**Intimate Witnessing: Volunteer Testimonies of Everyday Border Violence**

**Abstract**

In this paper, we center the witnessing repertoires of grassroots volunteers and explore the ways in which they bear witness to and condemn the border violence experienced by illegalized migrants across Europe. Drawing on long-term research of volunteer solidarity structures across Greece and in Paris, our analysis of witnessing uses the ‘intimate’ as a conceptual framing across three intersections of analysis. First, we locate the 'intimate' in volunteers’ embodied presence in migrant spaces, where important relations of care between volunteers and migrants emerge based on physical and emotional proximity. Second, we unpack how intimate mourning over migrant incarceration and death are publicly evoked, in the affective and emotive authorship of events to which volunteers bear witness. Finally, we reflect on the multiple political potentialities of intimate witnessing, not only as an alternative to traditional modalities of humanitarian witnessing, but as a radical confrontation against racialized logics that underpin Europe’s bordering apparatus. Bringing together literature on feminist geopolitics, humanitarian witnessing, and volunteer-refugee solidarities, we argue that the distinct repertoires of ‘intimate witnessing’ are paramount to solidarity, whereby volunteers render visible the mundane violence and indignities illegalized migrants face across Europe.

Keywords: volunteers; migrants; humanitarianism; witnessing; intimate; testimony; borders

**1.0 Introduction**

In this paper, we explore the distinct repertoires of intimate witnessing that grassroots volunteers deploy to bear witness to the violent abandonment of people on the move across Europe. Since 2015, innumerable grassroots volunteer collectives have created transnational networks of support, distributing food and clothing, providing legal assistance and medical care, and helping construct makeshift shelters in camps, transit sites and urban spaces across the continent. A growing body of literature has documented how these self-organized collectives have challenged the practices of state actors and established humanitarian agencies by enacting situated solidarities (Authors, 2020; Jumbert & Pascucci, 2021; Rozakou, 2017; Sandri 2018; Vandervoordt, 2019). Alongside their humanitarian role, many grassroots volunteers have also developed distinct ways of producing and disseminating testimonies on the plight of migrants: everyday practices of witnessing where volunteers document and denounce the violence and indignities to which they bear witness. Rooted in affective vocabularies drawn from everyday embodied encounters, and visceral in their denunciation of the way states police, incarcerate, and deport illegalized migrants, these testimonies are integral to how volunteers have sought to intervene in the ‘refugee crisis’. Yet, existing accounts of volunteer humanitarianism have not fully explored these distinct repertoiresof what we term *intimate witnessing*. As migrant solidarity initiatives and spaces become increasingly policed (Dadusc and Mudu, 2022), attention to these testimonial practices allows us to shed new light on the political potentialities and limits of grassroots humanitarianism.

To understand how volunteer witnessing emerges as a political and ethical response to border violence, we follow feminist political geographers (Pain and Staeheli, 2014; Smith et al 2016; Mountz, 2018) who center the role of bodies in co-constituting borders and foreground the *intimate* scale through which border violence and solidarity manifests. The affects generated through embodied interactions with various infrastructures, institutions, and people within and outside the migration apparatus can challenge received understandings of settlement, bordering and territory as well as advance an ethical attention to power relations (Gökariksel and Secor, 2020; Häklii and Kallio, 2020; Jacobsen and Gilmartin, 2021). Embodied encounters between volunteers and refugees are thus inextricably connected to (the resistance of) borders, just as Tyerman (2021) conversely notes, “globally oriented solidarity work is necessarily intimate” (466) through interpersonal encounters and sharing of life experiences. We thus bridge intimate geopolitics (Smith, 2012) with work on the politics of volunteer humanitarianism (Sandri, 2018) and humanitarian witnessing (Redfield, 2006; Givoni, 2011a) to understand how specific forms of volunteer witnessing offers creative possibilities to document border violence and confront the relentless dehumanization of illegalized migrants.

Operating within a field of humanitarian witnessing dominated, in terms of reach and visibility, by international NGOs like *Médecins sans Frontières* (MSF), grassroots volunteers have developed a diverse repertoire of witnessing to violent state bordering practices (Davies et al., 2023). While we acknowledge the importance of migrant-led witnessing, our focus is limited to testimonies that are authored, both individually and collectively, *by volunteers* in response to daily confrontations with the intimately embodied violence of Europe’s border and asylum regimes (Tyerman, 2021). Circulated primarily via digital solidarity networks (Siapera, 2019) and less constrained by established scripts and tenor of *témoignage* utilized by professionalized humanitarian organizations (Redfield, 2006), we contend that testimonies authored by volunteers working within ad-hoc, informal, more horizontally-structured collectives and small NGOs often foreground the personal biographies of migrants to which physical and affective proximity gives access.

We thus explore intimate witnessing as one mode within a broader *repertoire of humanitarian witnessing* that has emerged at the grassroots level. How do the embodied encounters within specific migrant spaces give rise to these witnessing practices? What sets volunteer testimonies apart, in terms of their affective vocabularies, their regard for migrant 'others', and their political potentialities? In pursuing these questions, our analysis uses the ‘intimate’ as a conceptual framing across three intersections: first, understanding the intimate relations of care between volunteers and migrants, across various spaces, that are built on proximity; second, unpacking how migrant neglect and death are publicly evoked in the affective and emotive authorship of volunteer testimonies; and third, exploring the challenge of intimate witnessing to racialized border policies.

