SOLROUTES

'Squatting in solidarity': negotiating solidarity politics and social becoming among (un)documented squatters and citizen-led initiatives in Brussels

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Abstract:

This node has revealed intricate configurations and features of solidarity associated with informal housing infrastructures (i.e. squats and building occupations) for illegalized migrants in Brussels, as well as interconnected mechanisms of solidarity among (un)documented squatters and citizen-led initiatives. It's evident that the Brussels reception system and selective solidarity significantly influence the trajectories of illegalized migrants within Belgium, closely tied to solidarity configurations in the city. Through our ethnographic engagement with collectives and individuals gravitating around squats in Brussels, we identify ways solidarity politics are negotiated by various subjects as they navigate Brussels' solidarity landscape. Analysing (1) citizen support of European nationals, (2) documented individuals with migratory trajectory, and (3) undocumented migrants involved in squatting in solidarity with illegalized migrants, we argue that these dwelling infrastructures are not mere shelters but dynamics spaces where negotiation of solidarity and social transformation occurs, challenging conventional humanitarian assistance models. Ultimately, the outcome is an account of the solidarity processes and relations rather than rigid individuals and figures as a location of solidarity. We here highlight nuanced trajectories and expressions of solidarity practices embedded in their situated realities.

Along with our ethnographic inquiry, this research endeavour also unfolded the generation of narratives of these issues by collaborating with a commissioned artist and people directly involved in this setting. These encounters unveiled intricate dynamics surrounding co-creation, collaboration, and narrative generation, revealing challenges inherent in working within project timelines and navigating nuanced intentions. Questions arose regarding the authenticity of collaboration and the potential pitfalls of extractive practices, adding depth to our exploration.

Delegation of reception responsibility and multiplication of labour

In Brussels, the reception of the newcomers has been declared in 'crisis' since 2015. This has oriented public opinion, civil society, and activist groups to reflect and act on the situation while questioning the reception modalities in Brussels and in Belgium at large (Mescoli et al., 2019). The current state of crisis serves as a primary catalyst for citizen mobilizations in Belgium (Debelder, 2020). Generally, civil society plays a pivotal role during crises, irrespective of their intentions and motivations. This involvement manifests either through voluntary participation in established governmental or non-governmental organizations or through the emergence of new informal groups composed solely of citizens. As emphasized by Larruina et al. (2019), European governments have predominantly adopted top-down crisis management approaches, characterized by the verticality of action plans, which have tended to restrict opportunities for civil society actors' involvement. Consequently, this management style has fostered the proliferation of new citizen initiatives that operate independently from institutionalized operators.

The Belgian reception system for asylum seekers begins at Fedasil's arrival center - the federal agency responsible for receiving applicants for international protection located in Brussels. Here, initial administrative screenings are conducted, determining eligibility for reception. In moments like the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 and now with the intensification of arrivals of Palestinians, Sudanese and Congolese asylum seekers, officials deem the Federal Agency's limited capacity in processing the screenings to determine eligibility for international protection and thus channel applicants to reception structures. With the process being delayed, asylum seekers fleeing persecution and those denied —those considered ineligible as they are framed as coming from so-called Safe Countries of Origin— are off the reception structures. They quickly realize that there is not a place for them in the center managed by Fedasile. If informed adequately, they try the reception network managed by collective and individual structures of NGOs and Civil Society Organisations so they can explore the possibility of enrolling for temporary accommodation in existing centers of emergency. In all cases, access to these structures is prioritized to those recognised by the Federal Agency as in the process of asylum determination. The right to these structures ceases upon the conclusion of the asylum determination procedures and the failed appeals. If not detained to be deported, illegalized migrants are left to circulate in the city of Brussels. As is the case of hundreds of illegalized protection seekers and undocumented people, they end up sleeping in the streets of Brussels.

To situate alternative dwelling infrastructures (i.e. squats) for illegalized migrants in the context of Brussels, the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 is key. In 2015, due to the augmented arrivals of protection seekers and their exclusion from reception structures, an improvised refugee camp in the North Quarter of Brussels was built.

Illegalized people and solidarity collectives occupying the Maximilian Park in 2017 - Credit: Valentina Pop (2017).

The Maximilian Park witnessed a noteworthy humanitarian response from community-based and citizen-led initiatives (Lafaut and Coene, 2019). The open park and the material assistance provided by humanitarian groups, have attracted additional categories of migrants in precarious situations, such as transit migrants seeking to reach another destination country, and undocumented individuals—those either denied residency permits or who did not meet eligibility criteria for asylum application. Around this makeshift campmany volunteer citizens and civil society associations have gravitated, some of whom formally united under the "Citizens' Platform in Support of Refugees" to address the gap in the reception of refugees. The consortium of the civil society association and NGOs working in this field will later in 2017 result in the Humanitarian Hub, composed of: the Red Cross of Belgium, Doctors of the World, Doctors Without Borders, the Citizens' Platform in Support of Refugees and SOS Jeunes. This hub is a major actor of the reception system in Brussels. Be that is it may, following two years, the Secretary of State for Asylum and Immigration, imposed a strict ban on staying in the park in 2017 and initiated police raids to evacuate and arrest anyone with irregular status. This sparked a climate of resistance against this aggressive political action, leading not only to the inception of the building occupation for refugees and undocumented people but also to "citizen housing" (Clarbout, 2020). While some citizens began opening their doors to park inhabitants facing the violence of police raids, worsening their conditions due to the permanent dismantling of the Park's camp, Urban collectives engaged in monitoring, occupying and sustaining vacated buildings in Brussels to host migrants exhausted by police violence. Later on, during Covid-19, buildings were occupied in convention with the Region of Brussels (these buildings were either the priority of the Brussels' region or the Federal State). An institutional appropriation of squatting to mitigate sanitary risks

by delegating this task to concerned collectives and thus allow medical and humanitarian corridors in which vulnerable migrants are ranged and handled according to some sanitary measures. A sense of urgency and emergency is what shapes the intensification of occupied buildings for migrants and refugees in nowadays Brussels. The framing of emergency, urgency and deservingness (Ravn et al., 2020) is the battleground on which the dwelling infrastructures of illegalized migrants and refugees are negotiated.

