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Countering the norms within Europe's colonial durabilities

Notes from fieldwork in Bosnia-Herzegovina across the Balkan Route

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ABSTRACT: This contribution examines how coloniality and racialization shape the European border regime, drawing on fieldwork in Bihać, Bosnia-Herzegovina, across the Balkan Route. The route has become a key corridor for illegalized mobility, marked by systemic violence and racialized bordering practices that reflect both biopolitical and necropolitical forms of governmentality. Using militant and decolonial methodologies, the study foregrounds the embodied experiences of people on the move as they confront pushbacks, dispossession, and confinement. Situating these experiences within broader dynamics of coloniality and racial capitalism, the article shows how the European border regime reproduces racial hierarchies through balkanist and colonial discourses that position Bosnia as a subordinate European borderland. By centering race within European migration governmentality, the article reframes illegalized mobility not merely as an object of control, but as a productive and contested force. Ethnographic insights highlight how people on the move strategically appropriate state categories and enact practices of refusal and subtraction disrupting the racialized logics of border regime and exposing both its violent dimension and the enduring colonial durabilities shaping Europe's peripheries, as well as the fugitive, everyday politics through which illegalized mobility becomes a site of political and epistemic innovation.

KEYWORDS: BALKAN ROUTE, COLONIALITY, BORDER REGIME, MOBILITY STRUGGLE, ILLEGALIZED BODIES

Introduction

The “March of Hope” in the summer of 2015 (Kasperek, Speer 2015; El-Shaarawi, Razsa 2019) brought international attention to what became known as the Balkan Route. More recently, scholarly and activist discourses have increasingly adopted the plural form, *Balkan Routes*, underscoring the multiplicity of trajectories opened by unruly mobility. While these routes have long been used for trade and travel, they have become a major illegalized path to the EU, travelled by thousands of people annually. After a period of persistent mobility struggles, border militarization and criminalization prompted a bifurcation of the route into Bosnia-Herzegovina (Kurnik, Razsa 2020). Since 2018, Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH or Bosnia) has become an intensified site of mobility within the shifting geographies of the Balkan Route. In particular, the Una-Sana Canton, bordering Croatia, has emerged as a critical site where, over the past decade, thousands have remained stranded due to systematic pushbacks, physical and psychological violence, and theft or destruction of belongings such as phones, money, clothes, and food.

Situated within this context, this contribution draws on my doctoral research seeking to foster dialogue between critical migration and border studies and postcolonial and decolonial critique, where ethnography is used as an analytical tool for constructing a genealogy of the present, enabling a situated political theory (Rabinow 1988) attentive to everyday practices (De Certeau 1988) and forms of life of racialized and illegalized people transiting through BiH, negotiating power relations and normative spatialities, thereby generating modes of subjectivation. The ethnography results from fieldwork conducted in Bihać, in the Una-Sana Canton, in October–December 2021 and June–July 2024, combining observations, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and exchanges with people on the move, activists and researchers, alongside my engagement in solidarity activities of a grassroots organization supporting people outside formal reception centers.

Such an approach underscores the framework of militant research, as a form of “collaborative knowledge production” (Beznec, Kurnik 2020: 41), grounded in the assumption that all knowledge is always situated (Haraway 1988), foregrounding the socio-historical and geographical of its production, as well as the racialized, gendered and classed positionality of the researcher.

Drawing on a Foucauldian perspective in which power and knowledge are intertwined, militant research challenges “disciplinary captures” (Garelli, Tazzioli 2013: 245) that reduce “migrants” to research objects, refusing the

measurability of knowledge and the framing of migration as an object of governmentality (Mezzadra, Ricciardi 2013). In this vein, Casas-Cortes and colleagues conceptualized militant investigation as a practice oriented toward “a political epistemology of migration” (2015: 63): an intervention on the institutional and discursive conditions under which migration knowledge is produced, shifting attention from dominant depoliticizing and dehumanizing regimes of representation toward unruly mobility as a subject of knowledge. This scope is further encapsulated by the concept of “border regime” informed by Walters’ effort to de-naturalize borders. From a constructionist approach, Walters (2002) demonstrates that borders operate through conflict, contestation and negotiation, rather than according to a unitary logic, positioning migration as a “co-constituent of the border as a site of conflict and as a political space” (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2015: 69). Such conceptualizations involve interpreting borders as strategic fields inhabited by diverse subjectivities shaped by multiple conjunctures of power that encompass and transcend the national state. These insights became central to the “autonomy of migration” approach (Bojadžijev, Karakayali 2007; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos 2008; Mezzadra 2011), which marked a methodological shift in migration and border studies, conceptualizing border regime as a biopolitical matrix that organizes populations, stratifying mobilities according to dynamic and complex hierarchies of power relations, while it simultaneously centers migration as a productive collective force, emphasizing the subjective dimension of mobility. Squire (2011) elaborates on this theorizing the “contested politics of mobility”, where illegalized mobility becomes a critical standpoint that transcends the dichotomy of movement and control, rearticulating the very meaning of the political. To politicize mobility, for Squire, concerns a contested process where forms of power, subjectivity and political possibilities are at play: a constant struggle over who gets to move, how and under what conditions. As Sossi argues: “it’s precisely the action of migrating-moving, insofar as migrating is a move from a place to another, that is contested for human beings when they are produced as migrants” (2013: 272). Thus, what becomes a site of contestation is the “making of migration” (Tazzioli 2020), namely the process through which some individuals are racialized as “migrants” and governed accordingly. This perspective grounds the “coloniality of migration” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018), as well as the urgency of a decolonial approach to migration and border studies.

