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Eroded and Reconfigured: The Dwelling Infrastructures of the *Mukara* along the Belgian-French Route to the UK

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Introduction: abandonment and control in shaping itineraries of escape to the UK

In Belgium, the Dublin regulation impactes the movements of unauthorised migrants strikingly. Due to the delegation of responsibility on the protection of asylum seekers, many are left excluded. The “Dublinised” people facing the stagnation of their cases and the exhaustion that comes from waiting indefinitely in makeshift situations take matters into their own hands. Often, they seek routes that might lead to stronger prospects of protection or sanctuary. In their perception, reaching the UK—a place where the Dublin Regulation does not hold the same sway—offers hope for taking routes of escape.

Many “dublinised” journeys from Belgium to the UK find themselves suspended or pushed back by the state's approach of the zero-point-of-fixation, controlling the corridor linking western Belgium to the northern ports of France, the primary gateway to the UK. Despite the hostility met in this route, the movement of people is sustained by intricate and often unexpected stations through their route. Along this route not-for-profit and for-profit facilitators create stations that allow dwelling and sanctuary in moments of suspension and push back in border zones. Makeshift camps, squats, and host's respite shelters are all transitory dwelling spaces for people escaping their exclusion from protection and legal statutes enacted by the Dublin regulation.

The route along the E42 highway in western Belgium has emerged as a critical itinerary in this quest for a refuge yet to be found. The E42 route offers access to highway rest areas where people might try the “Cargo-Truck game”, attempting to hide within trucks in hopes of a passage to the UK or to France's Opale Coast, where many pursue the “Boat game” to the UK.

The second and third nodes are concerned with these transitory dwelling spaces, hereinafter *migration stations*. To explore this I have conducted an itinerary-followed ethnography and series of life stories across key sites in Tournai, Lille, Calais and Grande-Synthe. These spaces, which span encampments, squats, and networks of respite houses are vital for understanding the migratory dwelling infrastructures emerging amidst pushbacks, suspension, dispersal. Understanding the forms through which these infrastructures are formed, eroded and reconfigured necessitates a holistic view of their interconnectedness. Thus, analysing these stations in isolation would obscure their role within this broader translocal framework. Hence, the need of linking node 2 and 3 into a sense of itinerary and route, rather than separated locations.

An itinerary-followed ethnography: following movement through movement and dwelling through dwelling;

This journey began in Brussels, where I encountered echoes of the route to the UK. From there, in March, I moved to Calais, the focal point at the northern French ports, a crucial point for passage to the UK. I quickly realized that many dublinised people seeking passage to the UK had to return to Belgium, particularly to the Tournai region. In France, highway rest areas leading to Calais are heavily monitored and policed, often erased, making it difficult for people to catch cargo-trucks. As a result, migrants relocate to Tournai, creating temporary dwelling spaces near loopy parks and highway stations where they can attempt to get into the “cargo-truck game”. After my initial fieldwork in Brussels and Calais, I returned to Tournai, in June, for exploratory research, to establish contacts that allowed me access to respite accommodation and makeshift encampments along this transitory space.

The need to understand the constant movement between locations—Brussels for respite shelter in winter time, Tournai for strategic positioning for trucks heading to England and Ireland, and Calais as a frontline border zone to the UK—led me back to Calais and surroundings, in septembre, for an in-depth ethnography of the migration stations emerging from the suspension and the push back of unauthorized migrants. In October, I returned to Tournai and surroundings following findings I collected in Calais. I then connected these migration stations, completing an itinerary of inquiry that mirrors the migratory circuits and movement. I gained a comprehensive understanding of the translocal migration stations, highlighting issues inherent to their infrastructuration in contexts of hostile state interventions, solidarity and commodification.

My methodology evolved from a place-based observation in the squats of Brussels to an itinerary-followed ethnography, driven by the need to capture the lived experience of movement and adaptation of shelter along this itinerary. The initial focus on Brussels squats provided echoes of other locations. Some squats are just one part of a broader shifting landscape of transitory dwelling spaces that sustain migratory routes through Belgium, into France and towards the UK.

This shift in focus led to an approach grounded in drifting and monitoring—a mobile ethnography that follows itineraries, anecdotes, and (trans)formation of dwelling along the Belgian-French corridor. Ethnography thus became a practice of capturing movement through movement and dwelling through dwelling. My ethnography became adaptable to moments of opening squats, of relocating POMs to emergency and respite shelters upon encampment evictions, to moments of distribution of material, to commemorations of the death, to general assemblies of collective actions... to negotiations with local authorities. All in all, I drifted within the three shifts of my narrators: work at job; work at home; work for justice.