In writing this paper, we acknowledge that who gets to bear witness is a function of colonial histories and ongoing, asymmetrical power relations that expose differences across race and citizenship, that are often perpetuated by humanitarian organizations and volunteers themselves (Picozza, 2021). We also acknowledge our own “embodied positionality” (Noxolo, 2009: 56) as volunteers to migrant sites with our own sets of relative privilege. Thus, bearing witness, composing testimony (and indeed postcolonial academic writing) are fraught with the same dilemmas of complicity, uneven power dynamics, and erasure of agency that permeate humanitarianism more broadly. However, if “volunteer humanitarianism”, as some scholars suggest, offers the potential to build more equal relationships between citizens and non-citizens, and defy dominant humanitarian logics that dehumanize and depoliticize migrants (Authors, 2020), then so too does intimate witnessing, we argue. In thinking beyond the ambivalent politics of humanitarian witnessing, we draw on critiques of racialized borders (Davies and Iskajee, 2019) to highlight the points at which volunteer-authored witnessing subverts the colonial underpinnings of the humanitarian project (Picozza, 2021). Ultimately, we conclude that such subversion occurs when testimonies foreground self-reflection upon the limits, contradictions, and the brutal inequalities on which they are premised, and thereby call upon their audiences to reimagine their relationship with the 'other'.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, we bridge three sets of literature including feminist geopolitics, the growing body of work on the ambivalent politics of volunteer humanitarianism, and studies of humanitarian witnessing. We draw on empirical research from two distinct migrant sites with intense volunteer activity, namely refugee camps on the Greek Aegean islands and an emergency humanitarian center in Paris. Our methods are two-fold, consisting of a series of ethnographic visits, during which we volunteered alongside grassroots initiatives and interviewed dozens of volunteers across the Greek islands and Paris between 2016-2022, as well as situated readings of two illustrative examples of volunteer-authored testimonies from Facebook solidarity pages. This dual methodological approach, characterized by immersion in both physical and digital spaces, is important for capturing the raw emotions and multilayered affective registers that demarcate intimate witnessing. Throughout, we have sought to carefully hold in tension the power differentials between both volunteers and migrants, and researchers and migrants, and the relative privilege required to write and dissent. We reflect on our positionalities and the ethics of doing so in our methodology section. The accounts that follow are not a strict comparison of divergent spatialities, but rather are meant to identify how witnessing unfolds despite the ever-increasing restrictions put in place by border apparatuses. Finally, we engage with postcolonial critiques to reflect on the ability of intimate witnessing to confront border violence and its racialized logics.

**2.0 Intimate Encounters at the Border**

Feminist political geographers have long argued for the critical centering of the body, whereby attention to its subjection to state violence, sovereignty, and borders illuminates power and its various manifestations (Pain and Staeheli, 2014; Smith, 2012). Embodied geopolitics has been used as a lens to analyze affect and everyday encounters. By collapsing the ‘global’ scale, “the body, then, functions as [its own] scale and site upon which ideas, ideologies and politics are performed and made meaningful … [and] are intimately lived” (Mountz, 2018: 762). The body is far from passive, however. Though certain bodies may be precarious --policed, incarcerated, and racialized -- they remain tools for political agency and important sites to challenge the performativities of power. Bodies can re/make territories, as Häkli and Kallio (2020) point to how state bordering is challenged through refugees' embodied presence, from mundane acts of resisting bureaucratic documentation to exceptional acts of hunger strikes or self-harm.

Deeply connected in the analysis of the body is the foregrounding of affect, bringing together the emotional, sensorial, and visceral to understand collective states and socialities – or how the body and affect co-constitute each other. While we are less concerned in creating a sharp distinction between affect and emotion, Malkii (2015) offers a useful starting point in understanding the two, defining emotion as the easily recognizable, individual states of mind, whereas affect is less easy to identify and a “potentially more disruptive presence in a social world” (55). Put differently, affect captures the “circulation of ‘objects of feeling’ and the concrete encounters that occur in and through this circulation” (Ahmed, 2000, cited in Gökariksel and Secor, 2020: 1241), as affect is inherently collective in its manifestation.

Critical border scholars have responded to Mountz’s (2018) call to focus on resistance that *already* centers the body, affect, and its attendant politics. One example of this response includes Hodge's (2019) work on solidarity activists’ protests against the incarceration of refugees in Australia's offshore detention facilities. Modes of bodily resistance for the #LetThemStay and #BringThemHere campaigns included 'body-blocking' techniques whereby protestors blocked police vehicles to ensure that a hospitalized baby could not be sent back to Nauru. Through these tactics, Hodge (2019) argues that activists "embody and affirm, in powerful ways, that bodies matter ... and highlight the body's myriad capacities -- to flourish, falter, and care -- is to strengthen claims for a corporeal geopolitics" (402). Though Hodge brings to the fore how bodies in concert publicly demonstrated solidarity, we seek to shift attention to the ways emergent affects and subjectivities generated through everyday *encounters* between migrants and grassroots volunteers are reflected in practices of witnessing.

In this vein, Häkli and Kallio (2020) argue that a focus on embodied encounters between refugees, governing institutions, and civil society actors, can reveal dimensions of empathy and humanity, which are critical to redressing representations of refugees as 'mere' bodies. For them, the encounter encapsulates not just the actual *event* of bodily contact, but also the wider socio-spatial environments that shape such encounters. Furthermore, the encounter mediates how affect traverses and the forms it takes, as Gökariksel and Secor (2020) write in their work on the attitudes of long-standing residents of Turkey towards Syrian refugees. Encounters remained largely hostile as Turkish interlocutors expressed a desire for boundaries between themselves and Syrian refugees, stemming from fear, anxiety, and xenophobia. Nonetheless, the encounter, even when messy, is crucial as "geopolitical imaginations come into being and differences between self and other, us and them materialize through emplaced, embodied *and* affective encounters" (ibid: 1240; original emphasis). Thus, these uneasy affective encounters entangle bodies, places, and ideas; from this entanglement an ethical disposition that challenges uneven relations can emerge. We take seriously this affirmative potential to think through how witnessing can disrupt fear, difference, and othering.

Elsewhere, Tyerman (2021) uses a “globally-intimate” lens to interrogate how everyday bordering in and around the makeshift migrant camps in Calais “re/produces locally a racialised global geopolitics" (471). Evident through the spatial segregation of illegalized migrants from the residents of Calais, this reproduction mimics the wider racialization of Europe's borders: the everyday geography of Calais is not only reshaped, but so too are migrant bodies, marked by struggles to access food, shelter, and sanitation, which in turn are exacerbated by police violence. At the same time, Tyerman highlights how solidarity emerges through migrants’ and activists’ everyday practices of care, mutual support, and moments of collective confrontation with the state bordering apparatus.