A genealogical analysis of colonial modernity reveals, indeed, how imperial formations, as racial projects, were fundamentally grounded in the control of movement (Mayblin, Turner 2021), shaping who could move, where and under what conditions. As Stoler aptly states: “A ‘colony’ as a political concept is not a place but *a principle of managed mobilities*” (2016: 117). Colonial border regimes, thus, emerged as mechanisms to regulate mobility, intertwining racialized conceptions of movement within the structures of global capitalism.

In a context of “colonial aphasia” (Stoler 2016: 122), where colonial histories are foreclosed through omissions and silences, racialization becomes unintelligible in the present. Recovering this genealogy resists accounts that treat contemporary illegalized mobility as de-historicized and detached from the long *durée* of coloniality. Therefore, recognizing how what is presently labelled “migration” is linked to the historical racialization of mobility, I understand the European border regime as a rearticulation of colonial dispositives that keeps race at its center, producing hierarchized mobilities and criminalizing non-white bodies, where colonial durabilities (Stoler 2016) are made productive as mutable formations reactivated to govern illegalized mobility.

Race, here, is understood as an historically constructed discursive category, organizing differences within what Herzfeld (2004) defined the “global hierarchy of value”, as a disciplining structure governing embodied otherness for value extraction (Bhattacharyya 2018). As Mbembe reminds us, race has long operated as a technology for “dividing and organizing a multiplicity, for fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, and for allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a logic of enclosure” (2017: 35). Within this framework, the European border regime emerges as a biopolitical mechanism that, through racializing processes, “marks” bodies and “population groups” (*ibid.*), distinguishing desirable from undesirable mobilities by differentially distributing “risk” (*ibid.*) and, ultimately, criminalizing racialized bodies and rendering them expendable.

Building on this framework and drawing on fieldwork in Bihać, this contribution offers observations on how norms – not only as legal and state-sanctioned obligations but also as normative and racialized categories and expectations shaped by the Western and colonial political framings – are challenged by racialized and illegalized individuals moving unruly. From this perspective, bodies appear not merely as objects of governmentality – technologies and knowledges through which “migrants” are made governable – but as sites of

contestation, where embodied practices disrupt the racialized logics of the border regime and expose its contingent, violent, and colonial dimensions.

Framing coloniality across the Balkan Route in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Since the so-called “long summer of migration”, mobility across the Balkan Route has often evaded European scrutiny beyond episodic media coverage. This oversight resonates with the “void in global coloniality” (Tlostanova 2012) within which the Balkans are embedded, a liminal condition where postsocialist societies are no longer part of a geopolitical bloc yet are differentially integrated into Western capitalism. This “void” also reflects a broader foreclosure of Balkan postcoloniality, sustaining the idea that the region was largely untouched by global racial dynamics within a regime of “racial exceptionalism” (Bjelić 2018: 907), marking the absence of southeastern Europe from postcolonial debates until the 1990s.

In her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Todorova distinguishes *balkanism* from Said’s *Orientalism*, emphasizing its ambiguous nature: while orientalism positions “the Orient” as absolute “other”, the Balkans are part of Europe, yet they are relegated to its periphery. Balkanism manifested in the infantilization of Balkan societies, portraying them as needing guidance, supervision and education (*ibid.*), but also as a “contagious disease” (Goldsworthy in Petrović 2014: 7) requiring isolation and colonial discipline. The wars in the former Yugoslavia exacerbated this condition, erasing socialist histories and framing European integration as both inevitable and necessary (*ibid.*), positioning peripheral societies as passive recipients of external directives, a dynamic further reinforced by EU-led state-building efforts (Rexhepi 2018). Here the case of BiH is paradigmatic, as the post-Dayton process can be inscribed in a discourse of “permanent transition” (Majstorović, Vučkovac 2016: 153), following a top-down approach under the supervision of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and later the EU Special Representative (EUSR), “making BiH look more like an international protectorate than a fully sovereign state” (*ibid.*: 147). This trajectory, as delineated by Majstorović and Vučkovac, represents a colonial and racial discursive strategy constructing Bosnia as a deficient, corrupted and backward periphery, with Europe idealized as a locus of normality, security and stability. Shifting modalities of Europeanization and international governance – often appropriated by local ethnonational elites and resisted by local social movements – framed Bosnia as always in need of supervision and control.

Kurnik and Razsa (2020) conceptualize Europeanization in BiH as a historically embedded process shaped by geopolitical, racial and colonial hierarchies, manifesting through the articulation of islamophobia, racialization and the imposition of the nation-state form. Within this layered dynamic, BiH and other Balkan countries have assumed a pivotal role in the European border regime, functioning as a buffer zone to control and tame racialized and illegalized mobility toward the EU through the externalization of bordering mechanism, rendering Bosnia a European borderland (Beznec, Kurnik 2020, Kurnik, Razsa 2020). As Stojić Mitrović and colleagues (2020) recall, since 2015 BiH has an obligation under the Stabilization and Association Agreement¹ to cooperate with the EU on visas, border management, migration and asylum. Thus, when the route bifurcated toward BiH, the externalization framework was already in place. In May 2018, the Council of Ministers of BiH adopted the Emergency Measures Action Plan and subsequently the EU, following recommendations from the EUSR, centralized all funding through International Organization for Migration (IOM), designating it as the primary operational actor.

