

Introduction

Migration is not a crime. Saving lives is not a crime.
Solidarity won't be stopped.

—Banner displayed by the mayor and local residents marching
through the streets of Palermo, June 2019

IN DEFENSE OF SOLIDARITY

On June 29, 2019, thirty-one-year-old Captain Carola Rackete defied Italian authorities and risked arrest when she decided to dock her search-and-rescue boat at the Sicilian island of Lampedusa, allowing forty migrants to disembark after seventeen days of drifting at sea. Before announcing this decision on social media, Captain Rackete had made numerous attempts to solicit the sympathy of public officials who refused to grant permission to disembark. The authorities promptly arrested Rackete when her boat arrived onshore, but fortunately by then she had attained international recognition; several crowdfunding campaigns had already been organized across the European continent to pay the hefty fines that would likely be levied against her and the nongovernmental organization (NGO) for which she worked, Sea-Watch. With her arrest, protests erupted across Europe as elected officials joined demonstrators who demanded of the Italian authorities, “Free Carola!” In the Sicilian capital of Palermo, Mayor Leoluca Orlando, followed by hundreds of demonstrators, took to the streets carrying a banner that proclaimed, “Migration is not a crime. Saving lives is not a crime. Solidarity won't be stopped.”

Days later, a court in the town of Agrigento on Sicily's southern coast

declared Captain Rackete innocent. Sicilian officials added that Rackete's actions were justified "in the performance of a duty": to save lives at sea and to prevent migrants from being transferred to unsafe conditions at migrant detention centers in North Africa. Within hours of the court's decision, an air raid struck a migrant detention center in Libya, killing more than forty people. Rackete heralded the court's decision as "a big win for solidarity with people on the move."¹

Between 2014 and 2018, more than two million migrants arrived by sea on the shores of Europe. Fleeing war, severe hunger and poverty, military conscription, political and social turmoil, and environmental collapse in their countries of origin, a large number of these migrants landed in Sicily.²

Yet Italy's government forcibly stopped migrant disembarkations in early 2018 when national elections resulted in the appointment of a far-right, populist coalition. Italy's newly appointed interior minister, Matteo Salvini—also known as "Italy's Trump" for his derisive, anti-immigrant rhetoric—had orchestrated a sea change in national immigration policies. He banned NGO ships transporting migrants from docking at Italian ports and sought to criminalize anyone providing assistance to migrants. Salvini labeled Captain Rackete a criminal and condemned her decision to dock in Lampedusa as "an act of war," as he was quoted in numerous media outlets.

Meanwhile, Rackete's actions elicited a mix of compassion and rage among Sicily's residents. Some *siciliani* praised her boldness, calling her a saint for upholding humanitarian commitments; others sided with Salvini, condemning and harboring resentment toward Rackete for ostensibly further burdening local communities with Europe-bound migration through Sicily (figure 1). Many bemoaned the fact that their island had been transformed into a de facto point of entry into the European Union (EU), or the "refugee camp of Europe," as Salvini quipped (BBC News 2018). Even *siciliani* who supported immigration believed it was unfair that their island and region should have to assume the bulk of responsibility in matters of migrant reception.

This book centers on the lived experiences of the citizens and noncitizens who have been performing various aspects of migrant solidarity work at the front lines of Europe's "migration crisis." Despite anti-immigrant



Figure 1. Public installation “Santa Carola” (Saint Carola) honoring Captain Carola Rackete by Italian street artist TVBoy in Taormina, Sicily. The painting was defaced by a supporter of Salvini within 48 hours of its debut.

and populist sentiment gaining momentum throughout Italy and much of Europe, there has been an equally robust movement for social solidarity, antiracist political action, and pro-migrant policies. *Island of Hope* underscores the threads of migrant solidarity that are coalescing with broader mobilizations for social justice at this moment in the Mediterranean. As this book illustrates, migrant solidarity is mobilized as an antidote to the effects of political, economic, and social marginalization within Europe's southern peripheries, specifically Sicily, and to more recent economic crises and neoliberal reforms that have brought about feelings of alienation and malaise in the region (Bassel and Emejulu 2017; Kersch and Mishtal 2016; Knight and Stewart 2016). This book sheds light on the forms of collective action among ordinary citizens and noncitizens that have surfaced in spite of multiple humanitarian and welfare state failures. These collective actions both advance the struggle for autonomy and dignity among *siciliani* and represent an important—but often overlooked—facet of migrant reception in the Mediterranean.