We apply the analytic of the *intimate* - or the *everydayness* of how borders are inscribed into differentiated bodies and the ways borders are confronted through embodied resistance - to the realm of witnessing. The use of the 'body' here also captures bodily and linguistic performativity converging and coinciding (Hodge, 2019). Building on this, we seek to connect bodily encounters, and the affects they generate, to everyday practices of intimate witnessing.

**2.1 Spaces of Solidarity**

A growing corpus of work has sought to document the multiplication of grassroots initiatives supporting people on the move across Europe – in camps (Authors, 2020; Ramakrishnan and Thieme, 2022; Sandri, 2018), urban “hubs” and squats (Sinatti, 2019), at sea (Stierl, 2018), and in digital spaces (Siapera, 2019; Stavinoha, 2019). While a comprehensive review of volunteer humanitarianism is beyond our scope, two strands of inquiry are relevant here: first, the potential of grassroots initiatives for developing a politics beyond humanitarianism*;* and, second, the “spaces of encounters” (Ataç et al., 2021) between migrants and their supporters where intimate solidarities are enacted.

In unpacking the ambivalent politics of grassroots initiatives, scholars have focused on how volunteers navigate multiple dilemmas: the prioritization of immediate needs versus structural change; the co-optation of services by professional humanitarian agencies and the state; and the provision of care without becoming complicit in violent bordering practices (Vandervoordt, 2019). Writing against claims about the depoliticizing effects of humanitarian action, research has documented how many volunteers *become* entangled in what Sinatti (2019: 146) calls “involuntary politics” in the process of assisting illegalized migrants. Based on their study of a migrant solidarity space in Milan, Sinatti (2019) found that many volunteers enact “silent” forms of opposition through everyday practices and relations that circumvent “the minimalist humanitarian logics of institutional approaches” and circumvent state categorizations of (il)legal migrants (142). Others have documented the gradual transformation of volunteers’ political subjectivities as they espouse more publicly visibly forms of activism. For example, research by Sandri (2018) and McGee and Pelham (2018) in the Calais ‘Jungle’ documents how even volunteers who continued to self-identify as “humanitarians” began to protest camp management policies of local authorities, and some became involved in campaigns against Britain’s hostile migration policies.

Thus, in a context where acts of hospitality and care on one hand and migrants’ unruly mobilities on the other are increasingly criminalized, the boundaries between humanitarian action and political solidarity are being unsettled. Indeed, recent work on “volunteer” (Sandri, 2018), “citizen” (Jumbert and Pascucci, 2021), “solidarity” (Rozakou, 2017), or “vernacular” (Brković, 2023) humanitarianism compels us to eschew such strict binaries. Instead, it highlights the fluidity between the two and the ineluctably *ambivalent* politics of *all* migrant solidarity initiatives.

Some scholars adopt a more measured reading of the subversive potentialities of volunteer-led interventions. Both at the collective and the intimate levels, the field of volunteer humanitarianism is inevitably permeated by gendered, classed, and historically sedimented, (post)colonial inequalities that inform categories of ‘deservingness’, inscribe whiteness as a dominant logic, and reinforce the racialized segregation between 'citizens' and 'non-citizens' (Picozza, 2021). Yet, through their interventions in the public sphere as *witnesses*, volunteers can challenge received scripts that states must detain, expel, and ultimately dehumanize border-crossers (Stierl, 2018). Writing on the Bosnia-Croatia border, for example, Davies et al. (2023) detail how networks of grassroots activists create a "counternarrative of refusal" by collecting testimonies from migrants and recording instances of state violence in digital archives. It is precisely because such practices of witnessing threaten the legitimacy of borders, that both migrants and volunteers are heavily censored on speaking out against the violence that people on the move experience, whether during 'pushbacks' or their incarceration in camps (Stavinoha, 2019). Ultimately, grassroots volunteers engage in forms of dissent and witnessing that exist on a continuum, reflective of the heterogeneity of volunteer humanitarianism in terms of the shifting politics of different collectives, diverging motivations of individual volunteers, and diverse modes of relating to migrants, established humanitarian actors, and the state (Vandervoordt, 2019).

However, both the potentialities and limits of volunteer practices of witnessing amidst Europe’s shifting bordering landscape are yet to be thoroughly explored and theorized. These practices, we contend, need to be situated at the level of the intimate - in the “spaces of encounters” where “transversal” solidarities (Ataç et al., 2021) take root. For Vandervoordt (2019), one of the “subversive” dimensions of grassroots initiatives is precisely the production of spaces where citizen-volunteers and illegalized migrants “[encounter] one another, unmediated by state agencies, professional NGOs, and media representations” (256). Such encounters are often characterized by exchanges of life histories and aspirations, intimacy, friendships, affection, and a relational ethics of care that transgresses conventional humanitarian boundaries and hierarchies (Authors). Where an erasure occurs in the latter through a focus on securing biological life – that is, refugees’ immediate physical needs – volunteer humanitarianism “gives a central role to interpersonal relations” that re-center and rehumanize illegalized migrants (Vandervoordt, 2019: 259). These “intimate forms of solidarity” (Schilliger, 2020: 543), as we document below, furnish the distinct affective registers of intimate witnessing that depart, in subtle but significant ways, from traditional modes of humanitarian *témoignage.*

**2.2** **Towards Intimate Witnessing**

In tracing the genealogy of different regimes of witnessing since the Holocaust, Givoni (2011a) argues that through the form of humanitarian testimony witnessing developed into a carefully “cultivated” practice. For Givoni (2011b), *témoignage* – as enacted in its archetypal form by MSF – enfolds heterogeneous communicative practices, such as documenting human rights abuses, circulating images of suffering, and publicly denouncing state violence. While accounts of volunteering have increasingly engaged with the interconnections between emotions, intimacy, and the body, the literature on witnessing has been slower to engage with these points of analysis. Indeed, the authorship of humanitarian testimony is also a deeply *relational* and *affective* practice by nature of its form and function, as recent work in cultural studies has highlighted: “Affective witnessing”, write Richardson and Schankweiler (2020), “is something felt, something which involves the whole body and at the same time kicks off relationalities to other bodies” (237). An emphasis on relationality allows us to sharpen the emergent connections between everyday encounters amongst volunteers and migrants, and grassroots testimonies that cannot be entirely encapsulated in long-established modalities of *témoignage*. Here, we briefly engage with three subtle distinctions between traditional *témoignage* and intimate witnessing*,* relating to their distinct affective registers,the role of emotion in witnessing, and the differing forms of sociality that characterize everyday volunteer-migrant encounters. We unpack these distinctions further in subsequent sections.