This bypassing of BiH authorities, under the pretext of an alleged lack of coordination (Stojić Mitrović *et al.* 2020), reflects balkanist discourses that racialize the Bosnian state as “incapable of self-rule” (Kurnik, Razsa 2020: 19), becoming “a racial aggregate and integral part of the racial ordering of European space” (Bjelić 2018: 927). Bjelić describes this dynamic in relation to the whole region, emphasizing how the Balkans by considering themselves white, European and noncolonial, have routinely excluded race from their historiography, recognizing only nationality and ethnicity as legitimate historical categories, facilitating the subordinate and racialized incorporation of the region into European border regime. Such incorporation introduces the idea that the EU, as a new political entity with no prior history, can displace the burden of Europe's colonial past onto former colonial subjects and their national histories. Building on this critique, Bjelić (2018) also identifies “internal colonization” as a related process, which Kurnik and Razsa interpret through the lens of islamophobia as foundational to European identity. Historically linked to racial anxieties, islamophobia persists in the contemporary European imaginary where the “figure of the Muslim” as analyzed by Goldberg

1. The Stabilisation and Association Process by which a state adjusts its legislation to the EU *acquis communautaire* ends with the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, after which the country obtains the status of potential candidate, a first step toward accession and full membership of the EU. For BiH, this process ended in 2016 when the country formally applied for EU membership.

(2006) operates as a condensed signifier for Europe's fear of cultural degeneration, disintegration and imagined death. Following Kurnik and Razsa, European islamophobia resonates both with the history of the ethnic cleansing and genocide on Muslim populations in the Balkans, that with postconflict ethno-nationalist outbursts, materializing, for instance, in accusations to Bosniaks of seeking to alter the country's demographic balance by settling new Muslim migrant populations, allegedly fostering conditions for Islamic extremism and terrorism. Against this backdrop, Rexhepi (2018) examines a contextual process of self-racialization among Balkan Muslims, who position themselves as culturally, historically and spatially representative of a distinct "European Islam", juxtaposed against migrant Arab Islam.

In this way, BiH assumed "collaborative" and "interdependent" roles in filtering people on the move, burdening racialized Balkan population like Muslim and Roma that are policed through white supremacy and narratives of the Balkans color-blindness, while amplifying disintegrative forces within BiH, consolidating ethno-nationalist divisions and relegating alternative political projects to the margins (Beznec, Kurnik 2020). The European border regime should therefore not be understood as an exceptional response to illegalized mobility, but rather as a rearticulation of colonial dispositives through which colonial durabilities operate via the reactivation of balkanist discourses and colonial tropes that situates BiH and the Balkans as a space where "Europeanness" is continuously reproduced and policed. Within this framework, the border regime operate as a biopolitical mechanism that *marks* bodies, racializing "migrant" bodies as non-European and thus expendable, while simultaneously racializing Bosnian population by compelling it to perform a normative whiteness to escape its own peripheral positioning, thereby becoming a tool to govern and police illegalized mobility.

The European border regime, thus, affects both Bosnians and people on the move, who are entangled in the same "global hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld 2004) and within the structures of racial capitalism where BiH manifests as a space of "double transit" reflecting a shared condition of waiting and competition for subordinated integration into the European labor market (Beznec, Kurnik 2020). In this context, "peripheral selves" emerged, following Majstorović (2021), as collective embodied experience of dispossession, exploitation and violence inscribed within asymmetrical power relations to the West. At the same time, this mutuality produces what Beznec and Kurnik describe as "assemblages of mobility": *joint agencies* that are "the results

of the mutual implication of various forms of escape” (2020: 33), revealing not only how border regime articulates itself but also possible practices to counter it.

Shifting racialized geographies of the route in Bihać

Bihać, positioned within Europe's racialized landscape as a majority Muslim town, lies in the Krajina region, historically a frontier between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires that symbolically marked boundaries between the West and the Balkan East. The city, now in the Federation of BiH, was politically and industrially important in socialist Yugoslavia and during the Bosnian war suffered a three-year siege (Hromadžić 2019), showing a layered history that shaped the local articulation of the European border regime.

In examining how race is articulated and understood in a European periphery, Helms (2025) has highlighted the complex positionality of Bišćani, Bihać residents, who, inhabiting multiple layers of marginality – post-Yugoslav, Muslim, ambiguously white and internally peripheral – have assumed an ambivalent positionality within European racial hierarchies and border regime, marking ambivalent sentiments towards people on the move (Hromadžić 2020). Through a scalar approach, Helms explains how, on a global scale Bišćani perceive racism as a problem of the West, while on a European scale, they assert proximity to normative whiteness and to the idea of Bosnia as culturally European, yet on the local scale, they draw sharp boundaries toward people on the move and Roma population. As Helms aptly points out, for both Bosnians and people on the move the border regime shapes their relation to Europe, making sure that latter arrive in Bosnia already racialized, through a process that allows residents and local authorities to reproduce racialized bordering mechanisms, becoming agents of externalization (Helms 2020).

Following the bifurcation of the route towards BiH, state authorities initially demonstrated a notable indifference, leaving local and international solidarity to address the needs of people on the move. Over time, however, these efforts increasingly relied on the mobilization of racist discourses previously discussed and racial violence including intensified evictions, pushbacks and surveillance, discouraging local expressions of solidarity (Kurnik, Razsa 2020).

In 2018, the EU began to fund reception centers through IOM, which assumed control over housing and food provisions while local authorities concurrently began to restrict the possibility for community-based support, implementing

measures such as checkpoints at cantonal borders, bans on public transportation and restrictions on housing (*ibid.*)², encouraging limited access to public and private services. Although initial solidarity was strong – with mosques offering aid and individuals providing food – state-sponsored discouragement fostered a more hostile environment. Growing fears of Islamic radicalism further eroded support, with the Islamic Community opposing such initiatives. As a result, people on the move increasingly relied on formal centers designed to deter movement and informal settlements.

