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DWELLING IN DISPERSAL

Logic of Subtraction, Infrastructuring of Endurance, and the
Production of Fugitivity along the Belgian-French Route to the UK

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Abstract:

This thesis asks how migrants dwell, move, and sustain orientation toward a destination when the state has organized their presence around its impossibility. Its ground is the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom, where "Dublinized" migrants face an architecture that compels movement while criminalizing it, and erodes the shelter it requires. Dispersal, the thesis argues, is enforcement's mode of operation, not its failure.

Three instruments constitute this formation: the Dublin Regulation III, a technology of suspension producing an administrative non-person for whom every jurisdiction disclaims responsibility; France's *zéro point de fixation*, targeting the consolidation of migrants' presence into a legally demandable form; and Belgium's "transmigrant" category, declaring the Dublinized migrant inherently nomadic and so exempt from rights formally owed to asylum seekers.

The thesis then turns to what dwelling becomes when it can no longer take root. Through nineteen months of mobile-activist ethnography, I trace how eviction cycles subtract terrain from migrants' encampments while assembling, in their place, a circuitscape: a distributed geography of squats, camps, and hosting networks spanning Brussels to the Channel, legible only at the scale of the route itself. Read through an infrastructural lens, these circuits endure not despite their ephemerality but through it, sustained by peculiar modes of endurance in infrastructuring dwelling and movement.

What this infrastructure sustains is not mere survival but a subjective orientation. Read through the analytics of fugitivity, the thesis distinguishes this from migration studies' aspiration framework: aspiration presupposes a field of possibility to select from, while Dublinized migrants inhabit a field from which possibility has been subtracted. What remains is anterior to aspiration – minimal, repeatedly reconstituted, oriented away from an intolerable present rather than a chosen destination. This fugitive orientation is not a mere tactic migrants deploy, but the very form of existence the border regime produces and then polices.

Held together, these registers (governmental, spatial, infrastructural, and subjective) outline a wider technique of contemporary border governance, in which the control of unauthorized migration works not through walls or deportation alone but through the engineered

impossibility of rest, and in which fragile infrastructures of solidarity must be continually remade in the narrow space that logic leaves open.

Abstract (Italian):

Questa tesi indaga come i migranti abitino, si muovano e mantengano un orientamento verso una destinazione quando lo Stato ha organizzato la loro presenza attorno all'impossibilità di tale destinazione. Il suo terreno d'indagine è la rotta belga-francese verso il Regno Unito, dove i migranti "dublinati" affrontano un'architettura che impone il movimento criminalizzandolo, ed erode il riparo di cui esso necessita. La dispersione, sostiene la tesi, è la modalità operativa del dispositivo di controllo, non il suo fallimento.

Tre strumenti costituiscono questa formazione: il Regolamento Dublino III, una tecnologia della sospensione che produce una non-persona amministrativa di cui nessuna giurisdizione si assume la responsabilità; lo *zéro point de fixation* francese, volto a impedire che la presenza dei migranti si consolidi in una forma giuridicamente rivendicabile; e la categoria belga di "transmigrante", che dichiara il migrante dublinato intrinsecamente nomade e dunque esente dai diritti formalmente dovuti ai richiedenti asilo.

La tesi si volge poi a ciò che l'abitare diventa quando non può più radicarsi. Attraverso diciannove mesi di etnografia mobile-attivista, ricostruisco come i cicli di sgombero sottraggano terreno agli accampamenti dei migranti, componendo al loro posto un *circuitscape*: una geografia distribuita di squat, campi e reti di accoglienza che si estende da Bruxelles alla Manica, leggibile solo alla scala della rotta stessa. Letti attraverso una lente infrastrutturale, questi circuiti perdurano non nonostante la loro effimerità ma attraverso di essa, sostenuti da peculiari modalità di resistenza (*endurance*) nell'infrastrutturare l'abitare e il movimento.

Ciò che questa infrastruttura sostiene non è la mera sopravvivenza, ma un orientamento soggettivo. Letta attraverso l'analitica della fugitivity, la tesi distingue questo orientamento dal quadro dell'aspirazione proprio degli studi migratori: l'aspirazione presuppone un campo di possibilità da cui scegliere, mentre i migranti dublinati abitano un campo da cui la possibilità è stata sottratta. Ciò che resta è anteriore all'aspirazione – minimale, ricostituito ripetutamente, orientato lontano da un presente intollerabile piuttosto che verso una destinazione scelta. Questo orientamento fuggitivo non è una semplice tattica messa in atto

dai migranti, ma la forma stessa di esistenza che il regime di frontiera produce e poi sorveglia.

Tenuti insieme, questi registri (governamentale, spaziale, infrastrutturale e soggettivo) delineano una più ampia tecnica di governo contemporaneo delle frontiere, in cui il controllo della migrazione non autorizzata opera non solo attraverso muri o espulsioni, ma attraverso l'impossibilità ingegnerizzata del riposo, e in cui fragili infrastrutture di solidarietà devono essere continuamente ricostruite nello spazio ristretto che tale logica lascia aperto.

Résumé (French):

Cette thèse examine comment les migrants habitent, se déplacent et maintiennent une orientation vers une destination lorsque l'État a organisé leur présence autour de l'impossibilité de celle-ci. Son terrain est la route belgo-française vers le Royaume-Uni, où les migrants « dublinés » sont confrontés à une architecture qui impose le mouvement tout en le criminalisant, et qui érode l'abri dont il a besoin. La dispersion, soutient la thèse, est le mode opératoire du dispositif de contrôle, non son échec.

Trois instruments constituent cette formation : le Règlement Dublin III, une technologie de la suspension produisant une non-personne administrative dont aucune juridiction ne se reconnaît responsable ; le « zéro point de fixation » français, visant à empêcher que la présence des migrants ne se consolide sous une forme juridiquement revendicable ; et la catégorie belge de « transmigrant », qui déclare le migrant dubliné intrinsèquement nomade, et donc exempté des droits formellement dus aux demandeurs d'asile.

La thèse se tourne ensuite vers ce que devient l'habiter lorsqu'il ne peut plus s'enraciner. À travers dix-neuf mois d'ethnographie mobile-activiste, je retrace comment les cycles d'expulsion soustraient du terrain aux campements de migrants, tout en rassemblant, à leur place, un circuitscape : une géographie distribuée de squats, de camps et de réseaux d'accueil s'étendant de Bruxelles à la Manche anglaise, lisible uniquement à l'échelle de la route elle-même. Lus à travers un prisme infrastructurel, ces circuits perdurent non pas malgré leur caractère éphémère, mais à travers lui, soutenus par des modalités particulières d'endurance dans l'infrastructuration de l'habiter et du mouvement.

Ce que cette infrastructure soutient n'est pas la simple survie, mais une orientation subjective. Lue à travers l'analytique de la fugitivity, la thèse distingue cette orientation du cadre de

l'aspiration propre aux études migratoires : l'aspiration présuppose un champ de possibles parmi lesquels choisir, tandis que les migrants dublinés habitent un champ dont la possibilité a été soustraite. Ce qui reste est antérieur à l'aspiration – minimal, sans cesse reconstitué, orienté loin d'un présent intolérable plutôt que vers une destination choisie. Cette orientation fugitive n'est pas une simple tactique déployée par les migrants, mais la forme même d'existence que le régime frontalier produit puis surveille.

Pris ensemble, ces registres (gouvernemental, spatial, infrastructurel et subjectif) dessinent une technique plus large de gouvernement contemporain des frontières, dans laquelle le contrôle de la migration non autorisée opère non seulement par les murs ou l'expulsion, mais par l'impossibilité savamment organisée du repos, et dans laquelle de fragiles infrastructures de solidarité doivent être sans cesse refaites dans l'espace étroit que cette logique laisse ouvert.

Introduction:

‘Dublin, Dublin, Dublin...’:

“I ran from it, but I was still in it”

— Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (2018)

Asylum, refuge, human rights? all that is words in Europe. You see those who had to give me refuge were the same who left me in the streets. And every time I try... it is always Dublin, Dublin, Dublin... as if the law has sense only when it works for them. In Belgium, in France, always Dublin. Like it is stamped on my forehead. They gave me nothing. No home. No papers. No work. Sometimes an association brings food or we have to go get it. What do they call it again... charity. I did not cross the world for charity, I did not go all the way to hear to be waiting for people to feed me, to give me where to sleep [...] The police keep telling me to ‘go there’ to Italy. Not here. But there, I was left with nothing. And here. I hunted like I was a thief. Chased from place to place, camp to camp, city to city, street to street, as if I am a criminal... as if I am a fugitive... I do not run from the police, the police never stopped running after me. Maybe I have to always be on the run... but if I have to keep running, at least let me run in the right direction.

(Daoud, person on the move, interview, Péruwelz, June 2024)

These words, translated from Arabic, are drawn from a longer set of conversations, fragmented, recursive, unfolding over time, that Daoud shared in Péruwelz and Tournai across June and September 2024. He narrated a life not as a linear account, but as something worked out in motion across borders, through waiting.

I do not begin from the story that policy tells about him. It flattened sequences of procedures, categories, and outcomes. That version presumes coherence where there is friction. Instead, I start from the experience as it is lived. A way of seeing the system itself. A way of ‘seeing

like a Dublinized’¹, to grasp how it organizes movement, how it distributes vulnerability, and how it produces the very conditions it claims to manage.

Daoud did not become a fugitive by choice. He became one by registration. In Italy, within forty-eight hours of his boat touching Lampedusa, a man in a uniform pressed Daoud’s fingers onto a screen. The procedure took some minutes. No one explained what it meant. No one said that these minutes will determine the next eight years of your life. No one said: we are now ascribing you, juridically and permanently to this territory; a territory that is about to reject you. No one said that ascription will follow you across every European border you subsequently cross, rendering you inadmissible everywhere you try to begin again. They said only that it was normal. Everyone does this.

What those minutes did was activate the Dublin Regulation III. The European Union law that assigns asylum responsibility to the first member state a person enters. Daoud had entered through Italy. Italy would process his claim. Italy would reject it. And from that rejection forward, every subsequent attempt to seek protection elsewhere in Europe would trigger the same procedure: a transfer request back to Italy, addressed to a country that had already definitively closed his case, and whose ‘obligations’ toward him it considered discharged. He was legally assignable there and practically unable to be sent anywhere else². The asylum system had produced a condition it could not resolve. Daoud was that condition, in person.

Italy, in 2019, rejected his claim on the grounds that Sudan was a safe country of origin. The designation had emerged from assessments temporarily tightened in the uncertain months following the fall of Omar al-Bashir, when it was assumed that Sudan might stabilize under

¹“Dublinized” names a condition produced by exposure to the Dublin Regulation’s machinery rather than a fixed legal category. Three distinct populations enter it through different mechanisms. The first is the registered arrival whose EURODAC record established the first country of entry. The second is the rejected asylum seekers: Article 13(1)(d) of Dublin III covers persons whose claim has already been decided, meaning rejection does not terminate Dublin exposure but produces its most irreversible form, in which the person remains assigned to a state that has discharged its obligations and is not required to reopen a concluded case. The third is the person who escaped fingerprinting and whose position is one of latent Dublinization: not yet caught in the machinery, but should essentially pass through it to claim asylum. What unites all three is that their claims have been removed from assessment on its merits and replaced with a question of administrative assignment. The regulation does not ask whether protection is available where it assigns them. It asks only whose turn it is to process them. Dublinization is the condition of being reduced to an unsolved delegated procedure.

²The Dublin Regulation III operates as a multilateral EU framework designating which state bears responsibility for an asylum claim. Once Italy issued a final rejection, it had formally discharged its Dublin obligations. Any subsequent transfer request from Belgium would arrive at a closed administrative file that Italy was not required to reopen. Removal to Sudan, meanwhile, was not enforceable. No functioning return channel existed, a situation compounded by the uprising that ousted Omar al-Bashir and later the collapse of state authority following the outbreak of civil war in Sudan in 2021.

the transitional government that followed. Through an accelerated procedure, the cases of Sudanese nationals were processed without serious examination of the specific fear of persecution and instability that had driven individuals to leave. The form letter that communicated the rejection used the words “insufficient” and “unfounded claims”, Daoud said. The appeal failed. He was, in administrative terms, a problem the law had created and declined to solve. The impasse was double: Italy had discharged its Dublin obligations and was not required to reopen a concluded case. Sudan was practically unreachable due to instabilities. What the regulation produced was not a transfer but a permanent deferral.

He spent fourteen months in Italy after the rejection of his appeal. In a squat in Rome, then a series of arrangements in Turin held together by the solidarity of local activists. He was not running away during this period. He was waiting, which is a different kind of exhaustion. The exhaustion of someone who has been told they must leave but has been given no reason to stay. Whose presence is tolerated only in the sense that no one has yet come to remove them.

It was in Turin that he heard about Belgium. About Brussels. About the Plateforme Citoyenne, the civic hosting network, the squats. He heard the word ‘support’ and he moved toward it. After fourteen months of institutional suspension: processed, numbered, rejected, left... a support network was something worth crossing a border for.

In Brussels, he claimed asylum. Within weeks, the Dublin procedure began. Belgium issued a transfer request to Italy. Italy did not respond within the statutory deadline. Under the rules, Daoud was the responsibility of Italy. But this responsibility does not ask whether protection is possible in the place it designates. It asks only whose administrative turn it is to hold the person who needs protection. Daoud was detained at a closed center in Bruges, while his lawyer attempted to secure a suspension of his removal on the grounds of documented deterioration in Italian reception conditions. After twenty-two days, he was released. His situation had not changed: inadmissible in Belgium, un-returnable to Sudan, unenforceable in Italy. The system had produced him as an exception to every rule and a subject to none. An exception not outside the law, but produced by it (Agamben, 1995).

What followed were two years in Brussels in the margins of everything. Not ‘illegal’, not ‘legal’. Not in the reception system, not fully excluded from it. Just practically, structurally, systemically unable to access it formally without relying on what remains of solidarity towards ‘unauthorized’ migrants. He slept in emergency shelters when there was room, in the

squats opened by solidarity networks when those could be found. He worked in delivery and construction without papers, without protection, without recourse when things went wrong, which they regularly did.

By later 2022 this pursuit has closed every door except one. The Channel. He had heard that the United Kingdom operated outside the Dublin framework, that a claim made on British soil would be assessed on its own terms rather than redirected back through the European circuit of inadmissibility. Whether this was fully true, whether the Nationality and Borders Act 2022³ had already begun to erode even this possibility, he could not know from where he was. What he knew was that every other direction had been blocked. He went to Calais.

In Calais the running became literal. Every forty-eight hours the police came. Early morning, with vehicles and cleaning trucks and the specific institutional rhythm of a procedure that has been performed so many times it has become routine for everyone except the people it is performed upon. Tents cut open. Sleeping bags seized. Belongings taken, thrown and destroyed. “You stand in the cold with what you wore to sleep and you watch the truck carry away everything you had collected, and you begin again. You find a tent. You find a sleeping bag. You find a place. After forty-eight hours. They come again”.

*Hunter like I was a thief. Chased from a place to place, camp to camp, city to city,
street to street, as if I am a criminal. As if I am a fugitive.*

This is the word Daoud uses: *hārib* (Arabic: هارب), one who flees or is a fugitive (this matter will be examined and articulated in depth in chapter six). He does not use it as a legal category. He uses it as a description of a condition. The condition of being permanently in flight, of having the state’s pursuit so organized around your movement that flight becomes the only available mode of existence. He is precise about one thing: “*I do not run from the police. The police never stopped running after me*”. The distinction matters. The fugitive, in conventional understanding, is someone fleeing the consequences of their own actions. Daoud is not that person. He is a person whose presence, whose rest, whose stillness (the act of putting down a tent or a sleeping bag in the same place twice) has been designated by the state as the transgression and subjected to eviction. He is hunted not for what he has done but

³ The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 introduced an asylum system criminalising irregular entry and enabling offshore processing, widely condemned by UNHCR as incompatible with the 1951 Refugee Convention, and largely rolled back by the Labour government following its 2024 election victory.

See the Act: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/36/contents>

for what he is: a person that has taken up space, attempting to move forwards, a person who has, against all institutional efforts to prevent it, begun to dwell.

What sustained him through the eviction cycle, through the interceptions, through the accumulation of loss that the forty-eight hour rhythm imposed, was not hope in any large sense. It was smaller than hope and more durable. It was people around him. Someone always knew where the food distribution would be. Someone always had contact with a solidarity collective for a tent here, two nights in a squat there. Every eviction scattered the encampment and within hours it had reconstituted itself; in the industrial zone, under the highway overpass, in the bushes along the highway. The state could destroy the tent. It could not destroy the capacity of people to try again.

What Daoud's trajectory makes visible are two conditions that the scholarship has not always held apart. Abandonment names the structural relation: the condition of being juridically present within a system that has withdrawn its protection (Povinelli, 2011; Gilmore, 2022). Daoud is not outside the law. He is assigned, transferable, detainable. He simply has no claim on what the law is supposed to provide. Exhaustion names the temporal dimension of that condition: what is produced across time, through the accumulation of evictions, displacement, rejections and suspensions that wear the person down not through a single act of exclusion but through the attrition of its repetition (Welander, 2021). The two are distinct, but overlapping. Abandonment is a structural position produced at a specific movement: the moment the Dublin mechanism closes without resolution. Exhaustion is a process, one that unfolds across months and years and that operates precisely through the machines of suspension that abandonment sets in motions (Stel, 2020). What the state produces through the eviction cycle is not simply a person without shelter. It is a person whose capacity to persist has been made the target of governance (Tazzioli, 2018).

Contemporary European border governance has produced, over the past two decades, a growing population of people who belong nowhere and are manageable everywhere (Tazzioli, 2019). People for whom the administrative machinery of asylum has processed a claim, issued a rejection, and then found itself unable to execute the return it has ordered, leaving its subjects in a condition that is neither protection nor expulsion but something more intractable than either (Leerkes and Van Houte, 2020). They are present in European territory. They are absent from its protection systems. They move, not freely, not by choice, but because the alternative to movement is to be left without any remaining direction (Pinelli,

2018), and because somewhere along the route there remains a direction that has not yet been closed. This thesis follows them.

The story of Daoud sits at the intersection of several bodies of scholarship that have in recent years grown considerably without yet being fully integrated. There is first, a robust literature on the production of precarity through border enforcement. A scholarship that has moved beyond early humanitarian framing of migrants “vulnerability” toward structural accounts of how states deliberately engineer exposure (Tazzioli, 2018; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020). This work has established that the material impoverishment of migrants along European routes is not policy failure but policy design: the deliberate production of exhaustion as a deterrence instrument (Welander, 2021; Palmas, 2021). There is second, a literature on mobility and immobility that has challenged the binary opposition between the free-moving cosmopolitan and the fixed local, demonstrating instead that mobility is always differentiated, that the same governance formation that enables certain circulations forecloses others, and that enforced movement and enforced stillness are not opposites but complementary instruments of the same control apparatus (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007; Nyers and Rygiel, 2012; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019). There is third, a substantial literature on encampment – on the camp as the paradigmatic form of migrant containment, from Agamben’s theorization of the camp as the biopolitical nomos of modernity (1998) through more empirically accounts of how camps function as spaces of humanitarian governance (Agier, 2011; Campesi, 2015), zones of prolonged displacement (Picker and Pasquetti, 2015), and sites where migrants produce forms of collective life that exceed their administrative function (Davies and Isakjee, 2019). There is fourth, a literature on borders and bordering. On the border not as a line but as a process (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), performed through practices distributed across territory and enacted through the bodies of those it sorts; a border that is, as Hess and Kasperek (2017) have argued, simultaneously a site of sovereignty and a site of struggle. There is finally, a literature on the autonomy of migration: on migrants not as passive objects of governance but as political actors whose movement constitutes a form of social practice that governance must continuously respond to and attempt to contain (Mezzadra and Nunes 2010; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; De Genova, 2017).

Each of these literatures illuminates something essential about the phenomenon this thesis investigates. Each also encounters limits when brought to bear on the specific configuration of the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom. The literature on confinement has tended

to analyze enforcement at single sites (the Calais encampment, the Greek hotspot, the Italian closed center) rather than across the translocal formation that connects them. The mobility/immobility scholarship has produced substantial frameworks but has been less attentive to the specific spatial forms through which enforced mobility is materially enacted. The encampment literature, for all its sophistication, has generally studied camps as relatively bounded entities – sites of containment with perimeters – rather than as nodes in circuits of movement where dwelling exists not despite mobility but through it, and where the governmental logic aims not to contain populations within camps but to prevent their consolidation anywhere along the route. The border studies literature has theorized bordering as a process but has been less attentive to the infrastructural dimensions of that process: to questions of how dwelling is made and unmade as the operational medium of border enforcement. and the autonomy of the migration framework, while productively insisting on migrants’ agency, has at times risked underdetermining the structural conditions that constrain what autonomous movement can be and what it costs.

This thesis does not resolve these gaps by synthesizing the existing literature. It addresses them by following the route. By attending to the specific configurations of the Belgian-French corridor in its intersection, from the Brussels squats where Dublinized migrants attempt to sustain urban dwelling despite systematic non-reception, along the highway where the route’s intermediate circuits of encampment and civic hosting operate, to the northern French encampments at Calais and Dunkirk where the crossing on the Channel is attempted and repeatedly interrupted. In following that route, the thesis develops three original analytical contributions. It proposes the concept of the circuitscape to account for the distributed, mobile, and perpetually reconstituted form of dwelling that emerges in response to systematic eviction – a spatial form that exceeds the camp’s bounded perimeter and can only be apprehended at the scale of the route. It develops the concept of improvisational endurance as infrastructure, drawing on Abdulmalik Simone’s proposition that people themselves become infrastructure in contexts of institutional abandonment, to account for the labor through which dwelling circuits are maintained after every act of dispossession. And it proposes the analytical category of fugitive orientation (distinct from the aspiration literature conventional framework) to name the specific subjective form that persists when the governance formation has progressively subtracted the field of possibility from which aspiration draws.

The thesis approaches all three of these contributions through nineteen months of mobile-activist ethnography along the route. A methodology developed in response to the conditions of the field, which refused the fixity that conventional research frameworks assumed and demanded accompaniment, participation, and co-presence as the conditions under which knowledge could be produced at all.

Structure of the thesis:

The thesis is organized across six chapters and a conclusion. Two for situating the inquiry and the conceptual consideration, one methodological, three empirical, and one concluding. They move cumulatively. Each chapter builds on what precedes it and prepares what follows. The three analytical registers the research question interrogates – governance, dwelling, and subjectivity – are addressed in sequences, but the argument is cumulative rather than compartmentalized. What the governance formation produces spatially is the object of the empirical chapters; what is produced subjectively is the object of the final empirical chapter; and what it all means held together, is the work of the conclusion.

‘Situating the inquiry: abandonment and dispossession along the Belgian-French route to the UK’ is the thesis’s foundational chapter. It addresses the question of scale: how do strategies of abandonment and dispersal manifest along the Belgian-French route? It establishes the governance formation that everything subsequently responds to. After Daoud’s story in the introduction, the chapter builds the analysis of the Belgian-French route as a translocal product of organized abandonment. It moves through three converged instruments: the Dublin Regulation III as a technology of suspension; Belgium’s ‘transmigrant’ designation as the discursive conversion of the state from its own obligations; and France’s *zéro point de fixation* as a spatial strategy targeting not migrant presence itself but its consolidation into visible and legally demandable form.

‘Conceptual considerations: mapping dwelling, infrastructure and the route’ performs the thesis’s conceptual work. Rather than opening the thesis with a literature review, the chapter positions itself after an account of the occurrences – after the reader has already been inside the route – so that the conceptual framework arrives as analytical tool rather than projection. The chapter moves through three moments. The first situates migrants’ dwelling in migration studies, it identified the dominant tendency to study migrant dwelling in a sense of fixity, and the consequent under-attention to dwelling forms that exist through mobility rather than despite it. The second moment reflects on migration infrastructure, engaging the foundational work on migration as intermediated process and the subsequent development in arrival contexts, it identified the limit of a literature that presupposes what systematic dispersal precisely denies – institutional anchoring, material sedimentation, organizational durability –

and brings into dialogue subaltern infrastructures and people as infrastructure as the conceptual bridge toward conditions of enforced impermanence. The third moment addresses the migratory route as a scale of inquiry: drawing on the borderscapes frameworks and the autonomy of migration transition, it develops the analytical implications of taking the route – rather than the camp, the city, or the border line – as the primary unit of analysis. The section also brings into discussion the ‘fish net’ woven to capture instances of migrants’ precarious dwelling along the route. After that it opens to research questions and objectives. As they aim to unpacking what dispersal produces, erases, and leaves behind.

The methodology chapter, *‘Mobile-activist ethnography: an ethnography of dispersal’* accounts for how the research was designed and argues for the epistemological adequacy of mobile-activist ethnography as its method. The chapter traces the development of the research posture chronologically – from squat participation in Brussels, to integration of distribution and support to encampment in Calais, to sustained collaboration with civic hosting coordination along the E42 highway – and develops mobile-activist ethnography through a critical engagement with its predecessors: multi-sited ethnography, mobile methods and activist research traditions. The methodological principle is not ‘follow the people’ but ‘follow as accompagnement’, a shift with profound epistemological consequences for what can be known and how. The chapters attends, as well, to the positionality this implies and to the limits the fieldwork’s specific configuration imposes on what the thesis can and cannot claim to restitute.

‘Subtracting terrain, assembling circuits: trajectory of encampment after eviction’ is the thesis’s first empirical chapter and addresses the spatial dimension of the research question: what forms of dwelling emerge in the aftermath of systematic eviction, and how do they together constitute a geography of survival along the route? This chapter analyzes the operational logic of ‘control on transit’ and develops from fieldwork an original typology of dwelling forms using emic terminology from the route’s principal populations. These forms are gathered under the concept of the circuitscape – extending the borderscapes literature toward the entire mobility assemblage connecting Brussels to the English Channel – to account for their operation as interconnected nodes in a relational circuit rather than as isolated sites. This chapter shows what the governance formation produces spatially; the following chapter asks what it takes to keep that spatial form alive.

‘Infrastructure endurance: the capacity to reassemble dwelling after erosion’ addresses the infrastructural question: through what practices and relations dwelling can be reassembled to encompass the geography of dispersal, what forms of solidarity infrastructure emerge from this reconfiguration? Drawing on Simone’s (2004; 2018) account of people as infrastructure and improvisational endurance as a mode of collective organization in contexts of institutional abandonment, the chapter identifies three overlapping modes through which dwelling is maintained along the route. Calibration and relocation describes the spatio-temporal negotiation of provisional tolerance. Commoning rehearsal describes the iterative practices of mutual care and shared knowledge through which squats and kharabat sustain collective life. Co-optation and repurposing describes the entanglement of solidarity provision with transit economies. The chapter argues that these three modes constitute infrastructure not despite their ephemerality but through it. The argument that improvisational endurance is not supplementary to dwelling but constitutive of it prepares the ground for the final empirical chapter’s inquiry into what this condition produces subjectively.

‘Fugitive orientation: Dublinized migratory projects along the route’ addresses the subjective question: what do people orient themselves toward across the full accumulated weight of this condition? By reading the testimonies of the subjects through the analytics of fugitivity developed in Black geographies the chapter proposes fugitive orientation to describe what takes shape when the field of possibility and migrants’ pursuit has been progressively and systematically closed. It goes beyond the aspiration framework to account for a different mode of forward-orientation, structured not by aspiration of what is possible but by the refusal of what has become intolerable. To take fugitive orientation as an analytic is to reframe how we understand the trajectory of illegalized migrants along the route. This chapter toes the thesis’s three analytical registers together, as it shows how the governance formation of the contextual chapter is experienced from within, how the dwelling circuits of the two preceding empirical chapters sustain not only physical survival but the micro-social worlds through which orientation is maintained, and how the systematic erosion of those worlds is the circumstance that orient the migratory project.

The conclusion restate the problem at the level of theoretical generality the empirical chapters have earned, articulating the thesis’s four core defensible claims, integrating the answer to the research question across its spatial, infrastructural, and subjective registers, and stating the

theoretical and methodological contributions with precision. It acknowledges the limits the research imposes and opens four directions for future inquiry.

Chapter 1:
Situating the Inquiry.
Abandonment and Dispossession along the
Belgian-French Route to the UK

1.1. What makes the Belgian-French Migratory Route Contentious?

1.1.1. Dublin and the Production of the ‘Unauthorized’:

Daoud’s account, articulated in the introduction, crystallises what Ruth Gilmore (2008, 2021) names organised abandonment: the deliberate exposure of racialized people to precarity and homelessness, justified through bureaucratic procedures that masquerade as neutral governance. The Dublin Regulation appears, in the language of documents, as an instrument of administrative rationalisation. A mechanism for ensuring orderly responsibility allocation within a shared asylum governance space. In practice, as Daoud’s experience demonstrates with clarity, the Regulation is neither orderly nor protective. It is a technology suspension. A legal instrument whose operational effect is the production of a category of persons for whom every European jurisdiction has designated itself incompetent while none has accepted responsibility.

The Dublin system operates through a simple but consequential principle. The member state through whose external border a protection-seeker first entered the Schengen zone bears responsibility for examining their asylum claim. Where that entry was documented (through fingerprinting and registration in the Eurodac database) the principle of first-country responsibility attaches automatically, following the person across every subsequent national border as a mark of inadmissibility. The structural consequences of this principle are well established in the literature (Brekke and Brochmann, 2015; Maiani, 2017). It systematically overburdens the member states at the European periphery (Greece, Italy, Spain, Malta, Cyprus) whose geographic position as external border states bears no relationship to their capacity, infrastructure, or willingness to provide meaningful protection. The situation incentivises so-called secondary movement (the onward migration of protection-seekers from first-entry states toward states with more developed reception systems) while simultaneously criminalizing the movement as a violation of the regulatory framework. And it produces, at scale, the condition that Daoud names with such precision: the condition of the person who is simultaneously immobilized and pursued, who belongs everywhere and nowhere, who is present in territory but absent from protection.

This doctoral thesis positions itself at the critical juncture of contemporary refugees' European displacement, interrogating the spatial, material, and relational transformations through which migratory routes emerge as both sites of state control and terrains of insurgent attempts to escape abandonment and control. Embedded within the SolRoutes ERC AdG project (Solidarity and Migrants' Routes across Europe at Large), this investigation excavates the profound reconfigurations of mobility and bordering that crystallised in the aftermath of what European institutions euphemistically termed the 'summer of migration' in 2015. A temporal rupture that destabilised and subsequently reconsolidated the Schengen apparatus, not toward free movement but toward a more sophisticated border regime for unauthorised migration (Hess and Kasparek, 2017).