Firstly, decisions on how testimony should be formulated and how denunciatory public speech can be reconciled with the principle of neutrality, have tested humanitarian organizations over time, and a range of studies have documented the political and ethical quandaries that impinge upon the field of humanitarian witnessing (Redfield, 2006; Givoni, 2011b). Yet, the tension between distance and proximity is often presented as irreconcilable in research on humanitarian practice. In her work on Finnish Red Cross workers, for example, Malkii (2015) writes about their perpetual struggle to locate an “affective neutrality”: between projecting indifference on the one hand versus risking affects that are more difficult to manage and could expose workers to secondary trauma on the other. Breaches in managing affect due to uncertainties of various magnitudes – narrativized by aid workers as ethical, technical, or otherwise – can lead to an “affective impasse”, Malkki argues (57-59). We thus ask how these affective entanglements come to define volunteers’ encounters with migrantss and how these, in turn, inform the distinct affective register of their testimonies?

Secondly, rather than condemning the display of emotions amongst volunteers as ‘unprofessional’, recent research has centered the role emotions play in enacting migrant solidarity. For Karakayali (2017), proximity to refugees is important in developing emotional bonds, even if such bonds ultimately cannot transcend the asymmetrical relationships that suffuse humanitarianism. This contrasts with Doidge and Sandri (2019) who foreground the strong emotional attachments – and the centrality of empathy – that move volunteer-migrant interactions in the Calais ‘Jungle’. Elsewhere, Stierl (2016) documents what he terms “grief-activism” by migrant solidarity activists. Rather than remaining individually focused, “emotionally charged commemorative practices” (177) such as the public reading of the names of victims of border violence, are collectivizing and politically transformative. We explore how the “subjective experiences of being present in the then and there – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, and thoughts … the daily struggles to survive, resist, help others and make sense of extremity” (Kurasawa, 2009: 103), draws out affective attachments and imaginaries that make their way to the public sphere. We build on this work and ask what visceral emotions come to the fore when volunteers bear witness to routinized border violence?

Thirdly, the production of professionalized humanitarian testimony revolves around the figure of the “expert-witness” who bears witness to the suffering of (distant) 'others’ (Givoni, 2011a). In the case of MSF, individual accounts of its humanitarian staff are subsumed under its global brand and become part of carefully crafted reports and media campaigns, “overshad[owing] the eyewitness accounts delivered by volunteers to more limited audiences” (Givoni, 2011a: 163). By contrast, witnessing by grassroots volunteers, most of whom are neither humanitarian nor medical experts, occurs in less formalized ways and with fewer resources. Of course, MSF staff are, through their embodied presence in sites of suffering, routinely exposed to the stories of people they assist; their “voices” are an integral part of MSF’s *témoignage* (Redfield, 2006). But, as we argue below, the encounters that underpin dominant modes of humanitarian testimony do not allow for the forms of sociality that characterize the relations between volunteers and migrants which foreground exchanges of “biographical life” (Authors). We therefore ask how do these intimate solidarities blur the sharp line between the expert-witness and the humanitarian subject in the production of *témoignage?*

**3.0 Methodological Notes**

Recent work has challenged the spatial fixity of the ‘camp’ in Europe, pointing to the proliferation of informal encampments that have emerged due to the simultaneous violent policing of migrants and their abandonment by the state (Martin et al. 2020). Often, these makeshift camps exist uneasily alongside institutionally administered ones, such that these spatialities co-constitute each other and create new spatial arrangements across a spectrum of informal and institutional permutations: from the migrant-built Jungle in Calais, ad-hoc street encampments in Paris, to military-run EU “hotspots” on Greek islands. Our comparative approach recognizes this multitude, attuned to how the spatial specificities of our sites – Paris and the Aegean – shape the capacity of volunteers to engage in intimate witnessing while focusing on their overlaps as sites of bordering, containment, *and* resistance.

In Paris, Porte de la Chapelle, a working-class neighborhood in the 18th *arrondisement*, became a hub of grassroots activities given the presence of a city-led, temporary reception center (informally known as the ‘Bubble’), launched in 2016 and permanently closed in 2019. During the time of our research, the Bubble attracted migrants to the neighborhood, who knew they could avail of services, food, and information through externally situated grassroots support. Its dismantling meant that migrants were dispersed, and the heavy policing of precarious encampments, established under bridges and along canals across Northern Paris, continued. Given the tactics of constant migrant movement and hypermobility (Tazzioli, 2020) to evade violence and deportation, volunteers, too, have adapted to provisioning and distributing in ad-hoc ways across the city (Ramakrishnan and Thieme, 2022).

Since 2015, the Greek islands of Chios, Samos and Lesbos have seen the establishment of EU hotspots and various smaller hybrid migrant camps, which were transformed, following the March 2016 EU-Turkey deal, into sites of prolonged confinement for tens of thousands of people warehoused in squalid conditions. The Aegean archipelago became a central node in the pan-European mobilisation of migrant solidarity initiatives, with countless grassroots collectives and small NGOs providing material aid, medical care, legal information, informal education, and spaces for socialization, while operating alongside, and in frequent tension with, established humanitarian agencies and state actors. On Samos, for example, the hotspot, desperately overcrowded for much of its existence, was located on the hillside surrounding Vathy, the island’s main town, giving migrants relatively easy access to various volunteer-run spaces. On Chios, volunteers had almost unrestricted access inside Souda camp – a semi-formal camp administered jointly by the municipality and UNHCR – until its closure in October 2017.

