

# On the Margins of EU-rope: Colonial Violence at the Bosnian-Croatian Frontier

Written by Benedetta Zocchi

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BENEDETTA ZOCCHI, JUN 30 2021

**This is an excerpt from *Dignity in Movement: Borders, Bodies and Rights*.  
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The reflection that will follow in this contribution can be traced back to one moment and one place. The place is a huge warehouse named Bira, in Bihac, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Bira used to be a refrigerator factory and is now managed by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) as a Temporary Reception Centre (TRC) for asylum seekers. The moment is 23 March 2018, when I first visited it. I was there with a group of activists and researchers and we were interested in understanding the dynamics of pushback and deportation that prevent people traveling on the Western Balkan Route (FRONTEX 2018) to cross the European Union (EU) border between BiH and Croatia.

Bira was not the first TRC I visited, but something about it made violence particularly explicit, undeniable and impossible to hide. The first time I entered Bira, an IOM operator gave me gloves and a mask. 'It is protocol,' he said, 'there have been plenty of diseases spreading in the camp and we shall take all the necessary precautions'. I looked around me. Nobody apart from visitors and camp staff was wearing masks or gloves. In a very visible way, those were precautions intended to protect us from them. The construction of an 'us' in opposition to a 'them' was pretty clear. The color of our skins, the quality of our clothes and the freedom of our bodies inscribed the undeniable acknowledgment of the different positionality that European staff and non-European hosts of the camp occupied in that space.

When IOM first arrived in Bihac, in 2016, Bira was set up to accommodate the unexpected deviation of thousands of people aimed at crossing the Western border with Croatia. However, because of the continuous pushbacks on behalf of Croatian police forces, many travelers ended up blocked in Bira for months, some even for a year. As their passage became more permanent, Bira was not re-adapted, but its existence as a camp was normalized. What used to be a storage of refrigerators and machines now looked like a storage of living bodies, forced into a paradoxical space, created to accommodate their temporary passage in the form of imprisonment.

As I walked within the building, escorted by IOM staff, I could sense the inevitable violence that act came with the space. In that space, my bodily existence as a white European woman inevitably shielded me from experiencing the camp in the way its hosts were experiencing it. My body performed that violence unconsciously and non-purposely, just for the categories of privilege it displayed. A white woman, whose white body could move freely in and out the camp, in and out the frontier, without being observed, monitored, or subject to suspicion. A European citizen, with papers that legalized her existence. A free individual, with a right to choose how to nourish her body, how to self-determine her identity. As a white European citizen, I entered in Bira performing my rights to freedom, legality, and mobility. However, these rights were not granted to me because of my humanness. On the contrary, they were strictly attached to my Europeaness. 'Bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism... (they) remembers such histories, even when we forget them' (Ahmed 2007, 153-154).

Decades after the end of the European colonial enterprise, and miles away from the geographical sites where it took

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place, my body vividly signaled the physicality of the colonizer as their body vividly signaled the physicality of the colonized. I was standing on European soil, within a United Nations managed facility, 18 kilometers away from the European Union. Symbols and labels inscribed in promises of universal human rights, freedom of mobility, and rights to self-determination. However, on this border, it was clear that those promises applied to some and not to others. They applied to us and not to them.

In the past decade, enormous amounts of funding and resources have been destined to securitize the external borders of the EU. Inevitably, the 'EU/non-EU borders became the favored arena for testing, developing and shaping the policies of fortress Europe' (Dalakoglou 2016, 183). The walls on the Spanish-Moroccan and Hungarian-Serbian borders, the intensification of police control in Greece, Turkey, and Serbia, and tensions between the Italian government and rescuing non-governmental organizations' boats in the Mediterranean Sea contributed to turning points of crossing into points of immobility, where thousands of people remain blocked for months, repeatedly attempting to cross and constantly pushed back.