Yet defending solidarity with migrants is an increasingly criminalized enterprise in the European context, as epitomized by the case of Captain Rackete (Fekete, Webber, and Edmond-Pettit 2017). Nonetheless, the principal social actors of migrant solidarity underscore that their work is vital, especially as EU governments continue to invest in “bordering tactics” that expose migrants to heightened risks in the Mediterranean (De Genova 2017). With more than ten thousand deaths recorded between 2014 and 2018, the central Mediterranean has been deemed “the world’s deadliest border,” a distinction rightly decried as “disgraceful” by the anthropologist Nicholas De Genova (2017, 3).³ Similar to systematic refusals by the US government to accept responsibility for the widespread loss of human life in the Sonoran Desert that straddles the US-Mexico border region and serves as a primary route for illicit migration (De León 2015; Holmes 2013), EU governments have routinely deployed a *politics of irresponsibility* in accounting for the death toll that has rendered the Mediterranean a “macabre deathscape” (De Genova 2017, 2). The specter of criminalization in the geopolitical contexts of both the EU and the United States has emboldened existing efforts by humanitarian groups to assist migrants and flagrantly defy state powers that consistently violate human rights. As a spokesperson for Mediterranean Saving Humans, another search-and-

rescue NGO, asserted following Captain Rackete's arrest and during an interview with Italy's national news network, RAI 24, in early July 2019, "There isn't a price we wouldn't pay to save lives." This book examines the work of these humanitarian actors alongside the more grassroots and locally specific forms of politicized, collective action and mutual aid that animate contexts of migrant reception in the Mediterranean.

AUSTERITY AND THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF NEOLIBERALISM

Shortly after Italy's "sovereign debt crisis" in 2008, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European political and economic institutions pressured Italy's government to implement a series of austerity measures. Italy's austerity diet consisted of more aggressive taxing and rollbacks of the nation's welfare and pension systems. Notable among these changes were increases in income and property taxes; cuts to pensions and wages; delays in the age of retirement and when individuals would be eligible to receive pensions; and widespread reductions in public spending primarily affecting the health, education, transportation, and cultural heritage sectors (see, e.g., Oxfam 2013). These austerity measures were implemented even as an economic recession plagued the fates of many Italian citizens and noncitizens.

Critical social scientists have keenly observed the colossal harm generated by austerity regimes. Rollbacks of basic public health and welfare services are often accompanied by price increases on commodities, slashes of wages, and widespread unemployment (Pfeiffer and Chapman 2010; Stuckler and Basu 2013). Direct cuts in health services and other public sectors are associated with widespread health decline, though the majority of research shows the greatest health losses are among the poor and those who are systematically marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, class, citizenship, or (dis)ability (Basu, Carney, and Kenworthy 2017; Carney 2017; Sargent and Kotobi 2017; Stuckler and Basu 2013). Recent ethnographies have highlighted the pervasiveness of austerity policies in exacerbating uneven life chances and heightening social and economic precarity (e.g., Knight and Stewart 2016; Muehlebach 2016; Ostrach

2017). Speaking to these trends, the anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach (2016, 4) writes, “Europe’s austerity policies have . . . not only broken stable work regimes, pensions, infrastructures, and the lives of impoverished Europeans, but the very idea of welfare as such.”

Recent intensification of migration into the EU cannot be analyzed without considering the influence of certain institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank on development and markets throughout much of the African continent and the Middle East (Merrill 2014). Decades of structural adjustment programs, trade liberalization, and deregulation between the EU and its “partners” in the global South have impoverished many of today’s migrant-sending countries.⁴ Anthropologists in particular have engaged “upstream” and structural perspectives to illuminate how governments in the global North are actually implicated in various forms of human displacement, including through the imposition of debt, disruption to agrarian livelihoods, and privatization of basic services that have threatened the welfare of entire populations in the global South. As asserted by De Genova:

Migrants arriving in Europe today, much as has been true for several decades, originate from places that were effectively mass-scale prison labor camps where their forebears contributed to collectively producing the greater part of the material basis for the prosperity, power, and prestige of Europe. . . . [V]irtually all migrations and refugee movements that today seek their futures in Europe have been deeply shaped by an indisputably European (colonial) past. (2017, 18)

Pro-migrant activists throughout the EU have frequently invoked the phrase, “We are here because you were there!” (Andretta and Porta 2015), indexing the centuries of colonial rule and decades of neoliberal policy making that have shaped today’s patterns of migration.⁵