Between 2016-2022, we collectively spent almost a year between across both sites, and it is this deep engagement we primarily draw on. Collins (2020) and Jacobsen and Gilmartin (2021) have suggested that ethical migration research should center encounters and collective affects, rather than individual migrant subjectivities, as a means of understanding power asymmetries. Our own work began by volunteering with several grassroots collectives in Paris and Chios, where we engaged in daily activities such as sorting donations, preparing and distributing food, and identifying vulnerable individuals. We also participated in volunteer coordination and logistics meetings, contributing to discussions on the most dignified modes of delivering food and clothing. This immersion allowed us to develop more reciprocal relationships with volunteers and migrants, ensuring that our presence was not solely premised on extraction, while cognizant of the ethical challenges that research in precarious conditions inevitably poses (Jordan and Poser, 2020). While beyond the scope of this paper, we acknowledge inhabiting dual categories of ‘researcher’ and ‘volunteer’, placed us in a fragile “in-between position” (Brankamp, 2021: 2), with its own tensions – for example, being privy to, and not immune ourselves, from volunteer burnout and stress, or ethical quandaries on migrant provisioning.

Alongside our ethnographic research, we also draw on illustrative examples of volunteer testimonies circulated on Facebook[[1]](#footnote-2) – a platform integral to the mobilisation of migrant solidarity initiatives across Europe (Siapera, 2019). In our attempt to thematically analyze testimonies that linked materially and experientially to what we saw on the ground, we develop a close reading of two testimonies authored by Paris-based volunteers that foreground moments of collective mourning of migrant death and public denunciation of border violence. Instead of analysing a large corpus of testimonies circulating on social media platforms, we selected these two accounts not only because they reflect the everyday violence of racialized bordering; rather, a detailed, situated reading of these testimonies was necessary for us to capture the ambivalent layers of compassion, rage, grief, despair, and hope that make up the affective register of intimate witnessing. Furthermore, as one of us was present in Paris during the passing of Karim (see section 4.1), this testimony was selected for enabling us to work across the digital/physical divide and to explore in granular detail how everyday solidarities and the affective entanglements that emerge from embodied encounters infuse testimonies intimate witnessing.

**4.0 Embodied witnessing: Transgressive presence amidst border violence**

“I was in the camp most of the day, hearing lots of very terrible stories. I was completely immersed in camp life,” recalls Leila of her time on Chios in 2016.While cognizant that her proximity is conditioned by ever-shifting spatial, temporal, and disciplinary arrangements, Leila’s immersion in everyday camp life attests to the physical and emotional proximity to migrants that many of the volunteers we met foregrounded. In this section, we chart how volunteers’ testimonial practices are rooted in their *embodied presence* within migrant spaces – the mundane encounters, shared sociality, and practices of care that constitute the “affective regime” (Givoni, 2020) of volunteer humanitarianism.

Much of volunteers’ day-to-day presence in migrant spaces are taken up by activities such as distributions of food and clothing that are inherently structured by vertical relations traditionally associated with humanitarian work. Yet, the informality of volunteer humanitarianism allows for varied forms of embodied encounters and practices of care to emerge, allowing for more horizontal, proximate relations with migrants (Authors). For long-term volunteers on the Greek islands, who spent several months, sometimes years providing support, this meant they were able to form close personal bonds, even friendships, with people in specific camps. As Leila explains again:

I felt like I lived in the camp. I felt like I was there more than anywhere else. I ended up spending a lot of time just sitting with people in tents, sharing tea, and talking about their experiences. (Leila, Chios)

For many volunteers, it is the varied forms of intimate encounters – whether in people’s shelters in camps in Greece, in surrounding cafes and parks, in UNHCR-sponsored apartments, but even in the more fleeting, precarious context of the streets surrounding the Bubble in Paris – that demarcate their role and identity from established humanitarian actors. In contrast to traditional humanitarian actors, many volunteers see emotional proximity as a value to be embraced. For Rob and Claire, who both spent more than a year coordinating one of the biggest volunteer teams on Chios, it is one of the defining features of volunteer humanitarianism. “It’s like a shield that they’re quite proud of carrying,” Rob, who was involved in liaising with UNHCR and other humanitarian actors on Chios, added, referring to the emotional distance purportedly maintained between humanitarian staff and people in the camps. “They will describe it as being a shield that protects them from the difficulties of their job ... [But] it’s not a shield of protection. It’s, you know, ‘I’m a professional and I don’t feel your pain.’ Well, you fucking should, or you shouldn’t be doing this [work].”

In this sense, as Givoni (2020: 401) notes, the “empathic connection” that is formed between volunteers and refugees becomes “transgressive” because it “challenges the distance that humanitarian action presumes and reproduces between helpers and crisis-affected people.” Yet, while the centrality of empathy to volunteer humanitarianism has been explored by some scholars (Doidge and Sandri, 2018), less attention has been paid to other emotions – anger, indignation, and rage even. These emotions have equally transgressive potential, which, as shown below, become entangled in their testimonies. “Should it really be happening like this?”, Nora voiced her frustration of running an improvised clothes distribution point in the dusty car park outside VIAL camp, the EU hotspot on Chios. “That some young, inexperienced coordinator is driving up in her red car a few times a week and setting up this [clothes distribution] system? No, I shouldn’t be the one doing that. There should be a system that should be fucking better.”

There is value in volunteers *being present*; as Hodge (2019) notes, the “affected and affecting body” is central in reshaping what we count as political, whereby the body (of both the migrant and the volunteer) makes visible the mundane ways through which the violent policing of mobility take place. Volunteer presence was demonstrated daily, and it took the accounting of migrants living in particularly precarious conditions -- under bridges and near canals -- seriously. For instance, when accompanying Solidarithé, a small collective that distributed tea, coffee, and information in Paris, we saw the deeply held concern volunteers had for where migrants rough-slept. Over the summer of 2017, Solidarithé spent time scouting new locations where informal encampments had arisen, with the intention of casting a wider net for migrants who were particularly vulnerable, such as minors.