The post-2015 conjuncture opened an era of calculated precarity, in which the deliberate asymmetries in granting international protection catalysed the multiplication and transformation of migratory routes across European territories (Kasparek, 2016). These routes manifest not merely as pathways of movement but as contested geographies where the logics of state abandonment encounter the circuits of migration support and solidarity (Tazzioli and Walters, 2019) that systematically challenge the bordering mechanisms regulating access to settlement and belonging. The outbreak of war in Syria, the ethnic tensions in Sudan and Eritrea, in Congo and Ethiopia, intensified these dynamics. Over time, narratives of 'tides of refugees' mingled with other discourses of crisis (humanitarian, economic, political) contributing to the progressive political legitimisation of the tightening of access to asylum across Europe (Rea et al., 2019). What appears as a rupture in European values of human rights reveals itself, upon closer examination, as an intensification and geographic expansion of pre-existing exclusionary practices.

The Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom is one of the sharpest expressions of this architecture. It is the spatial form that organised abandonment takes when it is combined with the logic of transit control⁴. When the ambition is not merely to deny protection but to keep persons in motion, perpetually displaced, never consolidating into the kinds of settled presence that would generate political visibility or legal accountability. Understanding how this route was produced, and what it produces in turn, requires moving through three interlocking registers: the Belgian management of Dublinized migrants as a category of

⁴ The UK/Belgium Agreement Concerning Immigration Controls on the Channel (2014) formalized bilateral cooperation on border enforcement in the Channel zone and beyond, extending juxtaposed controls and reinforcing mechanisms to prevent unauthorized crossings into the UK.

administrative non-persons and ‘transmigrants’; the French strategy of the *zéro point de fixation* and its systematic dismantling of transit-oriented dwelling; and the bilateral and trilateral legal architecture through which these national dispositions were formalised into a transnational technology of spatial control.

1.1.2. ‘Transmigrants’; a ground for dispossession

Belgium, long considered peripheral in Europe's migration crisis management, emerged from 2015 onward as a critical junction in the internal border apparatus. A site where the contradictions of mobility, control, and migrants' support converge with particular intensity (Mescoli, Roblain and Griffioen, 2020; Amigoni and Oubad, 2025). Against the backdrop of European migration control, in the aftermath of the long summer of migration, many central European member states increasingly applied the labels of 'safe country of origin' or 'safe country of transit', branding people arriving from other European states as presumptively undeserving of asylum (Ravn et al., 2020). Belgium's role became intelligible not as peripheral to arrivals through front-line countries but as integral to the internal border architecture of the European asylum system. Federal authorities managing migration and asylum stranded large numbers of people in legal limbo (suspended, yet without rights to housing, material aid, or social integration) producing what scholars and observers characterised as a crisis of reception (Rea et al., 2019).

These dynamics crystallised with particular sharpness after the dismantlement of the Calais encampment in October 2016. This demolition, rather than resolving what was being termed a humanitarian crisis, catalysed new forms of immobility and precarious settlement patterns that spread across the Franco-Belgian border zone and beyond. Dublinized protection seekers have since endured cycles of abandonment and exhaustion (Welander, 2019). This exhaustion found its urban expression in Brussels through the eviction of Maximilien Park. A space that had emerged as a critical node where protection seekers sustained forms of collective dwelling amid state abandonment (Daher and d'Auria, 2018). The park's eviction marked the end of centralised urban informal dwelling in Brussels and the beginning of what would become a translocal circuit of precarious habitation (the subject matter of this thesis), extending across multiple Belgian cities and into the Franco-Belgian borderlands.

Civil society organisations, particularly the Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés, responded by mobilising networks of civic hosting across multiple Belgian localities (Lambert and Swerts, 2018; Clarebout, 2020), creating interconnected nodes of temporary shelter that extended well beyond Brussels' urban core. These networks, while appearing as autonomous expressions of solidarity, increasingly operated within structured frameworks of state delegation and sanction (Rea, Roblain and Hertault, 2023). A dynamic that transformed formerly spontaneous solidarity acts into what might be understood as a network of solidarity, marked by funding requirements, institutional agendas, and the restriction of forms of assistance that exceeded state-sanctioned parameters. This transformation of solidarity will be examined extensively in Chapter five. It is noted here as context for understanding the material conditions within which migrant dwelling was simultaneously sustained and constrained along the Belgian-French route.

1.1.3. From 'Refugees' to 'Transmigrants'

The Belgian political apparatus produced, in response to this conjuncture, a migrant category whose consequences for dwelling, protection, and solidarity along the route cannot be overstated. The designation of Dublinized migrants as transmigrants (deployed strategically by Belgium's Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration, Theo Francken, and subsequently institutionalised as an administrative and political category) represents a decisive intervention in the governance of unauthorised mobility. The term diverges fundamentally from academic conceptualisations of migrants in transit. Rather than describing a movement pattern, it performs a political exclusion. It recasts the Dublinized migrant as an inherently nomadic subject whose essential condition is mobility, and whose presence in Belgian territory is therefore defined as transient, exceptional, and non-generative of rights or entitlements (Mistiaen, 2024).

The analytical significance of this designation resides in its double manoeuvre. On one hand, it positions Belgium as a temporary and reluctant host implicated in the 'undesired' trajectories of others. A relay point on a migratory route whose destination lies elsewhere, bearing no meaningful responsibility for the welfare and protection of those passing through. On the other hand, it assumes for Belgium the role of delegated enforcer of mobility control within the EU's transit migration framework. A framework that increasingly demands

cooperation with France and the United Kingdom, institutionalised through the bilateral and trilateral agreements examined in the section that follows. The transmigrant designation is thus simultaneously a renunciation of humanitarian responsibility and an assumption of enforcement responsibility. This is a formulation that allows the Belgian state to be simultaneously absent as a protector and present as a control agent.

Beginning in autumn 2021, Belgian federal policy further institutionalised this exclusion through the prioritisation of families for formal shelter placement, systematically directing single men onto indefinite waiting lists. This hierarchy intensified dramatically in August 2023, when State Secretary Nicole de Moor temporarily suspended all shelter provision for single men, a decision that, while overturned by the courts, continued to shape institutional practice and administrative culture long after its formal reversal (Van Dam et al., 2025). The consequence was the transformation of right-bearing subject into administrative non-person. Individuals whose legal status as asylum seekers entitled them, under Belgian law and European directive, to material reception conditions, but who were in practice excluded from the very systems that propose those entitlements.

Under this non-reception policy, many asylum seekers found themselves without any institutional support, driven toward informal squats as their only viable means of survival in the city (Oubad, 2024). Yet the scarcity of these dwelling arrangements, combined with their permanent vulnerability to police evictions, pushed many toward onward mobility as their sole remaining strategy. That is the attempt to exit Schengenland (Walters, 2002) toward the United Kingdom as the final option after the Dublin system had foreclosed every other avenue of protection.

1.1.4. The Prohibition of Transit-oriented Solidarity:

The ‘transmigrant’ designation did not only reshape the conditions of migrant presence in Belgium, it reshaped the conditions under which solidarity could legally operate. By transforming the provision of food, material assistance, shelter, or transport along the route into potentially criminal acts, Belgian authorities effectively weaponised legal uncertainty against the support networks that sustained migrant life. A 2015 Belgian plan initially defined

smuggling as profit-driven facilitation of entry or stay⁵; by 2021, this had expanded to include paid services such as information, housing, and transport (de Jardin, Oubad and Trucco, 2025). The result was the systematic erosion of forms of solidarity that emerged precisely in response to the state's withdrawal from its protection obligations.

Many civil society organizations and Belgian citizens who opened their homes to migrants in border towns, who offered overnight accommodations or weekend respite shelter found themselves accused of facilitation of irregular migration (Debelder, 2020). Organizations dependent on federal and regional funding were effectively compelled to operate within state-sanctioned channels (daytime information centers, legal counselling, and referral pathways) that were structurally mis-suited to the needs of 'Dublinized' migrants. Rather than supporting efforts to reverse transfer decisions, these services tended to bind beneficiaries to Belgian jurisdiction throughout the asylum appeals process, while foreclosing the possibility of autonomous onward movement. For those already Dublinized, with no remaining appeals, the referral pathways revealed their own structural contradiction: the very system they directed migrants toward was the system that had already definitely excluded those very individuals. Caught between the impossibility of accessing formal protection and the increasing pressure on informal dwelling, many oriented toward the Opal Coast and its truck-boat-crossing infrastructure as the remaining viable prospect (Lotto, 2021)

1.2. What is Targeted along the Migratory Route to the United Kingdom?

For migrants moving through Belgium under the shadow of Dublin, France emerges as both an obligatory passage and a zone of intensified expulsion (Escarcena, 2019). Those excluded from Belgian reception structures move toward the northern French coastline, where the possibility of crossing to the United Kingdom becomes inseparable from the necessity of surviving within precarious encampments along the Opal Coast. This orientation is not simply a transgression of the Dublin system rule, it is a continuation of the search for

⁵ Belgium's *Plan d'action de lutte contre le trafic des êtres humains 2015-2018* was the country's first action plan specifically targeting human smuggling (distinct from trafficking). It covered legislative reinforcement, criminal prosecution, financial flows, training, and international cooperation. Available at: https://emnbelgium.be/sites/default/files/publications/teh_plan_action_2015-18_fr.pdf

protection in a place yet to reach. It is an attempt to exit a Schengen zone that has already foreclosed its own pathways, and to reach a jurisdiction where asylum is imagined, however uncertainly, to operate outside the Dublin framework's reach.

France occupies a position within this geography that is simultaneously geographical and institutional. As the territorial threshold to Britain, it concentrates the aspirations of migrants whose trajectories have been systematically redirected by Belgian, German, and wider European reception systems. But France also functions as the site where the logic of containment is most sharply operationalized. The border's work of sorting, exhausting, and deterring is conducted with intensity (Welander, 2021; Palmas, 2021). It is here that the *zéro point de fixation* was born, and it is from here that its governmental logic propagated outward to reshape the entire Belgian-French transit route.

1.2.1. 'Zéro Point de Fixation': The Strategy and its Genesis

The *zéro point de fixation* is not a policy in the conventional administrative sense. It is a deterrence strategy (Triandafyllidou and Dimitriadi, 2014). The genealogy of this strategy does not begin in 2016 with the dismantlement of the 'Calais camp'. It began in 2002, with the closure of the Red-Cross Sangatte centre: a structure initially designed for 800 persons that was sheltering 1600 at the time of its dismantlement⁶. The political pressure behind Sangatte's closure came from both sides of the Channel: the British government, led by David Blunkett, had been vocal in demanding that France end what is characterized as a magnet for 'clandestine migration'; the French government with the Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, was itself eager to demonstrate security credentials after election. The closure was framed as a solution. It was, in practice, an inauguration. The opening of a process of migrants' dispersal and deterrence.

What followed Sangatte's closure was not the end of migrant presence in Calais but its relentless dispersal into less visible, less manageable, and more fragmented spatial forms (Schuster, 2003). Over a decade later, the emblematic Calais encampment, named by the media 'The Jungle' held nearly 6000 people and had become the most internationally visible site of migrant precarity in Europe, generating journalistic attention, and extensive civil society mobilization across both France and Britain. The French state has, through the

⁶ The closure of this center marked an early point in the management of transit migration toward the UK. GISTI, Fermeture du centre de Sangatte (2002), available at: <https://www.gisti.org/spip.php?article648>

accumulation of its own containment policies (Agier, 2018), produced precisely the large-scale fixation point it would subsequently declare intolerable.

The dismantlement of the Calais camp in October 2016 marked the moment at which dispersal ceased to be an incidental effect of containment policy and became its explicit and primary aim. On 23 October 2016, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve announced what he called ‘a global strategy to prevent a fixation point from reforming’⁷. A formulation whose political grammar warrants careful and analytical attention. The target named is not the migrant as such. It is the point: the spatial consolidation of migrant life into something countable. To prevent the point from forming is to prevent the formation of migrants organization that accompanies it. To prevent collectivity that can be seen, that can be photographed, that can be supported by solidarity networks, that can bring legal claims, that can generate the humanitarian visibility that places demands on the state.

His successor Gérard Collomb extended this logic through the claim of the *appel d’air* (pull factor), arguing that the very provision of shelter generated migration. A claim that inverted the relationship between cause and consequence with ideological precision, transforming humanitarian provision into a security threat and thereby justifying the withdrawal of state welfare as a deterrence instrument⁸. Gérard Darmanin, the most operationally explicit of the three, institutionalized this strategy, issued instruction for eviction on a 24 to 48-hour cycle, describing this rhythm as “the only way to prevent the unacceptable things from establishing themselves” (Human Right Observers, 2024)⁹. The unacceptable thing, to be precise, was not the violence, exploitation, and physical exposure of migrants that dismantlement actively produced. The unacceptable thing was migrant settlement itself. The accumulation of human presence into a form that makes demands.

⁷ Bernard Cazeneuve, *Situation migratoire à Calais*, Ministère de l’Intérieur. Available at: <https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-ministres-de-l-Interieur/Archives-Bernard-Cazeneuve-avril-2014-decembre-2016/Interventions-du-ministre/Situation-migratoire-a-Calais>

⁸ Gérard Collomb, *Déplacement du ministre de l’Intérieur à Calais*, Ministère de l’Intérieur. Available at: <https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/Archives/Archives-ministres-de-l-Interieur/Archives-Gerard-Collomb-mai-2017-octobre-2018/Actualites-du-ministre/Deplacement-du-ministre-de-l-Interieur-a-Calais>

⁹ Human Rights Observers, *Rapport annuel 2024* (2025). Evictions of informal settlements in the Calais and Dunkirk areas over 2024, Available at: <https://humanrightsobservers.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rapport-Annuel-2024-FR.pdf>

1.2.2. Preventing Consolidation

The material mechanisms through which this strategy was implemented deserve analytical attention. Because they illuminate the form of spatial erosion involved, and because they reveal the degree to which the erosion of migrants' precarious dwelling was not an incidental consequence of enforcement but its deliberate and central instrument.

The systematic nature of this destruction was documented with particular rigour by Louis Witter (2023) whose images of clearing agents slashing tents with knives following evictions generated significant public controversy and a brief political debate in which official denials served only to redistribute responsibility between state and contractor without contesting the practice itself.



fig 1. During the expulsion of the encampment called “Hospital” in Calais 24th February 2024 © Human Rights Observers

The Human Rights Observers collective recorded over one thousand evictions of living sites in Calais during 2024 alone (Human Right Observers, 2025). Human Rights Watch, in its October 2025 report, characterised the cumulative effect as a deliberate strategy of distress inflicted on both adults and children. A formulation that names, with precision, what the

strategy in practice constitutes. The systematic production of exhaustion, vulnerability, and spatial dispersal as instruments of deterrence.

Marta Welander (2023) and Louis Witter (2023) analyse this strategy as structural violence: a politics designed not to remove migrants from the territory but to make their presence within it so unbearable that they are compelled either to abandon the route or to attempt Channel crossings without the time, resources, infrastructure, or rest needed to do so with any meaningful degree of safety. This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but it requires extension. The ‘zéro point de fixation’ is not merely a deterrence strategy. It is also a spatial epistemology. It is based on a governmental theory of how migrant organisation works and how it can be prevented: the theory that organisation requires consolidation, that consolidation requires physical stability, and that physical stability can be prevented through continuous material destruction. To destroy the tent is, in this governmental logic, to destroy the network; to prevent the settlement from forming is to prevent the collective from assembling. However, this theory is partially ineffective, the network survived every eviction, but its partiality does not diminish its operational capacity, which were real and cumulative.

1.2.3. Belgium’s Role in Preventing Dwelling Consolidation

This is not a local strategy but a transnational containment effort, assembled piece by piece, treaty by treaty, through slow accumulation of legal instruments that bound states together in the shared project of ‘control on transit’ (Evrard, Nienaber and Sommaribas, 2020). The Sangatte Protocol (2001) and the Touquet Treaty (2003) did not merely establish juxtaposed border controls; they relocated British immigration enforcement onto French soil, making France the forward operating base of British border sovereignty and institutionalising the Channel coastline as a zone of organized control on transit. The Sandhurst Treaty (2018) deepened this arrangement in the aftermath of ‘Calais Jungle’ dismantlement, committing France contractually to prevent the re-emergence of large-scale encampments while Britain contributed £44.5 million to ensure it. What followed is the 2021 Joint Action Plan and the emergency agreements signed after 24 people drowned in the Channel. It revealed the character of this policy. Not one that failed and would be revised, but one that needs to be

intensified and extended. Belgium's incorporation is placed in the aim of extending this strategy across the entire corridor including the Netherlands, Belgium and France.



fig 2: Police arresting migrants following the dismantlement of an informal encampment in Froyennes, Francophone western Belgium, 2024. © SudInfo

Belgium's formal involvement in this strategy was not passive absorption but active institutional alignment. The trilateral coordination mechanisms developed through successive joint declarations from 2018 onward established the enforcement frameworks covering the entire circuit of movement; from the Channel ports, to the European highways to the Flemish and Opal Coasts. This integrated Belgian authorities to joint operational responses against what the trilateral framework termed 'transit migration facilitating networks'. That designation matters. Because it encompassed not only organized smuggling but, sometimes in practice, the informal solidarity infrastructures that sustained migrant life along the route.

The UK-Belgium Joint Statement on Migration 2023 (as analysed in European Migration Network, 2024) hardened this cooperation into explicit bilateral commitment. A joint operational task force targeting irregular transit, enhanced monitoring of transport hubs and informal settlement sites, and, in language that directly reproduced the 'zéro point de fixation' grammar, to prevent the consolidation of migrant camps on Belgian territory

functioning as organization hubs for Channel crossings. This shifted migrants encampment, in the Belgian political rhetoric, from humanitarian situations requiring state response into operational nodes in unauthorized transit circuits requiring disruption (Mastiaen, 2021). This led to authorizing, and then mandating the periodic clearance operations Belgian authorities were already conducting across Brussels and its francophone western corridors to the UK.

Belgium has not borrowed the ‘zéro point de fixation’ through proximity to France. It has actively imported and institutionally redeployed it, not through coincidence but through the shared governmental rationality encoded in the bilateral and trilateral instruments that bind the three states into a common project. What presents itself as a series of distinct national enforcement decisions is, in practice, a translocal assemblage. A coordination mechanism that has transformed the ‘zéro point de fixation; from a French security strategy into the governing logic of an entire migratory route.

1.3.Conclusion:

Belgium’s designation of Dublinized migrants as ‘transmigrants’ and the ‘zéro point of fixation’ convergence along the Belgian-French route produce the underlying substance considered in this thesis. That is the translocal governmental formation in which migrant dwellings are simultaneously pushed out and prevented from taking place. This compelled dispersal by the denial of fixation, yet it prevented moving freely by the very enforcement of control on the route to the United Kingdom. The route is not metaphorical, it is material, spatial, and traceable in the lived geographies of people on the move, who navigated its contours for years before a Channel crossing became both possible and necessary.

While Belgium’s designation of migrants as in perpetual transit allows the state to limit protection claims and welfare entitlements by framing the presence of the Dublinized as temporary and exceptional, France forecloses the possibility of durable settlement that preparation for onward movement requires. Belgium delegates responsibility, France erodes the spatial conditions in which the displaced people might prepare themselves for the next step of their journey. Together, they make the Belgian-French route a ‘battleground’ of contention between people on the move, state actors, facilitators and solidarity actors.

This section thus established the architecture against which every subsequent chapter will be read. What Chapters three, four and five analyze (the dwelling forms that emerge in the route's interstices, the improvisational labor that sustains them, the fugitive orientations that persist through them) can only be adequately understood as responses to a governance formation whose deliberate aim is erosion of migrants' capacity to dwell and move. The route is not the background of this thesis. It is its first analytical site: the spatial form that organized abandonment takes when it combines the logic of exclusion with the logic of non-fixation, and produces a corridor in which the only direction that remains probably open is the English Channel.

Chapter 2:

Conceptual Considerations.

2.1. Mapping dwelling, infrastructure and the route

The following sections map the state of reflection on migrants' dwelling, migration infrastructure and migratory routes. It moves through three moments: situating migrants' dwelling in migration studies; reflection on migration infrastructure; and the migratory route as a scale of inquiry and its implication. Beyond an account to the literature, I bring into discussion the governmental rationalities that targets migrants' dwelling, infrastructures and the route. Hence, I put forward considerations adequate to approach the forms of dwellings and solidarity that emerge along the migratory route. Together, these movements set the stage for the empirical chapters that will unpack what dispersal produces, erases, and leaves behind.

2.2. Migrants' dwelling:

In migration studies, the notion of “dwelling” has emerged as a corrective to earlier paradigms that organized the field around transition and destination. These earlier frameworks conceived of migration predominantly as directional movement between discrete territorial units (origin and destination, sending and receiving) and treated the spaces in between, as well as the practices of inhabitation that unfolded within them, as secondary phenomena, transitional stages on the way to settlement or return. Against this tendency, a body of scholarship has progressively foregrounded dwelling as constitutive dimension of migratory process in its own right (Boccagni, 2017). The analytical shift involved here is not merely terminological. It reflects a broader reorientation within the field toward processual and relational understanding of migration (Çağlar and Schiller, 2023), in which spatial, temporal, and subjective dimensions are understood as co-constituted through everyday practice rather than as discrete variables to be mapped against one another. To foreground dwelling is to ask not simply where migrants are or where they are going, but how they inhabit spaces through which they move and in which they find themselves suspended (Coutin, 2005; Oelgemöller, 2011) – how they produce, negotiate, and maintain the conditions of a livable life under conditions of displacement, constraint, and differential inclusion.

The dominant strand of scholarship that has taken up this question has done so through a phenomenological orientation. Drawing from Heidegger's foundational account of dwelling as a mode of being-in-the-world (1962; 1971a). Dwelling, in this gaze, is not simply to occupy space but to be meaningfully in it, to maintain a relationship of sense with one's environment. Migration scholars have approached dwelling primarily through the experiential, symbolic, and meaning-making dimension of inhabitation. The central questions in this line of research concern how migrants negotiate attachments to multiple places, construct biographical continuities across spatial rupture, and sustain a sense of belonging under conditions that structurally work against it (Boccagni, 2017). What has been documented here is the cultivation of familiarity within unfamiliar environments, the organization of domestic space as a site of memory and identity, the negotiation of temporal orientations that hold together past, present, and projected futures, and the complex interplay between chosen and imposed forms of mobility (Boccagni and Miranda-Nieto, 2021; Merla, Kilkey and Baldassar, 2020). The accumulation of this work has produced a rich and nuanced picture of how migrants relate subjectively and practically to the spaces they inhabit, and of how those relationships sustain (or fail to sustain) a sense of self, continuity, and connection across conditions of displacement.

Two recent contributions extend the line of reflection in ways that are directly relevant here, each pushing it in a distinct direction while unpacking the material possibilities of dwelling. Willecke (2025) develops the concept of 'practices of homing' to analyze how people in temporary and precarious living arrangements actively construct a sense of home. Rather than treating home as a stable condition that precarity undermines, Willecke attends to the ongoing, creative, and practical character in which people in provisional circumstances actively work to produce a meaningful inhabitable space. Everyday acts of arrangements, maintenance, and social connection are core to this account. The analytical relevance is the shift from home as a state or achievement to homing as a continuous practice, one that is exercised under constraint rather than requiring the absence of constraint as a precondition. Another work pushes this enterprise forward by foregrounding the forces that systematically undermine it. Lero (2025) underlines the everyday encounters with bordering mechanisms, administrative precarity, and legal instability that makes sustained habitation structurally difficult and costly. Together, these accounts establish that dwelling under precarity is neither simply degraded nor simply resilient, but traversed by a tension between active home-making and the structural conditions that continuously erode its possibility.

While these works looked at dwelling at a local scale, other scholarship considered the translocal and relational fields. Recognizing that migrants rarely inhabit a single bounded space, they have developed accounts of dwelling across stretched social fields. These are the arrangements in which migrants maintain networks, obligations, and attachments that connect multiple sites simultaneously and cannot be reduced to any one of them (Etzold et al, 2019). This translocal turn has been complemented by growing attention to the specific temporalities of transit and forced mobility (Fontanari, 2019). Scholars working in this register have foregrounded the experiences of suspension and uncertainty that structure many migrations' spatial situations: the indefinite waiting periods generated by asylum procedures, the extended temporalities of repeated and unsuccessful border-crossing attempts, and the makeshift character of the camps through which transit unfolds (Amigoni et al., 2023). In these contexts, dwelling is always shadowed by the unpredictability of future movement and the fragility of whatever provisional arrangement currently holds.

Given the circumstances outlined above, Lancione and Simone (2021) propose a conception of "dwelling in liminalities". They argue for a fundamental reconceptualization that moves beyond both the phenomenological emphasis on belonging and the translocal emphasis on stretched fields. Rather than treating liminality as an exceptional or transitional condition against which normal dwelling is defined, they propose it as a constitutive feature of inhabitation for broad populations. Dwelling, on this account, is not a settled state from which displacement represents a departure, but a practice that is continuously reconstituted under conditions of instability, suspension, and spatial indeterminacy. Their call to think beyond inhabitation (to attend to what dwelling actually requires and does rather than to the experience of it as a subjective state) marks a decisive departure from the phenomenological tradition and begins to open toward the material and organizational register that this thesis pursues.

These contributions collectively establish the centrality of dwelling to the analysis of migration and have substantially refined the conceptual vocabulary available for analyzing it. Yet they encounter a systematic limitation when confronted with the specific conditions that this thesis examines. Across the phenomenological transition and its various extensions (Willecke, 2025; Lero, 2025) and the translocal and transit-attentive frameworks (Etzold et al. 2019; Amigoni et al, 2023) the organizing questions remain oriented toward the experience of

dwelling: what it feels like, how it is symbolically negotiated, how it sustains biographical continuity across distance and disruption. Even Lancione and Simone's conceptually ambitious intervention (2021), which most directly anticipates the reorientation pursued here, frames its argument in terms of a different understanding of inhabitation rather than a systematic account of the material conditions and organization labor through which inhabitation is produced and maintained. What none of these frameworks systematically address is how dwelling is materially assembled – what logistical, relational, and organizational work is required to produce even provisional inhabitation under conditions not merely of precarity in general but of active, deliberate, and institutionally organized dispersal. This is the analytical gap this thesis addresses.

The empirical contexts under examination here make the stakes of this gap concrete. Encampment subjected to repeated forced dismantlement, squats evicted before collective life can consolidate within them, systems of martial aid pushed progressively into informality under the pressure of enforcement operations – these are contexts in which the conditions for dwelling must themselves be continuously and actively produced, in which the organizational capacity to assemble is itself the object of systematic governmental effort at erosion. Under these conditions, dwelling cannot be adequately grasped through attention to subjective experience or translocal attachment alone. It requires a different analytical register entirely. One oriented not toward what dwelling feels like but toward how it is made possible, by whom, through what material and relational arrangements, and under what conditions of systematic disruption.

Scott-Smith's (2022) analysis of the Calais encampment as an infrastructural response to bordering practices offers an important empirical step for this thesis. Examining life in the camp, he illuminates the sophisticated de facto infrastructure residents developed in response to the state's systematic withholding of formal provision (shelters, organized services, spatial arrangements, and collective resource management). This established that what appears from the outside as mere informal settlement is more accurately understood as a consequential infrastructural achievement. The analytical limitation, however, is that the account remains focused on infrastructural creativity within a bounded site. What it does not theorize is what happens when that site is itself systematically dismantled. When the challenge is not producing infrastructure within a place but reassembling it across a landscape of deliberately discontinuous and repeatedly disrupted places. It is precisely this extension that the present

thesis undertakes.

The conceptual foundation of this reorientation is Simone's (2004; 2018) proposition that in contexts of institutional abandonment, systematic withdrawal and material inadequacy, people themselves become infrastructure. Simone's account challenges the tendency to read arrangements that fall outside formal frameworks through a lens of deficit or failure. Instead, he shows how people in conditions of structural marginalization develop transversal and flexible arrangement through which they substitute for absent formal systems. Central to his argument is the concept of endurance, defined as the "*practice of living with instability that emerges from subaltern positions relative to the formal system*" (Simone, 2018: p.59). Endurance, on this account, is not a passive condition of survival but an active practice, one that must be continuously exercised, that is learned and rehearsed across repeated encounters with instability, and that produces a practical capacity to maintain life under conditions that formally organized institutions are either unwilling or unable to support.

This thesis develops Simone's proposition in an analytical direction to account for dwelling in contexts of dispossession, unstable conditions of collective life and lack of institutional anchoring. Dwelling in dispersal is therefore neither a symbolic achievement nor an experiential state, but a material, relational and organizational practice. One that must be continuously produced through collective labor, that takes shape across dispersed spatial forms and fragmented provisional sites. What this practice looks like concretely, how continuity is made under conditions of systematic instability, and how solidarity is reconfigured when the spatial fixity is denied, is what the empirical chapters that follow will demonstrate.

2.3. Migration Infrastructure:

The consideration of dwelling along routes as a materially produced achievement (assembled through logistical labor, relational networks, and organizational improvisation) connects directly to the field of migration infrastructures. Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) foundational contribution defined migration infrastructure as the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that mediate the movement of people across borders. Developed initially through the analysis of labor migration recruitment and its complex chains of intermediaries, their framework redirected analytical attention away from the migrant as an

autonomous actor navigating a given landscape toward the sociotechnical assemblages that constitute both the landscape and the conditions of migrant agency in the first place. Infrastructure here is not a neutral conduit but a site of power that shapes who can move, under what conditions, and at what cost.

Subsequent scholarship extended this infrastructural lens to arrival contexts. Meeus et al. (2019) showed that infrastructure shapes not only movement but arrival itself: the capacity to remain somewhere, access services, and build networks is infrastructurally produced and differentially distributed. Arrival, in this account, is not a natural endpoint of migration but an achievement that depends on the availability and accessibility of particular arrangements. The solidarity infrastructure literature developed alongside this work, examining the 'infrastructuring work' that facilitates arrival and settlement of unauthorized migrants in European cities has shown the centrality of networks of mutual aid and resource-sharing that create the material conditions for settlement (Meeus et al., 2020; Schilliger, 2020; Vasileiadi and Swerts, 2024). This scholarship has been instrumental in revealing how solidarity operates through concrete infrastructural practices rather than abstract political or humanitarian motivations, demonstrating the materiality of solidarity in urban contexts.