Akin to free trade agreements, the deregulation (or alternatively, “neoregulation”) of markets and corporations, and the privatization of public services, austerity policies are integral to neoliberal capitalist systems (Harvey 2005). Read as “a complex of opposites that can contain what appear as oppositional practices, ethics, and emotions” (Muehlebach 2012, 25), “neoliberalism” is regarded by many scholars as having a pluralistic character that encompasses manifold tensions, contradictions, and coun-

termovements. Along these lines, recent scholarship examining solidarity movements in Southern Europe suggests that neoliberalism and solidarity are “entangled” and represent two sides of the same coin (see, e.g., Cabot 2016b; Knight and Stewart 2016; Ostrach 2017; Rakopoulos 2015). Drawing on the insights of these scholars, I examine migrant solidarity initiatives as corresponding to a *politics of becoming* that reveals important shifts in the social (and global) organization of care and meanings of citizenship and belonging as they apply to both citizens and noncitizens. I invoke the Sicilian case as an example of the ways that neoliberal projects are both made possible and challenged by specific affective dispositions that articulate with particular configurations of labor, welfare, and citizenship (Foucault 1980; Klein 2007; Parla 2019; Parvulescu 2014). Recognizing that differential subjectivities and life chances underpin and shape the politics of austerity and migration, an ethnographic analysis of recent austerity measures and responses to migration in the European context renders the biopolitics of citizenship and governmentality a necessary theoretical framework (Agamben 2005; Cole and Groes 2016; Fassin 2005; Foucault 1980; Gonzales and Chavez 2012).

For the purposes of this text, I engage empirically and analytically with research that interrogates the affective dimensions of neoliberal ideology as it pervades political-economic systems around the globe and disciplines “indebted” and “moral” subjects who are necessary to the ongoing expansion and entrenchment of neoliberal projects (Lazzarato 2012; Muehlebach 2012). Ethnographic accounts from Greece have been particularly poignant in demonstrating how austerity regimes attribute “debt” to undisciplined, “piggish” individuals and groups and prescribe a regimen of “shared sacrifice” (Brown 2015) among citizens that precedes their widespread emotional collapse and alienation (Cabot 2016; Carastathis 2015; Vavvos and Triliva 2018). I interpret neoliberalism as a mode of affective discipline that targets the body—more precisely, a person’s thoughts, feelings, and aspirations—as its primary site of intervention (Carney 2013). Debt and its counterpart, austerity, are tools of affective disciplining in that they attribute material circumstances to personal, moral failings and reinforce the hegemony of markets and borders as “structures regulating what appear to be our innermost, authentic experiences of feeling and thinking” (Carastathis 2015, 109). Affective modes of discipline have the

effect of relegating subjects to a self-imposed exile, inclusion by means of exclusion (see also De Genova 2017), and practices of surveillance that materialize in the form of self-policing and individual restraint.

SICILY: BOTH ITALY AND NOT ITALY

Just prior to the summer of 2012, Italian, European, and US-based media outlets reported on plans for a “Greek-style takeover of Sicily” that ostensibly had been made necessary by reckless spending in the region’s public sector. These reports represented essentially nothing new. For years, Italian and global media sources had been covering politicians who disparaged Sicily as being the “Greece of Italy” and referred to the so-called economic indolence of *siciliani* as “a modern-day Greek tragedy.”⁶

Italian and European political elites routinely manipulated and reframed the post-2008 economic climate as one emerging from a sovereign debt crisis—as opposed to holding the financial sector accountable for its unregulated fiscal practices (Muehlebach 2016)—and invoked essentialist discourses when both blaming this debt crisis on Sicily’s “culture” and making decisions that resulted in the withholding and deprivation of material resources from Sicilian institutions. In the broader context of European economic austerity, Sicilians were being constructed as “indebted subjects” and scapegoated for Italy’s economic woes.

Sicily and its people have also been routinely scapegoated when human rights organizations have alluded to “failures” in Italy’s migrant reception system, as if Sicily was not a region of Italy (albeit ostensibly one of autonomous status). Responding to the accusations made against the island’s inhabitants, many *siciliani* have resorted to hostile, antimigrant discourse that further displaces blame for debt and austerity away from state practices and Sicily’s own citizen population and toward noncitizens, despite the fact that many of them are there because of postcolonial configurations of power that sustain and fortify European presence in places as distant and removed from so-called European borders as the Horn of Africa (Carastathis 2015; De Genova 2017). These discursive and material practices are consistent with the colonial dynamics that have historically