Volunteers’ bodily presence, then, stands not only as a challenge against the disposability of migrants’ lives that undergird border policies from Paris to the Aegean. It is also reflected in their public testimonies, which interweave varied forms of volunteer-migrant sociality and ‘gathering’, from distributions, to vigils to street protests. The first illustrative testimony we present is a Facebook post of a long-term *solidarién* who coordinates Solidarité Migrant Wilson (SMW), a Parisian collective that started off by distributing breakfast but found their remit expanding to accompanying minors for registration, explaining asylum procedures, and sourcing emergency shelter. In a lengthy, evocative post, the volunteer writes about a death along the St. Denis canal, where migrants, along with the assistance of various *assos,* had set up tents as a last refuge from frequent police evacuations. The testimony captures the indignities of life in Paris for migrants where *l’exil* (exile) kills:

He slept in a tent, not far from where we make breakfast on Wednesdays. He was “a little crazy” one of the people who knew him told me discreetly. He fell into the canal. Couldn’t swim. I do not know his first name, nor his age. The police officers I spoke to told me that he had a brother or a cousin there. But, I believe that the people I spoke to said to the police the same thing they said to me: “He’s our brother” (*C’est notre frère*). They spoke of their brother from Sudan, their brother in kind, their brother in exile, their brother in arms…They did not speak of “Civil Status”, just of Brotherhood. What we put on the facades of our school buildings. But which to our country's leaders does not mean much...Accident or suicide? I do not know. (selection of original post in French, Facebook, July 10, 2020)

The author draws on their longstanding role serving breakfast as their main mode of encountering migrants. As Malkii (2015) notes, such routine humanitarian practices can be interrupted in ways that are terrifying and tragic, and as a result, extraordinary and ordinary affects occupy “the same impossible space” (74). In our case, mundane distributions can elicit devastating emotions amongst volunteers, particularly when seeing the deterioration of migrant well-being due to precarious circumstances. In particular, wrestling with death speaks to extraordinary affects that haunt this testimony. Kurasawa (2009) writes that witnessing entails attempts to grapple with “the difficulties of portraying and grasping extremity” (100), which in turn has “ethico-political stakes”, such as rendering the loss of migrant life visible amidst state-sanctioned erasure and indifference. Through emotive authorship that emerges from a continued *presence* in migrant spaces, the testimony is simultaneously asserting the value of life *and* death of the nameless *brother*, thus recovering not only the humanity of the migrant, but that of the volunteer-witness.

To be sure, professionalized aid workers are, through their prolonged presence in migrant camps, also routinely exposed to the often traumatic, distressing life histories and circumstances of individuals they assist. They may also form emotional attachments to specific individuals (Malkki, 2015). But such encounters, and the affects they generate, are different, in subtle but fundamental ways, from the embodied encounters that tend to take root in specific place-bound contexts between volunteers working within small grassroots organizations and the communities of people they support. MSF or Red Cross staff, to put it simply, do not routinely ‘just sit with people’ inside their tents, parks, or cafes – encounters through which personal bonds of affection, mutual care, or friendships develop, and through which, in Leila’s words, volunteers “got to know them as *people* rather than just a *huge* *faceless mass of trauma*”**.** ‘Too much’ compassion and empathy, after all, constitutes an affront to the principles and professional norms of humanitarianism (Malkki, 2015). Without these self-imposed and organizational limits on how to care, and how to emote, volunteers demonstrate that presence is critical for reclaiming life and dignity amidst state neglect and humanitarian detachment. As Gökariksel and Secor (2020) remind us, to “remain proximate” through the encounter means that “we may become witness to what is impossible to hear: the pain of others” (1250), and the testimony above demonstrates this entanglement of bodies and affect in all its grief and messiness. Intimate witnessing, then, draws from a bodily presence that is deeply attuned to the dehumanization migrants face, and seeks to document and mourn death in unabashedly emotive ways.

**4.1 Moral Imperatives and Recentering Humanity in Affective Witnessing**

While volunteers' presence may mitigate violent abandonment, it is through testimony that injustices in liminal and carceral spaces are exposed and brought to the attention of wider publics. Our conversations with volunteers suggest that it is with the “experiential” level (Kurasawa, 2009) – the embodied encounters and daily confrontations with border violence – that practices of intimate witnessing are rooted. It is through their immersion within migrants’ lived spaces that volunteers become routinely confronted with the ways that racialized bordering practices are “intimately embodied in the everyday” (Tyerman, 2021) – their ability to frustrate dreams, to crush hopes, to foreclose futures, but equally to generate indignation, to create spaces for transgressive solidarities and collective mobilization. In the testimonies of volunteers, we see how moral imperatives to witness, combined with emotive authorship reject the dehumanizing tendencies of both traditional humanitarian aid and the wider state apparatus. For some volunteers, then, embodied encounters in and beyond the camp, combined with a self-reflexive awareness of the inequalities that permeate their relationships with illegalized migrants, translate into *a duty to bear witness*. This was the case for Francesca, who spent three years running a small educational center for teenagers on Samos. During this time, she bore witness to the physical and psychological violence that the brutalities of camp life left upon the children, which she depicted in a series of testimonies on Facebook, amassing thousands of readers. In an interview, she explained that it is precisely her proximity to such intimate manifestations of border harms that she felt compelled:

to use this power that I have just because I was born in the right place by “good- passport holding” parents…For [there are] people – *humans* – in the same place, under the same laws, but who somehow have no rights… It’s a *duty* of Europeans to say: why do I get this, and you don’t?

Bearing witness to death, suicide, sexual violence, and psychological traumas of fellow human beings – some of whom may have become “friends”, “brothers”, or “sisters” – constitute deeply transformative “limit experiences” (Malkki, 2015: 12). Contrary to Malkki (ibid), who finds that such experiences can affect aid workers in a “damaging way that diminished and troubled the self” (12), we argue that they can be generative of new political subjectivities, that, in some instances, find public expression in the form of *témoignage*. “Before [volunteering], I didn’t know what happened to people living in the camps, or put in prison or deported because I’d never spoken to anyone about it,” Leila explained. “As soon as you understand that, *to know that and not speak about it is the hardest part*,” she added, before she recounted her involvement in collecting migrant testimonies of “systematic police violence at the border with Hungary” and “stories of being taken in vans with police in balaclavas, and beaten, and the dogs, and taking their phones…”.