As a Balkan nation with a complicated past of conflict, BiH has often been observed as both within and excluded from Europe (Balibar 2012). As the Eastern margin of the EU, its transformation into a new peculiar point of immobilization shows how one part of Europe is transforming another part into an internal post-colony where 'all the excluded to the project of modernity are gathered and confined' (2012, 447).

Since 2015, the Bosnian-Croatian frontier has turned into a site of struggle over who has a right to enter EU-rope. The struggle results in the systematized and normalized illegalization, immobilization, and racialization of non-European travelers who, stuck on the frontier, are forced to face the reproduction and legitimation of forms of violence, inscribed on their bodies and on their minds as they 'are watched, channeled, documented, obliged, commanded and pressured' (Goldberg 2006, 355). Eventually, 'their presence, if not indeed their very being, is discussed, negotiated, ordered, and recorded' (Goldberg 2006, 355).

This contribution starts from the assumption that violence perpetuated on the margins of the EU cannot be disconnected from European legacies of colonial domination, and that these legacies are echoed by EU border securitization. Conceived after several fieldtrips, this chapter results from a combination of theoretical and empirical engagement with observing violence experienced by travelers stuck on the Bosnian-Croatian frontier in line with European action as a colonial force.

In order to understand how a space like Bira came to exist a few kilometers from an EU border, we must take a step back. It only took me a three-hour bus drive to go from Zagreb to Bihac. I fell asleep in the EU and woke up at the Croatian-Bosnian frontier, where they checked my passport and registered my arrival. After twenty more minutes of traveling, I could notice two main differences. Outside, I could no longer hear bells or see the bell towers of Croatian churches. Instead, I could hear the Muezzin coming from the Minarets of Bosnian mosques. Inside, I no longer had connection on my phone, because my roaming was limited to EU territory. As I arrived at Bihac bus station, I caught myself staring at a writing on the wall of a building: 'Bosnia = graves of the doomed'. I notice that the building was covered in bullet holes.

Bihac is the capital of the Una Sana Canton. This area is part of a region called Bosniaka Krajina. In Bosnian language, *kraj* means end, and the name of the area can be translated as Bosnian Frontier. Since the Ottoman Empire, this was considered the last zone before the West, geographically beginning on the opposite side of Mount Plješivica. Today, the same mountain sets up the institutional border between BiH and Croatia. This zone has a century-long historical legacy as a place of passage, clash, and encounter between peoples, ideologies, and cultures. In this area, Christians and Muslims have coexisted and interacted for centuries (Bergholz 2016). From 1992 to 1995, during the bloody conflict that succeeded the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the city of Bihac was under a siege by the Serbian army. Memorial monuments celebrating those who lost their life in the conflict can be found across the area, and many of the locals today suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the last two years, this frontier has become one of the central waiting zones for people arriving from the Western Balkan Route (Agier 2016). Most travelers come from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, but

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since the route on the Mediterranean has become less accessible, it is not rare to find people coming from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, or even from Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of them travel on foot, and it might take months on the road to arrive here. Today, this border remains one of the hardest to cross.

Following a series of EU and bilateral containment agreements that succeeded the 2015 Syrian crisis (Seeberg 2015), this route was one of the last to be securitized in Europe. However, because of the constant pushbacks of the Croatian police forces, the majority of travelers remain stuck here for an indeterminate amount of time, until they are able to collect the resources to cross again. Once they arrive in Bihac, it takes at least 10 days to reach Italy on foot. During the journey, people avoid villages, hide and sleep in the woods, and must carefully ration food and water. However, most of them will be caught on the Croatian or Slovenian borders, and will be pushed back to Bosnia. This situation condemns them to a paradoxical displacement, where they are prisoners and fugitives at the same time; not wanted in that country, with no desire to remain and no possibility to move forward. Border police violence, camping and squatting, and social marginalization are constant reminders to people stuck here that their lives are somehow less worthy than those of their European counterparts.

To address the humanitarian situation, IOM set up four camps. Bira and Miral are set up in two former factories and now host single men. Borici and Sedra, respectively, used to be an abandoned student house and an abandoned hotel. Today, they host minors and families. Notwithstanding IOM intervention, as both the arrivals and pushbacks increased, people began to occupy abandoned and bombed buildings or sleep on the streets around town.