However, the migration infrastructure framework as currently developed faces a constitutive limitation when applied to the route contexts analyzed in this thesis. The framework tends to presuppose what systematic dispersal precisely denies: institutional anchoring, material accumulation, and organizational sedimentation. Xiang and Lindquist's original framework was built around the relatively stable (if exploitative) intermediary structures of labor migration recruitment. Arrival infrastructure scholarship has analyzed the organizational and material arrangements that support settlement in cities. Arrangements that, even when precarious, have some degree of fixity and accumulation. The solidarity infrastructure literature has demonstrated the importance of sedimentation. That is the slow accumulation of alliance, routines, and knowledge that makes organized support possible (Schilliger, 2020).

The absence of an adequate infrastructural analysis of migratory routes has also limited our understanding of how dwelling is materially produced in the specific conditions of transit and dispersal. For migrants navigating this route, access to charging stations, aid distribution, civic housing, emergency shelters, and border-crossing facilitators can determine whether dwelling in one location or another is feasible at all. The availability of makeshift shelter, the

proximity of crossing points, and the spatial radius within which police tolerance operates constitute the infrastructural geography of the route. An infrastructure that is not simply found or institutionally anchored but continuously contested and reconfigured through the practices of migrants, solidarity actors, and border enforcement agents. In route contexts, state power operates through infrastructural control: the deliberate targeting of the material conditions that make dwelling and movement possible. The systematic dismantlement of makeshift dwelling, the erosion of material support, and the strategic limitation of aid distribution are not incidental effects of border enforcement. They are its method.

2.3.1 Subaltern Infrastructures:

The concept of subaltern infrastructure names the ensemble of material arrangements, relational networks, spatial practices, and forms of knowledge that migrants and their supporters produce from below. From the margins of state authorization, outside the frameworks of legitimate assistance, and often in direct tension with the governance rationalities that dispersal embodies. The notion is assembled from a body of scholarship concerned with what has been called subaltern-infrastructure nexus. That is the entangled relationship between marginalized communities and the practices of infrastructure making and maintaining through which they navigate, contest, and partially transform the conditions of their subordination (Bayat, 2000; Roy, 2011; Simone, 2018).

The notion of the subaltern invokes a diversity of individuals, groups, communities, and populations whose agency is simultaneously defined by their experiences of subordination, marginalization, and exploitation, and their transformative potential through disruptive and dissenting practices. It is this double definition (subalternity as simultaneously a condition of constraint and a position from which agency is exercised) that makes the concept productive for the study of migrant dwelling along bordered routes. What Bayat (2000) calls the ‘encroachment of the ordinary’ that the gradual and collective practices through which the subaltern claim resources, space, and services that formal systems deny them, finds a precise analogue in the everyday practices through which migrants and solidarity actors maintain dwelling circuits along the route. Not heroic acts of political resistance in the conventional sense, but the daily labor of building what state withholds and rebuilding what it erases.

In migration studies, Palmas and Rahola's *Underground Europe* (2022) and the SolRoutes project in general provide the most direct reference point for translating this subaltern infrastructure framework into the European borderscape context (Brambilla, 2015). *Underground Europe* maps the subaltern circuits of migrant movement, solidarity, and survival that run beneath and against the official geography of border enforcement. The 'underground' in their framework is not a metaphor for illegality alone; it names a form of social life that the state apparatuses seek to govern it, and is strongly relational and infrastructurally productive in its own right. The underground routes, solidarity networks, and crossing circuits they document are not the disorganized face of solidarity. They are a subaltern social world with its own logic, knowledge forms, hierarchies and solidarities and its own capacity to sustain movement and dwelling across the conditions of containment the border produces.

2.4. Situating Dwelling and Infrastructure within the Migratory Route

2.4.1. What makes a route?

The autonomy of migration thesis (Mezzadra, 2010; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013) positioned migrants as active political agents whose strategic negotiations, disruptions, and border-crossing practices shape the formation of migratory routes and the ways border regimes operate and proliferate. Rather than treating migration controls and bordering mechanisms as predetermined structures that migrants navigate, this perspective reveals them as reactive formations; dynamic responses to migrants' mobilities and their persistent effort to materialize their aspirations for movement and settlement.

The notion of a "route" in this thesis extends beyond its conventional understanding as a mere line on a map. Drawing on Schapendonk et al. (2020), the route is approached as a contested terrain. A battle ground on which migrants, solidarity actors, and state agencies continuously re-route and counter-route one another. Following Walters (2021), it is further understood as a space of governance shaped by what he calls "via politics": the deliberate management of movement through the calibration of routes themselves as instruments of control and exhaustion. Situated within the broader autonomy of migration tradition, this framework shifts the analytical focus from descriptive account of movement to the processes,

infrastructures, and power relations that constitute migratory experience. And that the route, as a politically produced space, both reflects and reproduces.

Migratory routes in this lens are not mere infrastructures, they are shaped with a specific underlying substance: mobile commons (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013; Trimikliniotis et al., 2016). That is the knowledge of crossing points, police patterns, and tolerant jurisdictions; the networks of mutual support among migrants with different levels of route experience; the material circuits of aid, shelter, and facilitation that make movement possible. Mobile commons are not fixed in place but carried, created, and adapted along the route. They constitute the relational substance of what this thesis will later account as dwelling circuits: the collectively produced, relationally maintained, and continuously contested resource through which migrant life along routes endures dispersal and the governance technologies that seek to disorganize it.

What this line of scholarship has established (and what this thesis takes as its starting point) is that routes are generative sites of social organization. They are not transitional voids between meaningful places but spaces in which dwelling practices are assembled, solidarity networks are reconfigured, and political subjectivities are formed. The question, then, is what specifically threatens the organizational capacity of routes today: what governmental technologies operate along them, and with what effects on the possibility of dwelling, solidarity, and collective life.

2.4.2. Governing the Route

If the route is a site of social organization and mobile commons, it is also a primary target of contemporary European border governance. Understanding what is at stake in this governance (and why it takes the specific forms it does) requires moving beyond the conventional analytics of border control, which has tended to focus on exclusion, detention (Mainwaring and Silverman, 2017), and deportation (De Genova, 2018) as its paradigmatic operations. What this thesis encounters along the Belgian-French route is something more diffuse, more continuous, and more specifically aimed at dismantling the conditions of organized migrant life than these paradigmatic operations suggest. The governmental rationality at work here is better understood through what Aradau and Tazzioli (2020) theorize as subtractive governance: a mode of power that operates not by adding constraints

to an otherwise functioning social life but by subtracting the very conditions under which that social life can organize itself.

The European migration regime has increasingly operated through what Tazzioli (2020) calls the governing of mobility through forced mobility; a paradoxical governmental logic in which migrants are not simply excluded from national territory but subjected to continuous and deliberately disorganizing forces. The experience of 'Dublinized' migrants along the Belgian-French route exemplifies this logic. Rather than securing regularization in any jurisdiction, these migrants find themselves in a condition of permanent transit, moved between locations, dispersed from urban centers to peripheral zones, and subjected to successive evictions that prevent any spatial arrangement from consolidating into a basis for organized collective life. Dispersal, in this sense, is not simply a demographic consequence of migration control enforcement; it is a governmental technology (Tazzioli, 2014) with its own rationality, its own targets, its own productive effects.

Aradau and Tazzioli's concept of the subtraction of space names the specific spatial operation through which the erosion of migrant precarious dwelling works. Subtraction does not produce empty space; it produces illegible space; space that migrants cannot claim, occupy, or organize without immediately becoming subject to police intervention, eviction, or criminalization. The erosion of migrants' precarious dwelling along the route (as I will show in the following chapters) is one recent manifestation of the governance of migratory routes. What dispersal produces is not the removal of migrants from territory but their reduction to a condition of spatial precarity in which the very possibility of collective organization, shared dwelling, and sustained movement is systematically eroded.

In fact, the dispossession of migrant space extends beyond the individual eviction into a structural practice of what dispersal could take away. Dispossession here does not refer primarily to the loss of material possessions, though this is certainly part of what evictions and expulsions produce. It refers more fundamentally to the loss of the mobile commons (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016) and the conditions of social reproduction: the relationships, the shared knowledge, and the collective arrangements through which migrant life sustains itself across time and space .

The work done on the differential production of migrants illegality (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Tazzioli 2019; Tazzioli and De Genova, 2023) is central to setting the stage for this thesis. It underlines that illegality is not a uniform condition applied identically to all unauthorized migrants but a graduated, contextually variable, and strategically selective governmental operation. Along migratory routes, this differential illegalization operates through selective tolerance of certain forms of migrant presence (makeshift encampments, short-term squat, that local authorities acknowledge but do not formally recognize) alongside the active criminalization of the solidarity (Schack and Witcher, 2021), practices that would make such presence more sustainable. The effect is that migrants are kept present enough to be governed but insufficiently settled to organize their own conditions of existence. Solidarity actors are permitted to provide food and registration while being criminalized for providing conditions that would allow onward movement. What is targeted along the route is precisely the work that exceeds the management of migrant presence and begins to constitute the conditions of migrant collective organization.

The politics of exhaustion (Welander, 2021; Queirolo Palmas, 2021) are called in within this account to illustrate this governmental technology. Exhaustion is not an unintended byproduct of migration control enforcement; it is a productive governmental effect. By sustaining continuous dispersal, denying spatial sedimentation, and criminalizing the solidarity work that would compensate for it, the governance of routes systematically erodes both the physical and organization capacity of migrants and their supporters to maintain dwelling and mobility.

This is where Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) articulation of the multiplication of borders comes relevant to framing the migratory route. Because this multiplication operates not as a single line of exclusion but as a diffuse field of friction, delay, and disorganization that wears down movement capacity while keeping bodies present and mobile enough to be continuously governed.

Therefore, understanding dwelling under these conditions requires a conceptual framework that can account for what it means to inhabit space when that inhabitation is constitutively threatened; when the possibility of dwelling and the anticipation of its erasure are inseparable.

2.5. The route as a scale of observation

The conceptual moves of this chapter (from dwelling as home-making to dwelling under conditions of dispersal; from conventional migration infrastructure to subaltern infrastructures) converge on a single space and scale: the migratory route. In this thesis, the route is the scale of observation and intervention. Not as a spatial background but an organizational “battleground”. It is the primary analytical object through which all of these processes must be traced together, in their entanglement and their mutual constitution.

Analyzing migration at the scale of the route reframes what becomes visible analytically. Single-site ethnographies (whether of a camp, a squat, or a border crossing point) risk capturing only a fragment of a dynamic that is fundamentally relational and extended across space and time. A route-scale perspective makes the connective tissue between sites: the power dynamics, logistical chains, and solidarity networks that link them into a coherent, if unstable, migratory infrastructure. It draws attention to how states attempt to produce and regulate mobility not only at fixed borders but across the route itself. Through dispersal policies, the strategic closure of certain pathways, and the deliberate production of exhaustion (Welander, 2021). These mechanisms give rise to what Queirolo Palmas and Rahola (2022) describe as “underground” routes, as migrants and their supporters develop increasingly sophisticated responses to successive border regimes. Routes, on this account, are not simply conduits of movement but contested spaces where control and counter-movement are simultaneously at work. To analyze dwelling along such a route, then, requires following it, across its sites, its interruptions, and the relational work that holds it together.

These matters confront us with fundamental problematics that neither single actor nor place based frameworks can resolve. How can migrants’ dwelling sustain across distances and spatio-temporal interruptions? What happens when this dwelling is eroded in one jurisdiction and tolerated in another? How does dwelling reconfigure across borders, and which arrangements come into play when established ones are erased? The scattering of migrants from urban centers to peripheral zones, and from border-crossing points to remote locations, raises fundamental questions about how dwelling practices can be infrastructured to encompass these geography of dispersal. The answers are not available from within any single site, any single actor perspective, or any single analytical framework.

Single-actor frameworks (Della Porta, 2018; Della Porta and Steinhilper, 2021; Dimitriadis and Ambrosini, 2023) are inadequate in a specific and important way. The tendency in solidarity studies to focus either on migrant agency or on activist organization produces an analytic that is constitutively partial. Studies that center migrant agencies (Bauder, 2022; Mainwaring et al., 2020; Swerts and Nicholls, 2021) illuminate the practices through which migrants navigate and contest exclusion, but often underspecify the organizational and relational arrangements that make those practices possible. Studies that center solidarity organizations (d'Auria et al., 2018; Vandevoordt, 2019; Mescoli and Roblain, 2021) illuminate the structural constraints and (dis)enabling conditions of activist work, but often reduce migrants to recipients of solidarity rather than active producers of the infrastructure through which it circulates. The infrastructuring of solidarity along the route demands consideration that holds these perspectives simultaneously. One that accounts for how migrants and solidarity actors co-produce dwelling infrastructure without subordinating one to the other or resolving their relationship into a simple hierarchy of support.

Place based frameworks are similarly inadequate. The rich ethnographic tradition of studying squats (Dadusc et al., 2019), border camps (Rygiel, 2011), and solidarity initiatives in specific urban location (Kron and Lebuhn, 2020) has generated important knowledge about the social life of particular nodes within the route. But it cannot account for the relational and organizational logic that connects nodes into a circuit, or for the way the erasure of one node produces reconfigurations elsewhere. The dwelling circuits analyzed in this thesis are not a property of single sites but of the relations between sites. As we will show, they are situated at the crossroads of knowledge circuits, material support, and mobility that flow through them and that must be continuously rerouted when dispersal erodes any particular node. Following the route means following these circuits across the spatial and organizational dynamics that forms when formal infrastructure is denied.

The route also demands attention to temporality in a way that place-based approaches tend to underspecify. The route is not a stable spatial entity that can be mapped once and analyzed as a fixed geography. It is a dynamic configuration that continuously reconfigures. New nodes emerge as old ones are closed, new arrangements are negotiated as old ones are withdrawn, new actors enter the circuit as established ones are criminalized or exhausted. Following the

route means following it across time as well as space, attending to the rhythms of erosion and reconfiguration.

Therefore, following dwelling along the route becomes imperative for developing a nuanced understanding of containment, dispersal, migrants' politics of escape, and the adaptation of solidarity efforts to both the forces of erosion and the changes in migratory routes. This task cannot be fulfilled by scaling up existing home-making and place-based solidarity frameworks, nor by examining the practices of any single group of actors in isolation (whether migrants, solidarity actors, border agents or smugglers). It demands an articulation of the above to trace these interconnected processes along the routes themselves, grounding analysis in the situated experiences that emerge from their intersection.

Research Questions and Objective

Before opening to the research question guiding this thesis, it is worth noting where the preceding sections have left us. Four gaps have emerged from the literature. Studies on migrants' dwelling have illuminated the experiential dimensions of inhabitation, but have not asked how dwelling is materially assembled and maintained under conditions of active dispersal. Migration and solidarity infrastructure frameworks have revealed the importance of sedimentation and institutional anchoring, but presuppose precisely what dispersal denies. And solidarity studies have generated rich accounts of urban arrival contexts, but cannot account for how solidarity is reconfigured when sites cannot consolidate and routes shift under enforcement pressure. And finally existing scholarship has established the route as a generative site of social organization, but has not adequately theorized how that organizational capacity is reassembled when systematically targeted and eroded. Together, these gaps converge on a single research problem: how dwelling, solidarity, and movement sustain and reconstitute themselves along migration routes under conditions of systematic erasure?

This thesis addresses that problem through the following central question:

How do abandonment, dispersal, and enclosure shape the material and relational conditions of migrant dwelling along the Belgian-French route, and how do actors involved reassemble infrastructures of dwelling and movement in the aftermath of that erasure?

This question is organized around the capacity to reassemble after dispossession. Rather than treating abandonment, dispersal, and enclosure as once-off events, or migrant and solidarity responses as purely reactionary, it examines how these dynamics co-constitute each other, simultaneously constraining and enabling particular forms of spatial practice. This comes from the consideration that control strategies designed to prevent settlement may inadvertently generate translocal connectivity. Mechanisms of dispersal may produce unexpected solidarities and infrastructural capacity. This framing moves beyond binary frameworks of control versus resistance to examine how state, migrant, and solidarity practices are mutually constitutive.

The question also operates across multiple scales, linking macro-level governmental processes (the Dublin Regulation's production of Dublinized migrants, control on transit and the pressure on solidarity) to the micro-level material and relational practices through which people assemble and maintain dwelling infrastructures under conditions of dispossession. Its twofold structure recognizes that migrants' dwelling is both shaped by and shaping broader political dynamics. Dublinized migrants thus become not merely subjects of control but active agents in the production of spatial alternatives.

Addressing the main research question requires four interrelated lines of inquiry: one examines the scales at which migrants dwelling is governed; another traces the dwelling's spatial reconfigurations; a third attends to its infrastructural dimensions; and a fourth considers how these arrangements shape and delimit migratory projects.

Scale: How do strategies of abandonment and dispersal manifest along the Belgian-French route?

Spatial: What forms of dwelling emerge in the aftermath of systematic eviction, and how do they together constitute a geography of survival along the route?

Infrastructural: through what practices and relations dwelling can be reassembled to encompass the geography of dispersal, what forms of solidarity infrastructure emerge from this reconfiguration?

Subjective : What forms of migratory projects take shape within and through conditions of dispersal and dispossession?

Taken together, these four lines of inquiry allow the thesis to move beyond static representations of displacement and control, instead highlighting the dynamic interplay between erasure and reassembly. By tracing how dwelling, infrastructure, and migratory projects are continuously produced and reshaped under conditions of abandonment and dispersal, the work reflects on the (un)making of the Belgian-French migratory route to the United Kingdom. It foregrounds not only the constraints imposed by governance but also the emergent capacities, solidarities, and spatial practices that redefine what it means to dwell in contexts of dispossession.

Chapter 3:
Mobile-Activist Ethnography:
An Ethnography of Dispersal along the
Route

3.1. Following Dispersal and Reformation of Dwelling

The dwelling spaces supporting Dublinized migrants that I followed through Brussels, along the Belgian highways toward France, and into the northern French zone of Calais existed in provisional arrangements constantly unmade by police raids, expulsion, and the material struggle for onward movement. These dwellings were scattered along the route to the United Kingdom, not as disconnected sites but as circuits of dwelling that sustained onward movement despite, and through, ongoing expulsion. Researching this dispersal meant abandoning the ethnographic fiction of the bounded field site (Tsing, 2004) and developing methods adequate to a phenomenon that was by nature intermittent, forced, and distributed across space.

This chapter reflects on the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching transit-oriented dwelling along bordered routes. I trace how my ethnographic posture evolved from attempting to understand fixed-site migrant squats in Brussels forward following dwelling circuits along the route with the proliferating facilitators and controllers (Schapendonk, 2020), infrastructures (Palmas and Cassarini, 2025), and arrangements that make dwelling possible under conditions of enforced dispersal. This required developing a mobile ethnography (Boas et al., 2020) that keeps the scale of observation at the level of the route¹⁰ itself, attending to how dwelling is reconfigured across successive sites where it is assembled and disassembled. I also reflect critically on my own positionality within this research: as a university affiliate, as an activist within solidarity networks, and as a racialized migrant with a precarious permit of stay in Belgium.

In this chapter, I argue that accounting for dispersal requires methodological innovations capable of attending to both material circuits and the socio-political arrangements that sustain dwelling in dispersal, while remaining attentive to how my own embodied position produces particular forms of knowledge and certain blind spots. I first trace the chronology of

¹⁰ The route as I engage it here is partial by design. My fieldwork tracked specific nodes within a route whose trajectory long predates my entry into it and extends well beyond the English Channel crossing. The route was not followed in its entirety nor have been documented in its full temporal arc. What I offer is an ethnographic account of dwelling within the Belgian-French part of the route, from specific positions of dispersal, dispossession, and reconfiguration. While the route is not fully mapped by any single researcher in migration studies, it is materially real, structurally consequential, and legible through the lived experiences of those who navigate it.

ethnographic engagement that shaped the fieldwork before offering a conceptual articulation of mobile-activist ethnography as a distinct methodological approach. I then describe the conditions of documentation under dispersal, introduce the protagonists of the research and the conditions under which they entered and exited the fieldwork, and finally reflect on the ethics of conducting research from within solidarity-embedded contexts.

3.2. A Chronology of Ethnographic Engagement:

I began with what appeared to be engaged ethnographic practice: monitoring, opening, and sustaining vacant buildings with state-abandoned migrants and supporters in Brussels (Oubad, 2024). The classic language of "observation" as forged by Franz Boas (1901) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) presupposed a position of witnessing without intervening, of documenting without participating and a stable community in a bounded field site. My initial assumption was that Brussels squats offered precisely this: a contained space where extended presence would yield a thick description of migrant dwelling. In my fieldwork, however, such detachment was neither possible nor epistemologically tenable. State-abandoned migrants living in squats without basic infrastructures, with the permanent threat of eviction do not need observers; they need people willing to align with their struggle to life and endurance, open buildings, carry mattresses, negotiate with building owners, and stand watch against police raids. To be present meant to be involved. The choice was not whether to participate but how to understand and operate participation as constitutive of the research itself, cutting with the colonial tradition of extractive, detached and objectifying observation (Manning, 2021) and embracing the obligation to engage in order to comprehend the realities under study.

This commitment to knowledge produced through engagement rather than despite it runs through several ethnographic traditions that have, in different ways, inspired my research posture. Participatory action research insists that communities are co-producers of knowledge rather than objects of study (Fals Borda, 1987). Feminist standpoint epistemology argues that knowledge produced within specific social positions is more rigorous than the view from outside (Haraway, 2013). Militant ethnography, developed within anti-globalization and social movement contexts, treats political commitment not as a bias to be managed but as an epistemological resource, a way of accessing dynamics that remain invisible to the detached

observer (Juris, 2007). In migration studies, scholars working within and alongside solidarity networks have extended this argument to the specific conditions of border violence and force mobility, insisting that accompaniment is not sentiment but method. A practice of co-presence that generates knowledge about survival, resistance, and the politics of movement that no interview or survey could reach (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola, 2022; Amigoni, 2025). My fieldwork took inspiration from this line of ethnography and applied it within a specific configuration: nineteen months of mobile presence across a translocal governance formation, embedded within solidarity networks that were themselves sites of knowledge production, political contestation, and ongoing ethical negotiation.

From December 2023 to March 2024, I participated directly in sustaining one squat with the migrants solidarity front of the *Réseau ADES* in Brussels. This is a network of autonomous activists dedicated to supporting building occupation and providing shelter for state-abandoned migrants and irregularized people. I engaged in a range of material and social practices that underpinned the survival of the space: carrying mattresses and supplies, relaying needs to the network regarding heat, water, electricity, and material conditions, presenting the situation in activist general assemblies, and occasionally assisting with bureaucratic processes. This direct engagement was not merely instrumental but epistemically constitutive. It positioned me within the logics and rhythms of squatting in a way that observation alone could not have achieved.

The transition from Brussels-based activist ethnography (Routledge and Derickson, 2015) in squat to following routes toward the United Kingdom represented not a pre-planned methodological evolution but an outcome of research encounters. By March 2024, it had become undeniable that the migrant dwelling I was attempting to understand could not be grasped from a fixed urban position. People were evicted, expelled, and some of them were leaving toward Calais and Dunkirk. The squat was not the destination but a node in a longer itinerary, oriented toward exit from Schengenland via the Belgian-French corridor to the UK.

The methodological problem presented itself clearly: if I remained in Brussels, anchored in the circuit of the urban squats and solidarity assemblies, I would be documenting a space that many of the people I sought to understand were actively leaving. I would be treating fiction of a stable field site as an analytical given at precisely the moment when the phenomenon under study was its dispersal. The question that emerged was not simply where to conduct

fieldwork, but whether conventional ideas of fieldwork location were adequate to the object at all.

This realization forced a fundamental question: what does it mean to conduct ethnography when the subjects of research are denied the spatial fixity that traditional fieldwork assumes? More precisely, what does it mean when that denial is itself the phenomenon under study, when displacement is not a background condition but the very thing being researched? The answer, worked out over months of engagement, was that I would have to move too, and that movement would have to be structured not by my research agenda but by the circuits of dwelling and displacement I was following.

In time, my research relationship with Daoud, a Sudanese interlocutor, fractured at the moment he enacted his most consequential decision: to escape Belgium and pursue the route to the United Kingdom. He was not alone. Many of those I had been following left Brussels, setting in motion multiple processes of control, pursuit, and dispersal along the route. I remained behind, studying a site of post-eviction from which the people who had made it legible had departed.

This created a methodological problem I could not sidestep. One path was to stay in Brussels, continuing participation in squatting networks while documenting departures through interviews and second-hand accounts, supplemented by messaging threads with those who had moved on. This would have preserved a spatially contained fieldwork while acknowledging the transnational character of dwelling along the route. I chose the other path: to follow people physically to Calais, to become mobile across the routes they were crossing.

That decision collapsed several boundaries that traditional ethnographic methodology (Tsing, 2004) conventionally maintains. To travel to Calais was not merely to observe; it was to participate in the material circuits sustaining migrants' survival. Through comrades in the *NoBorder General Assembly* in Brussels, I was put in contact with the *Calais Migrants Solidarity network*. My first visit, in March 2024, required careful negotiation: I was hosted by comrades in Calais, and those in Brussels had already informed the collective that I was both a solidarity comrade and a researcher seeking to understand how support for people on the move was organized along the Belgian-French route and beyond.

The collective in Calais made clear that my integration into their field would come with conditions: I was to spend two weeks during my first visit "learning the territory," its social dynamics, the tensions that structured everyday life, and crucially, participate in the solidarity labor, rather than immediately conducting research from a distance. This practice of observation-through-intervention was not unfamiliar to me. I had already engaged in similar forms of ethnographic participation within solidarity networks at the French-Italian border in Ventimiglia, where I had been trained through the SolRoutes project's fieldwork methodology. It was there that I first learned to navigate the tensions inherent to this kind of engagement; tensions between researcher and activist, between documentation and action, between analytical distance and political commitment. I had already encountered the ambiguities that arise when the ethnographer's presence is simultaneously that of witness, participant, and accomplice. The ethical questions of what to record and what to withhold, the blurred boundaries between solidarity work and data collection, and the uncomfortable awareness that one's participation, however genuine, remains shaped by the privilege of being able to leave the field while others cannot. These earlier experiences at Ventimiglia had prepared me, at least partially, for the conditions the Calais collective would set. Though each context generates its own particular configuration of tensions and ethical demands.

This was an explicit intervention from activists in Calais to avoid the pitfalls of classical research postures that too often reproduce narratives of migrant 'suffering', criminalize smuggling, or simplify the contradictions of humanitarian work. In this process, my positionality as a Moroccan precarious migrant played a significant role: it facilitated a degree of sympathy from actors who are frequently solicited by established European professors, whose institutional privilege can create distance from the precarities of the field. My presence had to be earned through understanding, participation, and respect for the rhythms and stakes of the local solidarity networks, embedding myself in the practices, negotiations, and responsibilities that underpinned survival in these precarious spaces.

"Learning the territory" also meant recognizing that Calais is just one node among others along the Belgian-French route. Migrants continue to move across space, and dispersal occurs well beyond the line of the border. Conversations with comrades and people on the move in Calais revealed that understanding the conditions of dwelling required understanding the full circuit: from the urban squats and solidarity houses of Brussels and the Walloon region, through the temporary encampments and emergency shelters along the E42 highway, to the

encampments and makeshift settlement of the Opal Coast. This insight shaped my *mobile-activist ethnography*: a methodological stance that follows circuits and routes rather than bounded sites, engaging with the flows, displacements, and contingent arrangements that define migrants' dwelling in real time.

My engagement along the E42 highway in the francophone western Belgian region deepened this methodological approach. From June 2024, I was hosted by the regional coordination of the *Plateforme Citoyenne* in Peruwelz, a network of volunteers supporting Dublinized migrants along the Belgian-French corridor. The main operational dispositive of this network was the "Welcome House". It functioned as a day center and coordination point for distributions, emergency accommodation, and bureaucratic support. I first arrived there as a volunteer and researcher with a specific utility: knowledge of the Dublin procedure, familiarity with the trajectories of people moving through this migration route, and enough Arabic to communicate with beneficiaries. The logic was the same as it had been in Calais. Participation and accompaniment preceded research, and presence had to be useful for the organization and the migrants before it could be anything else.

This solidarity space served as an initial point of contact, allowing me to meet Dublinized migrants undertaking this route. These mobile subjects became crucial interlocutors who narrated the existence of broader circuits supporting both dwelling and mobility along this route. Networks that extended far beyond, and were not necessarily limited to, the particular support spaces I engaged with both in Belgium and France. They revealed a complex geography of solidarity and survival that operated across multiple scales and through diverse actors, many of whom remained invisible to formal organizations.

Initially, my role consisted of participating in the daily activities of the House: welcoming new arrivals, facilitating communication and interpretation with beneficiaries, and observing the everyday support offered to Dublinized migrants. Over time, this engagement evolved into a more mobile and reactive presence: accompanying teams during distributions in forest encampments, supporting relocations after evictions, and accompanying people to administrative appointments. This phase of fieldwork allowed my ethnography to become synchronized with the temporalities of precarious dwelling in the Belgian region, the constant movement between expulsion and emergency shelters, between temporary hosting and displacement.

This phase also deepened my understanding of how solidarity infrastructures are themselves distributed across the route: how volunteers in Péruwelz coordinate with activists in Calais, how emergency shelter hosts in Tournai absorb people expelled from encampments further north, and how the circuit of dwelling is reproduced through these collective efforts. Through these circulations, from Brussels to Calais and back along the E42 highway, the research stance evolved into a constantly entangled position of researcher, witness, and activist (Reedy and King, 2019). Following migrants' itineraries required active participation in the circuits under study, and that participation gradually transformed the fieldwork itself into an activist-oriented mobility: a practice of presence that now encompassed Brussels, the western Belgian corridor, the E42 highway, Lille, Calais, Dunkirk, and other locations along the Opal Coast, moving not according to a research itinerary but in response to the rhythms of expulsion, solidarity mobilization, and onward movement that structured life along the route. This trajectory illustrates that understanding highly precarious, dispersed, and mobile populations requires more than observation: it demands presence, participation, and reflexivity, acknowledging that knowledge production is inseparable from the material, temporal, and affective conditions of the field.

3.3. "Follow the Thing," "Follow the People," how about Following as Accompaniment?