Multiplication of informal dwelling infrastructures

The context of squatting in Brussels has evolved over time, transitioning from an urban movement aimed at defending neighbourhoods against gentrification and industrialization in the 80s and 90s to a strategy for sustaining oneself in the face of the rising rental market by pressuring owners for occupation conventions in the early 2000s. Initially, squats were not specifically oriented towards migrants but rather towards, *inter alia*, various urban struggles. In the early 2000s, there was a shift towards seeking 'occupation conventions' or what is called 'bail précaire' with the owners to sustain squats for longer periods after evictions. This convention is often sought among the occupants and the owner to use the building up to the moment when the owner finds a vocation relevant to their building. In Brussels, a vacant building implies a considerable amount of taxes to the owner. The occupation of the building at 123 rue Royale in 2003 symbolized this shift. This collective, composed of a mix of individuals including those from the middle class, homeless individuals, and undocumented migrants, pioneered the struggle towards the "convention d'occupation" as a horizon for negotiations with the authorities and owners to remain in squatted buildings for longer periods (Dawance, 2008).

Manifestation Anti-Expulsion - Brussels, March 2024 - Credit: Front Anti-Expulsion 2024

In fact, squats have always hosted the unsheltered and undocumented migrants in Brussels (Mondelaers, 2017). However, upon the 'crisis' of reception and the multiplication of excluded and illegalized migrants around the Maximilian Park and the North Station, issues linked to the housing and welling of illegalized migrants have gained political and humanitarian significance. Within the park and its surroundings, collectives of activists and humanitarians have taken place, functioning independently of state control, exerting solidarity and care towards migrants (Daher and d'Auria, 2018), and struggling along for an adequate right to housing and to the city at large (Lefebvre, 1968). The park and its surrounding, once a mere hub of commerce and office buildings… has been reconfigured to accommodate homeless asylum seekers and people on the move. The North Quarter and Maximilian Park experienced not only an influx of Syrian asylum seekers upon the 'long summer of migration' but also the migratory routes passing through Brussels following the dismantlement of the Calais "Jungle" in October 2016. As the number of undocumented individuals peaked in the park, Federal authorities initiated negotiations with activist and humanitarian groups and associations to vacate the area, promising to provide longer-term shelter infrastructure. However, some undocumented migrant networks seeking not only accommodation in Brussels but also regularisation refused to leave and set up a protest camp near what is today known as the Humanitarian Hub, where aid continued to be offered to those in need, but they were ultimately evicted with force. Subsequently, there has been a rise in the monitoring and occupation of vacant buildings to accommodate excluded migrants, fostering the emergence of ongoing anti-expulsion fronts and collectives dedicated to squatting and providing shelter for migrants. This context marks the intensification of such collectives and fronts. A relevant dynamic developed among these collectives is a circulation of knowledge and assistance to existing squats and to groups seeking to squat. A guidance on opening buildings, dealing with authorities, and creating support networks for squats in need is one of the dynamics deployed and sustained by the Front Anti-Expulsion in Brussels. Be that as it may, illegalized migrants often find themselves reliant on squatting as formal reception structures are inaccessible to them due to their legal status. On top of that, negotiations with authorities and owners are challenging for them due to their lack of credibility and stability. In the eyes of the authorities and owners, a migrant lacking adequate papers and guarantees is not a reliable 'partner' in the negotiations for an 'occupation convention'. For this matter, support from privileged individuals (be that citizens or migrants with documents) and associations is crucial for undocumented migrants squatting in buildings. However, this support can be complex, raising questions about motives and power dynamics among citizens engaging in this matter and illegalized migrants (Ballet, 2021).

In Brussels, the management of reception and especially the acceptable modality of dwelling is a contentious matter. It involves permanent back-in-forth bargaining among activist groups, illegalized people and their representatives, the reception network and public authorities. This results in assemblages of facilitation to dwelling operating in different directions and among various figures, shaping thus the traits of the dwelling infrastructures for individuals suspended for administrative reasons, i.e. waiting for asylum procedures or lacking residency requirements.