An interview with a social worker in Bihać illustrates this evolving attitude. Responding to a question about local reactions to this unruly mobility, the interviewee remarked:

They [Bosnians] were really supportive. I remember that time in Kladuša when people cooked food for the minors who were in the park, they run to help, restaurants cooked, private persons cooked, but with time and the lack of resources people got tired and it's really exhausting to see every day such amount of suffering (...) and it's normal, it's a human reaction (...) and then when humanitarian organizations were involved, they said okay now you're paid for this, now it's your job. (...) solidarity became a job. (...) everything became a project, everything was monetized somehow, (...) and like this, through project you can control people. (Interview with R., social worker, July 2024)

These observations resonate with Tazzioli's concept of "extractive humanitarianism" (2023: 80), which captures how the humanitarian regime in Bihać operates as a bordering mechanism, where migration governmentality functions as a racialized regime of value extraction, mining trajectories, time, presence and data as surplus value, while sustaining precarity through racial violence. Crucially, this governmentality reshapes local space through what Tazzioli terms a "confinement continuum", producing racialized geographies beyond camps and border areas. In this sense, Bihać has undergone significant changes over time: the town I encountered in 2021 differed from earlier phases and continues to evolve as I write, materializing the Balkan Route as a shifting and contingent assemblage of trajectories.

Until the spring of 2021, Bihać's urban geography was characterized by the presence of large informal settlements that served as a refuge for most people on the move, offering an alternative to the confining infrastructure of Tem-

2. This applied exclusively to the Federation of BiH, as Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska, consistently refused from the outset the establishment of TRCs within the entity. (Cfr. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/photo-feature/2019/08/05/bosnia-croatia-border-needs-grow-migrants-losing-eu-entry-game>)

porary Reception Centres (TRCs) managed by the IOM. Two main settlements shaped the cityscape: Dom Penzionera, a socialist unfinished rest home and the former metal factory Krajina Metal, housed hundreds of people, until they were evicted by the Service for Foreign Affairs (SFA) in mid-2021.

Since 2018, four reception centers were established in the Una-Sana Canton, among them, only the Borići camp – located in Bihać and designated for families and “unaccompanied minors” – remained operational, alongside the newly constructed TRC in Lipa, located 25km from Bihać, which accommodated “single men” exclusively³. These centres have a peculiar status: they are not formal detention and deportation facilities yet, nor do they require people to submit formal asylum applications to enter. Nevertheless, all entrants are subject to identification and registration processes, creating a paradox: although the centers are intended for “asylum seekers” rather than “illegal migrants”, individuals categorized as “illegal” are forcibly evicted from informal settlements and relocated to these sites. These facilities therefore represent “porocratic” institutions (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2008), operating as a spatialized attempt to control and institutionalize unruly mobility resulting through the racialization of both time and space: an isolated and confined spatiality and a temporality of waiting and precariousness.

Racial violence and criminalization have profoundly reshaped Bihać's urban geography, as people on the move reorganize themselves into smaller informal settlements across various parts of the city, particularly in its outskirts. For the following two years, the only remaining informal settlement was the so-called *jungle*, a forested area, at the foot of the mountains bordering Croatia, which provided good coverage from both weather and police scrutiny, making it a strategic location for shelter and serving as an ideal starting point for border crossing. By June 2024, the situation in Bihać had changed markedly. During earlier fieldwork, the majority of people I met originated from Afghanistan or Pakistan, while the picture appeared significantly diverse, with people arriving from across Mashreq, Maghreb and increasingly from sub-Saharan Africa. In a conversation with D., a man from Senegal, I asked whether he knew of other Senegalese nationals undertaking the same journey: he spoke

3. The first draft of this article was completed at the end of 2024, while the revision took place in October 2025, so this article does not include the fieldwork conducted in 2025. It should be noted, however, that in August 2025 IOM closed the Borići camp. At present, Lipa facility remains the only operational TRC in the USK; minors and families are now being transferred there, resulting in a severe deterioration in living conditions and freedom of movement.

of four acquaintances who had followed the same route and were now in Italy, suggesting how Bosnia continues to serve as a transit country, amid shifting backgrounds and countries of origin. At the same time, the number of people staying around the area has significantly declined⁴ and the once densely populated squats – including the *jungle* – were largely abandoned, serving mainly as temporary transit points before crossing.

The dismantling of squats, the opening of Lipa and the dispersal of people from the city centre should be read as responses to earlier forms of unruly mobility and autonomous settlement, materializing the border regime not as a fixed structure acting upon mobility, but as a formation continuously re-configured in response to it. In this context, the opening of the TRC in Lipa in November 2021 marked an additional shift: local authorities reasserted control, with the SFA closely monitoring movements as many individuals were confined within the camp. The city centre was no longer routinely frequented by people on the move, who increasingly occupied marginal urban spaces, often recognizing Lipa, rather than Bihać, as their main reference point at arrival since routes through the *jungle* became common sites for pushbacks, prompting the emergence of alternative paths near the TRC.