As soon as they are able, they arm themselves with backpacks and food supplies and hit the road on the mountains to continue their journey. Until that moment, they have no other possibility than to remain where they are. They cannot work and are not included in public life. They sit in groups on the green grass of the shores of the river Una, or on the benches of the city center. Some of them prefer to remain in the camps, as most cafes and shops do not allow them in.

And so it begins, the preparation of what travelers call the game. The expression of the game grew to describe the long trekking that would bring travelers from one country to another. The game consists of days and nights walking and sleeping in the woods, exposed to cold temperatures, rain and snow, wild animals, and with the constant risk of being captured and pushed back by border police forces.

After days of walking in the woods, most of the people in the game will be caught by the Croatian police and pushed back into Bosnia. Some of them will manage to arrive to Slovenia and will be captured there. Those who make it to Italy and the Schengen Zone can hope to move forward. The rest of them will find themselves at the point where the game started, forced to attempt it again. The game has roles, characters, strategies, enemies, and obstacles. Forced to make many attempts, those who have been in the game often use the term as a metaphor to portray their role on the frontier as actors playing with their life.

As I reached the Bosnian-Croatian frontier, I found myself in a space of suspension, a space that was European without responding to the main narratives I had learned to associate with the idea of Europe. That space did not participate in the unilateral emanation of the universal character that Europe had for centuries imposed out of its borders. It did not participate in the collective amnesia of war, conflict, and darkness that Europe brought on itself. The dark side of Europe was not hidden. On the contrary, signs of a dark past were more visible than ever. This was the Europe not wearing an EU-ropean costume, where violence was visible and legitimate.

In his infamous theorization of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe recognizes a number of similarities between colonial and frontier spaces. He observes that both spaces exist as peripheral zones detached from a core. This core is geographically located far away and for as much as the physical presence of the central authority might be enforced through the imposition of similar educational, cultural, and political inputs, the implementing strategies are inevitably less rigid as they overlap with similar forms of local authorities. As a result, both frontiers and colonies are spaces of suspension.

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their wars are not wars between regular armies. They do not imply the mobilization of sovereign subjects. They do not establish a distinction between soldiers and civilians or again between enemies and criminals.

Mbembe 2003, 35.

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As no one in the core looks this way, on the frontier, violence returns to be a legitimate mean of enforcement. Today, in the Una Sana Canton, local authorities are increasingly making decisions independently of both Sarajevo and European institutions. For example, Kljuc's local police has orders to stop buses coming from the hinterland before they arrive in Bihac and force travelers to stop their journey. In February 2020, I took a ride on one of these buses. As we stopped in Kljuc, two police officers got on the bus. They walked around the seats rows and started asking documents to certain passengers. Not surprisingly, the passengers selected for the check were those not looking European. Four young boys and two adult men were asked to get off the bus. They kept showing officers a document granting them permission to travel in BiH, which was given them by IOM in Sarajevo. However, there, on the frontier, the legal value of those documents was suspended. A different authority was enforced. Those commanded to stop found themselves in the middle of a country road. From the core in Sarajevo, they had the imperative to move closer to the border. However, they were stopped before they could reach the frontier.

Another example of autonomous management of the crisis is the one of a jungle camp. During the summer of 2019, Bihac municipality independently set up an open camp managed by the Red Cross in an area called Vucjak. Travelers were arbitrarily caught in town by the police and deported there. The health and living conditions in the camp were so bad that people forced to live there were calling it the jungle or jungle camp, and several organizations reported it as not conforming to the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2019).

These examples are useful for beginning to observe the way in which conventional dynamics, rules, laws, prescriptions, and discourses are suspended to make space for a language of constant emergency. On the frontier, the status quo is eventually reorganized around the issue of travelers' undesirable presence, and new unconventional, violent, and de-humanizing measures become legitimate in the name of security (Ahmed 2007b).