Exclusion from reception... less eligibility and susceptibility to downgrade

Insights gained from the fieldwork and interlocutors have informed about specific features transpiring from the very exclusion of illegalized migrants from formal reception structures. The reception system perpetuates a cycle of susceptibility to downgrade and lose the accumulated. Illegalized people are continuously trapped in precarious situations with the constant threat of expulsion, detention, and deportation looming over them. The primary focus of the immigration and asylum management in Belgium is on "reception" rather than "inclusion," reflecting a paradigm of emergency rather than long-term inclusion. This paradigm confines both solidarity actors and public opinion, limiting their actions to reception. Here asylum seekers and illegalized people are either trapped in reception centers or excluded to less adequate situations (i.e. squatting, homelessness, etc.).. all this depends on their eligibility. The proposed solution is to move individuals out of makeshift camps, which are often nightmarish environments, with squats susceptible to immediate eviction and the street representing even worse alternatives. This situation aligns with the "less eligibility" principle, a configuration that suggests societal and solidarity support systems are increasingly structured to offer (or allowed to offer) minimal assistance, with the threat of further degradation looming if individuals fail to comply with regulations and the ways solidarity is deployed (Cf. see below the uneven circulation of solidarity and exclusion of some illegalized people by some solidarity collectives). The reception system operates on a downward trajectory, wherein individuals face the constant threat of downgrade if they do not adhere to prescribed pathways. For migrants, this means potentially transitioning from government-run camps to squats and ultimately to life on the streets if they fail to navigate the complexities of the support structures around squats. Ultimately, this system operates on a basis of intimidation, constantly reminding individuals of the potential for their situation to worsen if they do not comply with expectations.
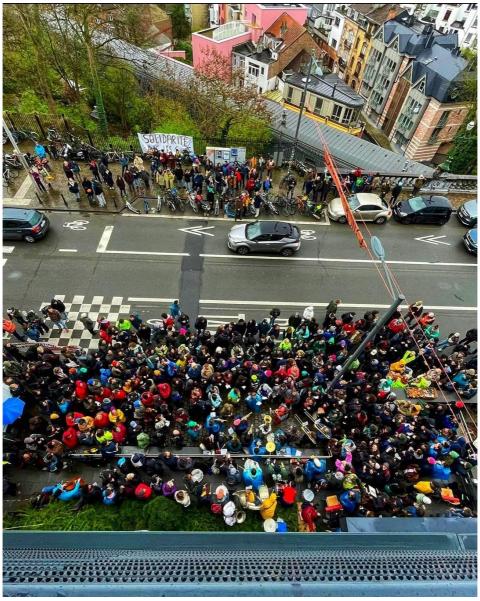
(Un)documented squatters claiming interstice in the solidarity landscape:

Our research endeavour in Brussels has observed various stances and configurations deploying solidarity in the forms of dwelling infrastructures for illegalized migrants. We have followed different rationales, intentions and material production and maintenance of squats. More than an analysis of squats *per se*, we provided an analysis of the production and circulation of solidarity *through* squats in Brussels.

In the following, we will illustrate ways different groups (1) Citizens support European nationals, (2) Documented individuals with migratory trajectories, and (3) undocumented migrants perform solidarity through infrastructural squats in Brussels. Before doing so, some indications on the configuration shaping this context are relevant. In Brussels, different activist groups linked to urban movements of squatting have engaged in solidarity with illegalized migrants excluded from reception structures. The idea is to arrive in a vacant building left to abandonment and to redevelop a living environment for the excluded migrants. As Fadi, a Palestinian spokesperson of the Squat S collective, defines it: "to bring life back where there was none". These collectives have started their projects of squatting and framing occupied spaces through different associations. At first, they gravitated around Maximilian Park; later on, they developed activities oriented towards framing and informing individuals and collectives about the temporary occupation. Squatters, as they occupy buildings, aim to pressure the owner and public authorities to sign an 'occupation convention'. This agreement allows squatters to stay in the building until the owner decides its

use. It initiates negotiations about ownership and the societal obligation of property owners who keep their buildings empty rather than offering shelter to homeless migrants.

The *laissez-faire* occupations in Brussels are shaped through practical norms (De Sardan, 2021) of emergency, vulnerability, and security in the neighbourhood. *A priori* federal authorities levy taxes on owners who leave their buildings vacant, citing concerns that such situations attract drug users and criminals to abandoned properties. However, squatters play on this partition, emphasizing the vulnerability of marginalized migrants and the urgent need to house them in empty buildings. This approach is deemed to address both neighbourhood security and the accommodation of homeless migrants through organized squatting. If the squatters assert the vulnerability of the occupants, citizen support is mobilized to prevent eviction ordered by the courts in favour of the building owner, often seen as prioritizing private priority over public welfare.

Squat-support gathered in front of an occupied building to prevent the expulsion by the federal police in Brussels - Credit: Rock'in Squat (2024).

Through squatting, subjects and groups observed produce norms and practices of solidarity. As they act, they bring about negotiations of vulnerability of migrants, solidarity and private property. The general credo defended by the squatters and their allies is that « public authorities cannot evict single migrant women with their children to the street just to preserve private property ». As Vincent, a lawyer supporting squatters argues « property owners cannot exert absolute control over their properties. They assert that owners have a social and societal responsibility to prevent their properties from remaining vacant, as it damages the neighbourhood's reputation, impacts the living conditions of residents, and fosters feelings of insecurity ». In contrast, the lawyer maintains that occupying vacant buildings through housing excluded migrants and bridging their integration in the city of Brussels revitalizes neighbourhoods and fosters social cohesion. The production of meaning on vulnerability, protection, private property, but also the preservation of the Common serves as the battleground where the production and the maintenance of squats is negotiated and contested.