The scenario just described underscores how mechanisms of racial violence have become structural in Bihać: police-driven actions aimed at dispersing and harassing people on the move, dismantling informal settlements and destroying belongings, including water, food, tents, blankets, mattresses, mobile phones, documents and even shoes appear as routinized practices. Rooted in a colonial genealogy of confiscation and theft, these practices, Brito (2023) argues, transcend mere “geographical exclusion” (2023: 14), rendering illegalized bodies “ungeographic” (*ibid.*), unable to anchor themselves in places, produced as “unable to possess” thereby rendered “available for (dis)possession” (*ibid.*: 15) and dehumanization. Such practices are integral to what Tazzioli calls the “politics of dispersal” (2020: 171), preventing gathering and temporary settlement while also disrupting collective political identities and transversal alliances, reasserting control over unruly mobility. Framing this analysis within longstanding patterns of racial violence and dispossession (Brito 2023) reveals the necropolitical dimensions of the European border regime, wherein illegalized bodies are systematically targeted

4. Information collected in the field reveal that the number of individuals present in the Sarajevo area exceeds that in the Una-Sana Canton, pointing to a pronounced heterogeneity in the routes across BiH and a possible shift in temporalities and modalities of crossing the country.

and criminalized. Here, necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) operates as a mode of “governing the expendable” (Giuliani 2020: 182) through the degradation of life-supporting infrastructures and the calculated exposure of racialized bodies to death.

Countering the norms: the politics of impolitic bodies on the move

Situating the Balkan Route within this broader framework of racialization and coloniality in the Balkan region and Bosnia, I have attempted to illuminate the intricate dynamics of contemporary colonial entanglements, acknowledging that illegalized mobility unfolds within spaces already racialized by enduring coloniality, as Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018) argues, revealing how people on the move are positioned as “already racialized Others” (Helms 2025: 474) through processes that interpellate colonial genealogy. Integrating these perspectives makes it possible to show how across the Balkan Route, illegalized bodies become the primary terrain upon which race is reproduced and operationalized, legitimizing a border regime that does not merely aim to halt movement but to manage, filter and hierarchize lives and bodies according to biopolitical logics.

Examining the interplay between colonial memory and postcolonial encounters helps grasp how subaltern mobility has been construed as a threat (Rediker *et al.* 2019), a “monstrification” rearticulated today through border regimes (Giuliani 2020). Giuliani draws on Butler and Asad, to situate the “‘killable’ Other” (2020: 63) within the post-9/11 “global war on terror”, understood as a continuation of “small colonial wars” (Asad in Giuliani 2020: 63) waged under the rhetorical banner of promoting progress and peace. Building on Aradau and Salerno’s analysis, Giuliani illuminates the colonial genealogy underpinning the conceptualization of the “risky body” and the “body at risk”, discursively positioning illegalized subjects as both passive victims of disaster and active agents capable of introducing catastrophe into Europe. Fanon’s (1952) critique of colonial histories offers a valuable lens through which examining this intersection, elucidating how colonialism produces and disciplines bodies and spaces, crafting a world designed for the inclusion of certain racialized groups while excluding others. Central to this analysis is Fanon’s notion of a “racial epidermal schema” (1954: 84) which demonstrates that the body is never merely flesh but a racialized surface that condenses fears, fantasies and “historicity” (*ibid.*). Building on Fanon, Ahmed (2000) argues that skin is not a neutral bodily envelope but an affective boundary that registers the encoun-

ter with the “other”. Across the Balkan Route, this affective economy renders racialized bodies legible as targets of suspicion and violence, as expressed by A., a person encountered in Bihać, reflecting on the racial logics underpinning borders:

For some countries like yours, you can get an easy visa. For other countries, they will decline your request for visa. Maybe because you are Arabic or you are from Africa or you don't have a lot of funds in your bank account. So they stop your visa request. The ideology of closing the border is racism. You don't imagine how it is to be caught at the border by the border police, they beat you and do a lot of bad stuff at you. (Interview with A., person on the move, July 2024)

His account exemplifies what Ahmed (*ibid.*) describes as the persistence of colonial legacies as embodied histories that shape how bodies emerge, move and interact with their environments. Illegalized and racialized bodies in motion are thus construed as “bodies out of place” (*ibid.*: 78), marked as “strangers” who paradoxically are already known as unknown. These bodies are preemptively identified as a threat, reinforcing spatial and cultural boundaries that preexist social interactions, shaping the public space – produced through the interactions of bodies (Lefebvre 2002) – and legitimizing certain mobilities while delegitimizing others.

When bodies deemed “out of place” intrude into spaces governed by the normativity of whiteness, as racialized bodies, they act as “space invaders” (Puwar 2004), provoking perceptions of threat and triggering surveillance, as their presence unsettles established norms. This conceptualization applies powerfully to bodies moving across the Balkan Route, which again materially act as “space invaders” insofar as their presence contravenes the “somatic norm” (*ibid.*) of whiteness that consecrates the region as a space for policing Europeanness, unsettling narratives of color-blindness (Helms 2020) and disrupting claims to a Balkan racial exceptionalism.

At this juncture, their intensified mobility becomes a politically charged phenomenon, encapsulating the aforementioned “contested politics of mobility” (Squire 2011). In this context, “risky bodies” are reconceptualized as “impolitic bodies” (Herzfeld 2004). Herzfeld’s notion of the “body impolitic” illuminates how individuals and groups navigate, resist or adapt to normative pressures and power structures. Within the European border regime, this perspective highlights how illegalized and racialized bodies appear both subjected to necropolitical governmentality and act as agents of its contestation

and subversion, interrupting the very processes through which illegalized mobility is made governable.

Ethnographic findings underscore how illegalized bodies materialize as *impolitic*, imprudently and excessively disrupting the “senses of normativity” (Panella, Little 2021: 1), exposing norms as neither universal nor disembodied (Puwar 2004), revealing intersecting forms of oppression and the persistent coloniality of our times.