My engagement in the field compelled a methodological reorientation. What emerged was not a prepared fieldwork strategy but a practice shaped by the necessity of following dwelling along the route. This is what I call mobile-activist ethnography. This approach departs from the conventional understanding of fieldwork as presence in a place, replacing location with circuit as the primary unit of ethnographic engagement. It takes as its object of investigation the route itself; understood not as a line connecting fixed points but an assemblage (Salter, 2013) constantly produced through the friction between regulatory power and migrants; autonomous movements (Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). My ethnographic approach followed people-on-the-move not because of an abstract methodological choice, but because the very conditions of their existence rendered fixed-site research impossible. The expulsion and dismantlement of encampments, squats, and other dwelling spaces unsettled the notion of "site" itself; revealing it as precarious, temporary, and subjected to eviction and raids. The border here operates as *method* (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Not simply a territorial line to be crossed, but a sorting mechanism that continuously produces mobilities and differential

settlements and displacements along the entire route. Each eviction, each police operation, each infrastructural barrier enacts bordering practices that organize and divide movement itself. The "site" here is not a container I entered and exited, but an unstable formation constantly made and unmade through displacement enacted by border technologies distributed far beyond national boundaries.

Therefore, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which presumes the stability of multiple sites that a researcher strategically moves between, proved fundamentally undeployable. Marcus's framework, however innovative in distributing ethnographic attention across geographical locations, still assumes the ontological stability of those sites: the nodes in a commodity chain, the offices of a transnational corporation, the settlements of a diaspora remain identifiable and relatively enduring spaces that exist independently of the researcher's trajectory. When researching dwelling and expulsion in contexts of forced mobility, what I confronted was precisely the dissolution of such stability. People moved from sites in the process of being dissolved toward other sites still coming into being. The very ground of ethnographic observation was constantly shifting beneath my feet. Where multi-sited ethnography distributes the researcher's presence across established locations, what I term mobile-activist ethnography must move with the unfolding of events, forces, and necessities. It tackles not stable sites but the turbulent processes through which temporary dwelling places emerge, solidify briefly, and vanish under the pressure of dispersal. It traces the routes, rhythms, and ruptures of "sites" themselves and their becoming, attending to how the assemblage of borders (Sohn, 2016) and facilitations (Schapendonk, 2020) shape dwelling through acceleration, deceleration, diversion, containment, and pushback. The temporal dimension becomes crucial: people are held in waiting, suddenly expelled, rerouted through displacement, or caught in the decelerated time of dispossession. These are not incidental obstacles but constitutive elements of a border regime organized through logistical rationales that manage populations as flows to be channeled, slowed, or blocked (De Genova, 2020). Here the "site" is less a place than a provisional arrangement always already under threat of dispersal, embedded within bordering practices designed to regulate movement itself.

In its early formulation, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003) offered a first attempt to rethink the spatiality of fieldwork. By moving between sites connected through flows of people, goods, and information, it sought to capture the dispersed nature of contemporary social worlds. Yet, as generative as this model was, it often presupposes a form

of researcher mobility that is strategic and planned, where the ethnographer chooses which sites to visit and when. The researcher maps connections between institutional or community settings already stabilized as “sites” (Falzon 2009). The mobility of the ethnographer, in this model, is methodologically deliberate; a tracing of circulation between relatively legible locations.

By contrast, the ethnographic condition I encountered in the Belgian-French route was not one of legible connectivity but of precarious arrangements. The “sites” were not pre-existing but constantly dissolving and reforming; an encampment today, an expulsion tomorrow. The field was not a collection of places but a chain of precarious situations linked by fragile social and logistical infrastructures, constantly moved by bordering technologies. When routes are increasingly bordered and dwelling is repeatedly interrupted, subaltern circuits emerge. They are sustained through the capacity to inhabit provisional spaces, negotiate the temporal suspension of waiting, and reconfigure dwelling within and beyond the limits imposed by securitarian regimes. Limits that both migrants and their supporters simultaneously contest and must work within. Mobile-activist ethnography thus begins where multi-sited ethnography ends. It takes not the connection between sites as the object of study but the circuit emerging after the erosion of the site. The field is not a set of dots on a map, it is the line that connects them, the line along which people move, rest, and are displaced.

This distinction is crucial. In multi-sited ethnography, the ethnographer’s movement is largely predefined by sites assumed to be stable nodes and locations. In mobile-activist ethnography, by contrast, movement is derivative: it follows insurgent encounters, events, and the movements of others rather than a preselected map of places. The ethnographer does not determine the itinerary but is pulled into it. To accompany the dwelling of people-on-the-move is to enter a temporality structured by uncertainty and improvisation. The methodological principle is no longer “follow the thing” or “follow the people,” but rather “follow as accompaniment”. This subtle shift carries deep epistemological consequences. Following implies distance, a form of observational tracking; accompanying implies co-presence and participation. It is not to trail movement from a distance, but to enter into it as a shared condition. It means aligning one's presence with people on the move and solidarity actors in ways that are practical, ethical, and political at once. Telling with them and allowing fieldwork to be shaped by the urgencies of their lives rather than by an external research design. Accompaniment refuses the fantasy of the neutral observer. In the context

under study, people do not need more eyes documenting their precarity; they need hands that carry, bodies that show up, and narratives that render their lived conditions intelligible. The ethnographer becomes implicated in the material circuits that sustain dwelling; helping to distribute supplies, relocate after expulsion, or coordinate information between fragmented networks. Observation becomes indistinguishable from collaboration.

In this sense, mobile-activist ethnography shares affinities with the broader “mobility turn” and its mobile methods (Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2011; Boas et al., 2020). Like those approaches, it treats movement not as an anomaly but as a fundamental condition of social life. Yet, where the mobility turn often celebrates mobility as a marker of fluidity and connection, this ethnography insists on the asymmetrical and violent nature of mobility in contexts of irregular migration. Movement here is not always freedom but also compulsion; a form of enforced circulation enacted to escape detainability, deportability and waiting (De Genova, 2020). The ethnographer who moves alongside precarious migrants’ dwelling does not share their condition but is nevertheless drawn into its orbit, inhabiting the peripheral experience of precarious presence.

Being a Moroccan precarious migrant and PhD student within the European space opened a specific space of knowledge that fundamentally shaped what could be known and how knowledge could be generated in this research. Being Moroccan was not merely a demographic marker but an active determinant of fieldwork access; it enabled forms of interlocution, spaces of conversation, and layers of shared experiences with precarious legal status that remain largely inaccessible to researchers positioned outside the circuits of precarity and racialized processing that structure European immigration and border regimes. This positionality made possible forms of trust and solidarity that are rarely extended to researchers arriving with institutional privilege (Ibeka, 2022). More crucially, it granted access to a particular register of knowledge: the embodied, affective, and practical knowledge of what it means to be administratively vulnerable in Europe.

People in Calais and Brussels frequently told me that my presence “made sense”; not simply because I could communicate in Arabic or do the work of interpretation in specific situations, but because I carried in my body and biography an experiential understanding of what precarious migration is. I, too, had navigated residence authorization limbo, endured months without documents in Belgium, and made the constant calculations about which borders and airports could be crossed without document check: commuting between Belgium and Italy to

renew my expired Italian permit while waiting for a Belgian document that never arrived on time. Be that as it may, this is not a sense of sameness, but one grounded in mutually intelligible vulnerability. This shared precarity opened conversational spaces where people spoke differently than they might to researchers insulated from such experiences: they assumed I already understood the bureaucratic violence they described, the temporal anguish of waiting for papers, the strategies of invisibility and hypervisibility that survival demands. They did not need to translate their experiences into frameworks legible to outsiders; instead, they spoke from within an assumed shared grammar of precarity.

This proximity did not dissolve the asymmetries between researcher and participant. I retained privileges of institutional affiliation, better mobility when I finally got my resident permit, and eventual security that most people-on-the-move did not possess. Yet it opened a relational space where action and reflection could unfold as forms of mutual recognition rather than extraction. Epistemologically, this meant that, in times, knowledge was not something I extracted from informants but something co-narrated and co-produced through our shared implication in overlapping structures of exclusion. The ethnographic relation could not be disentangled from the political responsibilities that accompanied it: to assist, to witness, and to make visible without reproducing the voyeurism of suffering or the extractivism of lived experiences that too often characterizes migration research conducted from positions of security and privilege.

The refusal of neutrality (Reedy and King, 2019) became an epistemological foundation of my ethnographic approach. As I followed the routes connecting Brussels' squats, Calais' encampments, and the makeshift dwellings scattered along the E42 highway, I came to understand that ethnographic knowledge in such settings cannot be extracted from a position of detachment. It must be produced through participation in the very circuits that make survival possible. The work of carrying mattresses into a newly opened squat, of participating in distributions from one encampment to another, of mediating information about relatively safe zones to dwell... this was not additional to the research; it was the research itself. Knowledge was generated through these acts of participation, through the embodied experience of sustaining precarious infrastructures of solidarity, and through the situated understanding that emerged from occupying, however temporarily and incompletely, overlapping positions within Europe's hierarchies of mobility and belonging.

The distinction between mobile-activist ethnography and its predecessors thus lies not only in its spatial orientation but in its epistemic orientation. Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Falzon 2009) maps the relational architecture of global systems; mobile ethnography (Boas et al., 2020) explores the textures of movement; mobile-activist ethnography, by contrast, is a method born in the contradiction of forced displacement and dispersal. It takes as its premise that under conditions of displacement and dispersal, ethnographic understanding can only emerge through moving with dispersal, with exhaustion and relational embeddedness. The method does not merely follow movement but it learns from movement, adopting the rhythms, interruptions, and improvisations that characterize life on the route.



fig 3 : Research itinerary across 19 months of fieldwork © Ismail Oubad

In this framework, the circuit becomes both an empirical and analytical form. The circuit is not simply a network; it is the infrastructure of continuity amid discontinuity. It is the collective endurance of improvised infrastructures (Simone, 2018), the connective tissue through which people, resources, and arrangements circulate despite constant rupture. The circuit linking Brussels, the E42 highway, Calais to the English Channel is not a stable geography but a moving assemblage of control and facilitation, maintained through endless improvisation and endurance. Each node (the squat, the roadside encampment, the emergency shelter, the distribution point) is temporary, but the relations that animate them persist. The

ethnographer's task is not to confine these relations into an ethnographic observation grid but to inhabit their motion, tracing how circuits endure through movement rather than stability.

To practice mobile-activist ethnography, therefore, is to ethnograph endurance itself. To think of attempts to dwelling and mobility not as a background condition but as the very medium of social life along bordered migratory routes. It requires letting loose the control over research design, accepting that the field will shift and move us to directions, that access will depend on trust built through shared labor and presence. It is a method that transforms precarity into epistemology. The researcher's own exposure to uncertainty becomes a lens through which to understand the precarious politics of dwelling and mobility.

Ultimately, mobile-activist ethnography contributes to a broader rethinking of what ethnographic practice and knowledge could be produced in a context structured by borderization, displacement, and enforced mobility. It insists that to know from within these worlds, one must move with them. Not as a gesture of empathy or representation, but as a methodological and ethical commitment. It is not only a way of doing fieldwork but a way of *being with* others under conditions where movement is both survival and resistance.

3.4. Documentation Under Conditions of Displacement and Dispersal:

The practice of mobile-activist ethnography demanded modes of documentation that could accommodate velocity, deceleration, precarity, and ethical sensitivity in ways that traditional ethnographic recording could not. The systematic field notes taken at day's end, the recorded interviews with written informed consent forms, the archived photographs that populate conventional ethnographic practice proved largely incompatible with the immediacy and vulnerability of life along the route. What emerged instead was a fragmented and improvised practice of documentation shaped by the conditions it sought to capture.

My field notes were dictated vocally to my recorder in moments of pause rather than according to any disciplined schedule: on train bathrooms between Calais and Brussels, in the evenings after long days at distributions, during brief respites in the house of my host in Tournai. I used encrypted applications for notes and communications, given the sensitivity of information about encampment locations, crossing plans, and the identities of people under Dublin designation. The phone became an extension of memory, a place to quickly record

fragments before they dissolved into the overwhelming flow of events. There were days when the intensity of evictions, the urgency of relocating people, or the exhaustion of physical labor made note-taking impossible. On those days I relied on memory, reconstructing scenes and conversations hours or sometimes days after the occurrence. This temporal gap between experience and documentation introduced some levels of distortions, I should admit, but at the same time forced a form of analytical selectivity that more systematic note-taking might have obscured. What remained vivid in memory, what demanded to be written, often signaled affective and relational intensity that structured my understanding. I start seeing these notes not as transparent records of reality but as traces of engagement with the field (de Sardan, 2008) marked by my own position within the events I was attempting to comprehend.

Photographs of dwelling spaces were used when needed and always with explicit verbal consent of the person and people I accompany. I documented material conditions rather than people. The architecture of makeshift encampments, the aftermath of evictions, the spatial arrangements of encampments when they are emptied of people. In contexts of illegalization and police surveillance, the camera is not a neutral research tool but a potential instrument of exposure and harm. I avoided photographing faces. When people requested that I document their conditions, asking me to “show people what is happening here” as one interlocutor in Froyenne put it, we discussed carefully what could and could not be made visible. Some images remain on my hard drive, never to be shared to the public. Others were deleted at the request of those who initially consented, later recognizing the risk.

Voice recordings were even rarer with people-on-the-move, though occasionally permitted with established solidarity actors and institutionals accustomed to being interviewed. The formality of recording devices introduced, at first, a distance incompatible with the conversational intimacy through which much of my understanding emerged. In spaces under constant threat of police intervention, recording devices felt invasive and risky. Instead I relied on what I now call *conversational retention*. Extended interactions whose substance I would reconstruct immediately afterward, capturing not verbatim speech but the relational texture and substantive content of exchange. This maybe meant losing the precise words people used, but it preserved something perhaps more important: the context, the affective tone, the meaning embedded in shared presence.

The research produced sustained conversations embedded within shared activity. While distributing food. While doing bureaucratic paperwork. During long days moving with

distribution and relocation. In the backyards of emergency shelters, while visiting evicted squats and dismantled encampments, and in general assemblies. These conversations were not discrete research events but ongoing relational exchanges, returning repeatedly to questions of dwelling trajectories, experiences of expulsion, strategies for onward movement, reflections on the violence of state intervention and organized abandonment of people-on-the-move. Within these recurring encounters, all interlocutors were informed that their stories would contribute to the SolRoutes project and to my doctoral research. Given the informal and mobile nature of these contexts, verbal consent was obtained, ensuring that participation remained voluntary and grounded in mutual trust.

Consent in such contexts could not follow institutional protocols designed for controlled research settings. Instead I practiced what I think of as *processual consent*. Ongoing, verbal, renegotiated through presence and reliance. I introduced myself consistently as both researcher and activist, explaining that I was trying to understand the dwelling conditions of state-abandoned migrants after expulsion, and that this understanding would eventually be written. People could refuse to engage, could ask me not to write about specific events, could withdraw from conversation at any point, or even ask me to leave in high risk situations with border-crossing facilitators. This refusal too became part of the knowledge produced, marking the limits of what could be known and represented.

In mobile-activist ethnography, data exceeded conventional categories of ethnographic material. The corpus emerged not from a predetermined research protocol but from the methodological necessity of documenting life within a border assemblage (Salter, 2013) structured by dispersal, acceleration, deceleration, and containment. It included fragmented field notes, written in motion, reconstructed from memory. Conversations informal and embedded in shared solidarity labor, documented retrospectively. WhatsApp and Signal exchanges with people-on-the-move, preserving real-time reflections on mobility and dwelling that formal interviews would never capture. My participant observation was not as passive witnessing but as embodied participation in material circuits, in carrying supplies, coordinating relocation, standing watch during raids. Photos of dwelling spaces, maps sketched during conversations, screenshots of coordination messages within activist networks channels, the notes I took during general assemblies all reveal the logics and tensions of dwelling spaces and solidarity infrastructures along the route. And finally, my own affective register, my exhaustion, my fear and anger during police raids, my frustration at bureaucratic

violence, moments of connection and moments of forced separation. These were not subjective noise to be filtered out but epistemic signals, revealing the embodied stakes of the research in ways that detached and expeditive observation never could.

This expanded notion of data reflects my ethnography's epistemological premise. That knowledge about precarious dwelling and mobility cannot be extracted through distanced observation but must be generated through immersive, relational, and embodied engagement. The data was not a collection of discrete units but a dense relational fabric, woven through participation, memory, and ongoing presence along the route.

Despite the fragmentation inherent to researching within this unstable terrain, over 19 months of ethnographic engagement between November 2023 and May 2025, I managed to construct a substantial corpus of ethnographic notes. I also recorded and transcribed interviews with six autonomous activists supporting encampments after expulsion, six NGO volunteers involved in makeshift distribution, eight Eritrean and three Sudanese people-on-the-move, and three hosts providing respite accommodation. These interviews, conducted in multiple languages (Arabic, English, French) and across various locations, provided systematic documentation from different positional perspectives. Activists offered insights into the long-term evolution of solidarity infrastructures and state repression strategies, revealing evolving patterns in how bordering practices adapt to migrant tactics. NGO volunteers, positioned at the intersection of humanitarian aid and state regulation, illuminated the contradictions of providing care within systems structured by exclusion. People-on-the-move themselves articulated sophisticated analyses of border operations and the dispersal of their dwelling, sharing knowledge about how to navigate dispersal, when to move and when to wait, how to read the signs of eviction or relocation.

In addition, I collected four life stories: two from Eritreans and one from Sudanese migrants, and one from an autonomous activist with experience in Calais since 2014. These extended narratives provided temporal depth, tracing individual trajectories across years and multiple displacements, documenting how the bordering of this route and facilitation to its crossing has evolved over time. The activist's decade-long narrative particularly illuminated the historical transformation of the route, the evolution from the "hotspot" encampments to dispersed dwelling along the route, the intensification of police operations, and the persistence of autonomous solidarity practices despite systematic repression.

The proposals put forward in this thesis are the culmination of 19 months of ethnographic engagement, twenty-six in-depth interviews, five life stories, and punctual participation in general assemblies and organizational meetings with activist networks in Brussels, Péruwelz, Tournai, Froyenne, Lille, Calais, and Dunkirk.

The empirical material collected ensures both triangulation and analytical density. The research design combines prolonged ethnographic immersion, semi-structured interviews across differentiated actor positions, and a limited number of in-depth life stories. This combination enables a systematic cross-reading of perspectives, practices and narratives. This triangulation operates on three levels. First, actor triangulation allows the confrontation of heterogeneous positionalities within the same field of action, making visible both convergence and tensions. Second, methodological triangulation combines participant observation, interviews, and life stories, ensuring that situated practices, reflexive accounts, and biographical trajectories are not treated as equivalent forms of evidence but as complementary layers in telling about the phenomenon. Third, temporal triangulation, made possible by extended participative fieldwork, allows the identification of recurring patterns and the stabilization of empirical regularities beyond episodic observation.

3.5. Protagonist of the Research: Categories, Entry, and Exit

The nineteen months of fieldwork did not produce a closed group of stable interlocutors followed from beginning to end. It produced instead a set of overlapping, intersecting and often fragmented relational threads whose incompleteness reflects the structural conditions that the research seeks to analyse. Four categories of protagonists populated the field: people on the move, autonomous activists, NGO volunteers and humanitarian workers, and respite accommodation hosts. Each category had its own modalities of participation in the field and its own characteristic forms of exit.

The most numerous and analytically central protagonists were Eritrean and Sudanese people on the move, all subject to Dublin designations that structured their mobility, constrained their access to protection, and shaped the risks they faced along the route. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with eight Eritrean and three Sudanese individuals across Calais, Dunkirk, and Froyenne, alongside three extended life story interviews whose accounts trace

trajectories across multiple sites and temporal horizons prior to and during the research period. Entry into the field with people on the move was never direct and was never accomplished through formal institutional channels. Initial contact occurred through activist networks and humanitarian distributions, where my positioning as a researcher embedded in solidarity spaces provided relational legitimacy without the gatekeeping effects of NGO mediation. First encounters most often took place in squats, in distribution in encampments, or in the immediate aftermath of evictions, when the temporality of fieldwork converged with moments of displacement. The exit of these protagonists from the field was neither uniform nor always final. The crossing of the Channel, attempted, failed, or successful, constituted one form of departure, but it was not the only one. When I moved between field sites, from Calais to Brussels or from Peruwelz to Dunkirk, co-presence with individuals at a given location would end without any deliberate disengagement. In many of the cases, interaction continued through instant messaging via WhatsApp and Signal. These exchanges were not peripheral to the fieldwork but constituted a sustained form of ethnographic contact: they allowed me to follow the living conditions of people on the move through successive dispersals and evictions from encampments and dwellings, to know where people had been relocated after a raid, and to remain informed about the state of specific sites from a distance. Absence from a site was therefore not necessarily absence from the research relationship. In some cases, contacts within activist networks relayed news.

Autonomous activists became protagonists through sustained co-presence in field sites rather than through formal recruitment. Six in-depth interviews and two extended life story interviews were conducted with activists based primarily in Calais, Tournai, and Brussels, including two activists who had been continuously involved in solidarity work in Calais since 2014. Their longitudinal accounts made it possible to trace the transformation of dwelling arrangements, solidarity infrastructures, and state repression strategies over more than a decade, situating the fieldwork period within a longer temporal arc. Entry into these relations was gradual and conditioned by the activist observation method that oriented the research. By positioning myself as a participant in the logistical and political work of solidarity, I became progressively integrated into the relational networks through which activists coordinated and responded to evictions. Exit among activist protagonists took several forms. Some moved in and out of the field geographically, travelling to other sites on the route or returning to life in France and Belgium during periods of lower activist intensity. Others underwent affective withdrawal: the exhaustion and moral injury associated with sustained work under conditions

of state harassment led some individuals to step back from active involvement over the course of the fieldwork. I myself withdrew in some period and upon my return some of my interlocutors have moved to other sites.

NGO volunteers involved in makeshift distributions and emergency shelters across Brussels, Tournai, Peruwelz, Lille, and Calais were generally more institutionally stable and geographically fixed than either activists or people on the move, which shaped both the conditions of entry and the character of the research relationship. Access was facilitated in part through the organisations in which volunteers operated, though several interviews were conducted on an individual basis and interviewees encouraged to speak beyond their organisational positions, including about the frictions and contradictions they experienced within state-regulated humanitarian systems. Exits among these groups were correspondingly more legible: the end of my collaboration with the organization, the closure or reconfiguration of specific programmes, and professional transitions led some interlocutors to leave the field over the course of the research. In several cases, interviews served as retrospective accounts of involvement that had already ended at the time of the encounter, making these protagonists narrators of past experience as much as current participants.

And lastly interviews were conducted with individuals providing respite accommodation to people on the move in Tournai and Calais. These protagonists entered the field relatively late, as the analytical significance of domestic hosting arrangements within dwelling circuits became clearer in the course of the research. Their participation was bounded by the interview encounter rather than grounded in extended co-presence, and their exit was therefore built into the encounter itself. Unlike the activist or humanitarian spheres, hosting did not constitute a form of ongoing collective practice that the fieldwork could accompany over time.

What made it possible to move between these four categories simultaneously was the activist-researcher positioning that oriented the fieldwork from the outset. Because my entry into field sites was conditioned by participation in the logistical and political work of solidarity rather than by institutional affiliation or formal research access, I was never confined to a single relational register. This simultaneity meant that relationships did not terminate at the boundaries of any single field site or category of protagonist. Contact with some people on the move continued through WhatsApp and Signal across successive

dispersals; involvement with activist networks persisted through evictions and periods of lower fieldwork intensity; connections with some volunteers remained. The nineteen months of fieldwork are therefore better understood as a temporally bounded intensification of engagements whose relational substance preceded the formal research period and continued well beyond it. The dissertation is an account from those engagements, not their end.

3.6. Beyond Positionality: the Process of Ethical Engagement

The ethics of mobile-activist ethnography extended beyond reflexive acknowledgement of positionality to encompass practices of care, protection and the right to opacity (Glissant, 1997; Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022) that structured every dimension of the research. Ethics here was not a preliminary hurdle to clear before real research could begin but an ongoing negotiation woven into the fabric of fieldwork itself.

Protecting interlocutors' identities was not merely ethical formality but a matter of engagement. All names in this research are pseudonyms. Identifying details, precise locations of encampments, dates of particular evictions, have been altered or generalized when their inclusion could pose risks. How much specificity is necessary for ethnographic authenticity? How much generalization is required for protection? There is no formula for resolving this tension. Each decision was contextual, weighing the analytical value of the detail against the potential for harm.

Anonymization in my ethnographic approach is complicated by the small, interconnected worlds of activists and people-on-the-move. Activist comrades who read this work may recognize events, places, dynamics even when individuals are anonymous. This recognition is inevitable in research embedded within solidarity networks. My strategy has been to focus on structural dynamics and relational patterns rather than individual stories and the obsession with the 'migrant experience' (Khosravi, 2024), minimizing the risk that any single person could be identified through cumulative detail.

Yet this strategy of focusing on the material formation of dwelling rather than the 'migrant experience' solely serves another crucial purpose. It allows me to represent the heterogeneity of the solidarity and facilitation itself without flattening its internal differences or imposing a false unity. The space of activism along this route is not monolithic but profoundly varied in its political orientations, organizational forms, and tactical repertoires. They are not partisans

of a single movement or ideology. The solidarity circuits I encountered and participated in ranged from institutionalized humanitarian organizations operating within legal frameworks, autonomous No Border collectives practicing direct action and civil disobedience to not-for-profit and for-profit facilitators of border-crossing. Amongst these orientations existed a constellation of actors: volunteers, established migrants, anarchist squatters, local residents offering or making occasional shelter, encampments, and respite accommodations. All engaged in explicit facilitation of dwelling along this route.

Taking a position is such a context built on a sense of complicity. A complicity that is not organizational but relational and situational. My engagement was not with "the solidarity movement" as a singular entity but with multiple actors who, despite their differences, were all implicated in circuits of support for people moving through this territory. This complicity (my own and theirs) was not about ideological coherence but about shared presence in spaces of precarity and shared participation, however differently motivated and enacted, in infrastructures of survival. The heterogeneity of the solidarity space becomes visible precisely when we refuse to reduce it to a single political subject or to privilege one form of action over others. What emerges instead is a complex ecology of care, contestation, and compromise; a field where different actors bring different resources, different politics, and different vulnerabilities to the work of making life possible for those whom the state seeks to render immobile or invisible.

This research was conducted with the formal approval of the SolRoutes Ethic Committee and the approval of my two supervisors at the University of Genova and the University of Liège. The decisions made reflected the realities of ethnographic research. Advanced consent like the one usually used in medical sciences proved impossible. How does one obtain written informed consent from someone possessing no permanent address, no document, facing imminent eviction? How does one secure advance approval for research whose sites and participants cannot be predicted? The rigidity of institutional ethics, designed for controlled laboratory or clinical settings, becomes, barrier to research in conditions of radical precarity. This is not to dismiss ethics but to insist on a different ethical framework, one grounded in relationality, ongoing negotiation, and accountability to those with whom I worked.

I practiced what might be called *ethical engagement in motion*. Continuously renegotiating presence, consent, and representation through dialogue with activists and people-on-the-move. When people expressed discomfort with my questions, my curiosities, I

stopped. When comrades asked me not to write about certain tensions within solidarity networks, underground arrangements among facilitators of border-crossing, I respected those boundaries. This processual ethics required attentiveness, sensitivity and humility, qualities no institutional ethical protocol can mandate. It meant accepting that I would not know everything, could not document everything, should not represent everything. These refusals and absences are themselves ethical achievements, moments when the imperative to protect outweighed the desire to know all. This is what Edouard Glissant (1997) terms the “right to opacity”. In times of heightened pressure on migration support, revealing precise details would constitute harm to interlocutors who shared their words, involved me in their world, and with whose struggle I aligned. Following this principle, I maintain sensitivity toward facilitators’ fundamental right to opacity (Cf., Keshavarz and Khosravi, 2022), recognizing that not everything should be restituted, explained, understood and revealed in public arenas.

My ethnographic approach generates obligations that extend beyond the duration of fieldwork. Having been present within solidarity networks, having participated in sustaining dwelling along the route, I remain accountable to those communities even as I transition now to writing and analysis. This accountability takes several forms. I remain in contact with key activists in Brussels, in Calais and in Tournai, discussing where my work is going and soliciting feedback. Some comrades have asked to read some drafts or restate them verbally and asked to remove certain details, making certain dynamics opaque, and I have accepted those requests. When people allow me their time and energy for this collaborative revision, the knowledge produced is therefore a collective labor.

My commitment to freedom of movement does not end when the research does. I continue to participate in activist networks when possible, attending demonstrations, contributing to coordination efforts, using my academic position to inform and reflect with those in the struggle. This ongoing engagement is both political conviction and ethical obligation. I cannot extract knowledge from these networks and then disappear. To do so would be to reproduce the extractive logic that characterizes many academic research on migration, treating marginalized communities as data mines rather than political subjects with whom we share struggles and stakes.

I have sought to counter extractivism by making my work accessible. Sharing findings, even verbally through phone calls, with activists before publication. Framing my public analysis in

ways that might support rather than undermine solidarity efforts. Whether I succeeded is not for me to judge alone. It remains an open question negotiated with those whose lives inform this research. Some comrades have told me the work is useful, that it captures dynamics they recognize and helps them think through tensions in their own practice. Others have been more critical, pointing out the very fact that this research is done under an ERC funded project by the European Commission, the very institutions mandating hostile policies on migrants and solidarity. Others underlined moments where my analysis risks reinforcing narratives they are trying to dismantle of border-crossing facilitation. I take both responses seriously, understanding that accountability means accepting critique and revising accordingly.

Ethical accountability also means representing tensions within solidarity work honestly, even when doing so might discomfort allies. There were moments of paternalism, resource hoarding, strategic disagreement within activist networks, dynamics that complicate romantic narrative of solidarity. I have chosen to take into account these tensions because ignoring them would be dishonest, producing a sanitized account that serves no one. Yet this too is ethically critical. Critique risks providing ground to those who seek to delegitimize solidarity work altogether. I have tried to navigate this by situating tensions within their structural conditions, showing how scarcity, state repression, and the pressure of demands placed on volunteer networks produce conflicts that are systematic rather than personal.

The ethics of my ethnographic approach then is not a problem to be solved but a tension to be inhabited. A continuous negotiation between accounting for the real occurrence (de Sardan, 2008), care and engagement, between the demands of scholarship and the imperatives of solidarity. I have not resolved these tensions. I live within them, trying to do work that is rigorous without being extractive, critical without being cynical, accountable without being paralyzed.