Documented and undocumented squatters, bound by the same chain

An example of documented squatters collectives is Squat S collective (hereafter SSC). To them squatting is seen as a strategic tool for political advocacy and the production of alternative solidarity with excluded migrants in Brussels and in Belgium at large. « About 10 years ago, the idea to squat buildings not only for housing but also to push political agendas for migrants or shed light on regularization-related issues took place. But now, it's slowly losing its significance. For many collectives, squatting is oriented to a banal direction. Take V (collective) for example. They claim to be an independent political voice, doing small actions… But V (collective) is getting co-opted by certain militant movements, by the authorities, and now they're basically a dormitory. V isn't any more self-managed. Relying on handouts from citizens' support and donations made them dependent ». Says Fadi, nuancing their position to that of other collectives. Fadi questions the evolution of squats, exemplified by the case of VSP, once a site of political activism but now primarily focused solely on housing as the goal. To Fadi, this puts the VSP collective in a vulnerable position to appropriation, either by authorities or other politicized collectives. « In Brussels all migrant groups are pushed to get political. Some anarchist crews want to use other people's misery to fuel their own activism. It is what keeps them going, you see? Either you politicize yourself on your terms, or they will do it for you without asking », maintains Fadi. Indeed, in a situation where migrant groups are in need to often mobilize other collectives to stop evictions, they are often framed under larger political claims. People from SSC opt for defining their own political line and directionality. A matter of choosing the lesser of two evils. In the face of two options, defining one's own claims and mobilizing other support collective around it, is deemed better than being modelled by others. A concern to aspire to and exercise one's own circumscribed autonomy. This also stresses specific co-option dynamics where collectives mobilize other vulnerability for specific political orientation of antagonism against larger structures of control. Whether intended or not, many undocumented migrants end up politicized without their consent. Absorbing and assimilating the vulnerability of undocumented migrants serves here as a resource to keep the political struggle going, aiming at larger structural changes for the 'oppressed'.

Indeed, without the constitution of a larger dynamic with a collective intentionality (Swerts, 2021), concerned people only get temporary and precarious solutions. What is to be nuanced here is the

ambivalence, consensus and consent among people involved on 'who belongs where' as undocumented people are required to be politicized and perhaps extracted in their vulnerability and used as a fuel to larger struggles. Even if potential regularization is seen in the favour of the undocumented, the risk is rendering undocumented migrants at the 'guardianship' of politicized collectives who claim the necessity of maintaining a contentious dimension to squats. « A squat is not made to be comfortable! If occupants are too comfortable, they will sleep. A squat is not a hotel, it is a place where we make struggle and visibility of migrants' problems and the exclusions done by the state. We cannot always wait for the police to expel the occupant. We must create a struggle and claims meanwhile... A squat is not a permanent residence, it is a springboard in the direction of regularization and autonomisation of excluded people ». Maintains Khadija, a Moroccan squatter, leading a committee of the undocumented women within SSC.

Following Khadija, squats must maintain their political dimension, it is crucial not to make occupants too comfortable, ensuring that the squat remains a space of struggle and visibility rather than a permanent residence. Also, the precariousness of undocumented individuals is also highlighted, with a lack of existential anchorage resulting from evictions and frequent changes in housing situations. Even sustaining squats for a few months or a year does not alleviate the risk of expulsion. So to deal with the susceptibility to expulsion and the incapacity of the undocumented to sign a lease agreement, SSC struggle for regularization and autonomisation of the undocumented. Indeed, a distinctive aspect of the socio-political condition of undocumented migrants is their precise juridical status within the larger immigration system in Belgium. While lacking necessary documents or being in the wait of those documents, they find themselves 'enforceable', wherein authorities can enforce legal measures, including expulsion, detention and deportation. Moreover, while the degree to which individuals are subjected to expulsion varies, without the mobilization of politicized collectives undocumented migrants are at higher risks of expulsion. However, to keep solidarity collectives gravitating around a squat, the politicization of the latter and its situation within the larger rhetoric on regularization is deemed inevitable. Specific to the SSC, both documented and undocumented people are sharing the same shelter. Together, they aim for autonomy and to move away from impersonal aid, often seen in practices where citizen-support provides assistance expeditively to only-undocumented squats. Their (re)definition to paths to regularization and autonomisation transpires from the way they occupy squats. Arranging temporary housing infrastructures to weave meaning and direction toward their aspirations. It is this ephemeral settlement with its discomfort that urges the occupants to think, to plan and to act. Moving from one squat to another, they negotiated and (re)defined senses of dependency and autonomy. In nuancing mixed squats to those functioning as humanitarian corridors, where citizen-led collectives channel their material and logistic support to undocumented migrant-only squats, Adiou, a Congolese undocumented-squatter states the following: « Everyone here does something for others. It's not like some social workers who bring you leftovers at the end of the week. It's not a human zoo where the whites throw a few scraps of food to those trapped in the cage of distress. Getting out of the zoo is entering the cage and deconstructing the dynamics from the inside out ».

For SSC, mixity is key. Intended to make-gravitate resources around the squat. It is primarily meant to manifest a pre-figure community of different resources. They direct their squats towards norms and values of personal inclusion and solidarity by proximity, as nuanced to institutional integration

and impersonal assistance. More than struggling for regularization, they also aim at injecting resources into the squats, attempting to reinforce the autonomy of the dispossessed.