One of the most immediately apparent disruptive dimensions of “impolitic bodies” grasped on the field is the necessity for border regime to continually adapt to the excessive mobility of these bodies, challenging and complicating the implementation of racial practices such as pushbacks, confinement and dispossession. Within this context, practices of refusal, subtraction and opacity enacted by people on the move emerge as critical strategies of contestation and subversion against border regime. These strategies include rejecting reception in humanitarian structures in favor of informal accommodations, such as squats in abandoned buildings, exemplifying a subtraction from extractive practices and sociality enforced by confinement logics.

In 2021, and persisting today, conversations with people on the move in Bihać frequently included the sentiment: “Lipa is not good.” S. explained his reluctance to stay in the new Lipa TRC, despite police forcibly taking him there multiple times.

The camp is far from Bihać, we have to walk more than five hours to the city and try the game, there are no buses and we can't get on them anyway because we are not Bosnian (...) In Lipa the food is not good and the rooms are for six people, they are too small, they are containers you know, how can we live there? I don't like the camp, there is SFA police in the camp that is the problem, everyone is afraid of SFA. (Interview with S., person on the move, November 2021)

This narrative, representative of many others, demonstrates that the decision to remain outside formal centers is not solely driven by a desire to evade violence and control but also embodies a deliberate pursuit of sociality and autonomy in shaping one's life. Within these spaces, people can cook, share meals, host gatherings and engage in rituals that restore meaning and facilitate socialization, even amidst enforced isolation and deprivation. These accounts foreground the body as a site of contestation and refusal: removing one's body from the camp entails withdrawing from the regulation of time, space, gestures and postures imposed by the humanitarian and border

regime. In this sense, subtraction constitutes a political strategy⁵, a pursuit of autonomy that exceeds mere reaction since it challenges the racialized norms embedded these regimes, as a stance grounded in the creation of autonomous living practices and collective spaces, representing alternative forms of livability and sociality, where food, shelter, medical and emotional care are available to everyone, free from the racialized and securitarian regime of control.

In summer 2024, I return to Bihać, when the city assumes a more vibrant character, animated by an influx of tourists and Bosnians living abroad spending their holidays. This seasonal liveliness also extends to illegalized mobility, as warmer weather prompts intensified movement and increased border-crossing attempts, met with equally intensified pushbacks. The decreased number of people passing through the city and the limited stay of those who do transit, resulted in many international activists redirecting their efforts to other locations. However, the structural racial violence experienced by people on the move has persisted relentlessly, still manifesting in collective expulsions, evictions, criminalization of movement and forced deportations to TRCs that remain undignified isolated facilities that often lack essential resources such as water and electricity. Additionally, there were consistently increasing reports of police brutality like the use of dogs at the border, harassment, psychological abuse, restricted and denied access to healthcare and the imposition of stricter surveillance measures⁶. In this context, reaching out or engaging with people to offer support or to listen and share their experiences has become increasingly complex. The bus station in Bihać has emerged as a space where many people gathered, with some using it as a place to sleep. This site appears to encapsulate the broader transformations of the city, reflecting the spatial dynamics of racial exclusion, wherein the urban geography is reconfigured to marginalize and displace racialized bodies, effectively pushing them to the margins, offering a critical lens to examine the intersections of race, space and power. Racist and extractive practices are evident in everyday interactions: people on the

5. Herzfeld (2004), although not explicitly addressing practices of refusal, describes dynamics that are interpretively comparable. He presents the artisan as an *artificer* whose expertise is both embodied and strategically opaque: through bodily techniques, gestures, and the rhythms of work, the artisan withholds parts of his knowledge and eludes the system's attempts to render him transparent and disciplined. These tactics constitute everyday forms of resistance to the norms that tend to marginalize him.

6. Testimonies of pushbacks, violence, evictions, rights violations and conditions in formal centres have been collected during my fieldwork and are collected daily by grassroots organizations present on the field (Cfr. <https://borderviolence.eu/reports>; <https://bloody-borders.org/>).

move report that they are relegated to the back of buses, denied service or entrance in local commercial activities and overcharged on taxis.

In this evolving context, people arriving in Bihać typically remain only briefly before a new crossing attempt, many sleeping on the ground at the bus station, while others proceed directly to the Lipa camp. This shift in movement patterns has also influenced the activities of local and international activists now concentrating their efforts in the area around TRCs. In conversations with my interlocutors, I often mentioned my previous visits to Bihać and on several occasions, I have pointed out once-busy squats, now-abandoned, to people looking for alternatives to returning to Lipa: most were unfamiliar with these locations and some have recounted attempts to sleep in the city only to be quickly evicted by the police or deterred by the presence of violent groups, preventing them from staying. Sentiments about the Lipa camp remain unchanged, people consistently express a strong aversion to staying there. However, the informal and community-based networks that previously facilitated settlement into squats appear to have been dissipated, a process largely attributed to the ongoing and deliberate strategy of evictions, which gradually eroded these support systems.

The shifting in racialized bordering mechanisms intensify the heterogeneity of political tactics employed to resist, negotiate and subvert norms, restrictions and forms of confinement. A notable element that emerges is the strategic utilization of formal centers. With rising temperatures in Bihać, many people residing in Lipa began spending more time in the city center, engaging in leisure activities such as bathing in the river. During these periods, some choose to sleep on the streets for several nights, enjoying time with friends away from the securitarian and humanitarian regime, before strategically returning to the camp to access resources such as showers or shelter. These embodied refusals echo what Tazzioli describes as forms of “spatial disobedience” (2020: 180), through which people on the move contest the spatial constraints imposed on them by moving, resting or dwelling “out of place”. By inhabiting the city or autonomously seeking shelter, they unsettle the spatial order of the camp, challenge the biopolitical grip of the border regime, and assert their own modes of presence and mobility.