It is in this suspension that we find the connection between frontiers and colonies. According to Mezzadra and Nelson (2013, 84), the colonial frontier is imagined precisely as the 'qualitative distinction between European space and those extra-European spaces which are by definition open to conquest'. As such, it naturally 'tends to superimpose itself over other divisions (colonists and natives)' (Mezzadra and Nelson 2013, 243). The colonial frontier is also strictly connected with what Ahmed would call a space oriented towards whiteness (Ahmed 2007a, 158-159), i.e., a zone where 'non-white bodies become hyper-visible when they do not pass, which means they stand out and stand apart'. In Bihac, the inevitable detachment from European cores blurred the lines between justice, human rights, and security. This is something that highly connects with a series of debates that are today central in critical migration studies.

The immobilization and illegalization of migrants at European frontiers captured the attention of a plurality of activist scholars in the post-colonial tradition. Reflecting on the reproduction of the post-colonial migrant as a neo-colonial subject and criticizing the overarching attention towards the language of a migrant crisis, new studies emerged combining the scholarly and activist effort to challenge classical epistemologies and re-think discourses and practices (Mbembe 2003; Mezzadra and Nelson 2013; Tazzioli 2015; De Genova 2016; Isin 2018).

Undoubtedly, the language of the colonial (post-colonial, de-colonial, neo-colonial) has today reached well beyond the historical experience of land conquer and domination on behalf of European imperialist forces (Bhambra 2014). Thanks to intellectual inputs of distinguished scholars, such as Said, Fanon, Du Bois, and Césaire, arguments are

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increasingly detached from treating colonialism as a circumscribed historical fact, highlighting how the histories of colonialism result from Europe or the West's self-proclaimed entitlement to modernity.

Following these theoretical inputs, I understand the colonial as relational before historical. In this sense, I believe we can find the colonial within hierarchies among peoples, ideologies, cultures, class, and race (Goldberg 2006; Bhabra 2014). In turn, reading on this relational understanding of the colonial, I dedicate the rest of this chapter to conversations with travelers I met in Bihac. There, my aim is to identify different forms of violence performed on the frontier that can be connected to colonial violence.

My first preliminary fieldtrips in Bihac were primarily aimed at observing and exploring the context to assess its potential as a case study for my PhD research. I did not know what I would find, and I did not plan to conduct formal interviews. The material I gathered at the frontier was supposed to form an archive to reflect on positionality and methodology issues. Consequently, most of the data I display here were gathered in informal contexts, as I reached out to people outside the camps or around towns. I presented myself as a researcher and briefly explaining what I was researching. I did not attempt to orientate them towards a particular aspect of their present or past experiences, but I let them decide what they wanted to tell me. However, I could not help but notice that violence was a recurring theme. In turn, I rely on images, description, situations, and conversations to tell a story about colonial violence on the Bosnian-Croatian frontier. The main objective of this approach is to situate my argument within the specific spatiality and temporality of the European frontier without overlooking historical trajectories associated with colonialism, race, and migration.

Travelers captured and pushed back on the Croatian border tell very similar stories about the dynamics of capture. Often, police officers beat men, insult woman, confiscate food supplies and money, and break phones. Deported bodies come back from the game covered in scars, bruises, and in some cases more serious injuries. A crucial and dramatic example is Ali, a 30-year-old man from Tunisia. Ali entered the game from the city of Velika Kladuša in the winter of 2018. The Croatian police captured him, beat him, and took his shoes, forcing him to walk back to Bosnia on his bare feet. Ali stayed in Bira for almost a year, with his feet completely necrotized, abandoned in one container where he lived isolated and immobile for seven months, until he died in September 2019. His story is both a story of physical and psychological violence. The trauma that Ali experienced highly affected his mental health. He refused to have his feet amputated, as he could have never been able to try the game again without being able to walk.