Citizen-support, advocating on behalf of the undocumented

The Citizen-support Collective (hereinafter CSC), an intricate web of collectives and individuals, mainly citizens of Europe, struggling for the rights of undocumented migrants. Central to the network's activities is its engagement in direct actions that consist of monitoring and occupying vacant buildings for unsheltered migrants. Occupying vacant buildings to advocate for regularization campaigns is one of their main vocations. More than the logistic support they provide for squats, they often mobilize needed social and institutional resources, drawing on their coalitions with individuals holding positions of influence within governmental bodies. This strategic collaboration facilitates access to crucial information and resources, such as contact persons in relevant institutions to act on a given situation or lists of vacant buildings to be used for squatting campaigns. However, unlike SSC, members of the CSC rarely live in the squats where they offer support to migrants.

The citizen-led support has taken center stage since the beginning of the 'reception crisis'. Their knowledge of the context and understating of institutional expectations and their social capital gives them an advantageous position in negotiating the upkeep of occupied buildings. More than providing logistical and material assistance, it is essential for them to convince public authorities of their reliability in maintaining the squats they establish. This is because public authorities typically view undocumented individuals or those operating outside civil society frameworks as unreliable parties to maintaining the convention of a squat. « We cannot rely on the undocumented to manage the squats. Often, we have public health problems, violence and drugs. We prefer to create conventions with citizens' support and allow access for doctors, for social workers and to create security and make sure that the squat won't turn into ruins » says a director of a regional representation in Brussels. Even though SSC and numerous other groups, primarily led by non-citizens and less-established associations have been crucial since the onset of the 'reception crisis', there persists a perception that non-citizens are less reliable compared to citizens operating within established associations and collectives.

CSC, with connections to elected officials in multiple municipalities and regional authorities, have accumulated resources to take and lead initiatives in supporting undocumented migrants. « Before making squats a living space, we have to play the game of harassing the authorities, using their rhetoric on protection and mitigation of precarity. Illegalized migrants are the case to which we can direct our attention... that is the reason for our existence. Undocumented people are already exhausted! looking for work, overloaded with stress and uncertainty... We take charge of the mental burden of these negotiations because we have been doing this for a while, and we know how to do it... at least we try,» says Magali, a Belgian national and member of CSC.

In CSC's history of action, initiatives carried were mainly the result of the proposition and the implication of the collective members. The involvement of these groups focuses on the concept of 'support'. This stems from their position as predominantly citizens of Europe not directly concerned with exclusion from housing and regularization. Individuals of the collective discuss these relations recurrently. Taking action 'for' the others or 'along with' the others triggers

questions on the "white saviorism" among members of the collectives and people directly concerned.

This peculiar solidarity configuration is indeed generative to positions and expectations. The citizen-support collective doesn't necessarily pursue guardianship of the migrants. However, permissiveness toward squats often depends on how well squatters align with administrative expectations. As leaders (citizen-support in this case) have contacts with municipalities, alliances with elected officials, and expertise in legal rhetoric regarding protecting vulnerable populations, tolerance for squats appears significantly higher. CSC retains an exclusive position over direct negotiation with authorities, complying with existing expectations of reliable civil society. Citize-led initiatives' to autonomise migrants often fall short due to their position in regards to the administrative expectation of them. The line of initiatives have been operating for long as 'providers'. This is due to their incorporation and possession of certain resources and privileges. Transping from that is the reinforcement of the institutional stereotypes of the unreliability of migrants in upkeeping a squat. The limited participation of migrants in negotiations with public authorities regarding their personal situation may perpetuate a guardianship dynamic, rendering migrants as annexed individuals whose fate is decided by others. Without a seat at the table, their voices are always lost in translations and echoes. With little capacity to shape the becoming of their squats and, by extension, their own social becoming through squats, illegalized migrants are not seen to prosper beyond the public authority and the citizen support's vision of them. A prevailing intermediation of the citizen-support is crystalised. For non-politicized undocumented migrants involved in this fashion, without this channel of support they risk expulsion as they lack — in the eyes of the authorities— credibility and legitimacy to autonomously negotiate and commit to an eventual convention. This setup questions the practices and the rhetoric of migrants' autonomisation within the larger solidarity landscape in Brussels.

Being caught in the expectations of the migration and reception system is not only the predicament of illegalized migrants. Activist groups with anarchist political orientation sometimes operate under this umbrella term of citizen support. They are expected to speak conventional rhetoric through their participation in social structures and institutions. Power dynamics with public authorities and illegalized migrants influence the prevailing norms and practices regarding advocacy on issues of vulnerability, urgency, and solidarity. Thus, activist groups often comply with the hegemonic narrative on citizen participation, just as some illegalized migrants adhere to rhetoric emphasizing protection and solidarity towards them.

Undocumented squatters contesting guardianship and exclusive solidarity:

Illegalized migrants are not only lost in translation and negotiation between the public authorities and citizen support but they are also subjected to selective support. « Before we had the Blacks, and then Ukranians and now the Palestinians… It is people who are seeking refuge that deserve priority to squats while they are waiting for their procedures. Like when you go to the emergency at the hospital, doctors prioritize patients with cardiovascular issues before addressing those with minor concerns like an infected toe,». says Alan, a volunteer in an association in support of squats. This uneven distribution of assistance based on deservingness and scarcity of resources to sustain squats creates a sense of sorting and ranging between those in urgency and those who are not. This is done based on some apprehension of the lived ordeals and selective moral imperatives

(Oubad and Mouna, 2023). In practice, this uneven assistance triggers frustrations and tensions among illegalized migrants and established actors of solidarity.