My ethnographies encompass a diverse array of settings, ranging from makeshift encampments in Tournai to the *Cherkebet*¹ and *Kharabas*² in Calais, and extending to respite accommodations in Lille and its surroundings. Throughout this journey, I have conducted ethnography and interviews with key interlocutors from various organizations, including *Xyz network* in Tournai, *Migraction59* in Lille, *Maison Margelle* in Calais, the *Auberge des Migrants* in Calais, and *Réseau Toile* in Calais, Grande Synthe and Dunkirk. My research has taken me to the *squat in Rue de S* and the *Kharaba in Rue J* in Calais, where I engaged with individuals and their supporters dwelling in these spaces.

Additionally, I have volunteered with *Caritas - Secours Catholique* in Calais—a critical hub for humanitarian aid, providing essential materials to support the dwelling of people on the move. My involvement extended to participating in the *general assembly of solidarians and NGO representatives*, where weekly briefings were held, and collective actions were decided to support various camps and squats. These multiple observation points allowed access to the intricate web of the infrastructuration of migration stations along this route. Eroded and Reconfigured: Migration Stations between hostile interventions, solidarity practices and commodification along the route to the UK.

Organised Abandonment, politics of exhaustion and zero-point-of-xation policy along the Belgian-French route to the UK.

This itinerary is structurally shaped by the ambivalence of *organized abandonment and control*. This duality is evident in the deliberate neglect of protection seekers by states and institutions, leaving them trapped in irregular and precarious situations. When individuals take matters into their own hands and pursue sanctuary and refuge toward the UK, mechanisms of control are activated to disperse, contain, and suspend their attempts to escape exclusion and precarity.

The neglect and control are not passive; they are systemic, an active form of governance, meeting protection seekers with refusal and abandonment. Control is enacted through the *politics of exhaustion*, which operates not only on the physical and emotional toll inflicted on migrant people but also through the structural impacts of forced displacement and the suspension of intentions, aspirations, and journeys.

¹ An Amharic Ethiopian term meaning “mixing readily available materials to create shelter.” It refers to the improvised and temporary clustering of tents, often formed in response to evictions, raids, and the zero-point xation approach.

² Kharabat (plural) is an Arabic term used by Sudanese and Eritrean people on the move along this route to describe dilapidated spaces where living conditions are unsuitable and, at times, nearly impossible. These Kharabat are often abandoned factories or houses lacking the basic infrastructure needed for daily life. Despite this, individuals trapped in a state of suspension on their journey to the UK often inhabit these spaces.

Policies that forcibly dismantle encampments and destabilize respite shelters transform this route into a bordered itinerary—a machine of perpetual motion where uncertainty and precarity become normalized. At the same time, the criminalization of solidarity exacerbates the banality of this evil. NGOs and grassroots solidarity networks face surveillance and punitive measures, limiting their ability to intervene effectively. The criminalization of aid and solidarity in specific zones, through the *zero-point-of-fixation* policy forces distribution points to disperse, paralleling the forced displacement of encampments and further exhausting both people on the move and their supporters. By ensuring there is no "point of fixation" for POMs—whether camps, squats, or distribution points—states enforce a strategy of disruption. This creates reliance on make-shift setups and a logistical exhaustion for those attempting to provide aid or organise support. This fragments solidarity networks and disperse both resources and people.

Encampments Dispersal

Encampments dispersal are a common tactic used by authorities to destabilize established migrant support networks. This approach involves dismantling informal camps where migrants have settled, forcing them to relocate to new areas. This tactic is often justified under the guise of “dismantling smuggling networks” or public health but primarily serves to disrupt the stability and continuity of migration stations towards which a corridor of support is directed by humanitarian and solidararian associations. Instances observed in Tournai and in Calais resonate with what we can call politics of exhaustion (Ansems de Vries and Welanders, 2021). Here exhaustion through dispersal is part of a broader strategy to wear down the persistence of sanctuary infrastructure by migrants and their supporters. They contribute to a cycle of instability, where illegalized migrants and their supporters are repeatedly forced to rebuild their stations, which exhausts the resources and motivation of solidarians in sustaining sanctuary along this route.

Kharabas Evictions

The eviction of Kharabas, where migrants have sought shelter, is another method used to displace them. These evictions are often carried out with little notice, leaving migrants vulnerable to immediate shelterlessness. The very fact that these Kharabas are faced with various degrees of support and hostility due to their situation in regard to points of passage make them scarce, selective and access to them is shaped through certain hierarchies of community, capital and deservingness. Thus, the entanglement of hostile interventions and exclusive support undermines their ability to function as permanent migration stations.

