhelming rejection of African asylum seekers and reporting the excruciating stories of suffering I heard from those who "made it" to Europe turned me into another agent of borderwork, discouraging people from exercising their (denied) right to mobility.⁷ On the other hand, talking about the forms of protection and support that were formally envisioned by the asylum system, and the existence of networks of solidarity inside and outside reception services exposed me to the fear of implicitly encouraging a potentially deadly and surely painful trajectory through the border regime.

Despite his silence on the asylum system, Mamadou was not exempted from confronting similar ethical entrapments and conundrums. He was concerned from his side about not conveying the triumphal image of the successful migrant because he was afraid of his relatives' and friends' requests for help and of accidentally encouraging people to leave. He told me once that he wanted to talk about the "dark side of Europe," but, as his friend Alpha told us laughing, "he could go on and on talking about that, and in a few minutes, he would be left alone talking with himself as nobody wants to hear those things about Europe, and they think you say it because you don't want them to leave."⁸ Besides the marginality of our comments and warnings, Alpha's sentences reveal the plurality of discourses on mobility which circulate in The Gambia and the various historical, religious, and cultural trajectories they follow. If one could see in this and in many other similar observations I heard in these years of research, a sign of what is now the well-known concept of the autonomy of migration (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2007), in these years, I also saw other disruptive signs, which were painfully acknowledged by families and communities: the suffering, grief, disappearances, and voids that the "backway" brought in the country.

On being caught in borderwork

In these entrapments and silences, a threefold dimension of borderwork appears. First is indeed its socially productive nature: it is not only mediated relations between institutional actors, or even the social connections between workers and migrants that are produced, that is, the reception center, but also what can/may be defined as "indirect connections." For example, my relationship with Tijan refracted back in The Gambia, and his narrative about it contributed to his younger brother's goal and expectation in attempting the crossing before our first meeting even happened. Similarly, my very relationship with Mamadou decisively affected his trajectory, his wife and daughter's condition, and his homecoming. The relationships Mamadou weaved with his co-nationals in the asylum system, both as an asylum seeker and as a social worker, extended his social network not only in Italy and Europe (as many of his acquaintances moved to other EU countries) but also in The Gambia. Such multiplications of ties can be seen as an accidental

product of the migration apparatus that exceeds its processes of differentiation, hierarchization, and regulation of people of the migration apparatus. They point instead to more informal, affective networks. Thanks to a more attentive analysis, however, the ambiguities and complicities that mark borderwork's messiness and its space for relationship (Sinatti, 2023) appear, and are more dramatically materialized, in our ethical entrapments.

Mamadou's and my fears of accidentally publicizing the humanitarian side of a more and more securitarian and necropolitical regime speak volumes to the fact that "humanitarian care for migrants is often located adjacent to, and intertwined with, enforcement efforts, making it contingent on their rejection at the border" (Turner and Mayblin, 2020: 134). Asylum, in this regard, is not just integral but crucial to the governance of EU borders (Hess and Kasperek, 2017; Novak, 2019; Pinelli, 2017; Tsianos and Karakayali, 2010). Some scholars proposed an "autonomy of asylum," recognizing how the apparatus of asylum is re-appropriated and re-signified by mobile subjects who are told to stay put (Tazzioli et al., 2018). However, it is also important to highlight that this autonomy comes with a high degree of risk, further de-humanization, suffering, and death. To live through the social connections of humanitarian borderwork (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017) meant to be caught within its profound injustices and its violence, and not to be able to disentangle from them. This happened because, even if the kind of connections that we built were more oriented towards care and solidarity, they were still partially engrained in the apparatus' asymmetries and ambiguities. In particular, the possibility of border violence always possessed those connections: it was, in a sense, the constant spectral background in which they were taking place. Of course, the potentiality to encounter border violence interlocked with and reinforced other intersectional inequalities which affected my Gambian interlocutors and structured our relationships. These inequalities, and the border regime itself, granted me the legal and economic possibility of flying in to The Gambia visa-free in order to conduct fieldwork on the effects of migration policies with people who are, *de facto*, prevented from entering legally in the Schengen area.