As with the case of Ali, violence is exercised on the body as much as it is on the mind. Many described the preparation for the game as invading their minds, dreams, and daily routines. They spent entire weeks studying routes and passages, and organizing supplies and groups. The trek is always dangerous. Wild animals, unexpected weather conditions, possible food or water shortage, and illnesses are inevitable risks. Yet, some people attempted the game 10, even 20 times. The constant perception of rejection, of risking one's life for nothing often leads to depression and anger. As a result, in the past year, there have been several suicide attempts. Many of the travelers who experienced pushbacks reported similar images about the way in which such experiences make one want to stop living. I remember a 16-year-old girl who came from Iran. She was traveling with her parents, and they had already attempted the game 15 times. She told me that she was tired of trying, but that they had no other choice, that this was not life, and that it was better to die attempting the game than to live like this. She said, 'At this point, death is the last thing I am worried about'.

Mbembe's (2003, 24) assertion that frontiers resemble colonial space highly relies on the understanding points of migrants' passages as death worlds where 'war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other'. According to Mbembe (2003), the suspended temporality and interstitial status that travelers experience in these waiting zones prompt the development of latency and expectation, where the present, the being, and the self, fade into a status of constant alienation. The frontier looks like a purgatory, a middle way, a bridge between life and death, where the traveler has no choice but to struggle. A necropolis where bodies are left 'subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' (Mbembe 2003, 32).

This also relates to forms of isolation and exclusion that permeate daily life on the frontier. Travelers are rarely called by their names. They are always observed, stop, and monitored as part of the mob, the multitude, or the migrants

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(Tazzioli 2020). Their body are physically re-oriented to spaces reserved for them, such as camps, TCR, abandoned buildings, or the woods. One day, I met a 16-year-old boy who lived with dozens of other travelers in an abandoned building just a few meters from Bira, on the way out of town. As many have done before him, he showed me the building as if it were his home, gave me a blanket to sit on, and invited me to stay for lunch. After the meal, we decided to go into town where we were supposed to meet another traveler he knew who was just back from the game and agreed to tell me his latest experience of pushback. To get into town, we had to pass in front of Bira. As we walked in front of the TRC, two police officers stopped us. They immediately divided us. One started talking to me, asking me for my ID and the reasons why I was walking with that migrant. I explained myself and showed my university card. Although he seemed to be satisfied with my explanation, he told me that I could not stay there and I had to go back to town. In the meantime, the other police officer took my friend by the arm and commanded him to go back to Bira. We both tried to explain that he was not living in Bira so he could not really go back to a place where he was not allowed to stay. But the officer seemed not to care. That was the dividing line. Within the frontier, that police checkpoint signaled the space designated for my white European body and the one reserved for his non-white and non-European one. The officer kept stressing that he could not move forward because there were too many migrants downtown. Therefore, I was told to go and he was told to stay. Even though there was not a place for him in that facility, he could not move forward. His body was confined to a space where it had no place.

In Fanon (1986), to be black in a white world means that one's bodily extension is diminished. 'In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity' (Fanon 1986, 110). Colonial violence is organized through the racialization of black bodies in a white space. In turn, the same form of subjectivities (Foucault 1972) applies to the field of the Bosnian-Croatian frontier. Although it experienced contamination with several cultures and religions, the Una Sana Canton remains a space of whiteness where black bodies are signaled, unexpected, watched 'hyper visible when they do not pass' (Ahmed 2007a, 159). On the frontier, the historical trajectory of the bodies that aim to cross is reconstructed on the lines of whiteness. Here, whiteness is a visual tool that signals the danger of the stranger body (Ahmed 2007b) just by looking at it. At the same time, it participates in the production of other layers of racialization. In conversation with Bihac residents, no one ever told me to be afraid of travelers because they were not white.

As noted by Du Bois (cited in Zuckerman 2004, 46), 'the global color line is not solely a matter of color and physical and racial appearance... [It] cuts across lines of colors of physique and beliefs and status... is a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching, and human hate and prejudice'.