Two cases can illustrate this situation. That of Wadie and Anass. The two are undocumented squatters who navigate the configurations around squats. Since 2016, they have been trapped in irregularity in Brussels, having previously sought asylum and subsequently fallen into undocumented status because they are deemed ineligible for protection as they are coming from Morocco, a so-called safe country of origin. They have lived in occupation along with several collectives and activist groups. Their socio-political condition of uncertainty lived precarity and attempts to overcome guardianship oriented them to try squatting building aside from vertical assistance-ship and politicized organized collectives.

Accounting for an episode, Wadie testifies « the whites wanted to open a squat for the Palestinians. Us with some Algerians were left aside. We asked for their tools to open a building, but they kept giving us excuses. I knew that they wanted to open the same house I showed them. The same day, I brought a group of people and we forced ourselves in. The whites did not like that. They wanted the Palestinians to be by themselves because they are refugees. At the end they left, and we took the house. When the police came, we had women and children with us. It is winter, they cannot take us out ». Wadie and his group have earned the tricks of the trade. If you have people considered 'vulnerable' and in 'urgency' for shelters such as children and women, then you have a ground on which to temporarily counter expulsion. In fact, the women and children are also undocumented, and they were dwelling temporarily in different places in Brussels. They delegated their wish for a family-only squat to Wadie and thus he engaged in doing so. This was sought both to provide shelter to the mothers and their children and to shield himself and single males seeking a situation in which they can enact their autonomy aside from the political struggle of and vertical assistance. While all undocumented and illegalized individuals are potentially subject to expulsion from squats, not everyone is expelled to the same degree. Those channeling elements associated with norms and values of protection can temporarily oppose expulsions. Channeling their vulnerability and that of others, Wadies and his group managed to make-gravitate other families, women, and children to build a sense of 'urgency' and thus sustain in the squat till the end of the wintertime. Yet, they remain vulnerable to hostile interventions of authorities as they are perceived lacking credibility to sustain a squat.

Not all the undocumented squatters decide to enter in conflict with the organized collective, some seek tactical alliance with these collectives, recognizing the resources these collectives possess. People like Anas have gravitated around occupations for years and volunteered in eventful moments as intermediators with migrant communities. An incident recounted by Anas involved him discovering an empty house and attempting to squat with his friends. Upon arrival, they encountered Palestinian asylum seekers already present. Although the Palestinians didn't mind Anass and his friend's presence, the collective providing logistic and material support in the squats requested Anass and the others to leave. The argument was that having both asylum seekers and undocumented individuals in the same squat at the moment of the opening increases the risk of hostile evictions by anti-squat police. This is because undocumented people, unlike asylum seekers undergoing determination processes, are not considered deserving of protection of the citizens. Anass left the squat indeed, but he sought to accompany the Palestinians in their daily quest in asylum administrations. With his capacity to speak fluent French and his knowledge of

the reception and support landscape, he gained significance in being in proximity to the Palestinians. He managed to secure a room in the squat. He is now dwelling there and making his room a sort of 'help desk' where he activates SIM cards, opens bank accounts, interprets asylum-related communications and monitors and plans to open other squats for incoming Palestinians. « You know Samaoui, he has done the same. He was in good relations with these associations. He used to lead groups of 60 and 100 people. Now, X association proposed to take him in charge and give him a work contract… he has papers right now…. They (associations) sometimes use migrants for funds, yes! But let's also use them to have papers ».

People like Anas and Wadie, being themselves undocumented and facing the permanent threat of expulsion either by authorities or by the discretion of the citizen support, starve to pave their incorporation within the solidarity landscape revolving around squats. Coupled with frustration linked to impersonal assistance, dependency, and non-consented politicization, they attempt to develop their ways of dwelling, according to their own norms, vision and needs. The result is squatting with a peculiar accent. An accent that cracks the established order (Khosravi, 2024) of solidarity configuration.

Negotiating solidarity politics and social becoming through squatting

Squatting in migratory contexts is a phenomenon deeply rooted in notions of solidarity and resistance (Mezzadra, 2010; Martinez, 2020). Beyond the differences in dynamics, the three cases we have described in the report play an underlying common pattern, that is the circulation of solidarity and the negotiation of its politics as a constitutive force of maintenance within a selective migration and reception landscape. Gravitating around squats implies some degree of infrastructuration practices, shaping the directionality of people through it. Squats are not fixedly bound to pre-defined social and spatial arrangement; rather, they are oriented towards a social becoming, as squatters adjust their relative engagements towards specific commitments for diverse reasons (Meeus et al., 2019). In the case of SSC, multiplication of resources through mixity and the politiczation of the subjects is the direction sought. Beyond struggling for regularisation, SSC aims to mitigate their dependency on impersonal assistance. Conversely, CSC holds the position of 'supporter'. Without sharing the same shelter with the undocumented migrants, they position their intervention as intermediators with public authorities and seek to incorporate excluded migrants in specific municipalities. Aside from organized collectives, undocumented squatters seek self-incorporation aside from structured interventions. Frustrated with impersonal assistance and non-consensual politicization, they seek to develop their own ways of doing, attempting potential transformation through incorporation around squats.