In sharing these methodological details (the fragmented notes, the interviews conducted in motion, the participation in solidarity labor, the affective dimensions of fieldwork) I seek to make visible the actual trades of ethnographic work as I experienced them, something often absent in migration scholarship. The ethnographic methodology courses rarely prepare researchers for the practical, emotional, and ethical tensions that emerge when studying contexts of perpetual marginality and precarity. No manual taught me how to navigate the simultaneity of being researcher and participant in circuits of survival, how to document lives

while contributing to their material struggle, how to write about violence without reproducing voyeurism, or how to manage the affective weight of witnessing systematic abandonment and dispersal.

These tensions are not mine alone to resolve but belong to the entire community of ethnographers working on migration in such contexts. By explicating the *iterative itinerary* of my ethnographic fieldwork (its improvisation, its ethical dilemmas, its methodological adaptations) I hope to contribute to a collective conversation about what it means to produce knowledge within, rather than about, bordered spaces of precarity, and to invite other researchers to share their own practices, failures, and innovations in ways that might enrich our collective methodological repertoire.

Conclusion:

The methodology chapter does not merely account for how data was gathered. It argues for a specific epistemological stance (mobile-activist ethnography) as the only adequate response to the conditions this thesis investigates. Where multi-sited ethnography presupposes stable nodes connected by traceable flows, the field this research entered offered neither: sites dissolved as they were studied, routes reconstituted as they were followed, and the very object of analysis (dwelling in dispersal) refused the spatial fixity that conventional fieldwork assumes. To follow the route required becoming part of its circuits and intervening within it. The refusal of neutral observation was not a political preference imposed on the research. It was an epistemological condition that the field itself imposed.

What the chapter also makes visible is the asymmetry this methodology cannot resolve. The researcher who moves alongside Dublinized migrants along the Belgian-French route retains privileges (institutional affiliation, relative mobility, the ability to leave) that the people whose dwelling I followed do not possess. This asymmetry is not overcome by methodological technique. It is acknowledged as constitutive of the knowledge produced. A knowledge that is partial, positioned, generated through co-presence and shared labor rather than extracted from a distance. In naming these conditions, the chapter set the stage for the specific texture of the empirical analyses that follow. Analyses that are not transcriptions of an external reality but co-produced accounts of a shared field, bearing the marks of where, with whom, and through what forms of engagement they were made.

Data collected:

Data type	Participant / material	Number	Language	Locations	Analytical contribution
Ethnographic fieldnotes	Longitudinal activist observation and mobile ethnography	19 months (Nov. 2023 – May 2025)	Multilingual context (FR, ENG, AR)	Brussels, Péruwelz, Tournai, Lille, Calais, Dunkirk, Grande-Synthe	Thick description of everyday maintenance of dwelling, solidarity infrastructures, and state interventions
Collective meetings and assemblies	General assemblies and organizational meetings	Punctual participations	Mainly French and English, something Arabic	Brussels, Calais, Dunkirk	Observation of coordination, decision-making, and collective responses to repression
In-depth interviews w/ autonomous activists	Activists supporting encampments after expulsions and opening squats	6	English, French, Arabic	Calais, Brussels, Tournai	Evolution of solidarity infrastructures, state-repression strategies, adaptation of activist tactics
In-depth interviews w/ NGO volunteers	Volunteers involved in makeshift distributions, and emergency shelters	6	English, French	Brussels, Tournai, Péruwelz, Lille, Calais	Role of humanitarian emergency shelters along the route. Frictions of humanitarian and citizen's solidarity initiatives within state-regulated systems

In-depth interviews – Respite accommodation hosts	Hosts providing respite accommodation	3	French	Tournai, Calais	Role of domestic spaces within the dwelling circuits and migration stations.
In-depth interviews with people on the move	Eritrean (8) and Sudanese (3) Dublinized people-on-the-move	11	Mainly in Arabic, something in English	Calais, Dunkirk, Froyenne	Situated knowledge on dwelling circuits, border operations, dispersal, tactical mobility, post-eviction resourcefulness.
Life stories with People-on-the-move	Eritrean (2), Sudanese (1)	3	Mainly in Arabic	Multiple sites along the route	Trajectories before the Belgian-French route, cumulative effects of displacement, evolution of dwelling and crossing facilitation, and the migratory project.
Life story with autonomous activist	French (2) activist involved in Calais since 2014	2	French	Calais and route long	Transformation of solidarity across time; transformation of dwelling from “hotspot” encampments to dispersed dwelling. Longitudinal changes in modalities of interventions.

Chapter 4:
Subtracting Terrain, Assembling Circuits.
Trajectory of Encampments After Eviction

4.1. Subtracting terrain, assembling circuits:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them... between different natures. An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections.

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (1980)

For two decades now, scholarship on unauthorized migrants' precarious dwelling has proliferated alongside the increase in displaced populations and normalization of camps as governing solutions (Agier, 2018). This surge in research, and the diversity of approaches it encompasses, reflects the material and social complexification of these spaces. What were initially conceived as temporary arrangements have morphed across varied forms and multiplied actors, transforming in nature until some became sites of permanent habitation (Davies and Isakjee, 2019). Encampments are no longer merely provisional or sites of containment, but hybrid spaces, always in relation to border enforcement, unauthorized human mobility and their suspension. Far from simple emergency devices, they exist within a continuum of spaces and relations that exceeds the camp's perimeter, raising varied spatial and political stakes.

Existing reflection, however, often researches migrants' precarious dwelling in a sense of fixity and containment (McConnachie, 2016). The various interconnected dwelling forms operating along migration routes are often underdeveloped. These are spaces where encampment is not a destination but a way station, where dwelling exists not despite mobility but through it, and where the governmental logic aims not to contain populations within camps but to prevent their consolidation elsewhere along the route. While scholarship has illuminated camps as sites of prolonged displacement (Agier, 2018), humanitarian governance (Campesi, 2015), or zones of abandonment (Picker and Pasquetti, 2015), far less attention has been paid to the spaces between recognized frontline border camps: the highway margins, forest bushes, abandoned buildings, and urban parks where migrants are pushed back to while maintaining trajectories toward border crossings. These are sites where dwelling persists precisely through its continuous destruction.

This chapter illuminates how "control on transit" (Cf. Schengen borders code) is practically deployed along the Belgian-French route to the UK, not primarily through detention or direct capture of unauthorized migrants, but through subtraction of terrain and resources (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020). That is the active disruption of infrastructure that supports livability,

making life *en route* exhausting (Welander, 2021). This involves various fashions of systematic erosion of material, social, and legal terrain necessary for autonomous dwelling, while simultaneously deploying substantial resources to pressure transit-oriented solidarity (Fekete, 2018) to ensure this dispossession appears as mere state inaction and abandonment of what is institutionally framed as ‘transmigrants’.

I will then go on to account for the aftermath of encampment eviction and what dwellings remain after the systematic state intervention along this route. By articulating together the spatial tactics of removal with the temporal dimension of what happens after eviction (which practices persist and how dwellings reconfigure itself) this chapter discusses dwelling assemblages: spaces that exist beyond binary oppositions between removal and existence, subtraction and sedimentation, dispossession and place-making. In this endeavor, I suspend the official categories of ‘illegal camp’, ‘temporary shelter’, ‘humanitarian site’, and ‘evicted space’ to approach migrants’ dwelling not as present or absent, established or eradicated, but as distributed phenomena assembled across multiple sites, materialities and temporalities. Assemblages that are constantly becoming through their confrontation with dispersal and dispossession and their persistent reconstruction through collective practices.

Later in the chapter, and building on literature of borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015; Brambilla and Jones, 2021), I gather these multiple dwelling forms under the term *circuitscape* to emphasize their operation as nodes connected through migrants’ movement between sites. The typology that follows reveals dwelling not as presence at fixed locations but as circulation through interconnected refuges that collectively constitute migrants’ lived geography along bordered routes. Yet it is simultaneously structured by governmental rhythms (eviction cycles, police patrol patterns) and positioned by the route’s logistical geography of highways, truck stops, ports, and border zones. I will show how the circuitscape exists neither as stable infrastructure nor as purely spontaneous mobility, but as the assembled outcome of migrants’ tactical navigation, solidarity support, and state dispossession operating across the Belgian-French route to the UK.

So, what constitutes this circuitscape in material and spatial terms? What dwelling forms emerge in the aftermath of systematic eviction, and how do they relate to one another despite governmental efforts to prevent it? This chapter addresses these questions by first analyzing

the typology of dwelling that composes the circuitscape, examining each form's materiality, temporality, and tactical function within the broader assemblage.

4.2. The targeting of dwelling sedimentation

The dwelling spaces of *en route* migrants, whose trajectories are shaped by forced relocations and the pressures of transit control, exemplify these dynamics with particular clarity. The Belgian-French route toward the United Kingdom serves as an illustrative case. Following the demolition of Calais encampment in 2016 and subsequent expulsions, migrants seeking to reach the United Kingdom have not disappeared but have scattered across a wider geography (Queirolo Palmas, 2021). They now span the Channel coast and extend to Belgian highways, where *en route* migrants attempt to board cargo trucks heading to the UK. Authorities in France and Belgium have implemented systematic expulsion strategies aimed at preventing the fixation of encampment; – what local authorities emically term a “zero point of fixation” strategy (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation). Such strategies fragment encampments, evict autonomous squats, and push displaced populations into increasingly precarious and scattered dwelling arrangements. This is the operational reality of *de facto* control on transit: governance that does not stop movement but renders it increasingly exhausting for those in transit (Welander, 2021), while simultaneously making the route and its migration infrastructure the primary site of control and erosion (Oubad, forthcoming).

Yet despite the relevance of these dynamics, the encampments that have emerged along this route remain undertheorized. The dwellings that dot this route do not fit neatly into existing analytical categories; they are neither the larger-scale humanitarian camps that dominate migration imagery nor the informal settlements that cluster at border lines. They represent something distinct: reconfigured spatial arrangements produced by systematic efforts to prevent fixation at vital border-crossing points. From a migration control perspective, they function as devices of containment through unwanted mobility (Tazzioli, 2018). A governing strategy that controls migration not through immobilization or detention alone, but by decelerating, accelerating, and troubling migrants' geographies while simultaneously denying them stable ground. Thus dispossession manifested as the removal of the very possibility of secure dwelling along the routes.

“F.?[anonymized location] It is not a camp. People say in the news ‘the camp of migrants in

F.’... they think tents, and food and all. No. F. is just... we find blankets and tarps and we cover ourselves with that as we wait... and the police will come to take it. You find empty buildings and the police come again... You sleep there because the trucks go that way, because it is between Brussels and Calais, because for two or three days maybe the police don’t know you’re in the bush. There you cannot really stay... you bring a tent, a mattress from the associations, next day it’s gone. I don’t know... You find plastic to cover the [broken] window, they come and break the door. Not to always arrest us. Just to make us go away. Always away, away.”

(Interview, D., *en route* migrant, June 2024, Calais)

The words of D., an Eritrean migrant encountered in Calais in summer of 2024, illuminates the distinctive character of encampment along the Belgium-France corridor. His insistence that F. (anonymized Belgian border town) “is not a camp” merits careful attention. The statement tells a fundamental gap in how migration infrastructures are publicly represented, lived and analytically understood. When the media invoke “the camp of migrants in F.”, they evoke a set of associations (semi-permanent settlement, organized hubs for transit, and often smuggling hubs) that bear little relation to the material reality D. describes. What exists in F. resists the definition boundaries of established categories. It is neither a humanitarian camp with its tents, distributions, and organizational presence nor the informal settlement that consolidates over time at border crossing points. Instead, what emerges is a provisional and more precarious arrangement constituted through the tension between the imperative to move toward vital border-crossing points and the systematic denial of any possibility to establish secure dwelling along the route. The blankets and tarps that migrants “cover themselves with” are not building materials for a settlement; they are temporary shields against exposure, always already marked for removal. The abandoned buildings are not appropriated into dwellings but merely occupied in the intervals between police interventions.



Fig 4. Sleeping bags and tarps left on the Belgian highway to northern French ports. © Ismail Oubad



Fig 5. Makeshift tents hold migrants waiting near F. for reliable passage to Calais. © Ismail Oubad

The dwelling sites visited during the fieldwork reveals the operational logic of migrants' precarious dwelling along this side of the route. With the cyclical destruction of makeshift dwelling, migrants move within the impossibility to secure dwelling suitable for finding safe passage. Considering the temporal rhythms D. articulates: "for two or three days maybe then police don't know you're in the bush". This brief window (two, perhaps three days) defines the maximum duration of occupation before the next intervention. The dwelling that might be

established in F. cannot extend beyond this threshold. The result is a permanent state of provisional occupation, terrain continually dispossessed by state authorities, where the present is always already threatened by the certainty of imminent displacement. Migrants *en route* exist in what might be called ambivalent erosion and dispossession; neither fully mobile (they remain in the area for weeks or months) nor properly settled (no occupation lasts more than days). This is the core functioning of the ‘zero point of fixation’ at the Belgian side and its manifestation as *de facto* control over transit along this bordered route.

The recurrence of migrants heading to Calais and aiming for the UK along the Belgian highways is itself a spatial effect of France’s way of deploying the ‘zero point of fixation’ strategy. Following the 2016 dismantlement of Calais encampment (portrayed mediatically as the ‘jungle’), French authorities sealed and fenced all highway rest areas designated for cargo trucks (Agier, 2018), rendering attempts to cross through cargo trucks not only merely impossible but subject to intensified surveillance. This infrastructural closure produced a spatial displacement: migrants move backwards to Belgium, where local jurisdiction (de Massol de Rebetz and van der Woude, 2022), while systematically targeting transit-oriented migrant encampments through evictions, stop short of fully sealing truck rest areas, aware that doing so would disrupt road freight transport operators and the transnational flows of the economy along this route.



Fig 6. UK-funded walls and fences built around Calais region to block access to highways. © HRO

Be that as it may, the ‘logistical turn’ (Rossiter, 2014) has illuminated how illegalized mobility increasingly depends on inserting oneself into existing circulation systems (container ships, freight corridors, cargo trucks) that were never designed to carry human passengers but which nonetheless become appropriated as migration infrastructure. This shift has fundamentally transformed the nature of border control itself: managing illegalized migration is no longer primarily about fortifying territorial boundaries, but rather about controlling the infrastructures along which migrants are dispersed and abandoned. Border enforcement thus operates increasingly through the strategic disruption of these circulation systems. Deliberately fragmenting migration routes and scattering migrants across hostile terrain.

4.3. A typology of dwelling in the aftermath of eviction:

Fieldwork encounters revealed a recurring pattern of dwelling among evicted migrants along this route. Interlocutors emphasized a general eviction logic: dwelling is rarely allowed to become fixed, preventing the spatial and material sedimentation that would enable migrants en route to organize their living conditions and onward movement.

The typology that follows emerges from sustained observation of the cyclical erosion and reformation of dwelling sites, from conversations with migrants navigating between different dwelling arrangements, and from engagement with solidarity actors who support dwelling across multiple locations (see methodology chapter). The terminology used to describe these dwelling forms comes primarily from Tigrinya and Arabic-speaking migrants (mainly from Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia). These terms constitute emic classifications employed by migrants themselves to distinguish and make sense of different dwelling arrangements. They designate a network of sites that migrants move between, combine, and deploy according to shifting needs for rest, safety, concealment, and proximity to border-crossing opportunities. Understanding this landscape requires attending to the specific materialities of each dwelling form: what physical structures and infrastructures characterize these sites, what temporal rhythms organize life within them, what social relations they enable or foreclose, and how they position migrants differently within the circuits of escape.

4.3.1. Cherkbet:

Belgian E42 highway: October 2024. C., picks me up in the early morning, before the light has fully settled. She is a solidarity coordinator and civic hosting organizer who has worked this corridor for several years, long enough to know its rhythms, its Bourgmestres, its informal tolerances, and the specific geography of concealment that has developed along it. We drive east along the Belgian side of the E42 as the highway empties slowly of its overnight truck traffic. C. talks while she drives, pointing occasionally to a treeline, a rest area... She has driven this road so many times that she sees its margins differently from someone passing through... not as background to the highway but as the thing itself, the space where most of what she coordinates actually happens. We park near a forested area in the locality X [anonymized] and walk in from the road. The undergrowth is wet. The path, if it can be called that, is visible only from having been used: branches bent back, a line of compressed earth between the roots. We come through a clearing where the evidence of recent habitation is visible. The site has been abandoned recently enough that the cardboard has not yet fully disintegrated, but long enough that no one is here. C., explain what she calls the precarious tolerance that governs spaces like this one. "The Bourgmestre is tolerant", she says, "as long as there are no problems". The Phrase carries the weight of long experience with local governance. Tolerant, as long as. Tolerance is not unconditional, it is extended contingently, withdrawn contingently, and the condition is not the welfare of people sheltering here but the maintenance of an order that this sheltering must not visibly disturb. "When people were seen crossing the highway, the highway police took notice and called on the Bourgmestre to do something" C., recounts. Bourgmestre, caught between the implicit tolerance he has extended and the institutional demand to act, found a middle way: he called C. He told her to warn people to leave before the police came, so that the arrests could be avoided on all sides. This eviction was negotiated in advance; it was delivered not as enforcement but as a warning through the solidarity network; it produced the appearance of clearance without the conflict of a formal operation. We leave the abandoned site and drive a short distance to another location. Here, a Cherkbet is currently active. We park further from the road and approach by foot. Under dense tree cover, a small cluster of tents sits in the shadow of the canopy. C. estimates fifteen people shelter here. The number rotates, people who have attempted

a crossing and failed return; the people who succeed do not come back; new arrivals come in from further back along the route to try. The site is a kind of waiting room for the next attempt, and the attempt is its reason for existence. Standing at the edge of the tree cover, the highway is audible before it is visible. What emerges in the interstices between the forest edge and the highway, between the concealed and the exposed, between the tolerated and the policed... is not a camp in any conventional sense. It has no perimeter, no administrative existence, no organization that the state recognizes. What it has is a logic: the logic of remaining exactly as invisible as the tolerance of the nearest authority will permit, and no more.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Francophone western Belgium).



Fig 8. A Cherkbet in the bush near the E42 highway. © Ismail Oubad

The first dwelling form to materialize after eviction of larger encampments is typically the Cherkbet. The term, drawn from the Tigrinya-speaking migrants who constitute significant populations along the route, captures both improvised, temporary character of these sites and their endurance. Witnesses of the Cherkbet's reformation tell about a process of spatial reconstruction that begins almost before the vehicles carrying confiscated belongings have left the area. People initially rely on improvised shelters made of cardboard, plastic sheeting, and sleeping bags. These early forms of makeshift sheltering represent a minimal infrastructure of survival, preceding the emergence of small, hidden clusters of tents

supported through volunteer networks. Checkbets emerge in what might be called the interstices of the state attempts to erosion; spaces that fall outside the regular rounds of clearance, yet remain accessible to the route's infrastructure. In forests surrounding the E42 highway, positioned where tree cover provides concealment but proximity to highways to enable onward movement attempts.

The materiality of Cherkbet is defined by strong precarity and minimal infrastructures. Tents (when available) are tied to branches or weighted with whatever materials can be found. More commonly tarps or plastic sheeting create fragile shelter. Fires are built in makeshift pits, serving simultaneously for warmth and cooking.

Yet within this extreme precarity, micro-infrastructures emerge with surprising speed. Solidarity networks channel material support toward these sites. Information networks operate to share knowledge about eventual evictions, solidarity distributions, and sheltering possibilities along the route. The temporality of Cherkbet is structured by the anticipation of the next eviction. Dwelling here means knowing with certainty that any accumulation of materials or improvement of conditions will be destroyed. Police raids occur within rhythms that vary by location and proximity to highway rest areas. Authorities may temporarily tolerate such forms of dwelling when no alternative sheltering solutions are available; however, any perceived transgression is enough to prompt immediate dismantling. Yet Cherkbet demonstrates that impossibility is not absolute. While Cherkbet does not represent comfortable dwelling, nor dignified habitation, it provided the irreducible minimum that enables physical survival and the maintenance of escape trajectories.

4.3.2. Mahettat:

F. [anonymized location]: October 2024. The Q8 rest station on the main highway corridor sits at a junction through which trucks pass continuously toward the northern French ports. Day and night the rhythm is the same: engines idling, drivers stepping out briefly before climbing back into their trucks and continuing north. A node whose function is visible, whose logic is transit. What the station's design does not account for, and what its daytime appearance does not reveal, is the other transit that has organized itself around it. Until December 2023, the land surrounding the

Q8, the borders of the lot, the treeline that runs along its eastern edge... had functioned as Cherkbet: one of several dispersed sites along the route where people on the move attempted provisional dwelling while waiting for the moment to conceal themselves in Cargo trucks heading north. The duration was never fixed. Someone might stay two days, or four, or a week, sleeping in whatever shelter could be arranged, eating from what solidarity networks managed to bring or what could be gathered, watching the trucks and learning their rhythm, looking for the right moment, the right configuration of circumstances. The Q8 sat at the right distance from the port and on the right road. The trucks that stopped there were the trucks going where people needed to go. In December 2023, the Bourgmestre ordered the eviction. What followed is something that local residents still speak about: it was the depth of winter, and the police came at night. Tens of people on the move were woken and removed. There was, according to my informant Y., no emergency solution in place when the order was executed... no shelter, no accommodation, no plan for what would happen to people once they were no longer at that specific Q8. The sheltering problem was delegated in the hours that followed to local associations who were not prepared for it and who had not been consulted in advance. In conversations with solidarity coordinators, what stays in the image was people being taken in the cold, and the question, which no one has answered convincingly, of where they went. Since then, the area around the Q8 has remained largely empty of visible encampments. The eviction produced what evictions are designed to produce: the disappearance of the visible. But activists working the corridor report that crossing attempts did not stop. They relocated. People began moving for more concealed positions further back from the highway, from the tree margins... that the clearing operation had not reached yet. The geography shifted, the activity continued. What this area makes visible, even in its post-eviction, is the form that dwelling takes at the scale of the route. My informants use the Arabic word Mahettat (stations) to name these sites. The word carries more than its literal meaning. A station is not simply a place, it is a place organized around the possibility of enabling forward movement. Mahettat are precisely this: they emerge at the nodes where logistical hubs generate crossing opportunities, where the density of trucks and the specificity of a route create the conditions under which concealment becomes possible. They are not camps. They do not aspire to duration. They materialize when people move forward from more remote Cherkbet to make a crossing attempt, and they last a night, two nights, before dispersing... either because

the crossing succeeded, or because it failed, or because the site became visible and therefore untenable. They are not places at all in the conventional sense of the term. They are intervals in a logistics system of commodity movement.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Francophone western Belgium).

If Cherkbet emerges in spaces of concealment distant from visible points of border-crossing, Mahettat exist precisely at the nodes of mobility infrastructure. The term, translating roughly as “station” or “stops”, captures explicitly transient character of these dwelling sites. Mahettat are not places where *en route* migrants settle, even provisionally, but rather positions they occupy while maintaining readiness for immediate movement.

The spatial distribution of Mahettat follow the geography of truck transit. Along highways leading from Belgian cities toward French ports, Mahettat appear near service areas where trucks pause for fuel, rest stops where drivers sleep in their cabs, industrial zones where cargo is loaded and unloaded, and highway crossroads where vehicles slow to merge with traffic.



Fig 9. Traces left in Mahettat in francophone western Belgium. © Ismail Oubad

The materiality of Mahettat is minimal by necessity and design. Unlike Cherkbet, where some degree of infrastructure accumulates despite regular destruction, Mahettat are characterized by what might be called "dwelling without accumulation". Personal belongings

are reduced to what can fit in a backpack. Perhaps a sleeping bag, a change of clothes, and a mobile phone. Shelter, when present at all, consists of a single tent that can be collapsed and packed within minutes, or more commonly, just blankets or tarps that provide minimal protection from cold and rain.

4.3.3. Kharabat:

Calais: September 2024. On a cold autumn late afternoon I walk into a Kharaba as the last light comes through a broken storefront in thin, flat angles. The building was once part of Calais' industrial economy, a warehouse from the period when the port's expansion drew manufacturing to its edges. Now it belongs to the longer geography of deindustrialization that has left this part of northern France marked by structures the economy has finished with. The smell hits before the eyes adjust: damp wood, something cooking on a wood flame, wet fabric that has dried and been wetted again many times. The interior has been organized with care. Tarps and sleeping bags rest on wooden pallets that keep them off the concrete floor. Clotheslines run between the exposed beams overhead, hung with clothing. Along one wall, thin wires snake from an outlet in an adjacent structure... a connection that has been found and extended... with plugs dangling at intervals where phones sit charging. These phones are not communication tools only. They copy maps, contact numbers, the messaging threads through which information about routes, police movements, and crossing conditions circulates in real time. Around a shared pot near the center of the space, a group of men talk. The conversation moves across registers without pause... practical, then sardocin, the practical again. Someone describes a route where police checks have intensified this week. Someone else explains what to do when a tent or a sleeping bag is confiscated: where to go, who to call. There is laughter about the confiscation, the specific kind of laughter that requires a certain fluency in absurdity... officers treating a sleeping bag as contraband, as if the object and not the cold were the problem. What the warehouse holds is not simply a shelter but the accumulated knowledge of people who have been navigating this stretch of the route long enough to have developed protocols for its failures. The cooking, the charging cables, the information exchanged over the shared pot... these are the substance of dwelling. The building is a ruin, what happens inside it is not. Kharabat (the term my interlocutors use) names

a practice of appropriation: the taking of abandoned industrial infrastructure and making it, temporarily, into something liveable. The kharaba does not ask permission from the economy that left the building empty. It occupies the residue of that economy and reorganizes it around different needs. What kind of dwelling this produces (fragile, illegalized, alive with collective care..) is a question the building itself seems to hold in suspension.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Northern France).



Fig 10. Kharaba in a location near Calais. © Ismail Oubad

Where Chekbet occupy the margins of open terrain and Mahettat appear at mobility nodes, Kharabat emerge within the ruins of the French deindustrialized landscape. The term, carrying connotations of destruction, abandonment, and decay, describes the occupation of abandoned warehouses. To enter a Kharaba is to inhabit spaces that bear material witness to earlier cycles of economic extraction and abandonment, now appropriated for a different kind of migrants' existence.

En route migrants occupy the shells of factories closed years ago, structures with collapsed

roofs and broken windows, their floors marked with traces from machinery long since abandonment. These sites near Northern French ports become temporary dwelling sites, their interiors offering protection from weather alongside state abandonment of excluded migrants. In smaller towns along the Opal Coast, condemned factories scheduled for demolition but caught in bureaucratic delays provide months of precarious habitation before authorities move to evict people and destroy them.

The materiality of Kharabat involved intervention of solidarity and support networks in the Calais region. Together with migrants they appropriate and transform ruined space into minimally habitable shelter. The spatial organization within this Kharaba reflects the attempts of migrants and their supporters to create social order within ephemerality. Many of the volunteers and solidarians spend night overs here and participate in the work to maintain this space beyond the mere act of distributing material aid. I was led to this site during my activist-ethnography (Routledge and Derickson, 2015) as part of the Calais Migrant Solidarity collective. This Kharaba offers resources that Cherkbet cannot: protection from harsh weather, a hub of support and information, and relative stability. Unlike outdoor encampments visible from roads or accessible to regular police patrols, abandoned warehouses once occupied for more than 48 hours, they provide physical and bureaucratic barriers that complicate eviction. Police must navigate through bureaucratic orders to evict people dwelling there. Since many of these warehouses are suspended in bureaucratic procedures, owners often struggle to claim their eviction. This process gives time to dwellers and reduces the efficiency of eviction operations.

The temporality of Kharabat exists in tension between extension and uncertainty. These sites last longer than Cherkbet, creating possibilities for the sedimentation of resources and social relations that outdoor makeshift sites cannot sustain. This extended duration allows migrants and their supporters to treat Kharabat as relatively stable bases from which to plan crossing attempts. Here collective work is invested in making spaces livable, only to face sudden eviction when property owners or municipal authorities finally act.

Kharabat thus represent a tactical occupation as long as the complexity of related bureaucracy allows. They emerge in the gaps created by French deindustrialization, in the temporal lag between building's abandonment and its eventual demolition or repurposing. In these gaps,

migrants and their supporters construct temporary shelter from ruins, transforming spaces of economic abandonment into sites of social reproduction, however precarious.

4.3.4. Transit-oriented squats:

Calais: May 2024. On a sunny morning I load donated clothes and meals into a van at the entrepôt with S. The warehouse from which Refugee Community Kitchen, a British organization, coordinates its daily operations in Calais. The task is straightforward: deliver food and material to the squat on rue X. The drive takes less than ten minutes. The building, an abandoned house on a residential street, does not announce itself as anything unusual from the outside. The squat has been operating under a three-year occupation agreement granted in late 2021. The arrangement is rare along this route and was made possible by a specific combination of factors: the presence of supporting associations, the fact that the building shelters not only single men but women and families, and the political difficulty of executing a forced eviction under those conditions. The agreement does not make the space legal in any full sense. It makes it harder to clear. Inside, activists from the collective live alongside migrants en route. The cohabitation is functional and deliberate. The space is transit infrastructure... a place to recover from a failed crossing attempt, to wait out a period of intensified police presence at the border, to charge a phone, to eat, to sleep somewhere that is not a tent in a field subject to the forty-eight hour clearance cycle. M. and his group arrived two nights before my visit. He describes the squat as a “place to breathe” phrase that is precise about what the space provides: not resolution, but temporary relief from pressure, and enough time to replan. Tonight the squat houses twelve people. By early morning, if a crossing attempt fails overnight that number will likely double. The squat absorbs failed attempts. It is designed to. What distinguishes this space from squats elsewhere in the city, or from squats as a form of urban housing claim, is the explicit orientation toward departure that organizes everything inside it. In Calais, presence is not a state people are trying to sustain. It is an interval between attempts. The squat does not shelter people who intend to stay; it shelters people whose intention to leave has been temporarily interrupted. The collective infrastructure that maintains it (the food deliveries, the activist presence, the negotiated occupation agreement) exists precisely to enable the

onward movement that the border is working to prevent.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Northern France).



Fig 11. Squat in Calais © Calais Solidarity Migrants

Transit-oriented Squats emerge from a fundamentally different logic than Kharabat, despite their appearing similarity as occupied buildings. Where Kharabat involve the opportunistic habitation of ruins in gaps of official procedures, squatting represents the coordinated, deliberate occupation and transformation of buildings into defensible dwelling sites. This difference is not merely one of degree but of kind. Squats embody organized refusal of migrants' abandonment rather than tactical adaptation to it. Transit-oriented squats opening along the Belgian-French route typically involve collaboration between migrants and solidarity activists with housing occupation experience. Unlike the individual discoveries of Kharabat, squat openings are planned actions requiring coordination and resources (Oubad, 2024).