Blocking Distribution Points

Blocking food and material distribution points is a tactic used to increase the intricacies in infrastructuring transitory dwelling spaces. Authorities may close down or obstruct access to parks and points where distribution of this material is usually carried. These strategies of dispersal and harassment to support providers also discourage solidarians. Here material is disposed of in certain distribution points and then redistributed by certain migrants' community leaders within encampments and Kharabat. This position some as brokers and gatekeepers to material needed to maintain these dwelling spaces, creating dynamics of captation.

Criminalizing Providence of respite accommodation:

Solidarians providing respite accommodation, function through conducting and dispatching people on the move for respite periods during the weekend as they await moments of passage. NGOs and grassroots organisations that federate citizens conducting and offering shelter to undocumented migrants frequently face obstacles such as roadblocks, document checks, fines, and sometimes even legal actions under the pretext of "transporting illegal migrants." These forms of restriction are designed to undermine the support networks essential to a form of migration stations. Such measures not only disrupt immediate assistance to encampments and Kharabat but also delegitimize the respite accommodation provided by family hosts along the route. Varying in degree, criminalisation becomes particularly direct in situations of translocal conductions between Belgium and France, as crossing state borders with undocumented migrants is often criminalized as facilitation of illegal migration.

All that considered, political erosion of migration stations manifested through both direct actions against migrant support networks and broader policies that neglect or undermine access to protection along the route. This reflects the broader trend of undermining sanctuary along this itinerary.

The Becoming of shelter along this bordered route

This occurrence significantly shapes the types and forms of shelters available along this route. In the following section, I provide a brief typology of the shelters supporting the *Mukara*— that is an Amharic term used by POMs to refer to the attempt of crossing this route despite the challenges and difficulties. It is an attempt towards a betterment of self.

Mahattat:

An Arabic term meaning "stations" or "stops", often used metaphorically by Sudanese and Eritrean POMs to describe temporary gathering points along highways. These stations serve as hubs where POMs pause to plan their next steps or connect with others before continuing their journey toward the Opale Coast or the UK.

Cherkbet:

An Amharic Ethiopian term meaning "mixing readily available material into a home." It describes the improvised and transient grouping of tents that often emerge following evictions, raids, or the enforcement of zero-point-of-xation policy.

Kharabat:

Used to refer to dilapidated spaces, such as abandoned warehouses, often repurposed by POMs and their supporters as makeshift shelters. These spaces are adapted to provide survival near logistical hubs and ports.

Squats:

Self-organized spaces created by migrants and activists, functioning as vital sanctuaries that offer temporary housing and support. These squats are the result of collective organizing efforts among POMs and solidarity networks.

Collective Shelters:

Formal or semi-formal accommodations managed by NGOs or solidarity groups. These shelters serve as living spaces for international protection seekers (IPS) and are often part of broader support networks for migrants. They may provide access to essential services, legal aid, and the rechanneling of people on the move into protection systems.

Emergency Rooms:

Short-term accommodations set up to respond to immediate critical situations, such as survivors of shipwrecks, injured individuals, or those rendered vulnerable. Typically integrated into collective shelters, they prioritize urgent needs and offer temporary respite.

Local Hosts' Respite:

Private homes offering weekend accommodation, facilitated through community-led initiatives like *l'hébergement citoyen*, *Migraction*⁵⁹ or similar networks. These homes provide respite within the broader circuit shaping the dwelling infrastructures of people on the move.

The zero-point-of fixation has significantly contributed to the fragmentation and dispersion of sheltering infrastructures. The frequent evictions of the encampments and Kharabat forced migrants and their supporters to seek stations in smaller, less organized encampments and squats across different locations, through make-shift setups. NGOs no longer dominate the management of migration stations as they once did. This is apparent in S., testimony: *“Before, NGOs were really present. They set up distribution points in important places, shared information, and sometimes even stayed with us in the camps and squats. But now, it’s not the same. They only come by to drop off some basics... food, blankets, and stuff like that.”*

Indeed, their involvement has become more sporadic. This shift is partly a strategic response to not only avoid harassment of State authorities, but also conflicts with organizers of the passage business, which have increasingly taken over the management of certain migration stations. As a result, the infrastructuration of these stations is now largely developed and maintained by the migrants themselves and passage business. This shift introduces new dynamics, including the emergence of hierarchies of access and the commodification of shelter stations.