Our account demonstrates that in a context characterized by hostile exclusion of migrants and the delegation of responsibility for their management, numerous alternative and unconventional processes occur to challenge and undermine the perceived injustice. Beyond the issue of personal interests, political orientations and humanitarian reasons, squatters starve to fill the gap of the reception 'crisis'. By shaping squats, these actors infrastructure a counter-assistance and support in contrast to the conventional actors of the reception and migration system, who rely on institutional notions of deservingness (Ravn et al., 2021). To quote Nancy Fraser; they shape a counter-public space that operates as an underlying arena where squatters and their supporters invent and circulate norms and practices of solidarity, which in turn permit them to formulate

oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (Fraser, 1990:67). These dynamics lead to the formation of alternative directionalities about ways solidarity is produced, articulated, and mediated. Instead of merely operating within the established relations of assistance and support, squatters and their allies craft their own politics of solidarity. They actively forge and shape new forms of acts, and produce a specific circuit of access to accommodation and regularization, with attention to verticality, guardianship and impersonal assistance. Through squatting vacant buildings the asylum and immigration management in the city is contested. These acts open alternatives and cracks within such selective machinery of eligibility determination. The *status quo* is challenged, offering a tangible alternative to the dominant institutional narrative on deservingness to solidarity. Squatting emerges as a response to the exclusionary policies that often accompany migration. These spaces become sites of negotiation where individuals assert not only their right to housing and livelihood but also to emancipation and autonomy. By reclaiming physical spaces, squatters also reclaim the social and political dimensions of everyday life. The encounters of citizen-led support collectives and (il)legalized migrants around squats opens various solidarity practices, and thereby a (re)definition of politics of solidarity employed to create, manage and sustain informal dwelling infrastructures in Brussels. Squatted spaces become incubators for alternative forms of community and organization, where diverse individuals negotiate new possibilities for collective becoming.

While the infrastructuration of squats —as a manifestation of solidarity— is often told through the rhetoric of humanitarianism or contentious politics, in practice, both citizen-led initiatives and migrant collectives, comparing both documented and undocumented squatters, frequently encounter a predicament of appropriation, guardianship and personal interests. Despite the tension transpiring from these challenges, they pursue social becoming (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013) and larger structural changes through pre-figurative politics (Fians, 2022). Be that for humanitarian reasons, political antagonism, a quest for recognition, or to tackle the urging insecurity of expulsion, detention and deportation risks (as is the case of independent undocumented squatters) each group navigates this moving terrain (Vigh, 2009) of 'squatting in solidarity' with a specific intention. These intentions are not static, they are continuously shaped and modelled through specific encounters and confrontations.

What we find particularly interesting about these distinct situations is that squats are not a mere vacuum filled with dwelling people, they are rather mediums to negotiate the politics of solidarity. The attempts to produce and maintain the squats as a solidarity infrastructure bring about tension and negotiations in the social fabric of situations in arrival cities. We could say that what was initiated as a matter of housing the excluded, has become a battleground to negotiate power relations and aspiration to autonomy over humanitarian assistance-ship. Of course, it can be contended that this kind of shaping the common (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016) takes the politics of subjectivity (Kron, 2016) into account, thus reproducing dividing lines and moving geometries of coalition within specific migrant-citizen communities. However, we believe that this social terrain is the most fertile soil in which to observe seeds of alternative solidarity grow. Identifying how solidarity forms, moves and transforms across social interactions and relations within alternative dwelling infrastructures gives dignity to actually existing underground practices of solidarity.

Generative Narrative Workshop: Navigating mistrust and uncertainties... A Reflexive Exploration of Narrative Generation with and on Illegalized Migrants in Brussels.

Amidst the complexities of generating narratives in Brussels, our collaboration with the commissioned artist to portray 'squatting in solidarity' unfolded with both promise and challenge. The Brussels' context, heavily influenced by a surge in artists and researchers aiming to shed light on the struggles of vulnerable migrants, has been a focal point since the project's inception. Beginning with the researcher's involvement in a reflection day at the squat of la Voix des Sans-Papiers (VSP) in November, where undocumented individuals, representatives of artistic institutions, and academics converged, we witnessed a call for alternative approaches amidst criticisms of extractivism and institutionalism. Notably, the VSP emphasized the importance of forging alliances and adopting alternative methodologies, advocating for a "faire sans-patron" (doing without a boss) approach. This concept, articulated by participants, underscores the need to shift away from pre-framed projects dictated by institutional agendas, where undocumented individuals are reduced to mere 'maquettes' or mock-ups in the hands of documented artists or academics. Instead, embracing a 'doing without a boss' ethos entails amplifying voices equally, ensuring fair compensation for undocumented artists, and maintaining political engagement in the presentation and communication of the narrative, aligning with their struggles for regularization and rights access.

Challenges in collaboratively generating narratives: rhetoric and practice

In an earnest endeavour, a researcher I. Oubad sought to pave the way to collaboratively craft narratives about squatting as a manifestation of solidarity, involving those directly impacted, the commissioned artist, and the researcher himself. However, the fleeting nature of the artist's presence (due to the temporality of his commission as a contracted artist) thwarted this intention, as it necessitated the collaborative participation of all involved parties on longer temporalities in order to discuss intentions, and avoid confining people directly involved to the mock-up function. Be that as it may with the artist's arrival, plans were set to organize a drawing workshop aimed at generating narratives on squatting, legalization challenges, and solidarity. Yet, reflecting on the ambivalent and unsustainable linked with the potential participants, coupled with the announcement of the workshop's funding by the European Commission (Perceived as complicit in migrant illegality), and the rushed timeline to wrap up the workshop within the artist's limited availability (6 days on the month of February) led to the withdrawal of four participants. They had initially believed in the researcher's vision of fostering true collaboration, but in actions not only in rhetoric.