The materiality involves transformation rather than mere occupation. Where Kharabat dwellers work minimally with ruins, squatters actively repair and improve structures. In the Calais squat that operated during my fieldwork, it was opened to shelter people who are on the wait for an immediate passage or who are coming from a failed attempt. The stability of

this site enables more sense of sedimentation that manifests in terms of gradual accumulation of knowledge, relationships, and resources supporting effective onward movement or engagement with appeal procedures to regularisation and settlement. Transit-oriented squats function as political projects beyond shelter. Occupying vacant buildings in border towns makes visible the tension between state-abandonment to migrants and the forms of solidarity providing protection and support. They frame this form of squatting as a challenge to the production of migrants' illegality and border violence. For *en route* migrants, squats provide not only shelter but experience of collective planning and resourcefulness to access regularisation or onward movement.

Eventual eviction involves more elaborate state response than routine Cherkbet clearances. Court orders must be obtained, large police forces mobilize. Physical removal involved forcible entry, arrests of those refusing voluntary departure, and immediate building securing preventing re-occupation. Unlike Cherkbet that rapidly reform, evicted transit-oriented squats rarely reopen.

4.3.5. Temporary emergency shelters:

Calais: September 2024. During my shift at the entrepôt, S. and I talk about the previous night. A police patrol intercepted a crossing attempt near Ambleteuse. I ask where the people intercepted ended up. Some, he explains, were taken to state facilities for screening. Others were not. They found their way to emergency shelter through the coordination that happens in the early hours... phone calls between activists and the network of emergency shelters. S. suggests I speak with A., the coordinator of La Maison Margelle. I already know her from activist assemblies. We go together. La Maison Margelle is a house annexed to a church in the periphery of Calais, made available by the parish. The arrangement has no formal legal architecture; it runs on the parish's willingness to extend the space and the association's capacity to manage it. Inside, the house shelters around ten people. Most are appealing asylum denials... people in the legal system but suspended within it. Four arrived recently from failed crossing attempts. The five bedrooms upstairs sleep two or three each. The kitchen runs continuously. The living room functions as communal space: phones charging along the walls, cards on the table, conversations

moving between French, Arabic, English, and languages I cannot identify. A. is careful about the house's limits. Capacity is strictly controlled, and she is direct about the fact that sheltering people in transit is not part of Margelle's mission. The four people from the failed crossing are accommodated as an exception, the emergency made unavoidable, not as a structural function of the space. What the house's location reveals is as significant as its interior. Margelle sits in the periphery of Calais, an hour's walk from the encampments along the border's edge. The people staying here have moved away from the immediate geography of crossing. What they gain is recuperation: sleep in a room, a meal from a kitchen, a day without the border's immediate pressure. What they temporarily surrender is proximity to the crossing infrastructure itself. It is a trade the emergency made for them. Whether they will return to the edge, and when, is a calculation that continues inside the house.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Northern France).



Fig 12. Emergency shelter in Calais. © Ismail Oubad

These shelters provide institutionalized space mainly for International Protection Seekers (IPS) under procedure. However, they only host *en route* migrants in times of shipwrecks, injuries and major emergencies. And that is for a few days. Be that as it may, few nights

allows washing clothes, treating injuries, resting without constant vigilance. Yet this comfort is rationed through capacity limits, first-come systems, and registration processes. Many shelters explicitly exclude migrants “in transit”, prohibiting those most desperate; those attempting crossing to the UK, who are ‘Dublinized’ and, who cannot engage with asylum procedures. When allowed, *en route* migrants cycle between shelters, Mahettat and Cherkbet near Calais, mobilizing this institutional space when accessible while maintaining mobile positioning for crossing attempts. Autonomous activists facilitate these movements, providing transportation and carve opportunities for the needs of *en route* migrants to access such facilities.

Emergency shelters represent a respite dwelling but always conditional to categories, timelines, and capacity. Often, protection here is offered only to those accepting immobilization, documentation, institutional rules, and can present themselves as ‘properly’ vulnerable rather than actively mobile.

4.3.6. Civic hosting along the route:

Day center near E42, Belgium: July 2024. It is my first day volunteering at the day center that operates alongside the E42 corridor. The space is modest and functional: tables for hot meals, a row of charging stations along one wall, a corner where a legal information volunteer receives people by appointment. Outside in the backyard, during a break, I sit with L., a longtime volunteer who coordinates civic hosting across the region. She has been doing this long enough... a continuous background process of matching need with capacity across a network of people she knows by name. L. draws a distinction between how hosting works here and how it works in Brussels. "In cities it's all through platforms," she says. "Databases, formal placements." She pauses. "Here it's phone calls and trust networks." She pulls out her phone and scrolls through a thread of encrypted messages... a running list of available hosts, updated in real time, circulated among a small group of coordinators who know both the hosts and the people who need hosting. The list has no institutional existence. It lives on the phone. She describes what happened the previous week. A group was evicted from the camp by morning. By afternoon, places had been found. "No forms, no conduct charts," she says. "We just explain to people how to be with a family, and we know those who can take in." The knowledge that makes this possible is relational, built from years of managing the same network,

knowing which hosts can handle how many people, which families have capacity this week and which do not, which situations require a particular kind of care. The hosting network she coordinates serves two overlapping populations whose needs differ but whose presence in the region follows the same logic. The first are those appealing asylum denials: dublinized people who need enough stability to sustain a legal process, who require an address, continuity, time. The second are people in transit to the UK for whom Belgium functions not as a destination but as what L. calls a rear base: a place to recover between crossing attempts, to regroup after a failure at the coast, to wait until they are ready to move again. "PZ is Calais' rear base," she says, naming the anonymized locality. "People recover here, regroup, then move back to the coast when they are ready". The phrase organizes a geography that the hosting network is quietly sustaining. The corridor between the inland day center and the coastal encampments is not simply a route; it is a circuit with a rhythm... advance, attempt, failure, retreat, recovery, advance again. Civic hosting sits at the recovery end of that circuit, providing the infrastructure that makes the next attempt possible. L. does not describe it in these terms. She describes it as finding people a place to sleep. The two descriptions are not in contradiction.

(Fieldnotes, July 2024, Francophone western Belgium).

Civic hosting (the practice of individuals opening their private homes to accommodate state-abandoned migrants) initially operated through informal solidarity networks during the time of Maximilian Park (Clarebout, 2020). It has since become institutionalized in urban centers, with CSO platforms systematically connecting hosts to migrants seeking respite from makeshift encampments. In cities like Brussels and Lille, civic hosting now functions as a formalized system: CSOs coordinate placements, maintain databases of available hosts, conduct placement procedures, and provide support structures for both parties. Border town hosting follows a fundamentally different logic. Though some CSO connections exist, hosting in border towns operates through informal networks. Solidarity activists maintain lists of willing hosts via encrypted messaging or word-of-mouth within trusted circles. Migrants learn of these possibilities not through organizational channels but through activists distributing material support directly in encampments. Every connection requires personal intermediaries who vouch for both host and guest, explaining unwritten rules of respite hosting. This informality is not incidental but necessary, given the heightened legal risks

hosts assume in border zones and the acute vulnerabilities migrants face entering strangers' private spaces under intensified state surveillance.

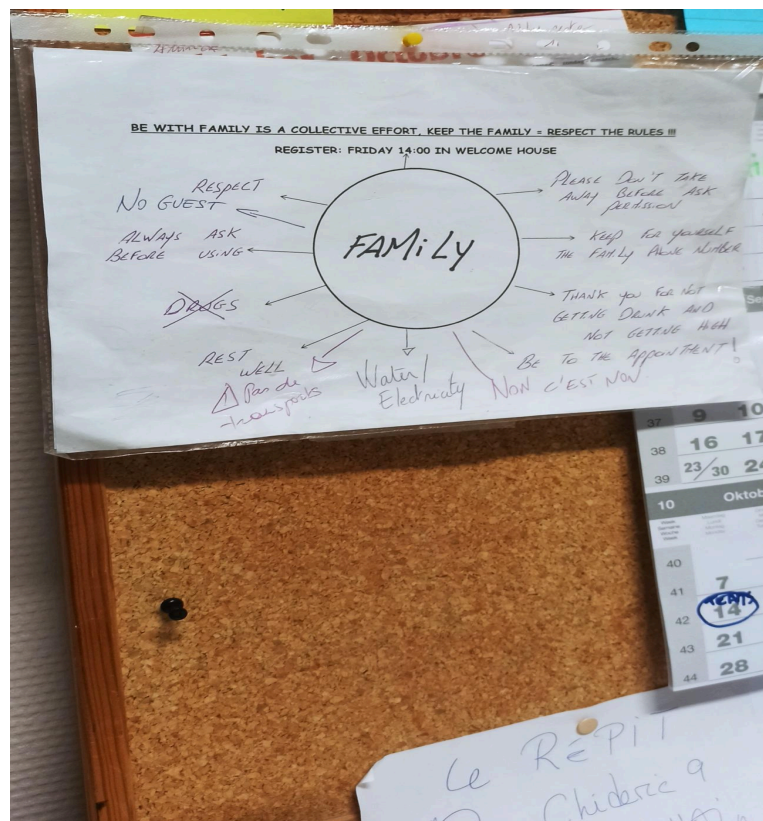


Fig 13. Citizen hosting guide for beneficiaries. © Ismail Oubad

Most hosting arrangements remain temporary (days, occasionally a week) maintained through precarious goodwill. Hosts continuously negotiate between solidarity commitments and the pressures of work routines, family obligations, limited domestic space and the ever-present risk that sheltering migrants could be reframed from humanitarian care into criminal offense under “solidarity trial” prosecution (Lochak, 2017). For migrants, civic hosting provides crucial but temporary respite; time to rest and recover, but insufficient to replace Cherkbets, Kharabat or Mahettat as primary dwelling sites. Hosts often provide information about the region and support countering isolation often associated with transit. Some hosts maintain ongoing relationships, staying in contact after hosting ends, providing assistance when attempts fail. Domestic space’s intimacy creates possibilities for social relations transcending emergency shelter’s utilitarian exchanges or makeshift sites’ survival focus.

Civic hosting represents respite and solidarity along this route; the opening of private space to those the state marked as ‘transmigrants’, as surplus, as threat and as illegals. This operates

across scales: legally, in willingness to risk police harassment; spatially, in transforming domestic space into sanctuary; socially, in creating relationships across borders states work to maintain; politically, in practically refusing the proposition that some humans deserve shelter while others deserve abandonment, just because they are on the move. Yet this intimacy makes civic hosting necessarily limited in scale. It is dependent on individual capacity, constrained by legal risks, unable to provide the collective density or strategic positioning other dwelling forms offer.

These diverse dwelling forms, from *Cherkbet* and *Mahattat* to *Kharabat*, to transit-oriented squats to emergency shelters, and civic hosting, do not exist as discrete alternatives between which migrants choose but rather as interconnected elements within larger assemblages of survival and mobility. Understanding post-eviction dwelling requires attention to how migrants move between these forms, combining them according to shifting needs, opportunities and constraints. A single migrant's week might involve sleeping in a *Cherkbet* along the Belgian highway for several nights while attempting trucks, spending two days in civic hosting in nearby localities or in Brussels or Lille to recover from illness, returning to a *Mahatta* near a crossroad where favorable crossing opportunities materialize, and using an emergency shelter for one night when injured, and sheltering in a *Kharaba* when winter cold becomes unbearable.

The interconnections between dwelling sites are maintained through peculiar infrastructuring work: information networks, solidarity actors who facilitate connection, circulating material resources, and enduring social relationships that span different dwelling forms and localities¹¹. Yet, the movement between dwelling forms reflects migrants' tactical navigation of competing priorities within the migration industry (Cranston, Schapendonk and Spaan, 2020). Dwelling sites, particularly those in frontline zones of border crossing, face intensified police targeting and heightened eviction pressures under the transit control framework (Witter, 2023). In contrast, the more distant a site is from crossing points and the more it remains marginal to transit routes, the more authorities cast organized abandonment. That is letting precarity intensify through deliberate neglect rather than active intervention (Gilmore, 2022). This reveals the state's ambivalent governance: erosion through intervention in transit sites, extreme precarity through abandonment in peripheral ones.

¹¹ The dynamics of collective endurance will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter on modes of permanent improvisation and politics of endurance after expulsion.

What emerges from this ethnographic examination is that post-eviction dwelling exists as a distributed, networked, constantly transforming landscape rather than as fixed sites. Dispossession removes terrain, but migrants and their allies continuously reconstruct dwelling possibilities across whatever spaces remain accessible, however inadequate. The result is not the absence of dwelling but its radical proliferation into unstable, provisional, interconnected forms. A landscape of makeshift shelters, occupied ruins, temporary hosts, and strategic positions that migrants must navigate while maintaining their trajectories toward escape. The governmental strategy of preventing fixation through systematic eviction does not eliminate dwelling but rather transforms its character, producing the precarity, dispersion, and exhaustion that subtractive biopolitics aims to generate (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020).

4.4. The circuitscape of migrants' precarious dwelling: a constellation of sites and resources

My attempt at forging the concept of *dwelling circuitscape* builds on the critical potential suggested by Brambilla's borderscapes framework (2015), which already displaces the conception of borders from a fixed site of control toward a dynamic terrain of negotiation, belonging, and becoming. Rather than treating borders as merely regulatory lines, Brambilla conceptualizes the borderscape as a heterogeneous field where representations and practices co-constitute lived realities (2015: 16). Circuitscape extends this insight by shifting analytical attention from the border as a bounded zone to the mobile configurations of connection that traverse and exceed it. It foregrounds flows, shifts, and contingencies as constitutive elements of migratory space, emphasizing how routes are continually reworked through practices of survival, dwelling, solidarity and their erosion. In this sense, the circuitscape does not replace the borderscape but specifies a particular optic within it: one attuned to the relational infrastructures and provisional assemblages that sustain movement, revealing migration as a process shaped less by linear trajectories than by recursive circuits of interruption, adaptation, and collective endurance.

Where the borderscapes concept has illuminated borders as performative spaces (produced through practices rather than given as fixed lines) the *circuitscape* extends this understanding to the entire mobility assemblage (Salter, 2013) connecting border sites. It names the interconnected network of spaces, infrastructures and interventions that span from Brussels through intermediate zones along the E42 highway to Calais and onward toward the UK. But

crucially, the circuitscape is not merely a geography of control. It is simultaneously a geography of possibility, produced through the constant tension between state strategies of dispossession and migrants' persistent reconfiguration of dwelling across subtracted terrain. Thus the circuitscape of dwelling is constituted not only by police raids, evictions, and infrastructural closures, but equally by the Cherkbets that reform within moments of clearance, the Mahattat that position migrants at nodes of crossing opportunity, the Kharabat that appropriate ruined industrial sites, the solidarity networks that circulate materials and information across sites, and the tactical movements between dwelling forms that enable survival despite systematic dispossession.

What makes the dwelling circuitscape distinct from more conventional analyses of migrants' precarious dwelling (Boccagni, 2017) or camps (Agier, 2018) is precisely this emphasis on the generative capacity of ephemeral dwelling. Where governance operates through the orchestration of dispersal across multiple sites, migrants and their allies produce counter-geographies (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2019; Bonnin and Oubad, 2025) and through distributed circuits of provisional refuge. These are not stable alternatives to state control but rather what emerge in the interstices, gaps, and temporal lags of the eviction apparatus. The dwelling circuitscape thus operates through spatial interdependence that is simultaneously repressive and productive. Heightened surveillance in Calais pushes migrants back towards the E42 highway and Brussels, but this displacement also activates solidarity networks in Belgian localities. Squat evictions in Brussels redirect migrants *en route* toward peripheral zones, but these zones become sites where new forms of collective dwelling sediment, however briefly. The systematic unlivability of intermediate spaces ensures perpetual circulation, yet this very circulation generates knowledge networks, social relationships, and tactical repertoires that span the entire route (dynamics that form the subject of analysis in the subsequent chapter).

When D. (abovementioned migrant *en route*) speaks of moving between Brussels, F. [anonymized location], and Calais "Brussels to F. to Calais, Calais to Brussels to F.,. The highway, I know every kilometer" he describes not mere helplessness within a system of dispersal but the acquisition of route-specific expertise, the accumulation of spatial knowledge that enables continued survival and pursuit of passage. The police intervention in F. [anonymized location] that destroys tents and break doors is indeed connected to park and squat clearances in Brussels and early morning raids in Calais as coordinated elements of

governing logic. But equally connected are the solidarity distributions that provide replacement tents, the civic hosts who offer respite, the information networks that warn of police intervention, and the collective practices through which dwelling is continuously reconstructed across subtracted sites.

The circuitscape, then, must be understood as a relational space in Brambilla's sense: a mobile assemblage that varies depending on the point of view from which it is interpreted. From the perspective of state authorities, it appears as a system of containment through dispersal, preventing both sedimentation and passage. From the perspective of migrants navigating this route, it is simultaneously a trap and a field of possibility. A geography that constrains movement while also generating the spaces, relationships, and knowledge necessary for continued escape attempts. From the perspective of solidarity actors, it is a terrain for intervention; not through the provision of stable shelter (which governmental strategies render impossible) but through support for the ephemeral dwelling forms that migrants create in the interstices.

This recognition of the dwelling circuitscape's generative dimension does not romanticize precarity or suggest that migrants' agency somehow negates the violence of systematic dispossession. Rather, it insists on attending to what actually exists in the spaces of subtraction: the Cherkbets in forest margins, the Mahettat at highway nodes, the Kharabat in industrial ruins, the squats that temporarily consolidate, the civic homes that open despite legal risk, and the circulation between these forms that constitutes the lived reality of escape routes (Tsianos and Papadopoulos, 2013). These dwelling arrangements are not external to the circuitscape but constitutive of it; they are what makes continued presence along the route possible despite governance aimed at impossibility.

The dwelling circuitscape is therefore the spatial infrastructure through which migrants are held in suspended transit, but it is equally the distributed network of provisional refuges through which survival and mobility are maintained. It is the apparatus that circulates migrants endlessly between nodes that cannot become homes, but it is also the assemblage of dwelling practices, solidarity relations, and tactical knowledge through which those nodes are momentarily inhabited. All in all, the dwelling circuitscape captures this dual reality: the systematic erasure of migrant dwelling and its persistent reformation through circulation. It encompasses both the orchestration of displacement and the reconstruction of dwelling space,

both the cumulative effect of dispossession and the irreducible minimum that enables continuation, both the sites from which migrants are expelled and the sites they recreate.

Conclusion:

This chapter underlines what remains after the governance of precarious migrants' dwelling, described in chapter 1, has done its work. It shows that the *zéro point de fixation* does not prevent dwelling, it forces dwelling into a distributed, mobile, and perpetually reconstituted from that chapter named *circuitscape*. The five dwelling typologies analyzed (cherkbat, mahettat, kharabat, transit-squats, emergency shelters and civic hosting) are not separate and stable dwelling options. They are nodes in a single relational circuit that migrants navigate according to shifting pressures of police enforcement, crossing proximity, material availability, and accumulated social knowledge. The circuitscape is the spatial infrastructure of dwelling in dispersal. Not what exists despite the force of erosion, but what that formation produces as the only form of presence it fails to fully prevent.

Crucially, the chapter demonstrates that the governmental strategy underlying the zero point of fixation (that destroying the tent destroys the network) is structurally incorrect. The network is not housed in the tent. It is housed in the relations, knowledge, and relational capital that people carry with them after each eviction, and that reconstitute new nodes in the circuit within hours of clearance. What the strategy does succeed in destroying is not the network's existence but its capacity. Each reconstitution occurs under conditions more scarce, more socially thin, and more temporally compressed than the last. But they never vanish. This finding sets the terms for Chapter 4, which examines not the spatial forms of the circuitscape but the labor, and the specific modes of improvisation, through which those forms are produced and reproduced after every act of erasure.

Chapter 5:
Infrastructuring Endurance:
The Capacity to Reassemble Dwelling After
Erosion

5.1. Infrastructure, dispersal and endurance:

Migration is fundamentally a mediated process. It is made possible (and made difficult) through arrangements that are at once material, organizational, political, and relational. The question of how movement and dwelling are mediated, enabled, and obstructed has become one of the central preoccupations of contemporary migration studies, generating a substantial body of work concerned not simply with who moves and why, but with the infrastructural conditions under which movement becomes possible. This concern with infrastructure emerged partly in response to earlier frameworks that foregrounded migrant agency or state control as the primary explanatory variables, without adequate attention to the intermediary arrangements (the facilitators, technologies, channels and material spaces) through which agency and control are exercised and contested.

Xiang and Lindquit's (2014) foundational contribution to this field defined migration infrastructure as the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that mediate the movement of people across borders. This drew attention to the labor that makes migration technically executable. Infrastructure here is not a neutral conduit but a site of power that shapes who can move, under what conditions, and at what cost. This insight redirected scholarly attention away from the migrant as an autonomous actor navigating a given landscape, toward the sociotechnical assemblages that constitute both the landscape and the autonomy of the migrant in the first place. Subsequent scholarship extended the infrastructural lens to arrival contexts (Meeus et al., 2019), showing that infrastructure shapes not only movement but dwelling itself. The capacity to remain somewhere, access services, and build networks is infrastructurally produced and differentially distributed. Arrival, in this account, is not a natural endpoint of migration but an achievement that depends on the availability and accessibility of particular arrangements.

For many 'dublinized' migrants arrangements for arrival and settlements are never achieved. What we witness is rather an erosion of infrastructures supposed to facilitate that. If infrastructure enables movement and dwelling, then its deliberate dismantling becomes a form of governance, as shown in the previous chapters. These are strategies through which states regulate migrant presence not through direct expulsion alone but through the erosion of the conditions under which migrants can organize their lives. What emerges from these observations is a picture of migration infrastructure as simultaneously enabling and

constraining, productive and destructive, formal and informal. Infrastructure does not simply facilitate migration; it shapes its form, rhythm, cost, and social meaning.

When infrastructure is denied, eroded, or criminalized, migrants and their supporters do not simply cease to move or dwell; they find other ways. It is at this point that the conventional frameworks begin to show their limit. Migration-infrastructure studies have tended to presuppose what contexts of systematic dispersal precisely deny: institutional anchoring, material accumulation, and organization sedimentation. Where these conditions are actively prevented, the literature offers limited tools for accounting for what persists and how. Accounting for the infrastructuring of dwelling circuits under dispersal therefore required reaching beyond migration studies toward analytical tools better suited to the conditions this ethnography encountered.

Critical urban scholarship on cities of the Global South has long refused to read the arrangements that operate outside formal institutional framework through the lens of ‘informality’ or ‘illegality’. They have shown that ‘informality’ is not simply a deficit condition but a productive mode of organization with its own logics, solidarities, and vulnerabilities (Simone, 2004). It is from within this tradition that Simone developed his influential proposition that in contexts of institutional abandonment and material inadequacy, people themselves become infrastructure. They develop transversal, flexible arrangements through which they substitute for absent systems, coordinating across difference and maintaining circuits of exchange that require no institutional anchoring to function.

This proposition travels productively into the context of illegalized migration along the Belgian-French route, where the deliberate dismantling of formal support structures and the criminalization of solidarity produce precisely the conditions of absence and inadequacy that Simone theorizes. When squats are evicted, organizations circumscribed, and material resources seized or eroded, what remains are people (migrants, activists, volunteers, border-crossing facilitators) and the relations they maintain across shifting locations and under sustained pressure.

This chapter analyzes how the assembling of dwelling after eviction is structured around coordinates of subversive solidarity, reciprocity, and the maintenance of mobility circuits under deliberate state dispossession. I approach this through Abdulmalik Simone’s (2018, p.61) concept of improvisational endurance: practices for living with instability that emerge

from subaltern positions relative to formal systems. Despite sustained precarity, I will show how such practices provide infrastructure for moving forward through improvised alternative means of getting things done – moving resources, information, and care outside official channels. Rather than treating the continuous practices of assembling dwellings after eviction as failed settlement or temporary crisis response, I underline how they constitute alternative forms of social organization that operate beyond institutional logics of migrant support; or what Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) term mobile commons. As I will discuss further, the circuit along which these forms of migrants' precarious dwellings are situated is an infrastructure that enables mobile commons to be shared despite instability.

This chapter identifies three recurring modes through which dwelling is infrastructure along this route. First, calibration and relocation that involves temporal negotiation for provisional authorities tolerance. Second, commoning rehearsal that sustains collective dwelling through iterative mutual aid practices and adaptation to erosion. Third, co-optation and repurposing of material resources to navigate entanglement of border-crossing economies and solidarity. These three modes reveal how dwelling persists not despite dispersal but through its continuous re-making. These patterns emerged recursively from fieldwork, while empirically entangled in practice, and are distinguished here only for analytical clarity. In contexts marked by continuous state-enforced dispersal, people on the move must rely on a particular kind of dwelling infrastructure: one defined less by the stability of institutions, actors and materiality than improvisation, a repetitive cyclicity, and solidarity work. This chapter thus shows that infrastructures do not have to be durable to matter and it contributes to the migration-infrastructure literature by demonstrating that even in highly precarious and repressive contexts, a form of infrastructure contributes to enable subversive mobilities.

5.2. The conditions of permanent improvisation:

Before examining the three modes, it is important to understand the circumstances in which the post-eviction dwellings take place. Three dynamics make this permanent improvisation particularly contentious. First, the state's dependence on delegated humanitarian labor channels civil society into provisional, tightly circumscribed forms of intervention. As a coordinator of a solidarity organization in the Wallonies-Picarde region explained: *"We are called upon in a crisis... we are asked to follow the rules, we register everyone, we document. But if we go a step further to host migrants and give them phones and SIM cards, suddenly*

we are called 'friends of the passeurs'” (francophone western Belgium, October 2024, fieldnotes). This instance reveals how state authorization operates through ambivalent delimitation. Certain forms of assistance are allowed (food provision, registration) while others that would enable autonomous movement (hosting near the highway, communication tools) are rendered illicit. The work that exceeds the limits becomes framed as complicity with what is framed as “facilitation of illegal migration”.

Second, repeated criminalization reshapes migrant supporters’ positionality, creating tension between work-for-job (work according to institutional frameworks) and work-for-justice (solidarity commitment that exceeds those frameworks). One social worker reflected about the work of her organization saying: *“Soon is winter... where could they [migrants] go? If they stay in the area, we feel responsible for their needs. What's wrong with giving someone a phone to reach their family or shelter from the cold? Yes, we are harassed by the police, but we still bring sleeping bags and tents, when we can. We are doing what's right, not just what's written on paper”* (francophone western Belgium, October 2024, fieldnotes). Her account demonstrated how care imperative persists despite police harassment, compelling work that transgresses official authorization. The phrase “doing what is right, not just what is written on paper” articulates commitment that exceeds institutional boundaries; a form of care labour (Sanchez, 2023) that infrastructures dwelling precisely by refusing to limit support to what authorities permit.

Third, the dispersal of migrants en route has prompted solidarity organizations to increasingly coordinate across locations with autonomous squatting collectives, independent supporters, and informal networks. As another coordinator notes: *“Without coordinating with other support networks, people in transit get nothing... Here we do not run the intervention we do it in multiple hands”* (Northern France, June 2024, Interview). This produces contingent, adaptive, and relational ways of repurposing resources that exceed state expectations. The ‘multiple hands’ she references constitute a distributed solidarity network characteristic of mobile commons (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016). These are the resources and information that moves among formal organizations, autonomous activist groups and individual supporters coordinating what they have in hand across jurisdictional boundaries to sustain dwelling circuits.

Assembling dwelling in this context unfolds through three overlapping modes analyzed below. Who is involved in each and all varies (individuals from formal support organizations, autonomous activists, local authorities, for-profit facilitators, and migrants themselves), but the point is not the individual actors so much as how improvisation itself becomes infrastructural through repetition. The ways in which people make dwelling exceed and often subvert institutional, moral, and economic expectations is done precisely because migrants' survival depends not on establishing stable infrastructure, but on improvising anew each time displacement occurs.

5.3. Modes of endurance in infrastructuring dwelling

5.3.1. Calibration and relocation: spatio-temporal negotiations of dwelling

Francophone western Belgium, November 2024: Three weeks after my first visit to this stretch of highway with C., I return. The Cherkbet that had been active was dismantled yesterday. C., picks me up, her car already loaded with sleeping bags and thermal blankets. "We are going to check what is left", she says. We walk through the same undergrowth to the same clearing. destroyed materials, no people. C., explained that the Bourgmestre called again last evening. This time the stakes are broader. Federal authorities have been pushing for a general clearance of all "problematic encampment" near the highway rest areas. The logic is familiar, but the call carries more weight than a simple heads-up. The Bourgmestre did not only warn for migrants to leave before arrest, he also advised C., to coordinate with other organizations, anticipating that more evictions were coming and that local actors would need to absorb displaced people. Leaving the site, C., makes calls while walking: "Do you still have those tents?... How many places are left in the emergency shelter?..." Back in her car she told me about mayors who are tolerant but short-term, mayors who changed after election, shelters available but only for families. Her phone rings, she negotiates. three people, two nights maximum. C., mobilize what she has in hand to get things done... to shelter people after eviction.

(Fieldnotes, francophone western Belgium, Novembre 2024).

The first mode through which the assemblage of dwelling operates is calibration and relocation. That is the ongoing negotiation over the location and the temporality of dwelling

after eviction. Here improvisation takes form through its repetitive rhythm. Authorities tolerate provisional spaces, then destroy them; supporters relocate dwellers, only to repeat the process when the next eviction occurs.

These moments illustrate the constant calibration required to maintain dwelling. C.'s engagement with state-abandoned migrants exceeds what state tolerance officially permits, compelling her to operate in the shadows of formal organizational frameworks. The Mayor's indirect warning and mobilization (calling C. to prepare in advance rather than facing sudden eviction) reveals a tacit acknowledgment. Her organization has become necessary to the overall management of migrants en route, providing solutions the state cannot or will not offer. This calibration operates through accumulated relational knowledge. The Mayor knows C. can informally mediate displacement without official intervention becoming visible through arrests or public controversy. By delegating responsibility to the solidarity organization, he maintains plausible deniability to this form of dwelling while ensuring migrants are moved from vital crossing points.

Yet, relocation arrangements remain fundamentally precarious. Highway police pressure overrules municipal tolerance, forcing the Mayor's stance. When relocated, tents could be destroyed, makeshift camps erased. C.'s relational capital allows her to negotiate brief delays and sometimes facilitate relocation to other dwelling forms (emergency shelters, civic hosting, or squats) but cannot prevent the underlying logic of dispersal. The contingent arrangements between Mayor and solidarity workers produces not protection of migrants but managed displacement, a provisional tolerance punctuated by inevitable expulsion.