Another layer adds to European ethnographers' broader forms of complicity with the border regime in this case. Christina Sharpe, in her discussion on the endurance of the semiotic of the slave ship in the current bordering processes in the Mediterranean, noticed how "the rescuers' sympathy does not mitigate Fortress Europe's death-dealing policies" (Sharpe, 2016: 58). Here, my sympathy, my attempt to circumvent the border regime epistemologies and un-ethics did not change death-dealing policies. What materialized was even an accidental agentivity I could play in these death-dealing policies when I found myself dreading Fofana's confidence that he could take the backway and find another "humanitarian" like me who would help him in his asylum journey.

In this scenario, despite the fact that I tried to mobilize and inhabit social connections that eschewed borders' differential power and the binaries on which it relies such as that of migrant–nonmigrant (Sharma, 2020; Anderson, 2019; Dahinden, 2016), humanitarian worker and humanitarian subject, and last but not least the ethnographer–ethnographed, I couldn't exit the mechanics of Othering enacted by the border regime and the "structural antagonism" between racialized subjects (Sharpe, 2016) it reiterates. Nevertheless, the objectifying and Othering processes of the border regime did not pertain exclusively to white subjects. Despite not being a

winner of the birthright lottery (Shachar, 2009) and enduring the violence of the border regime, Mamadou's positionality was also affected by bordering processes. He could also not exit from the dilemma between participating in borderwork (even if with his critical discourse on "the dark side of Europe") or potentially publicizing the "backway" displaying his new and more privileged status.

This happened because of bordering processes' capacity to differentiate subjects' positions and "concretize the principle of dissimilarity" (Mbembe, 2021: 12) on which they rely and organize global inequalities more broadly. As the liminal positionality of Mamadou demonstrates, such dissimilarity lurks and troubles not only the social connections built in to the interstices of the migration apparatus but also those of the intersubjective mobility of migrants themselves, contingently narrowing the gap between Mamadou and me and displaying the sticky entanglements of the border regime. We felt trapped in the responsibility of delivering certain representations, struggling to decide which could be potentially less harmful and more just to those whom we were speaking to. The anxieties, fears, and ethical torments that haunted our social connections acquired a terrifying materiality a week after Mamadou left to return to Italy, demonstrating how "extraordinary events of violence are folded into everyday routines" (Povinelli, 2011: 14). On 4 December 2019, 63 young Gambians lost their lives in a shipwreck near the coast of Mauritania. They were attempting to reach the Canary Islands and Spain on an overloaded boat that left from Barra, north of The Gambia. The re-opening of the Atlantic route, an old way to try to reach European shores that had been abandoned because of its dangers, was a direct consequence of the border externalization policies, which made the Central Mediterranean route impracticable. The day after the tragedy, Saikou, a dear friend of Mamadou and a research collaborator, accompanied me to his neighbor's house. He was a thin man who could no longer walk because of a severe disease and had a son in Italy. He had arranged a phone call with the latter so that I could counsel him regarding his complicated situation with his asylum procedure, which was too compromised to be reversed at that point, though I tried to remain positive with his father. While we were walking out of the compound, Saikou pointed out an empty chair in the porch of nearby house: "This is where one of the boys who was in the boat lived; he used to sit on that chair in the afternoon." When we arrived at Saikou's place, I exchanged a few words with his adolescent daughter, who had also lost a schoolmate in the shipwreck.

The border proved its deadliness in a way I had never witnessed before, manifesting not only its powerful existence but also "for whom, how and what it is like in each particular context" (Walters and Lüthi, 2016: 361) in its most dramatic sense.

In that contingency, I could not help but think that the relentless agentivity of the border created those disappearances, along with many others. I stared at this agentivity within my at once privileged but powerless situatedness, entangled in the global connections that the mobility regime re-enacted.