Beyond workshop's confines: drifting through the city of Brussels:

Relations with some of the participants were rather reinforced after this episode, despite their withdrawal from the workshop. In an attempt to adapt to their dynamics, we have opted to 'drift' in the city with two participants, a methodological approach adopted to match participants' posture but also to hear narratives of squats as we move together. We followed the lead of

participants, and built on the threads to testimonies, anecdotes and personal stories as we tried to restitute the experiences of individuals within the city of Brussels. This approach facilitates a fluid exchange among us, laying the groundwork for narrative generation.

Some narratives unfold through a series of episodes. These encounters and testimonies have stimulated the artistic imagery and the ethnographic imagination.

<u>Anti-expulsion sit-in:</u>

In the heart of a wintry February, the artist and the researcher swept into the heart of a potent demonstration orchestrated by the Committee of Undocumented Women and the Citizen-Support collectives. Their goal was to stand firm against the eviction looming over those seeking refuge in a squatted hotel. A chorus of solidarity rose from a diverse array of individuals, united in their support of the undocumented women and their children. We aimed to absorb nuanced and tense exchanges between the protestors and the authorities.

Protestors blocking police from entering the hotel and enacting expulsion. - Credit I. Oubad 2024

These moments have shaped the artist's imagery that would find expression on postcards and storyboards. This visual representation carry a narrtaiveon the harsh reality of housing struggles faced by those illegalized by the migration system. It also crystalizes the unyielding energy of solidarity permeated to counter this eviction. A testament of the resilience of solidarity in the face of the violence of expulsion.

Storyboards by A. Ferrari on the anti-expulsion sit-in. - Credit A. Ferrari 2024
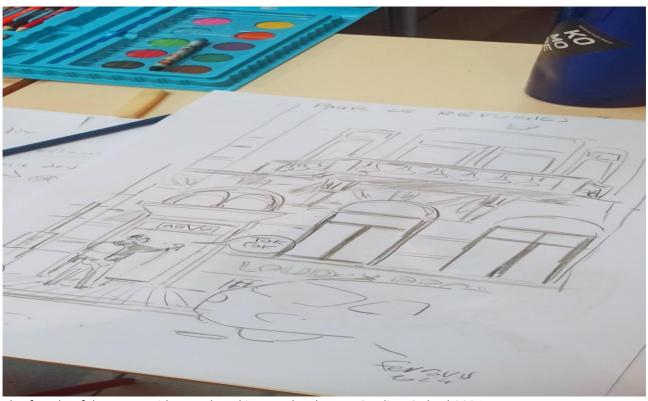
Squatting colonial legally, drifting with Anass.

The next day, Anass eagerly led us through the streets of Brussels. An undocumented Moroccan squatter, he shared tales of his experience in two once-vibrant squats, recounting confrontations with police and strategies to counter expulsion. Interestingly, Anass highlighted the resilience of his group of Moroccans who sustained themselves in squats without reliance on the citizen-support or 'white' collectives as he terms them. Amidst the rubble of a demolished squat adorned with graffiti honouring Omar Radi, a detained Moroccan journalist for political reasons, Anass delved into an account of a recently occupied villa, a symbol of Belgium's colonial past. To Anass squatting this villa, part of Brussels' patrimonie wasn't just about claiming shelter; it was a bold statement of reclaiming power from the colonizer and seeking justice for ancestors.

Demolished squats previously occupied by Anass and his group - Credit I. Oubad 2024

<u>Workshop, in consultation with Jaser on our artistic and ethnographic apprehension:</u>

At the workshop, we anticipated both Jaser, a Palestinian newcomer seeking asylum, and Adam a Moroccan with expertise in squatting. However, only Jaser attended. With Jaser primarily speaking Arabic and limited English, and the artist fluent in Italian with limited French, I facilitated real-time interpretation to bridge communication. We began by drawing what resonated with us. As we sketched, Jaser shared his experience with solidarity and squats as a newcomer, emphasizing that migrant stories should not portray them solely as victims but also highlight the State's role in producing their predicament. We thus presented testimonies we heard and events we witnessed for Jaser to reflect with us on that. His insights guided our artistic and ethnographic depictions. Jaser then asked the artist to draw the squat where he once lived as he arrived. After our moment together, we visited the squat where he once lived to hang the drawing. Despite being denied entry due to restrictions, we left the drawing as a symbol of J.'s presence. Reflecting on the day, we gained invaluable insights and guidance, enriching our understanding of individuals navigating similar challenges.

The facade of the squat with Jaser knocking on the door. - Credit I. Oubad 2024

Drifting through Brussels' urban landscape and engaging directly with those concerned with squats and solidarity around it has allowed us to overcome the limits of expeditive collaborations mentioned above. By allowing ourselves to be guided by Anass and Jasser and witnessing moments of solidarity to counter eviction, we gained intermediations to testimonies and situated eventful moments. This was material to generate narratives to account for the lived experiences of people excluded from rights and protection due to their administrative status in Brussels.

All in all, it is important to note the expressions of the people we met in this process. Despite their engagement in this endeavour, they have asserted a critique of the tokenistic approach taken by researchers and artists towards including marginalized groups, particularly illegalized migrants,

in their projects under the guise of co-creation and collaboration. The encounters highlight how these individuals are often treated as mere add-ons or temporary collaborators, with their involvement limited to specific project timelines and lacking in substantive engagement beyond superficial visibility. This approach raises significant questions about the perpetuation of extractive practices within these endeavours.

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