The destruction of this encampment signals the state's strategy to contain movement and dictate where and how informal dwelling can occur. The internal logic here is both temporal and spatial. Dwelling is tolerated as much as it is far from vital crossing points and then it is erased when it enables movement. The endurance of this form of dwelling lies not in producing stability but in continuous reconfiguration of dwelling for migrants. Sometimes, evicted migrants are relocated to emergency shelters or sheltered for days in vacant municipal buildings, or hosted through the civic hosting network. All in all, dwelling endures because it mirrors migrants' attempts to sustain onward mobility despite containment pressures.

Relocation after expulsion operates within this terrain of provisional permissibility. During my fieldwork intervention with C., I understood that relocation moves through the

accumulated knowledge of localities and jurisdictional capacities, through proximity to specific mayors and other collectives and organization distributing tents and material. C., would spend hours on the phone with municipal contacts, carefully mapping which officials remained ‘tolerant’ to their organization work and which other organizations had available resources: a tent and sleeping bag here, emergency shelter and squat there. She, and her team tracked which municipalities had vacant buildings, which mayors were approachable after work hours when fewer officials were around.

This engagement reveals how solidarity towards abandoned migrants often exceeds the boundaries of work-for-job and of authorities' tolerance, compelling coordinators like C., to navigate in ambiguous zones of tolerance and erosion. However, these efforts do not always result in immediate sheltering. Negotiation takes time and the immediate need for shelter presses expelled migrants, especially during winter when sleeping rough becomes deadly. When relocation becomes less viable (when mayors withdraw tolerance or material resources are exhausted) relocation shifts toward squats and Kharabat.

5.3.2. Commoning rehearsal: sustaining dwelling through iterative improvisation

When relocation to another encampment proves impossible (when emergency shelters reach capacity and civic hosting can only offer weekend respite) local solidarity coordinators direct migrants toward squats and kharabat. This second mode operates through iterative commoning: a process of continuously matching available resources to immediate needs while relying on resources from elsewhere, drawing on networks of other collectives and organizations. Unlike the calibration mode's negotiations with authorities, dwelling here is sustained through connections among autonomous collectives and organizations who have occupied or channeled material resources towards abandoned warehouses and vacant houses across Belgian and French localities, transforming them into sites of respite and resourcing for migrants en route.

One such squat became a crucial node within this circuit. During fieldwork in northern France (March to September 2024), I documented, in different moments, how this site functioned and ultimately transformed under pressure.

Northern France, September 2024: I return to the squat on rue X after three months. The contrast is immediate. From February to June, this place functioned through a collective rhythm: shared cooking, material distribution, freely circulating information about routes and police checks. Activists lived alongside migrants, maintaining daily care practices that sustained both survival and future movement. Today, the house sits unused. People occupy its backyard only, with few tents scattered around. The activists have mostly left. Two men near the entrance now control distributions, intercepting donations before they reach what was once a communal storage in the squat. S., an activist with whom I revisited the squat explains the shift: "Started in August. Passeurs began sending clients here not just for shelter, but because they told them that the squat is included in their payment for the passage. The energy we had broke down... no one cooked collectively anymore or took care of the squat. Passage now costs money, and it is not shared". The turning point came mid-August when the police evicted the squat. After eviction some returned with the help of the activists, but the configuration is now individual survival.

(Fieldnotes, northern France, septembre 2024)

For a period, this squat functioned as a hub where daily routines of cooking, living, and mutual care intertwined with the labor of navigating border-crossing. New arrivals assumed maintenance roles while others planned crossings or recovered from failed attempts, producing a mobile commons (Trimikliniotis et al., 2016) that extended beyond formal organizational structures. What made this form of commoning infrastructural was precisely its iterative character: each day required the enactment of adjusted practices that sustained collective life. Care practices (making food, sheltering those on the move, advising newcomers) sustained both immediate survival and the social fabric enabling dwelling and future crossings. These were not one-time acts but repeated performances that, through their daily reenactment, became the infrastructure of transit-oriented dwelling itself. Knowledge circulated as commons. Which routes remained viable, which police checks were active, how to handle encounters without losing materials. This information was collectively produced, freely accessed, and continuously updated.

However, the very openness that sustained the squat's early vitality also exposed it to contention. As word spread of its proximity to aid organizations, crossing points, and collective facilitation, it drew attention from those with divergent intentions. For-profit

facilitators (passeurs) and their intermediaries, seeking potential clients, began embedding themselves into the space's daily routines. Some newcomers were drawn to its resources without sharing its sense of commoning. Over time, tensions crystallized: between established dwellers and newcomers, between mutual care and transactional exchange, between maintaining the space as an open commons and preventing its transformation into a recruiting hub for passeurs.

These tensions signal a critical threshold in the dynamics of solidarity and politics of care (Milan and Martini, 2024) shaping this dwelling arrangement. As long as commoning practices (sharing information, distributing resources, collective decision-making) remained distinct from commodification logics, squat residents could accommodate even individuals connected to for-profit facilitation within a sense of reciprocity and collective care (Alam and Houston, 2020). This accommodation moved beyond pre-established stigmatizing labels of 'smuggler' versus 'migrant,' categories that have been shown to be unstable legal constructions failing to represent the complexity of migrants' multiple affiliations across different worlds along the route (Amigoni and Bonnin, 2025). However, once commoning practices began eroding (as some residents were recruited toward what was deemed more reliable circuit of border-crossing, as the site itself risked becoming a passeur recruiting hub, and as the space and its resources were increasingly appropriated for individual, for-profit ends rather than collective solidarity.) activists' sense of solidarity and reciprocity fundamentally shifted. The transformation moved from mutual aid toward individual survival strategies, altering the very organizational basis that had sustained the space. What had functioned as collective infrastructure became contested terrain where competing logics of care and commerce collided.

The iterative character of this mode emerges from its fundamental instability and contention. Resources shift constantly: one squat fills beyond capacity while another opens, donations arrive irregularly, police raids close spaces that activists must then reopen elsewhere, organizational principles shift, requiring that people rehearse another configuration to keep support flowing. Supporters must repeatedly assess which spaces can absorb new arrivals, which networks remain active, and which material reserves can be mobilized before exhaustion. Commoning here is not a stable practice but a perpetual improvisation that must be rehearsed anew each time dwelling is displaced and reformed.

5.3.3. Co-optation and repurposing: the entangled logic of survival economies

Northern France, October 2024: We load tents and sleeping bags into M's van at the distribution warehouse, then drive to a distribution point near X park. The setup has changed drastically. Before, distributions were organized openly. People queued, volunteers served tea, there was time and space where people could hang out as they await to get tents and sleeping bags. Now police harass distributions regularly, even placing rocks in parking areas to prevent vans from unloading. Today we distributed it on a side road. We work fast, before police arrive to stop the distribution and leave people empty-handed. It feels tense, controlled. Unlike distributions I participated in months ago, there is no collective sorting, no open discussion about urgent needs. Three of us stand by the van, handing materials to whoever approaches. Before my coming back to Calais M. informed me: "with police removing tents every 48 hours, and with tensions between the Sudanese and Eritrean groups last week, we cannot organize like before. We come, we give what we have until nothing is left, then leave. They self-manage among them. If we try to order distribution, we get pulled into fights, that makes us more visible to police. I watched one man receive multiple tents for his claimed "large family". Later, at the Kharaba, I saw him allocate these tents not to family members but to newcomers who have already arranged passage with a specific facilitator. The transaction is subtle: tents exchanged for information and guaranteed placement near a reliable crossing point, not for money. A., whom I'd met in June, told me that: "Before, people shared what we had, now we count everything. We gave first to people with urgent needs. Now everybody is in urgent need". His words capture how scarcity has transformed distribution of resources that once circulated as commons, now carry exchange value within transit economies.

(Fieldnotes, northern France, october,
2024)

The third mode through which dwelling is infrastructure emerges through co-optation and repurposing. Here resource distribution becomes inseparably entangled with border-crossing economies. The logic is entanglement: survival and mobility, solidarity and transaction, care and commerce cannot be separated. Improvisation becomes infrastructural precisely through repeated negotiation of these ambivalent arrangements.

Systematic expulsion of dwelling spaces and harassment of distribution points obstructs not only where people can stay but how material support circulates. Humanitarian workers, once able to organize regular distributions, find themselves pushed into makeshift interventions that delegate distribution to migrants themselves. M's account reveals this transformation. Police harassment rushes and destabilizes formal distribution, forcing aid to flow through informal intermediaries who then reappropriate allocation under conditions of scarcity. What emerges is a contingent repurposing tied to survival and border-crossing economies, where managing scarcity becomes both survival strategy and principle of social organization.

In many instances, distribution became embedded in complex arrangements where access to tents linked directly to border-crossing opportunities. Long-staying migrant dwellers developed "the contact" – proximity to humanitarian workers enabling them to redirect aid portions. Yet this intermediation resists the state's criminalizing frame of "smuggling". As Keshavarz and Khosravi (2022, p.8) argue, people engaged in such activities identify as hustlers, not smugglers; their roles emerging as survival strategies within constraints imposed by border regimes. The blocking of legitimate crossing routes, the erosion of migration infrastructures manufacture these informal economies, transforming people attempting to move into brokers of movement, when every other financial pathway is cut off.

Transactions often operated through what dwellers called "moving right": demonstrating capacity to facilitate others' passage while maintaining relationships with facilitators. G., who had arranged several placements, explained: "Sleeping here is free, but you still have to pay to cross or find those who can pay for it. You cannot be here if you are not planning to move or make others move". His words show how positions within border-crossing circuits shape the position of intermediaries and that of access to dwelling. Material support, dwelling spaces, and mobility opportunities become mutually constitutive through repeated transactions that must be negotiated anew with each distribution.

This repurposing transforms resources into ambivalent arrangements. Becoming simultaneously life support and logistical apparatus. Distributed tents moved through circuits where solidarity and survival intentions overlapped inseparably. The same tent might be gifted in mutual aid to a fellow migrant, exchanged for information, or allocated for specialized skills in collective boat passages (the conductor of the boat is allocated material

and dwelling spot for being an essential actor of the passage). Some migrants *en route* and activists described these as “fair sharing”, merging care practices with transactional logics in ways defying reduction to pure categories: those of ‘migrant’ and ‘smuggler’.

Solidarity organizers navigating this terrain confronted daily contradictions revealing structural limits of humanitarian intervention. J., a coordinator with decade-long experience, articulated the bind: “The primary need here is secure passage. Millions in police control, aid, and smuggling haven’t fulfilled this need. There’s tolerance with how people reuse distributed material, not because we sympathize with the passeurs, but because people need to move and have their own self-management. The least we can do is give tents... Neither police nor passeurs care about secure crossing, two sides of the same border”.

Indeed, in such instances, solidarity remains structurally entangled with transit economies precisely because the fundamental need (crossing the border) stays criminalized and commodified. Withdrawing support would increase vulnerability, yet providing it in a specific manner enabled some economies organizers cannot morally endorse. The “tolerance” she describes is not endorsement but recognition of structural and entangled constraints.

Co-optation and repurposing, as an infrastructuring mode, should thus be read not as failure of solidarity but as evidence of how improvisation becomes infrastructural under pressure. This mode’s infrastructural quality lies not in stable distribution channels but in its aftermath and the repeated negotiations of entangled arrangements where survival and mobility, solidarity and transaction, remain inseparable. Each distribution requires improvising within these ambivalent logics anew, making entanglement itself the medium through which dwelling persists along bordered migration routes.

Ethnographic engagement across this migratory route reveals how the above three modes expose the interwoven character of seemingly distinct forces: systemic policing, humanitarian aid, solidarity activism, and for-profit facilitation operate not as separate spheres but as entangled practices that simultaneously shape dwelling circuits while reproducing hierarchies of access and mobility. Also, the three modes should not be read as sequential stages in which one replaces the other, but as analytical distinctions that frequently overlap in practices. Their partitioning serves a heuristic function, and this nuance remains essential when tracing how they co-present within specific situations.

All in all, what emerges is a resignification of solidarity, humanitarian work and border-crossing facilitation. Acts that sustain dwelling, enable movement, and reclaim space under hostile conditions constitute the core of permanent improvisation. This labor is never neutral; it remains contingent, contested and morally charged across all three modes. Yet it demonstrates that survival after eviction depends not only on resisting state violence but on reworking livelihood through arrangements that are simultaneously solidaristic and entangled with border-crossing economies. This is where improvisational endurance reveals itself as fundamentally infrastructural. Not supplementary to material provision but constitutive of how commons are enacted, circulated, and sustained despite ongoing dispossession

5.4. The composition of facilitation along the route

The solidarity infrastructure along the Belgian-French route is not a unified movement with shared doctrine and coordinated leadership. It is better understood as an archipelago (Mountz, 2011): a dispersed constellation of actors, groups, and arrangements that are loosely connected, sometimes coordinated, occasionally in tension, and collectively indispensable to the maintenance of dwelling and movement for people in transit. What holds this archipelago together is not organizational affiliation or ideological agreement but the material fact of the route itself: a geography of encampments, squats, distribution points, civic hosting, and border-crossing zones that different actors orbit, inhabit, and resource in different ways.

On a Thursday evening at a Je-dis action assembly, a coordination meeting took place in the back room of a municipal library in Calais. Around the table sat a coordinator from Secours Catholique, three activists from Community Kitchen, two members of the NoBorder collective Calais Migrants Solidarity, and five volunteers from L'Auberge des Migrants and the Red Cross. What had brought us together was an eviction scheduled for the following Monday: the second clearance of the squat on rue Sauvage, which housed forty-three people, mostly Sudanese, all attempting to cross to England. We were counting options and looking for allies in the municipal council who might be willing to postpone it. The Secours Catholique coordinator had a contact in the Prefecture, an opening worth noting given their established

collaboration around material distributions in Calais. Members of Calais Migrants Solidarity proposed two vacant buildings that could be opened if the postponement failed. The volunteer from L'Auberge des Migrants offered their van to move people's belongings in three trips. Nobody used the word solidarity. Nobody shared the same political vision. But by nine o'clock we had a plan.

(Fieldnotes, northern France, Septembre 2024)

The actors present along this route span several distinct social worlds. Formal solidarity organizations (non-profit with legal statuses) operate primarily out of French and Belgian localities and maintain more or less institutionalized relationships with local governments. They are constituted by a mix of professional social workers and part-time volunteers. Their organizational capital includes registered networks, established contact with local authorities, warehouses with material stocks, and relationships with the existing civic hosting networks. Their institutional position grants them a form of legitimacy that opens doors (to occupy buildings, to dialogue with police, and to funding) but it also produces constraints. They are called upon in moments of crisis and expected to operate within state-authorized frameworks of “legitimate” assistance. That is registration, food provision, and documentation for the migration management apparatus. The moment their work exceeds this frame (hosting migrants near highway crossing points, providing SIM cards, facilitating onward movement) they enter a zone of legal risk and political vulnerability, and they become vulnerable to be accused of complicity with irregular migration facilitation within the vein of criminalization of contentious solidarity (Schack, 2023).

“We have a mandate. It says what we can do and what we cannot. Within that mandate we do food, we do blankets, we do legal guidance. But when a group of young people call the hotline at midnight because they were pushed back from the beach after a failed crossing and it is minus two outside, I am not thinking about the mandate. I am thinking about where they can sleep. So we find a place. And in the morning we fetch phones for those who have lost theirs. Yes, the police have harassed us for distributing phones and SIM cards. They claim they are used to contacting smugglers. We say they are the only means of communication these people have, and the only way they can reach us when they need help.”

(Interview, Marie, coordinator, Dunkirk, March 2024)

Alongside these formal organizations, autonomous collectives operate with markedly different profiles. These are groups without legal registration or only minimal bureaucratic form. Their capital is relational and spatial rather than institutional: they know which buildings are unoccupied, which squats can be reopened after eviction, how to maintain a collective space against police pressure for months at a time. They do not seek permission from authorities and often explicitly refuse the logic of managing migrant presence on behalf of the state. Their ideological orientation tends toward a politics of no borders (King, 2016), or at least of non-compliance with the state bordering practices that demand for solidarity actors to keep in place, registered, and legible. The costs they pay for this position include persistent police harassment, legal proceedings, and the precarity of operating in spaces that can be evicted without notice.

A third distinct presence along the route is what might be called independent supporters. These are individuals who operate neither within organizations nor within collectives but who have accumulated, over months or years, a personal knowledge of the route, its actors, and its logistics. These are often people who began as volunteers within formal structures but progressively moved into more autonomous, less visible forms of support: driving people between locations, maintaining phone contact with migrants, opening civic hosting when evictions occur. Their position is structurally ambiguous. They are neither employed nor institutionally accountable, and their capacity for support rests on personal availability rather than organizational infrastructure, which makes them both invaluable in ways that are not systematized.

Kevin does not belong to any organization. He was once a volunteer with a Brussels nonprofit organisation but left after a disagreement about what could and could not be offered to people near the highway. On weekends, he is driving his own car between T and M [anonymized locations] when needed. He knows the E42 by the texture of its lay-bys. On an evening I accompanied him, he transported four people from a just-evicted encampment in P [anonymized location] to a civic host family in Tournai. He asked nothing about their situation and they told him little. When he dropped them off, he said: “call me if you need to move again”. I dropped off with the people and Kevin drove back alone.

This infrastructure along the route is not composed solely of “supporters”. Migrants in transit are not simply the recipients of these dwelling opportunities. They are among its most active builders. Long-staying dwellers in squats accumulate knowledge of routes, police activity, local differences, crossing points, and the reputations of various facilitators that circulate as commons within the dwelling space. They inform new arrivals, absorbing functions that activists cannot continuously maintain. Some develop a proximity to humanitarian distribution networks that allow them to redirect aid, or to take position within certain border-crossing facilitation circuits. These are not separate from the dwelling circuits described here. They are constitutive to them, even when they introduce tensions with the commoning ethics that formal and autonomous actors sometimes seek to uphold.

5.5. Guiding principles and positional logics

What differentiates these actors is not simply their organizational form or their resource base but the principles that orient their engagement and the frames through which they understand what they are doing. However, it would be analytically imprecise to reduce this to a simple opposition between “political activists” motivated by ideological commitment and “moral humanitarians” motivated by compassion. The actors along this route rarely occupy these ideal types in pure form. They navigate between them situationally, and the categories blur under the pressure of daily practice.

Among those with more explicitly political orientations, the guiding principle tends to be one of refusal: refusal to accept the legitimacy of border enforcement, refusal to treat solidarity work as management of irregular presence, refusal to register, report, or render migrants legible in ways that facilitate their dispersal or removal. This position is not purely ideological in the sense of being disconnected from material practice. It generates specific tactical choices about which authorities to engage, which forms of support to deliver, and which forms of alliance to form. The commitment to squatting as a form of dwelling, for instance, carries a double logic: it provides shelter that the state will not provide, and it refuses the premise that people in transit must be accommodated only within frameworks the state authorizes.

“People always ask us: why not work with the municipality? Why not get funding, get offices, get legal? to help more people. The answer is simple. As soon as you have an office, you have an address. As soon as you have an address, you have a place the police can come to. As soon as you accept funding from the state, you accept that the state decides who you help and how. We would rather operate from nothing than operate from that. their organisations can do this type of work, and we do what we do as well”

(Interview, Thomas, autonomous activist, Calais, Septembre 2024)

Among those within formal organizations, the guiding principle is more often articulated through the language of care and obligation: the sense that people in abandonment cannot be left without tents in winter, that improvisational support is better than no support at all. Yet this position is not simply apolitical compliance. The coordinators and social workers who exceed their mandates (who host people they are not supposed to host, who provide phones that official protocol forbids, who warn migrants of coming evictions before they happen) do so not out of organizational instruction but out of a moral commitment that exceeds the boundaries of what their employer or municipal authorities allow.

In the autumn of 2024, a coordinator of a registered organization in Tournai received advance information from a police contact that a nearby squat would be cleared the following morning. Her mandate did not cover this situation. She had no protocol for it. She sent a message to one of the dwellers that night. When I asked her later why she had done it, she said “Because if I hadn’t, and people were tackled by the eviction they would lose all their tents and sleeping bags. We cannot afford that, and always start from zero. We do what is right, not just what is written on paper

(Fieldnotes, Tournai, October 2024)

Between these poles, the route sustains a range of positions that do not map cleanly into one. There are actors who are simultaneously oriented by care and by political critique, who have moved from formal organizational settings into more autonomous practices without abandoning the relational capital and institutional knowledge their previous positions generated. There are actors whose engagement is primarily logistical (the person who drives the distribution van, who knows which distribution site with less police harassment, and who maintains the inventory of tents and sleeping bags) and whose politics are difficult to

characterize because they are expressed through action rather than articulated as ideology. And lastly, there are actors for whom the route is also a site of transaction and economy, where the provision of border-crossing services occupies a position somewhere between mutual aid and economic transaction, and whose self-understanding draws on neither humanitarian nor political registers but on the logic of the “hustler”: someone doing what needs to be done when the opportunity presents itself.

“I am not an activist. I am not a volunteer. I am someone who knows things. I know who needs what and who has what. If you need a phone, I can get you a phone. If you need to know who to call, I know who to call. I help people because I know how to help, and everybody knows that. And sometimes people give me something for that. That is not wrong. That is just how it works here”

(Interview, person on the move, Grande-Synthe, June 2024)

5.6. Embeddedness along the route

What makes this facilitation circuit function is not a shared ideology but the embeddedness in the material geography of the route. Actors know the same stretches of highway, the same rest areas, the same municipal jurisdictions, the same police units and the same crossing points. This shared knowledge produces a form of distributed resource that no single actor holds but that circulates relationally across this route.

The relational capital that coordinators like C. accumulate over years of work is precisely this: the capacity to call, within hours, a sufficient number of contacts across sufficient locations to improvise a response to an eviction, a clearance, a sudden influx of dispersed people. It is a capital that cannot be institutionalized, that does not stay put after the departure of the person who holds it, and that must be continuously maintained through the day-to-day labor of being present and being active. The same is true at the other end of the composition. The migrant who has been at a crossing point for months, who knows which *passeur* to trust, who has built proximity to a distribution coordinator, holds a form of relational capital that is equally non-transferable, equally produced through presence and duration, and equally indispensable to the functioning of the dwelling circuit.

The composition of facilitation, then, is not a solidarity ecosystem in the sense of a

self-regulating, harmonious system of complementary parts. It is a contested, unequal, and unstable configuration of resources, of actors who are embedded in a geography of dispersal and who has the capacity to repeat and improvise forms of cooperation because the alternative (not cooperating due to difference) leaves people in the cold. What sustains it is not shared ideology, not organizational affiliation, and not stable material infrastructure, but the accumulated weight of repetition and improvisation in a route that the state systematically makes uninhabitable, and exhausting both for migrants and their supporters.

5.7. Improvisational endurance and the mobile commons of solidarity along bordered routes

What the three modes reveal individually is argued above. What they show together is different and requires asking what do we see when we read calibration, commoning rehearsal, and co-optation as parts of one infrastructural logic operating under dispersal?

The first aspect that becomes visible is that across all three modes, the state is never simply absent. It is present as the ambivalent tolerator that delegates the management of state-abandoned migrants to solidarity organizations while maintaining pressure and expectation on their work. As the force that erodes commoning from within by manufacturing the scarcity and criminalization that transform reciprocity into transaction. As the border enforcement apparatus that engineers the informal border-crossing economies it then criminalizes. This is not anymore the state that earlier migration scholarship theorized; one overwhelmed by reception demands, leaving gaps that civil society fills through their resources (Rea, Martiniello, Mazzola et al., 2019). Scholars showed a state struggling with inadequate systems, forced to open space for solidarity intervention. What this ethnography reveals is a nuance to that. A state that actively architects the conditions under which improvisation becomes the only option. Precarity here is not a side effect of institutional failure but a deliberate outcome of dispersal, criminalization, and the systematic erosion of both migrant presence and the support structures that sustain it. The distinction matters. In the first scenario, solidarity compensates for gaps. In the second, it operates against a system that engineers those gaps as a governance strategy; targeting not only migrants but the actors and resources attempting to support them. This means that improvisational endurance here is not a mere response to migrants' abandonment alone but to a specific form to endure governed

precarity. One that produces absence as a strategy rather than neglecting provision through incapacity (the differential response to Ukrainian refugees makes this distinction clear). While Simone's (2004) *people-as-infrastructure* proposition was developed for contexts of 'informality' and 'illegality' in urban contexts. This ethnography extends it into the scale of the migratory route: where people become infrastructure not because formal systems have withdrawn but because they have been made exclusive and sometimes instrumentalized, and where the improvisational capacity of people is the only foundational layer for organizing dwelling that dispersal has not yet found a way to fully destroy.

The second aspect that becomes visible is the relationship between repetition and infrastructural capacity. Each mode operates through a cycle. Calibration negotiates a temporary form of dwelling then is undone by eviction, and must be renegotiated. Commoning assembles resources and information, and then eroded by for-profit intentions and eviction, and must be rehearsed again. Co-optation repurposes resources that are then seized or redirected, requiring repurposing anew. What sustains dwelling across these cycles is not the accumulation of any particular resource, alliance, or material arrangement. It is the repeated enactment of the capacity to reassemble. This is what the chapter contributes to migration infrastructure studies most directly. Xiang and Lindquist (2014) showed that infrastructure mediates movement through systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors. Meeus et al., (2018) advanced that arrival depends on the availability of particular arrangements. Schilliger (2020) underlined that solidarity infrastructures require sedimentation of alliances, routines, and knowledge. What this ethnography shows is that at the scale of a route marked by ongoing dispersal, sedimentation is not the condition of infrastructural capacity but its counterpoint. That is because state-enforced dispersal, operating through the 'zero point of fixation' strategy, directly targets and erodes the very possibility of sedimentation. In its place, repetition functions as the infrastructural principle. Infrastructure in this case is not the accumulation of what has been built but the iterative re-enactment of the capacity to build again. Approached this way, the dwelling infrastructure does not have to be durable to matter. It has to be repeatable, with the ongoing capacity to open opportunities for dwelling and mobility along bordered routes despite dispersal.

This finding resonates with what Simone (2018) theorizes as rhythms of endurance in a specific way. Simone describes practices for living with instability that emerge from subaltern positions relative to formal systems. That is to say practices that provide infrastructure for

moving forward through improvised alternative means. This case study extends that insight and demonstrates that such endurance and efforts do not merely accompany infrastructure or compensate for its absence; they are infrastructural, in the precise sense that they produce the dwelling capacity upon which movement depends. The dwelling circuit along this route does not exist prior to its enactment. It is constituted through the repeated labor of people coordinating across difference, absorbing dispersal, and reconstituting arrangements that the previous cycle of eviction eroded. Improvisational endurance is not a characteristic or a survival strategy layered within an existing infrastructure. It is the infrastructural form that dwelling takes when sedimentation is denied.

Care is what makes this repetition possible. Sanchez's (2023) concept of care commons, productive as it is, requires extension to account for what the ethnography shows. Sanchez theorizes care commons as shared labor of life sustenance enacted within moments of crisis and state pressure. It is a collective, relational mode of care that operates through and against chronic precarity. What the dwelling circuits along this route add is a demonstration that the care commons has neither a fixed site nor a fixed composition. As dispersal erodes care in one location, among one set of actors, or within one organizational form (e.g. squat, encampment), care does not diminish, it migrates. It is then constituted among different actors, in different arrangements, through different relational imperatives, as conditions of dwelling and movement demand. The mobility of care is not marginal to its sustaining function; it is the form that care takes when its sites are systematically targeted. Care endures here not because it is resilient in any optimistic sense but because the relational imperatives that orient it (the sense that something must be done, that people cannot be left without tents in winter, that the squat must be reopened after eviction, and that emergency shelters and civic hosting must adapt to the emergency of rescued border-crossers) persist across the shifting assemblage of people who carry them forward. Here care is an underlying substance, not supplementary to dwelling capacity but constitutive of it. It is enacted through everyday reproductive labor that produces the conditions of endurance and movement that no formal system aims or can provide.

Yet the ethnographic engagement also demands that the account of these dwelling infrastructures must be read alongside something uneasy. The finding that improvisational endurance operates not only through solidarity but through entanglement of different logics. With border-crossing economies, with for-profit facilitation logics, with the transactional

arrangements that scarcity and criminalization fabricate. The mobile commons that Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2013) and Trimikliniotis et al. (2016) theorize as sustained through circulation, displacement, and regrouping is, in this case, also sustained through contradictions. Resources circulate not only as commons but also as commodities¹². Relationships are simultaneously solidaristic and transactional. The same tent serves mutual aid and commodified logistics of passage. This is not solidarity's failure. This is the structural condition that border enforcement produces when it forecloses legitimate movement while criminalizing its informal alternatives. The mobile commons along this route should not be read as pure space of collective autonomy but a contested terrain where solidarity and survival economies are continuously negotiated, where the boundary between care and commerce is not a moral line that actors either hold or cross but a structural condition that dispersal continuously unsettle. To theorize mobile commons and solidarity without accounting for this entanglement is to miss what makes sustaining them exhausting, morally charged, and politically significant.

What emerges from holding these findings together is a picture of solidarity infrastructure that Schilliger's (2020) framework theorizes but does not put it at the scale of migratory routes. Schilliger's important intervention shows that solidarity infrastructures require sedimentation. That is the slow accumulation of alliances, routines, and knowledge that makes organized support possible. This is true, and the ethnography confirms it. C.'s relational capital, the squat's accumulated knowledge of routes and police activity, the coordinator's decade of jurisdictional mapping. All of this is sedimented, slowly built, and essential. But at the scale of the route, sedimentation is the precondition that dispersal strategy most directly targets. What this case study shows is that when sedimentation is eroded (when the squat is evicted, the organization circumscribed, the distribution point policed into non-operation) solidarity infrastructure does not collapse. It shifts. It does toward recalibration, adaptation, and repurposing, always rehearsing the conditions of a form of solidarity yet to come, while struggling to remain ephemerally functional. This is a condition accounted by earlier scholars to underline the bound to the immediate emergency response rather than structural inclusion of migrants (Vandevoordt and Fleischmann, 2020). However, the capacity to shift is itself infrastructurally produced. Through relational networks that extend beyond any single site, through care imperatives that persist beyond any particular

¹² This finding resonates across various case studies done within the SolRoutes project (Palmas and Rahola, 2022; Bonnin, Fravega and Palmas, 2024; Oubad and Ghaffari, 2025; Amigoni and Bonnin, 2025).

arrangement, through the accumulated knowledge of how to reassemble when the previous configuration is eroded. Sedimentation and improvisation are not opposites in this case but successive phases of a single infrastructural rhythm. People only reassemble what is left when building is continually eroded.