For some volunteers, the violence they bear witness to becomes “lodged in bodily memory”, to borrow Andersson’s (2014) phrase, and translates into their practices of intimate witnessing. “Believe me,” wrote Giuliana, an Italian volunteer, in of her many testimonies penned on Facebook while working with grassroots collectives on Chios:

I have so many faces, many eyes and many names in mind…When I realized that the smell of VIAL [hotspot] reminded me of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the blood froze in my veins, I felt that maybe I need to find a way to tell these stories. A way that doesn’t put me in the forefront…stories of strength [but] also stories of pain. Immense. And pain, as we know, shouldn't be fed to everyone (original post in Italian, October 7, 2019).

The visceral, emotive nature of intimate witnessing can also be seen in the aftermath of the death of Karim, a young Sudanese migrant, on the streets of Porte de La Chapelle in March 2018 that stunned the volunteer and migrant community. While there were different ideas on how to commemorate Karim’s death from various solidarity initiatives, SMW organized a vigil with the following Facebook post commemorating him:

Death lurks day and night in Paris, in Ile de France, for these thousands of children, women, and men, because we lack everything here, we lack food, shoes, diapers, medicines and doctors to treat war wounds and wounds of all sorts; and sometimes we also lack hope. Words come to us in all languages. They are words of anger and indignation. At times they also come to us with tears and sobs. So Karim, today we cry for you, and we cry also with you who were so compassionate towards all those whom we've lost (selection of original post in French, March 11, 2018).

Unapologetically raw and visceral, the testimony captures an affective interconnectedness and accountability to Karim even in his death – a testimony that transgresses multiple conventions of humanitarian *témoignage* in terms of its affective register. First, it is not the “expert-witness” (Givoni, 2011a), necessarily detached to some degree from the humanitarian ‘victim’, who bears witness here, nor is the testimony concerned with recording the facts of the tragic event. Instead, the testimony is deeply entangled with the emotional toll of bearing witness to violent abandonment and encapsulates the deep sense of loss volunteers experience. Second, instead of shying away from emotive commemoration and public gathering, the testimony demonstrates the simultaneous linguistic and *bodily* performativity which Hodge (2019) illustrates; here, volunteers demonstrate that both written anguish and bodies gathering on the streets *matter*, and that affirming the grievability of life needs multiple forms of commemoration and witnessing.

Third, the testimony captures an important distinctive element of volunteer *témoignage*: the invocation of “humanity” that refuses racialized borders. Rather than operating as a signifier that purports an imagined equality, understandings of ‘humanity’ circulated within volunteer testimonies are rooted in spaces of solidarity -- migrant hubs such as Porte de la Chapelle allow for emotive connections, the imperative to bear witness, and recenter the value of migrants' lives amidst and *against* their state-sanctioned disposability. The post continues:

But Karim, you also know that life is everywhere at Porte de la Chapelle. It is in our surprising, sometimes difficult, quite rich exchanges. Life is in this solidarity among all, towards all, so pathetic and so precious.... It is in the dignity and humor so evident here at Porte de la Chapelle, and wherever you bring along in your tiny luggage an immense portion of humanity. (March 11, 2018).

The author is not articulating an abstract ‘universal’ conception of humanity as invoked in the humanitarian imaginary that depoliticizes refugees (Suzuki, 2022), or one that fails to acknowledge racial hierarchies (Picozza, 2021). Rather, a specific affective attachment is articulated, rooted in an ethos of solidarity. 'Humanity' operates as an intersubjective affect, one which binds the volunteer and migrant communities together, even if in temporary and fragile ways, and that signifies an embodied politics of rights beyond borders.

**4.2 Bearing Witness to Racialized Borders**

Recent postcolonial scholarship has argued for an engagement with the “distinctly colonial and racial logics” (Davies and Isakjee, 2019: 215; Bhambra, 2017) that underpin border violence. For Picozza (2021), refugee solidarity does not escape these logics, as it too is irredeemably tainted by coloniality. The “production of racialised subjectivities, specifically the nonwhite victimised ‘refugee’ and the white heroised ‘supporter’”, extends to the ways that the volunteer is bestowed with “a moral legitimacy...as *witness* and *advocate* with a direct relationship to ‘refugees’” (ibid: 128). Drawing on their ethnography of solidarity initiatives and volunteer-refugee encounters in Hamburg, Picozza denounces practices of witnessing as a “racialised spectacle of solidarity” (ibid: 150). Picozza‘s powerful critique reminds us that bearing witness amidst a racialized border regime does not guarantee a decisive rupture with coloniality. On the contrary, *coloniality structures the conditions of possibility of témoignage,* dividing populations into 'citizens' who can bear witness to the everyday physical and psychological violence enacted upon the bodies of ‘undesirables’, and the latter who are subject to dehumanization and erasure in the public sphere.

But it seems to us too one-dimensional to reduce the kinds of testimonial practices we describe above to a bankrupt “politics of otherness*”* (Picozza, 2021: 150) that resides at the heart of humanitarianism. The connected acts of encounter, witnessing, and testimony described earlier are intimately linked to affective registers of pain, sorrow, and outrage. Stierl (2016) writes that an impossibility always remains in sharing anguish between solidarity activists and migrant families who have lost loved ones, despite being together in commemoration. However, these limits and contradictions of bearing witness are not lost on volunteers, especially as the encounter that gives rise to repertoires of intimate witnessing, is often described in testimonies as painful, uncomfortable, and inherently unbalanced. As SMW note:

…we are all very different but we are united by our willlingness, day after day, to go and meet those whom the State has chosen to make invisible and to deprive of rights. We go with our willingness to do what seems right and important to us, with our love and our thirst for justice, but also our helplessness and our questions. Témoignage. (selection of a Facebook post, November 13, 2020)