The Infrastructuring work of dwelling, people as infrastructure and (un)expected arrangements

The infrastructuring work for making the dwelling possible is shaped by a complex web of alliance, oppositions, and interactions among various shape-shifting constellations, including NGOs autonomous groups, and facilitators of the passage. Despite differing political, ethical and lucrative stances, these people often find themselves intertwined in (un)expected attunements after state’s interventions and dispersion of existing efforts. While criminalisation is sought to abolish solidarity efforts, in the stances we observed it produced a counter-effect. The byproduct is people with various references and intentions get together to fulfill the immediate needs of the dispersed people on the move. They get together to operate in an *ad hoc* alliance as “infrastructure” of information and material providence. In fact the immediate need mobilises better than ideology. People get to become an infrastructure, despite their divergent stances. They sustain and adapt their resources amid dispersion.

H.: An (in)formal organizer

H. plays a critical role as an organizer who navigates the fine line between formal and informal modes of operation. They provide vital information about the dismantlement of encampments and the availability of sanctuary zones, helping POMs adapt to rapidly changing conditions. H. also mediates the tensions between highway police crackdowns and the local Bourgmestre’s occasional tolerance, carefully balancing the dynamics of enforcement and leniency. In addition, H. facilitates moments of respite for POMs, offering a temporary shelter for those on the move. H., is channeling their

resources in strategic negotiation and adaptability in the maintenance of the dwelling infrastructure.

T.: Fixated POM and organizer

T. is a POM who has become a semi-stationary figure within this circuit, simultaneously occupying the roles of dweller and organizer. Their familiarity with the local network of support enables them to guide other POMs toward reliable dwelling groups and trustworthy intermediaries. T.'s work reflects the importance of intra-community knowledge and social trust in sustaining the dwelling infrastructure. By acting as a reliable point of contact within the transient community, T. makes others access essential resources and connections, stabilizing parts of the migratory infrastructure.

A.: An (in)formal organizer Supporting Mukara

A. operates within the delicate intersection of formal humanitarian aid and informal support networks. They are actively involved in facilitating not-for-profit shelter initiatives, ensuring that POMs have access to safe spaces amidst the zero-point-of-fixation intervention. Additionally, A. plays a role in supporting the *Mukara* in cargo-trucks. A.'s dual focus on shelter provision and logistical support highlights the multifaceted nature of infrastructuring work, where the so-called humanitarian provisions, political contention, and practical needs fulfillment intersect.

Contingent Arrangements and the formation of dwelling infrastructure.

These people, through their unique capacities, resources and circulation along different locations and itineraries illustrate the interconnectedness of people, politics and economies along this bordered route. *Mahettat*, *Chekbet*, *Kharabat*, Squats, collective shelter and local host respite become spaces infrastructured through people actions, circuits and shape-shifting constellations.

Here solidarity has neither fixed affiliation nor attribution, it transpired from the entanglement with different modes of facilitation. It is liquid, rather than solid. *People as infrastructure* (Simon. 2021) is a way to capture the fluid and adaptive nature of migration infrastructures.

Ultimately, the intertwining of diverse actors in these spaces reflects the complexity of the infrastructure of shelter, where survival, resistance and commodification are deeply intertwined. Despite the criminalization of support and the precarious conditions of these makeshift stations, individuals and groups continue to find ways to weave critical solidarity, shaping this route in an enduring way.

Conclusive Remarks:

The 2nd and 3rd nodes have underscored intricate relationships that underpin the circulation of solidarity and the circuits and itinerary sustaining it. Squats, Kharabat, and Cherkbet are all reaction formations to the systemic abandonment of those deemed undeserving or excluded from institutional frameworks of rights and recognition.

In this context, the attunements within migrant support reveal a dynamic interplay—not operating according to the enforced codes of conduct to solidarity groups. The solidarity shaping these infrastructures is rather a shadow, and echo and a resolution to rounds and rounds of dispossession and criminalisation. This solidarity exists in a space of "in-betweenness," responding to the needs of the moment while resisting not only to the logics of exclusion and abandonment but also to those of rigid affiliations and identity politics.

These practices invite us to rethink dwelling spaces and their broader implications. They push us to consider how organized abandonment, enacted through illegalization, border containment policies, and dispossession—both large and small—produces the makeshift setups that challenge traditional notions of territory, professionalised roles of “assistance”, legal identities and even conventional understandings solidarity inherent to the mainstream framing of it— humanitarian or contentious political. In fact the dwelling infrastructures we account here are not just shelters but sites of circulating and ambivalent migrants' support, they are rehearsals of a fluid form of solidarity.

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