The expression 'economic migrant' is widely used on the frontier to convert racial and class issues into instruments of fear. As a person who is already in a condition of illegality, the traveler is subjectified as someone having nothing to lose and therefore is keener to engage in criminal activities, such as robbing or pickpocketing. The intersection between poverty, desperation, and race remains a fundamental lens to criminalize the traveler. As noted by Ahmed (2004, 132), it 'is through announcing a crisis in security that new forms of security, border policing, and surveillance become justified'. In her theorization of affective economies, Ahmed (2004) uses the two cases of burglary and asylum as connected matters participating in the discourse on the right to defense. Traveler are subjects one needs to be afraid of precisely because 'they are not part of the picture, and with their simple presence they are stealing something from the nation' (Ahmed 2004, 123).

This relies to another narrative recognized by Fanon, which identifies the black body in a white space as constantly out of place. They should not stay where they are, and do not have access to liberty. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1986, 170) argues that, for the colonial subject, 'it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained... human reality in-itself-for-itself can be achieved only through conflict'. For the colonial subject, the right to liberty is not something that comes with humanness, but is something that must be earned and conceded by the white master. On the frontier, migrants' illegalization produces them as subjects who are arbitrarily deprived of liberty. Ballas, Dorling, and Hennig (2017, 28) observe this illegalization as part of a continuum in the criminalization of racialized subjectivities where 'every act, as long as it is made by a slave, an indigenous person, a colonized subject, or a black person... become a criminal act'. Thus, the stranger who appears on the frontier is not feared for being unknown, but for being a suspect (Ahmed 2004). The non-white traveler who attempts to reach Europe today is illegalized until the moment he/she is able to ask for asylum. During his/her journey, the condition of illegality forces him/her to hide,

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escape, and select routes that minimize the risk of being captured. His/her inferior status as a colonial subject is somehow re-framed in the form of illegalization.

The first thing the colonial learns is to remain in his place and not overstep his limits. Hence the dreams of the colonial subject are muscular dreams, dreams of action, dreams of aggressive vitality... I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing.

Fanon 1961, 22.

To be a colonial subject in the colonized world means having limited bodily extension, being checked, and being stopped (Ahmed 2004). On the frontier, immobilization is not just expressed in the impossibility to cross the border, but exists in the normalization of specific customs that eventually forbid people who are temporary on the frontier from entering certain spaces. Violence appears also in the form of segregation. In Bihac, most restaurant and cafes would not let migrants in. Some of them even have signs outside their door saying that migrants are not welcome. There are customs inscribing where migrants can and cannot go. As they are labelled migrants, they are immediately confined to certain ideas, places and imaginations. Wandering around towns, sitting in the camps, trekking in the mountains, hiding, making oneself less visible as possible become new strategies of survival.

Borders are constructed and indeed policed in the very feeling that they have already been transgressed: the other has to get too close in order to be recognized as an object of fear and in order for the object to be displaced (Ahmed 2004, 132). Throughout this chapter, I proposed a dialogue between theoretical and empirical engagement to address violence perpetrated at the Bosnian-Croatian frontier as an expression of European colonial force. This should be read as an input – one among many – to challenge, problematize, and question conventional practices of EU bordering as directly connected with the colonial codification of difference between worthy and unworthy peoples. At the same time, it should also prompt discussion concerning the practice of internal EU bordering throughout which a part of Europe, mostly associated with EU member-states, is making another part peripheral, and for this reason expendable.

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**Benedetta Zocchi** is a Leverhulme Trust Doctoral Scholar in the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London (UK). She previously completed a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics at LUISS University (Italy) and an MPhil in International Relations at the University of Oxford (UK). Benedetta is interested in post-colonial legacies, de-colonial thinking and critical migration studies. Her past work explored the social and political construction of colonial amnesia in Italy and the discursive re-activations of colonial consciousness in Italy, France and the UK. Her current research focuses on practices of European coloniality at EU



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borders, with particular attention to the different realities of exclusion and marginalization on the frontier between BiH and Croatia. Her intellectual approach is informed by the intersection between political activism, social engagement and critical scholarship.