As the punctuated end of the opening declaration, *témoignage* points to a mode of solidarity that is replete with unknowns, processual and emotion-laden – solidarities unfold through continual, daily presence and a commitment to reaching out to those invisibilized and dehumanized. Through intimate witnessing, self-reflection is outwardly extended, so that audiences too, are prompted to reimagine alterity. Of course, it is not always guaranteed that testimony will be consumed, let alone acted upon by volunteers or wider audiences alike. Audiences can “grant or deny recognition” of specific testimonies, while Kurasawa’s (2009) proverbial “message in the bottle" may never arrive, subject to the algorithmic whims of social media platforms. While the question of audience reception lies beyond the scope of our research, we wish to emphasize that, *if* effective,testimony constitutes more than *mere* public speech. Rather, it has the capacity to forge “witnessing publics”, where “testimonial practices bring together people across boundaries of difference, putting them into relationship with one another in such a way that obligations are put into play and communities of solidarity are formed” (McLagan, 2006: 193). Following Stierl (2016), we thus argue that the testimonies through which volunteers publicly denounce the dehumanization of migrants operate as “powerful counternarratives” that carry the *potential* to open a “dialogue with Otherness” (185). The violence of borders, and the segregation and diminishment of certain lives is ever present for many volunteers, leading to anger and a sense of injustice that is channeled into testimony: articulations of ‘humanity’ and ‘brotherhood’ – metonyms for rights and citizenship – expand beyond the racialized confines of the European nation-state.

Building on what the “ethics of the encounter” (Gökariksel and Secor, 2020) may entail, sites of migrant containment such as the temporary accommodation center in Porte de la Chapelle or the hotspots in Greece are not only ones of abandonment. They are sites of everyday resistance (Stavinoha, 2019), generating practices of witnessing that embody a solidarity cognizant of inherent asymmetrical relationships, but also a commitment to “count those who have been dehumanized” (Mountz, 2020: 17). Thinking with Mountz (2020), we argue that these practices – despite their inevitable contradictions – form part of a transnational struggle against the “continual processes of forgetting and erasure” that make “the violence enacted on the body” (13) of illegalized migrants possible. The words, descriptions, and accounts that make up the testimonial discourse of intimate witnessing have the power to destabilize hegemonic truths: a source of “epistemic friction” (Davies et al., 2023) against the masking of state violence against people on the move. Whether volunteers can engage in denunciatory acts of *témoignage* is largely dependent on the extent of criminalization of solidarity initiatives, modes of securitization in particular migrant spaces, as well as their degree of entanglement with the state-sanctioned “humanitarian industrial complex” (Dadusc and Mudu, 2022) – this also includes dealing with threats to migrants from far-right vigilante groups. On the Greek islands, long-term volunteers spoke of police-enforced prohibitions on taking videos or photos in the camps and the need to “watch our language in terms of describing situations in order not to jeopardize access,” as one volunteer on Samos explained. In Paris too, volunteers faced constant surveillance and harassment by the police, and the restriction of distributions to specific places and times. Many grassroots organizations struggle to maintain their autonomy from the state and official humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR, including their capacity to speak out against the latter; others have imposed strict rules on what kinds of messages individual volunteers can disseminate via social media. Individually and collectively, volunteers are thus compelled to continually navigate the shifting micro-political dynamics, tensions and conflicts that structure particular migrant spaces. As Sophie, a coordinator of a small NGO working inside the Moria hotspot on Lesvos, explained a few months before the camp was destroyed by fire in September 2020:

There’s times when I just want to be angry. There’s times when I wish I could write a Facebook post like “how dare you!”. Because we’re on the inside we genuinely see all of the atrocities that happen…We know that we *can* say things but we are…constantly worried. We got visited by the police not even a week ago…

Emblematic of the criminalization of migrant solidarity across Europe, concerted attempts by the Greek state to erase spaces where transgressive encounters between citizens and illegalized migrants unfold have only intensified since the Moria fire, initially under the guise of heavily racialized COVID-19 public health measures (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021), followed by the construction of highly securitized and surveilled camps in the Aegean archipelago. The consequence is not just the diminished capacity of grassroots volunteers to provide material support but, crucially, the foreclosure of encounters from which repertoires of intimate witnessing emerge.

**5.0 Conclusion**

Throughout this paper, we have centred *intimate witnessing* as one response of grassroots volunteers to the violence of racialised bordering across Europe.By adopting the feminist analytical lens of the ‘intimate’, we have sought to situate our reading of volunteer-authored testimonies not only within the spaces and embodied encounters from which they emerge but to attend to their distinct affective grammars that continually hold in tension the difficulty and complexity of what it means to bear witness to suffering. Our engagement with intimate witnessing contributes to existing literature on the politics of volunteer humanitarianism and humanitarian *témoignage* by highlighting the transgressive potential of volunteers’ embodied presence within migrant spaces and the wider critiques against racialized logics of bordering that emerge *through* testimony. Intimate witnessing, we argue, fundamentally differs from traditional humanitarian *témoignage* in affective register by recentering emotional proximity to create ruptures in the racialized segregation between 'citizens' and 'non-citizens'. Also importantly, the political subjectivities that emerge through intimate witnessing, and the public circulation of testimonies to migrant deaths, create important archives of injustice and solidarity that counter the relentless dehumanization and disposability of illegalized migrants in the public domain. Biographical, visceral, and emotive, everyday testimonies produced and circulated by grassroots volunteers across Europe compose, in their collectivity, a mosaic of the everyday border violence, injustice, and defiance. Therefore, if the “global-intimate” (Tyerman, 2021) is rooted in the everyday, then the study of intimate witnessing can point to how the “life [of activism] contends politically with the death of asylum” (Mountz, 2020: 195), foregrounding fragile openings for hope, resistance, and solidarity, and the dismantling (even if temporarily) of emotional and physical borders.

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1. We followed a variety of Facebook pages, including the grassroots information platform *AreYouSyrious?* and the collectives we volunteered with: Solidarité Migrants Wilson, Paris Refugee Ground Support, Utopia56, and Chios Eastern Shore Response Team. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)