From another perspective, daily negotiations with the actors of confinement structures also constitute a political tactic to counter racialized norms. This is evident in the experience shared by M., a person on the move who, along with his wife, was residing at the Borići camp. M. recounts:

On Saturdays and Sundays we stay till late outside [the camp]. We couldn't, but you just go... What they can do. (...) We go back, they look at us like this: 'go inside' (...) Because they know we don't do anything and it depends also on which people are at the entrance gate. (Interview with M., person on the move, July 2024)

These interactions underscore the tacit and movable arrangements negotiated with the confinement actors, where bodily and social resources are activated (Clough Marinaro, Panella 2021) to secure improved conditions within formal centers for their families or groups. A recurring tactic in this evolving context remains practices of refusal or subtraction, manifesting as non-participation in formal center activities or non-cooperation with police and humanitarian authorities. F., for instance, reflects on this strategy:

Sometimes in Lipa I don't get out from my container. When the people working on the activities, for example the volunteer of art class calls me and ask me 'can you come to help us with translation' I say 'just leave me alone' or I just [pretend to] sleep. (Interview with F., person on the move, July 2024)

This illustrates how people on the move are transformed into sources of value extraction, whether, as Tazzioli (2023) argues, through economic profits generated by the "migration industry", the commodification of "migrants' data" or the unpaid labor activities they are often compelled to perform. In this sense, if value is being extracted from knowledge, time, bodily presence and embodied dispositions, then withdrawing one's body as an act of refusal – such as pretending to sleep – constitutes an interruption of racial capitalist accumulation and a form of subtraction from these exploitative practices. Ethnographic encounters revealed a diversification of these practices, encompassing a range of discursive strategies.

In my conversations with interviewees, I focused on their experiences of racism while traversing borders, their aspirations in Europe and their envisioned futures. Interestingly, during these exchanges, the term "refugee" was consistently used in the third person, creating a sense of detachment from a label that seemed unclaimed or externally imposed. This observation prompted me to ask whether they intended to seek asylum in Europe. Responses varied widely. Some explained they did not plan to apply for asylum, as they already had family or acquaintances in some EU countries who could provide support and work opportunities. Others viewed asylum as their only viable pathway to obtain legal documents. Still, some expressed a strong determination to seek asylum, such as K., a person on the move who described himself as "stateless." He explained:

The European Union doesn't accept the current [Afghan] government. So our passport is just like a piece of paper. You are not recognized, when your country is not recognized. So Afghan people, we don't have any country. (Interview with K., person on the move, July 2024)

For many, the refugee status is intrinsically tied to notions of safety, though their interpretation of safety extends beyond the juridical protections outlined in frameworks like the Geneva Convention⁷. A., for example, described safety as follows:

Your country is the place that you have rest in (...) and you feel safe in it. At the end of the day, you come back from your work, (...) and get some rest. Without the feeling of anything. The country that you feel safe in is your country. I don't feel safe in my country. (...) [A refugee is] someone seeking peace, (...) where you cannot fear the government doing something bad or where you are paying for something you didn't commit (...) I'm looking for safety (...) I don't have this kind of problem, but I want to feel safe (...) For example, I'm worried that my little brother can get involved in some kind of problem with someone that can make our life miserable. (Interview with A., person on the move, July 2024)

His understanding of safety extends beyond the legal and individualistic scope, encompassing instead a collective and inherently political dimension. Furthermore, this conception of safety contrasts sharply with the securitization of borders, countering a "gendered and racialized politics of vulnerability" (Sachseder *et al.* 2024: 5) which plays a pivotal role in legitimizing the European border regime. Vulnerability, as a colonial construct (*ibid.*), positions the body as the primary site where this politics is inscribed. Illegalized bodies are in fact read, classified, and governed as loci of risk, "harmability" (*ibid.*: 6) and potential deception, enabling bordering practices that generate hierarchies of deservingness. By contrast, A.'s understanding of safety functions as a marker of an "autonomous subjective disposition" ("Refuge" in De Genova, Tazzioli *et al.* 2022: 835), embodying the pursuit of a dignified and peaceful existence, free from the coercion of oppressive governmental, judicial or familial structures. This reconceptualization of safety was a recurring element in many accounts of people I interviewed, who associated it with aspirations for a secure and self-determined life.

This element is further illustrated by the narrative of S., who left Afghanistan several years ago and resided in Turkey for three years, during which he

7. The Geneva Convention establishes that the asylum seeker's claim should be assessed in relation to the country of origin and not to the country of residence, in view of the applicant's individual circumstances.

built a stable life. It was only when forced to leave Turkey that he began to identify as a refugee. He recounted his experience as follows:

I didn't expect to be called as refugee, because I didn't leave to come to this side, to European Union. I was in Turkey, I didn't ask for asylum, I was like a refugee there, but I didn't feel like a refugee. I was feeling like other people was around me (...) it was unexpected. Because the first years that I went to Turkey (...) I had like a normal life. (...) the second year was a bit more pressure on us and the last year (...) was like really crazy. They [police] were getting into houses. (Interview with S., person on the move, July 2024)

S.'s narrative reveals how impolitic bodies can strategically appropriate and counter state-imposed categorizations. In his case, the experience of being a refugee is shaped by intersecting dynamics of insecurity, systemic repression and racial violence in the country of chosen residency. This compelled further mobility, facing the threat of coercive deportation, detention, police raids and broader illegalization and criminalization.