Shifting positionalities, unsettlement, and the otherwise

Critical border studies have analyzed the humanitarization of border politics, and "how border scripts that oscillate between security concerns and human rights allow actors

to justify policies by moving rapidly between aid and intervention” (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019: 7). These oscillations frame migrants as simultaneously at risk (because of the dangers of the journey to Europe) and a risk (to European borders), risks that therefore need to be countered through European intervention (Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Aradau, 2004). Despite Europe’s hyper-restrictive visa regimes towards African countries, which have generated the industry of irregular migration (Andersson, 2014) and the necropolitics of border enforcement, in the transnational space of migration management discourse, the blame for human rights violations is put exclusively on smugglers, traffickers, the malfunctioning of southeastern European states and now on the illiberal political cultures of “transit countries.” This paints an image of brutality and inhumanity as something outside the space of Europe, as delocalized and away from its assumed institutionalized humanitarianism (Cuttitta, 2018). Borders’ (il)legal violence is also removed from the campaigns that demonize irregular migration and portray the journey as a failure and a deadly risk, implemented in the many Sahel and Sub-Saharan countries by international organizations as one of the tools of migration management. In an increasingly restrictive European border regime, development and agreements with third countries become crucial tools for border externalizations. These strategies demonstrate how “aid-funded projects do not need to physically injure migrant people to be rooted in and conducive to containment” (Gazzotti, 2021: 19), as the condition for their success still relies, among other factors, mainly on the very (il)legal violence which dominates in the border regime.

I believe these conditions are laid bare by the ethical entrapments in which Mamadou and I found ourselves. At the same time, if one examines the reasons behind our fears and discomfort, what emerges is not just the inherent violence of the border regime but also the contradictory fragmentation of its functioning.

The border regime is indeed organized in spacetime as an unspoken succession of momentums/statuses, which can also coexist according to the policy priorities through which a mobile illegalized subject is framed: irregular migrant, victim of human trafficking, detainee in transit countries, asylum seeker, refugee or *sans papier*, voluntary returnee-turned entrepreneur, deportee, successful returnee, are some of these statuses and subjectivities. It enacts securitarian, humanitarian, and, more recently, developmental measures, depending on the person’s position in its political geography, turning the various actors into subjects and agents of borderwork. Similarly, Mamadou and I shifted our positionalities depending on where we were located in the spatiotemporal grid of the border regime and who we were interacting with. We constantly slipped in and out of our professional niches, crossing the blurred boundaries between legal and illegal, between roles of agents and opponents of the border regime. We were complacent actors taking part in its functioning both willingly and unwillingly and in its reproduction (Cabot, 2019), whether through formally playing the role of social worker, knowledge producer, or cultural mediator in the (increasingly) liminal space of the asylum system. Simultaneously, we passed through other roles traversing its nodes: Mamadou was once also an “illegal migrant,” a victim of the (il)legal border violence, a humanitarian subject, and a “successful” returnee in The Gambia. I was an improvised legal advocate finding strategies for asylum seekers in their quest for international protection, an agent of

the state who worked in a segregating and illegalizing device, and a European ethnographer researching the social and human impact of EU and Italian asylum and migration policies on Gambians. We also collaborated with migration rights activists and lawyers, co-authored papers, and gave workshops and talks in non-profit associations. That is why Mamadou's and my liminal positionality as (former) workers in the asylum system who were talking with potential "migration candidates," as policy briefs describe them, in other words, not-yet-migrantized and not-yet-illegalized Gambian citizens, interfered with the juridical rhythm enacted by the border regime. Our presence in The Gambia collapsed the border regime's spatiotemporal architecture and exposed its contingent and counterintuitive logic, forcing us to manage its apparent contradictions and aporias. Our silence and incapability of conveying a coherent representation of the border regime could signal the potentiality for the "otherwise" nested in its social connections. Elizabeth Povinelli defined the "otherwise" as something "radically empirical" and "found in the enduring and crumbling conditions and forces of governance," a potentiality that "stares back at its actual conditions without yet being able to speak its new conditions" (Povinelli, 2012: 455). If social connections represent something that is indeed discouraged by the migration apparatus, as Feldman rightly noted, it is because they can unsettle its order, "unsettled" here understood as something that is "not necessarily removed, toppled, or returned to a previous order but as fundamentally brought into question" (Bonilla, 2017:335). To inhabit the "otherwise" through ethnography then does not imply solving our complicities, as Rozakou would say, with some magical ethical, methodological, and theoretical trick, but interrogating them as spaces of epistemic disclosure and ethical (im)possibilities, highlighting something that cannot be said (Moten and Harney, 2021). What cannot be said here is the "principle of dissimilarity" that such politically crafted exposure to harm institutes between subjects.

In this regard, it is crucial to highlight how such a principle of dissimilarity does not arise from a vacuum. Border arrangements and assemblages in the Mediterranean display an overlap of unevenly durable forms of colonial domination (Gazzotti, 2021). The Mediterranean has been recognized as a relational space that displays a racialized colonial *longue durée*. This geopolitical and economic entity had and has a key role in the reiteration of global racism and subalternity, through apparatuses of people's containment, detention, forced labor, and exploitation (Proglio et al., 2021; Raeymaekers, 2024). Similarly, Gambians' adamant willingness to take the backway is strictly connected to the economic expropriation left by colonial economies and neoliberal globalization, as well as to local and partially autonomous practices of migration and return (Bellagamba and Vitturini, 2021; Gaibazzi, 2023).⁹ As argued by Nina Glick Schiller, "processes of dispossession are maintained ultimately by force, but those displaced are simultaneously dehumanized by narratives of national, racialized, ethno-religious difference" (Glick Schiller, 2016: 6).

Being entangled and affected by the social connections of the border regime and being caught in its counterintuitive logic presents an opportunity to unveil its functioning and deep historical genealogy as well as its fractal nature. As a white Italian who worked in the asylum system and then decided to do fieldwork in The Gambia, I had to confront how the condition of possibility of both are given by my national and racial identity

first and foremost. Mamadou, a Gambian migrant who became a cultural mediator in the Italian asylum system, lived on unequal grounds deriving from his newly acquired status as a mobile subject and his re-location in the hierarchy of value that the border regime administers (Herzfeld, 2004). Returning to a more intersubjective, empirical sphere of action, it is evident how such global entanglement made us relate and act upon each other through labor and affects. In sum, those relationalities were produced by, through, and against the institutional grid, which made these encounters possible. That is why, as people at/in/across borders who have been part of the asylum system as agents, users, and researchers, our *connected stories* and subjectivities in the field are also a magnifying lens to look at the *connected histories* (Bhambra, 2010) shaping those global inequalities.

Connected histories emerged in the conjuncture, which set the conditions for our encounter and the role we were supposed to play in our initial forced relationship. As I tried to articulate above, they similarly manifest in our epistemic entrapments.

Conclusion

In this article, I look at illegalized migration and its humanitarian catastrophes from the location of a “country of origin” and through the social connections accidentally produced by the border regime, often overseen within academic and political debates. In so doing, I also tried to decenter the site from where “the border spectacle” (Cabot, 2019; De Genova, 2020) is usually observed, and explore its “off-scene” (Andersson, 2014) both geographically and relationally. In particular, I tried to show how social connections crafted by the depersonalized policies of the migration apparatus, move within it, transforming people’s positionalities. From one side, the focus on such social connections hints to the multiple “otherwise” of the border regime, so the attempts of borders’ de-activation, circumvention, and overcoming, both physically and epistemically. On the other side, it shows how global inequalities of mobility, border violence, and racialization constantly haunt people and their relational worlds, generating the fears, interruptions, and entrapments I described/analyzed. Keeping a constant dialogue between the object of observation and the object of study through the analysis of “ethical entrapments,” my will is to contribute to a relational theory that “needs concepts that reflect on the asymmetrical interdependence that shapes the dynamics of power relations, which give rise to institutions of ‘significant difference’” (Eckert, 2016: 245).

A reflexive stance on shifting positionalities and border social connections could be used as a tool for knowledge in interrogating the “constitutive inequalities as material and practical conditions of possibility of the ethnographic encounter itself” (De Genova, 2016: 228). The epistemic and ethical entrapments I describe express what it means to “inhabit the tension of implicated necropower relations in research and writing practices” (Nayak, 2017: 202).

Retracing the social connections of the migration apparatus ethnographically and investigating how they are signified, interpreted, and acted out could then be a fruitful methodology to “unsettle” borderwork. At the same time, the analysis of the ethical

entrapments that mark such social connections highlights how the principle of dissimilarity is materialized by the deep inequalities that shape people's trajectory concerning their desire for mobility. In this, I take my location in the border regime as one of an actant as much as a witness, resorting to Thomas' definition of witnessing as an embodied practice which produces intimacies and unveils complicities and which could potentially exceed the conjunctures of power in which we live (Thomas, 2019).