The strategic appropriation of identity disrupts exclusionary classifications that frequently position racialized people on the move as subjects requiring rescue while simultaneously denying them access to rights and recognition. By framing its violent securitization practices as neutral, the EU projects an image of itself as a guardian of human rights within the narrative of a post-racial order (El-Tayeb 2008), while reinforcing racialized hierarchies. As analyzed earlier, the coloniality of the European border regime has increasingly discursively constructed racialized and illegalized people as either threats or victims. The victimizing discourse along the Balkan Route casts people on the move as in need of rescue and protection, whether from the perils of the journey or the "predation" of criminal smuggling networks, without, however, meaningfully altering their simultaneous racialization as "illegal" and, therefore, expendable bodies undeserving protection.

In particular, the "protection regime" (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2015) itself is embedded in the colonial racialization of mobility, framing the one deserving free mobility from the ones that does not, because constructed as a threat. This framework demands the figure of the refugee to perform victimhood in order to gain legitimacy for entry, casting Western states as benevolent saviours, reinforcing a system in which only those who conform to Western expectations of helplessness are deemed deserving (Sachseder *et al.* 2024). A strict disciplinary mechanism that demands staying in camps, cooperation with authorities or accepting outcomes without contestation, producing a normative

framework that not only deny agency but displace the role of the state and its violence and depoliticize biographical and travel trajectories.

Conversely, the ethnographic analysis just discussed demonstrates how people on the move appropriate, resist and subvert these racialized categorizations producing forms of political subjectivity that disrupt colonial frameworks, aiming at dismantling racial hierarchies of value, fostering alternative forms of recognition and asserting both the right to stay and the right to move freely. In this context, such practices embody what Papadopoulos and colleagues (2008) conceptualized as “imperceptible politics”: a politics rooted in the refusal of regime control, operating as a subversive force that navigates within existing discourses and representational forms while simultaneously exceeding them, opening up possibilities for escape and the emergence of new forms of sociability and collective life that evade the “representational regime of policing” (2008: 75). Central to the authors’ conceptualization is the body, which is undoubtedly the object of power’s strategies of control, yet simultaneously the primary terrain on which social transformation and practices of subversion and escape materialize. The body is domesticated, disciplined and rendered productive, however, it is only through embodied experiences and practices that it becomes possible to transform how we perceive, sense and act in the present. These *fugitive* modes of being rupture the imposed correspondence between norms and bodies, enabling forms of opacity that elude surveillance and racialization. As Papadopoulos and colleagues argue, illegalized mobility – as an embodied experience – resists theorization through the materialization of political actions that render border regimes permeable, disrupts fixed identities and categories and thereby become a “constituent force of social transformation” (*ibidem*: 75).

Conclusion

This article has traced the contested and dynamic politics of unruly mobility across the Balkan Route, foregrounding the political subjectivities of illegalized people navigating a landscape shaped by colonial durabilities and racial capitalism. Situating mobility struggles in Bosnia-Herzegovina within the historical and structural continuities of coloniality and racializing discourses shows how the European border regime operates as a reconfiguration of colonial dispositives, perpetuating racialized mechanisms of control and stratification of mobility both on people on the move and Bosnian population, a crucial aspect that deserves further ethnographic investigation.

The analysis has highlighted how the biopolitical and necropolitical governmentality of the border regime organize populations through racialized hierarchies of mobility, positioning the illegalized body as the central terrain on which race becomes operative. Bodies are marked, sorted and rendered governable so that mobility may be filtered, slowed or redirected. At the same time, Bosnia is cast as a subordinated European borderland whose institutions and population are racialized as incapable of self-government and mobilized as a filtering device for mobility toward the EU. Reframing the Balkans from the balkanist representation of a “bridge” between cultures to what Bjelić calls a “corridor of races” (2018: 927) clarifies how claims to “racelessness” (El-Tayeb 2008) coexist with, and are functional to, structural racialized practices of surveillance, containment and dispersal. Unruly mobility across the region exposes the full operativity of race as a political and discursive category in both historical and contemporary Balkans, dispelling the narrative of Balkan racial exceptionalism, no longer tenable with the region’s incorporation into the European border regime. Practices observed in Bihać illustrate then a dimension of struggle, encompassing acts of subtraction and refusal that challenge the racial logics underpinning border governmentality, underscore people agency in forging unruly trajectories and compose an embodied archive that unsettles the normativity of Europeaness and the scalar geographies of racialized protection and risk.

Bridging critical border studies with postcolonial and decolonial scholarship and balkanist critique, this contribution presents race as the structuring lens through which these fields can be analytically integrated. It is precisely its ethnographic grounding that makes it visible: while genealogical and theoretical analyses have established the connections between balkanism, coloniality and the European border regime, it is at the level of embodied, everyday and fugitives practice that race emerges as the operative logic, simultaneously shaping the subordination of Bosnia as a European borderland, the criminalization of illegalized bodies in motion and, by contrast, the fugitive politics through which people on the move contest and exceed these governmentality. In so doing, this ethnographic material reorients scholarly attention to the enduring coloniality of border regimes and contributes to a broader decolonial critique, challenging the ways in which social conflicts have been politicized by the West (Gledhill 2000), and advancing the transformative potential of a *fugitive politics* that centers the struggles of illegalized and racialized people on the move as crucial sites of political and epistemic innovation.

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