As there is no outsider analytical position beyond the complex assemblage of powers that enact the border regime (De Genova, 2013), to be "of these connections" means recognizing the obligations they carry and how they could also mediate (im) mobility.

The social connections I described in this article and their ethical entrapments emerge from this potentiality: from the entanglement of life trajectories that the border regime, in its contradictions, brings to life. Interrogating these frictions could harness opportunities to develop theoretically effective ways to investigate the border regime as an assemblage relying on and (re)producing global inequalities.

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Notes

1. All the interlocutors' names present in the article are pseudonyms.
2. While Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) defined this assemblage as "mobility regime," referring more broadly to the assemblage's capacity to encourage or hinder human mobility, scholars have provided many other definitions. If some concepts, such as that of migration regimes (Tsianos and Karakali, 2010) and migration apparatus (Feldman, 2011) emphasize the increasing institutionalization of migration, others, such as border regime (De Genova, 2016) and "militarized global apartheid" (Besteman, 2020), focus more intensely on the restrictive and securitarian aspects of migration management. Other scholars have proposed a more processual and dynamic definition, like the one of borderwork (Vaughan-Williams, 2008) or one of borderities (Szary and Giraut, 2015). In this article, I use alternatively the definition of migration apparatus to refer to the web of institutional powers organizing human mobility and the one of border regime to refer to the broader spectrum of events and phenomena generated by mobility containment, encompassing legal, illegal, pursued and collateral forms of violence.
3. In using the term relationality instead of relationship, I want to emphasize the co-production of subjectivities in some of the interactions in the border regime, like the ones I participate in and that I describe in the article. In this sense, I welcome the definition of Sarah Lucia Hoagland for whom "relationality involves our forming and being formed, both individually and culturally, in relation through our engagements and practices" (Hoagland, 2007: 99).
4. Despite their country's small size and population, Gambians became one of the top nationalities applying for asylum in Italy between 2012 and 2018. However, the Italian asylum authorities generally rejected their claims for international protection, regardless of the documented violations of human rights and the political persecution of opponents perpetrated by the autocratic regime of former President Yahya Jammeh, which lasted until 2017 (Altrogge and Zanker, 2019). Just like most West African asylum seekers, they were considered as economic migrants, and the few of them who accessed a form of protection did it through a humanitarian permit and not the refugee status.
5. For a review of the politics of humanitarian permits in the EU asylum system, see Fassin, 2011.
6. "Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the fields of development, the fight against illegal immigration, human trafficking and fuel smuggling and on reinforcing the security of borders between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic," signed in Rome on 2 February 2017.
7. The Gambia has one of the highest visa rejection rate for European countries among so-called migrants' "countries of origin" and does not have EU embassies or consulates working on Visa procedures in its national territories. Gambian nationals need to go to Senegal to even try applying for a Visa.
8. Interview with Alpha, Kololi, 28/11/2019.
9. Although I do not have the space to elaborate here on some factors contributing to The Gambia's backway, it is important to mention a few. The dictatorship of Yahya Jammeh (1994–2016) was marked by several violations of human rights and severe restrictions on civil freedoms, as recently exposed by the Gambian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Altrogge and Zanker, 2019); the condition of "involuntary immobility" imposed by the European visa policies, which instead enhanced the desire to leave the country (Carling, 2002; Gaibazzi, 2014); and the war in and political destabilization of Libya in 2011, one of the main destinations for circular migration of West Africans (Mensah, 2016). Additional aspects that contribute to the phenomenon of the "backway" can be traced to a desire to pursue globally recognized education and training and Gambians' aspirations towards Western lifestyles and well-being, fostered by

the recent development of The Gambian coast as a (European) tourist destination, by the regular return of Gambians from the diaspora (Ceesay 2016), and by mobile technologies. In terms of social pressures, the expectations exerted on young men, especially male firstborns, concerning the need to support their extended family play a central role in the decision to migrate. Due to the lack of viable options to establish themselves as autonomous and dependable subjects, they resort to migration as a “rite of passage” in the stages of individual pathways to social adulthood (Conrad Suso, 2020), and as a reaction to the disintegration of their original households in rural areas. Indeed, poverty and structural unemployment have steadily worsened in recent decades as a result of several complex factors variously tied to the *longue durée* of the colonial era and of neocolonial geopolitics.

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