The dwelling circuits examined here demonstrate that making infrastructure along the routes hinges on cycles of repetition, displacement, conflict and repair. They remain inseparable from care labor and relational particularities. These dynamics orient improvisational endurance and manage risk across the shifting geographies of precarious migration. What emerges is not only insight into solidarity infrastructures, but also into alternative forms of social organization taking space in sites eroded by the state. They reveal how people create life-affirming possibilities precisely where dispersal seeks to foreclose them.

Conclusion:

This chapter asks what it takes to keep the circuitscape alive, and answers: it is the people. Where migration infrastructure studies has theorized infrastructure as constituted by durable institutional anchors and accumulated material arrangements, this chapter demonstrates that infrastructure can be constituted through the recursive capacity for reconstitution after erosion. The three modes identified (calibration and relocation, common rehearsal, co-optation and repurposing) are not survival strategies layered over an existing infrastructure. They are the infrastructural form that dwelling takes when sedimentation is systematically denied. They are the dwelling circuits' operative mechanism: the labor of endurance through which they are constituted, maintained, and reconstituted each time the state erases them.

The chapter also refuses to sanitize what it finds. The same squat and encampment that functions as a mobile commons of mutual care is never fully separable from the economy of border-crossing that runs alongside it, and scarcity is what dissolves the boundary between them. When shelter is scarce, access gets priced. When information about crossings is scarce, it gets brokered. When food and phones and charging cables are scarce, the logic of transaction enters the space that mutual aid had organized. What begins as commoning (shared resources, distributed labor, collective survival) gets progressively colonized by the transactional logic of for-profit facilitation, not because solidarity actors abandon their

commitments but because the material conditions that made non-transactional care possible are precisely what state policing destroys. The entanglement this chapter documents is not incidental. It is produced: organized abandonment creates the scarcity that transforms shared resources into commodities, and the for-profit economy fills the vacuum the state has deliberately hollowed out. This entanglement is not solidarity failure. It is a manifestation of the structural condition under which migrants' precarious dwelling takes place. Holding this tension (between improvisational endurance as consequential, as imposed, constantly and morally ambiguous) is also an underlying substance to the question chapter five raises: what do people orient themselves toward, and what sustains that orientation, when everything the route has provided has been this precarious, this exhausting, and this difficult to hold.

Chapter 6:
Fugitive Orientations: On the Escapes
Dispersal Demands

6.1. Fugitive Orientations toward Escape:

Migration. Can it be called migration? There is a sense of return in migration – a sense of continuity, remembered homes – as with birds or butterflies or deer or fish. Those returns which are lodged indelibly, unconsciously, instinctively in the mind. But migrations suggest intentions or purposes. Some choice and, if not choice, decisions. And if not decisions, options, all be they difficult. But the sense of return in the Door of No Return is one of irrecoverable losses of those very things which make returning possible. A place to return to, a way of being, familiar sights or sounds, familiar smells, a welcome perhaps, but a place, welcome or not.

– Dionne Brand, *A Map of the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001).

On a grey Tuesday morning in October 2024, at a makeshift encampment assembled beneath the highway overpass on the outskirts of Tournai, I sat with a man who called himself Darou on an upturned rock, smoking a cigarette with ease. He was thirty-eight years old, originally from Eritrea, and he had been in Belgium for eleven months. He had not chosen Belgium. He had arrived here (via the Central Mediterranean route, a Libyan detention, the Italian coast, and three weeks in a closed center in Catania) because an exclusion from international protection had taken him here. His fingerprints were in the Italian system and the European EURODAC. Under the Dublin Regulation, he was, in the language of European asylum governance, Italy's responsibility. But Italy, in Darou's words, 'had nothing for me. No papers, no work, no future that meant anything'.

Belgium, he had heard from an Eritrean friend who was already here, was easier to navigate, at least for a while. He had moved, without permission, and in doing so, he had become administratively, legally, and practically a person on the run. An escaped to be captured, processed, and then returned to the territory of his ascription. Belgium had not been indifferent to his arrival. Four months after he had crossed into the country, he had been picked up in a routine police check near Gare du Midi in Brussels and taken to the closed return centre at Merksplas in the Antwerp province. One of the six detention centers in which Belgium holds migrants pending deportation or Dublin transfer. He had spent fifty-seven days there. At the end of the maximum detention term permitted under Belgian law, with no transfer materialized, he had been released. Not regularized, not given any particular status, but simply released, back into the city, with a document that says he was required to leave the Belgian territory within eight days.

By the time I met him under the highway overpass, Darou was dwelling between the highway strip and French northern ports attempting a potential crossing of the English Channel. England was specific in his mind. He had a cousin in Wolverhampton who worked in a warehouse and now he has been there for three years and he holds a temporary work permit. He knew that a person who arrived there and claimed asylum would be examined under British law, not transferred back to Italy, not to Belgium. That there was work. In Belgium, Darou said, ‘I am a number in a database that nobody wants. In England, maybe I can be a person’. He was not naive about the crossing. He had heard about the boats, the cold, the people who did not arrive. He was calculating, not dreaming. The encampment under the overpass was not a destination. It was a node, a pause before the next attempt to find, as he put it in his words, ‘a life that works’.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Tournai, Belgium)

This chapter examines the project of Dublinized migrants along the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom through the lens of fugitivity. Fugitivity, as this chapter deploys it, is not a metaphor imported from elsewhere and laid over the experiences of the subjects. It is a category that their trajectories demand. Its analytical roots emerge from a body of critical scholarship at the intersection of Black geographies, abolitionist thought, and the study of migration and border regimes (Stierl, 2020; Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton, 2023; Brankamp, 2025). Scholarship that has insisted on reading disobedient migrant mobility not as deviance from a norm of orderly movement but as a structured response to organized violence. What this scholarship shares, across its different emphases, is a refusal to explain migrant movement primarily through the categories that governance used to contain it (the irregular, the undocumented, the illegal) and an insistence on reading that movement from the conditions that produce it and intentions that animate it.

Those conditions and intentions have a history that precedes the European borderscape (Palmas and Rahola, 2022) by centuries. Fugitivity as lived practice and as an analytic was forged in Black struggles against enslavement and colonial domination. In the running, the hiding, the collective refusal to remain within systems that assigned Black life its value exclusively as property or labour (Hartman, 1997; Winston, 2021). What that history gets to present is not a simple analogy but a structural insight: that flight from unfreedom and movement toward the possibility of a liveable life are not two separate acts but a single one.

One that the fugitive is always simultaneously running from something and running toward something, and that toward is not less real for being uncertain, not less important of the act for being unreached yet. That dualism is the point. Escape and aspiration are indissociable in the fugitive act, because the condition being fled is precisely the one that has made ordinary aspiration (a present and a future of one's own making) impossible.

This is what fugitivity carries within it, as Hess (2014) has argued, a refusal that is both personal and political. This refusal translates, as I will show throughout this chapter, as the refusal to be reduced to what the system of eligibility says one is worthy or unworthy, to be processed according to an exclusive system that ranges migrants in prolonged abandonment. The Dublinized migrant who moves without authorization, who crosses the border that the fingerprint was designed to make impermeable, who rebuilds the encampment that eviction was designed to destroy – each of these acts is, in this sense a fugitive act, a practical insistence that life exceeds the administrative category or territory assigned to contain it.

The analytic carries further weight because it holds together what a purely contemporary analysis, with their methodological presentism (Cobarrubias and Lemberg-Pedersen, 2025) tends to separate. The containment and capture that organizes the present (detention, eviction, pushback) is not apprehensible in full without the longer histories of capture and enclosure from which it descends. The colonial afterlives that distributed vulnerability unevenly across people and geographies, the racial regimes of citizenship that continue to determine whose movement is free and whose is criminal (Chase, 2019; Mountz, 2020; Bona, 2023). Fugitivity is complementary to understanding migrants' projects along the route. Because the route is not a line on the map with a predetermined starting and endpoint. It is lived as a zigzag and back and forths (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Palmas and Rahola, 2022). It passes through moments of solidarity and collective resourcefulness alongside moments of interception and dispossession. The future it moves toward is not known in advance and cannot be guaranteed. What fugitivity names, finally, is the practice of moving anyway. Of holding the possibility of a life no longer organized by flight, even when that possibility remains, for now, on the other side of the English Channel that police patrols seek to prevent.

This chapter is organized around three moments of Dublinized trajectories along the Intra-Schengen migratory routes: In Brussels; along the route; and the orientation towards a refuge yet to come. In these three moments I analyze three overlapping dimensions of a

single fugitive condition. living in non-fixation; escaping capture; and seeking a refuge yet to come. They are examined here in the specific geography of the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom. A corridor that functions simultaneously as a transit space, a space of prolonged encampment, a site of capture, and despite all of that, a living geography of fugitivity inscribed daily by people who refuse the spatial ascription that Dublin, control on transit and the zero point of fixation have constructed of them. The testimonies of Dublinized migrants escaping to the United Kingdom will illuminate the elements composing the migratory project along this migratory route.

As Darou's account shows, in practice, the effect of the abandonment through Dublin Regulation III and containment via zero point of fixation is less the execution of transfers to countries of entry than the creation of conditions under which migrants cannot stabilize their legal presence. A person fingerprinted elsewhere who subsequently moves to Belgium or France is not simply inadmissible to asylum in those countries, they are rendered structurally illegible to the asylum systems they inhabit. This illegibility is not merely administrative. It is lived as a specific form of spatial and social unfreedom, a condition Darou articulated with a precision no policy document could match. 'A number is a database that nobody wants'. It is from this unfreedom to settle and to move that the subjects in this chapter are running, in different ways.

6.2. In Brussels: containment, abandonment and production of fugitivity

6.2.1. Moussa: Movement without a precise destination

On a grey mid-day in October along the highway that runs southwest from Brussels toward the French border, carrying traffic toward the northern ports in a continuous pace that does not vary by hour or weather. The encampment sits on a strip of land between the highway and a line of trees, a space that is neither road nor field nor anything with a name. Useful precisely because it has no designated function and therefore no designated authority responsible for regularly clearing it. For now. The trees give partial cover from the road. If you knew to look, you would see a few tents. Most drivers do not look. There are eight men here this morning, fewer than last week according to Moussa's account. Some have moved on toward France. Someone went back to Brussels. The tents are arranged in proximity to the

threeline, that angle that barely keeps the rain from entering. A small shopping trolley near the edge of the site holds recovered material and tarpaulins. A cooking pot, two folded sleeping bags. Pairs of shoes drying upturned on a stick. Someone has extended a cord between two trees and hand wet clothing. Myself and Moussa fixing a broken tent stick, chatting while doing so. He has been here for eleven days, which is, he tells me, about as long as the police do not come.

(Fieldnotes, October 2024, Froyenne, Belgium)

Moussa's trajectory along this route does not begin at a point of departure but at a point of dispersal. When I first met him in Brussels, sheltered in a squat during the winter months, he was no longer certain how many times he had been moved on. He recalls places not as destinations but as interruptions. A squat cleared after months of inhabitation, a park where police arrived before sunrise, a night spent in a metro station until security forced everyone out. He does not describe these as events with clear sequence but as repetitions. Each one structurally identical to the last, distinguished only by minor details of location and season. The squat he had stayed in for several weeks was 'good', he explained, not because it was permanent but because it allowed for a temporary suspension of movement. When it was evicted, that suspension dissolved.

A month later, I met him again near the E42 highway, on a strip of land partially hidden by trees where a small encampment has reformed under shared tarpaulin. The men here know each other, or have come to know each other in the way that repeated dispersal creates its own community. Not often chosen but assembled by exclusion, held together by proximity and necessity. Two weeks after that encounter, the encampment was removed. Police cut tents, remove material, and tell people to leave. No clear destination imposed. No transfer order, no formal procedure. The only imperative is to disperse. Much has already been lost in previous evictions: a sleeping bag, a phone charger, weeks worth of proximity to the local solidarity collectives. 'You don't keep things', Moussa explains. 'You carry what you can run with'. He seemed hesitating in choosing a direction, not out of preference but because no option presents itself as more reliable than another. Movement here is not guided by a stable plan but by the absence of alternatives.

Over successive encounters across several months, Moussa's trajectory becomes legible not as a journey toward the United Kingdom but as a continuous struggle within a space that

refuses fixation. He moves between Brussels, the highway encampments, and northern French warehouses and squats, never allowed to remain long enough in any location to establish continuity. He does not accumulate a social life so much as repeatedly rebuild the bare minimum of that life from scattered pieces. Moussa does not frame his actions in terms of resistance. He frames them in terms of necessity. 'If you stay, they will take you' he says. 'So you move'. Each dispersal returns him to the previous point in a different form. The movement is not progress but recurrence. The same structure of rupture and reassembly.

6.2.2. Non-fixation as Experienced:

The production of fugitivity within the European borderscape (Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton, 2023) is not only manifest in juridical instruments such as the Dublin III Regulation, it is materially enacted through the organized abandonment of migrants without documents and the systematic dispersal of the informal infrastructures they build (Chapter three and four). While Dublin formally allocates responsibility for asylum claims to the first country of entry, its practical effect in Belgium and France is less execution of transfers than the creation of conditions under which migrants cannot stabilize their presence. The squats in Brussels and the encampments along the E42 highway and northern French ports operate as infrastructures of endurance (Chapter four) where migrants collectively organize shelter, exchange information, and prepare attempts to cross towards Britain. Their repeated dismantlement constitutes a deliberate interruption of these collective structures. What emerges is not simply precarity, but a structured condition of non-fixation. A governance strategy that refuses both settlement and formal expulsion, and in doing so produces the very mobility it claims to police.

This systematic dismantlement of precarious dwelling is central to this governance precisely because it produces displacement, flight and attempts to escape. The destruction of encampments erodes social ties, disperses material resources, and forces migrants into repeated processes of reassembly under increasingly constrained conditions. Each eviction does not only displace bodies; it fragments the micro-social worlds that make sustained movement possible: the shared knowledge of who to trust, which route is currently less surveilled, where food distributions are organized, which solidarity collective has been helpful. These are the material infrastructure of fugitive life (Bona, 2023), and their repeated destruction is the mechanism through which organized abandonment renews itself.

Fugitivity, in this context, is not an optional tactic as Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton, (2023) contend but the only viable mode of inhabiting a space structured by subtraction (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2020). As fixed points disappear, forced movement becomes the sole remaining form through which migrants can both evade capture and pursue onward mobility. Yet this movement is qualitatively distinct from the liberal ideal of free circulation. It is compelled, evasive and highly constrained. It unfolds within a field saturated by surveillance and interception, and requires continuous recalibration in response to shifting enforcement patterns, fragmented information, and the loss of previously established routes and contacts. The absence of stable sites forces reliance on fleeting encounters that enable temporary escape but rarely endure. Fugitivity, in this sense, is not merely movement across space but movement without the possibility of settlement. A trajectory defined by its inability to pause without risking capture and return.

‘They move you, they wait, they do nothing, then they move you again’, that is how Moussa articulates his dwelling along this route. He names the vicious circle in which the entire regime of non-fixation tends. Making migratory route exhausting, a space in which movement is always immobilized, dispersed and made unlivable. The dispersal of encampments and the detention of those who do not move fast enough are not distinct instruments but two phases of the same governmental logic. One that refuses to let migrants stabilize and refuses to let them leave, holding them instead in an ongoing state of suspension in relation to their migratory trajectory.

6.3. Along the Route: the Capture, the Attempt, and the Horizon of Escape

6.3.1. Farouq: ‘Breaking out of Suffocation’

It is early evening at the Grande-Synthe encampment, three days after the failed attempt at the lorry park. The encampment sits behind the dunes, set back far enough from the road that headlights do not reach it. From the road you would not know it was there. From inside it, the road is always present. The sounds of the trucks and the cars heading toward the port. There may be thirty people in the camp tonight, more than the previous evenings. The tents are arranged, close enough for interaction. Farouq, San and myself are sitting out back against

the tents. Chatting about today's distribution and the need for more tents for the people in the encampment. The conversation moved, Faroud is telling us how he got to Grande-Synthe, the times he tried the cargo trucks, how he was moved from Grande-Synthe and how he came back.

(Fieldnotes, September 2024, Grande-Synthe, France)

Farouq was twenty-six years old, from Darfur, and had been living in the encampment near Grande-Synthe for three months when I met him during evening distributions with Care4Calais. By that point, his trajectory had already been shaped by successive events of capture, waiting and rejection. He had crossed from Libya after months of detention by militias who held him until payment was delivered by his family. In Italy, he was fingerprinted, registered, and then held in administrative suspension for nearly eleven months in Catania before his asylum claim was refused. What followed was not a decision to move but the inability to stay. 'There was nothing to stand on', he said, describing Italy as a place where life could not take hold. Where time passed without accumulating into anything, where the days were structurally identical and legally stagnant. From Ventimiglia to Paris, each step was less a progression than an effort to release himself from irregularity and exclusion.

In Paris he stayed for seven months, working cash in hand cleaning for a restaurant whose owner, he said, 'knew exactly what he was and used it'. Seven euros an hour, sometimes less, always in cash, never on the books. He tried to calais asylum in France but was Dublinized. The Italian fingerprint followed him across the border and closed the French system to him. He had heard from someone at the mosque that in England things were different. That Sudanese people had been there a long time, that work paid more even without documents, and that asylum was examined differently, outside the Dublin predicament. His cousin, who had reached Birmingham two years earlier by boat, sent WhatsApp messages every few weeks. 'He kept saying, try to come, it is better here. Not always easy here, but here you can breathe. Nobody will send you back', Farouq explained.

He reached Calais, but two crossing attempts had already failed. The first time, he had been in a group of nineteen people who reached Coquelles but were intercepted by French police near the industrial zone before reaching the lorry park. The second time, he had made it to the lorry park and hidden inside a cargo truck, but the heartbeat detector and dog patrol had found them. He had not been charged with anything. He had been driven to Centre d'Accueil

et d'Examen des Situation (CAES) near Saint-Omer. He was found again ineligible to asylum. He had walked back to Grande-Synthe. The return was not experienced as defeat so much as a reset. A return to the condition that made the attempt necessary in the first place.

When he spoke of trying again, it was not as persistence in the face of risk but as the absence of alternative. 'Lazem nufukk min al-dīk,' he said (I must break out of suffocation). The phrase translated his entire trajectory into a single intention. Suffocation, here, was not metaphorical. It described the cumulative effect of dispossession: removal from legal status, erosion of shelter, the fragmentation of social ties built around encampments, and the constant threat of being pushed back into prior points of exclusion. 'What else is there?' he continued. 'Stay here in the cold? Go back to Italy? Italy has nothing for me. Go back to Sudan? With what?'. The attempt to cross was therefore not oriented toward the United Kingdom as a destination but toward the possibility of existing this closed circuit altogether. The possibility of ceasing to be the object of a governance that moved him through arrival to a specific destination.

6.3.2. Capture as Experienced:

The Belgian-French corridor between Brussels and the northern French ports is not, in its dominant institutional narrative, a space of transit. It is, from the perspective of state practice, a space of interception. Organized, resourced, and continuously adapted to migrants attempting to move. The French-British control on the Channel crossing has, over two decades, produced a layered apparatus of control. Thermal cameras near the ports, heartbeat detectors deployed in lorry parks exist, coordinated drone surveillance along the coastline between Calais and Dunkirk, and a regular presence of CRS riot police in and around the encampments. The United Kingdom funds a significant portion of this apparatus through bilateral agreements with France, most recently consolidated in the Touquet Treaty and its successive amendments. The architecture of enforcement is not designed to stop movement altogether. It is designed to make movement costly and exhausting enough that a sufficient number of people give up.

Migrants along this route describe the experience of the capture with precision. Their key feature is not a single confrontation but an accumulation of repetitive encounters. The headlight of a patrol car sweeping the beaches, the dogs that arrive at the lorry park minutes

after a group has tried to conceal itself, the before dawn patrols before a planned boat departure. Each encounter reshapes the next attempt. Information circulates among people attempting the crossing. Which sites are currently less watched, which nights tend to have reduced police presence, what the sea conditions are likely to be at a given time of year. This information is fragile, partial, and sometimes inaccurate. But it constituted the practical knowledge of the attempt. The collective knowledge by which migrants are forced into fugitivity navigate a space organized to prevent their passage.

The pursuit is not only spatial. It is also temporal, operating through exhaustion as a deliberate governmental instrument (Palmas, 2021; Welander, 2021). The long waits, the repeated failure, the nights spent alert in encampments that may be evicted before morning. These are not simple hardships but functional elements of a regime designed to make the cost of continuation higher than the cost of return. Farouq knew this. ‘They want you to get tired’ he said. ‘They think if they make it hard enough, you will stop... But they pretend to not know that there is nowhere to go to’. The logic of exhaustion meets the logic of impossibility. The attempt to escape continues not because it is hopeful but because everything behind it has been foreclosed.

6.4. A Place to Be: The Refuge Yet to Come

6.4.1. Dawit: ‘When I get There’

It is a Tuesday morning in November and the ‘entrepôt’ is already in motion when I arrive. The space runs on a rhythm that the volunteers and the regular visitors have developed together over the years. who takes which storage, where the boxes go, how the queue forms without crowding. Near the entrance, two volunteers are unloading a van. Along the back wall, the food sorting has begun already. Bread counted and set aside, the donation cases opened and assessed with the practiced speed of people who have done this enough times to know immediately what is useful and what is not. Dawit is at the sorting table when I find him, working alongside a volunteer named Mariane who has been coming here three times a week since the previous winter. We are filling cases for the squatted warehouse behind the ‘entrepôt’, a former logistics building that has been occupied for several months and where twenty or so people are currently living under its shelter. Moussa works quickly without instruction, with the ease of someone who knows the logic of the task and does not need it

explained. I need it explained. He has been before many mornings. He knows which items travel well and which do not, knows how to balance a case so it carries without spilling, and knows that people in the warehouse will need the tin opener because there is only one between them. This is what months of living in and around the ‘entrepôt’ produces. A practical fluency in distribution that one of the few forms of competence the route does not take from you.

(Fieldnotes, Novembre 2024, Calais, France).

Dawit was thirty-one years old when I met him in the distribution at the ‘entrepôt’ in Calais. He was from Eritrea and had spent fourteen months in a rural remote accommodation in Donauwörth, Germany before he decided to move to France to try England. The *Königsteiner Schlüssel* quota system of asylum seekers distribution placed him in this center, where he must stay during the entire procedure. Under residency restrictions he felt captured. By the time I met him, he had already attempted crossing one time, where he had been pushed back by the French Gendarmerie Maritime patrolling the beaches and preventing boats from launching on the Channel. He spoke about this attempt without drama. It was, in his account, not failure but incomplete movement. ‘I have not arrived yet’, he said. ‘It does not mean that I am not going’. The distinction mattered to him. Not going would mean having accepted the logic of the enclosure. That the fingerprint in Donauwörth constituted a final say on his existence, that the route was closed, that the encampment was the end of the line. Not having arrived yet meant something different. That the encampment was still a node, that the route remained open, that the attempt would be repeated until it succeeded.

After the ‘entrepôt’, we walked to the squatted warehouse nearby. There are twenty, maybe twenty-five tents arranged under the thin roofing metal sheet. The organization of the space has the sense of extended inhabitation. Objects placed with care, a pair of shoes set to dry on a wooden pallet, a phone charging from a portable plug strip extended between two tents. We sit on low concrete. I ask him what he thinks about when he thinks about England. He does not answer immediately. As if the answer is located somewhere out there rather than inside him. ‘When I get there’, he says and then stops. ‘When I get there’ he begins again. ‘I will be what I wanted to be. In Eritrea, before everything, I wanted to be the one for my family. The one to take care of them. I was told I have the kind of mind for it’. He goes to say. ‘Through Libya, through the boat, through Italy, through Germany, through this’ he points at the camp behind us and the road. ‘I kept it. It is the one thing that was not taken from me’. He goes

quite for a moment. ‘When I get there, I will have my rights. I will work. Maybe something else first, a document. But I will work. No one will chase me out whenever they want. I will have my freedom to do my day as I want’.

What Dawit describes when he says *when I get there* is not a destination. It is becoming. The England he imagines is not a place he has reached or idealized but a condition he has carried inside him across every point of dispossession the route has imposed. Libya, the boat, Italy, Germany and the Calais warehouse. The phrase does not point toward an unknown future so much as it points toward something he had before the system of enclosure took hold of his life and reclassified him as a case number, a file, a problem to be returned somewhere. *I kept it*, he says of the intention to become the person his family needed him to be. The keeping is the act. The route has not taken the intention. *When I get there* is the formulation through which Dawit refuses to let the pursuit become a cancellation.

The imagined refuge carries a specific content here that is worth examining. It is, first, relation. to get there is to become, again, the one for his family, the person whose capacities can be turned toward others rather than consumed entirely by the labour of survival. This relational dimension of the imagined future is what the route systematically eroded. Every eviction, every pushback, every suspension redirects all available energy toward the bare maintenance of presence, leaving nothing for the form of care through which a self is constituted in relation to others. Second, it is legal. ‘I will have my rights, no one will chase me out whenever they want’. The document he anticipates is not a bureaucratic abstraction. It is the material condition of temporal continuity, the thing that transforms the encampment’s permanent present (always now, as he said, always the same recurrent dispossession) into a life with extension, with a past that accumulates and a future that can be planned. Third, it is spatial. ‘My freedom to do my day as I want’. The spatial claim in this phrase is minimal and full at once. It is not freedom as horizon or freedom as political ideal. It is freedom as the right to move through a day without movement being organized by someone else’s enforcement logic. To do one’s day. To occupy time as a subject rather than as an object of governance, a problem to be solved, a problem to be put away.

6.5. The Labour of Emancipation as Necessity not Aspiration

Fanon, writing from a different geography and a different historical movement, described the colonized subject's orientation toward liberation not as a wish but as a vital imperative. A demand issued by the body and the social world simultaneously, when the conditions of the present have been rendered structurally intolerable (Fanon, 1961). The formulation is not projected without care. Dawit, Farouq and Moussa are not colonized subjects in Fanon's precise sense, and the European borderscape (Brambilla, 2015, Mountz, 2020) is not the colonial situation. But the structure of the claims resonate across the historical distance. What the subjects described when they spoke of the United Kingdom was not a preference among available options. It was the only imagined exit from a condition that had made remaining (in the encampment, in France, in Belgium, in the Dublin circuit, in the permanent state of being a number in a database nobody wants) a form of slow suffocation structurally continuous with what Farouq named *al-dīk* (suffocation) and what he had described as having nothing to stand on. The emancipation Dawit names (rights, work, a day on one's own) is not a demand for the extraordinary. It is a demand for the ordinary, made extraordinary by the systematic exhaustion with which it has been denied. The United Kingdom as imagined refuge is the place where the ordinary becomes possible again. Not a utopia but the restoration of what Frantz Fanon called the "zone of being" (1961, p. 9), the minimal space in which a person can exist as a person rather than as the object of a system's administrative problem.

Walcott's formulation of fugitivity (2021) as slow and long emancipation is useful here because it captures the temporal structure Darou, Moussa, Farouq and Dawit orientation without romanticizing it. 'When I get there'; 'break out of suffocation' are not expressions of imminent arrival. They are expressions of a direction that has survived everything the route has thrown against them, and that remain, despite all of it, the organizing principle of a life that insists on having a future. The expressions are repeated because repetition is the work. Each morning after a failed attempt, each day in an encampment that is not a place, the expression is said again. Not to an interlocutor, not even necessarily loud, but as an internal act of orientation, a refusal to let the present become permanent. This is what Walcott means by the labour of emancipation (2021, p. 152): not a single act of rupture but the sustained, daily, exhausting work of keeping the horizon open when every structural force is organized to close it.

The tension between the necessity and postponing is where this analysis must rest, without resolving it. Migrants en route will attempt the crossing again. They may be pushed back

again. They may attempt it a third time, a fourth, and more. The United Kingdom they imagine (the document, the work, the day organized by one;s will rather than dispersal orders) may take years to materialize even if they arrive, may be partially denied by the hostile environment, maybe prove harder and slower than what is imagined. They know this. Yet this does not change the intention, does not change the expression. Because the intention is not about the United Kingdom as it actually is. It is about the self that has been held in suspension across the entire length of the route (the one with the kind of mind for it, the one who will be what he wanted to be) and that requires, as its minimum conditions of becoming. A place where no one can chase them out whenever they want. The refuge yet to come is not a fantasy of arrival. It is the only form in which a self dispossessed of everything except its own intention can imagine becoming whole again.

6.5.1. Fugitive Orientation: Beyond the Aspirational Subject

Migration research has long attended to how migrants orient themselves toward future possibility; to the ways in which displacement, mobility, and settlement are structured not only by structural constraints but by the forward-looking dispositions of those who move. Within this broader concern, a substantial body of work has coalesced around the concept of aspiration as a key analytical lens. Aspirations frameworks (Appadurai, 2004; Carling, 2014; Carling and Schewel, 2020) have made an important contribution to migration studies by insisting that human mobility cannot be reduced to structural determination or push-pull mechanics. Migration, on these accounts, is a process driven by the capacity to imagine alternatives and to project oneself toward a different life even when structural conditions systematically narrow the horizon of what is reachable (Müller-Funk, Üstübeci and Belloni, 2023). Appadurai's (2004) foundational account of the "capacity to aspire" established aspirations not as mere individual desires but as culturally embedded practices through which people maintain a livable relationship to future possibility under conditions of constraint. Carling and Schewel's (2018) aspiration-capability framework refined this by distinguishing between the will to migrate and the structural conditions that either enable or foreclose its realization, producing a nuanced account of why aspiration and movement do not always coincide. Most recently, Müller-Funk and colleagues (2023) have extended these insights into contexts of protracted displacement and highly constrained mobility, demonstrating that even under conditions of severe structural foreclosure, migrants maintain and continuously rework aspirations. The orientation toward a better future is neither eliminated by precarity nor

simply preserved intact through it, but actively reconstructed in response to lived experience, policy regimes, and shifting opportunity structures.

But what happens to aspiration when the migration project has been systematically eroded, when the person is no longer deciding whether to move but surviving the consequences of having moved. When the future they oriented themselves toward has been postponed, not once but repeatedly, and when the structural conditions of that delay are not incidental but organized.

What Darou, Moussa, Farouq, and Dawit carry along the Belgian-French route is not aspiration in the classic sense. Aspiration implies a field of possibility from which futures are selected and pursued. What these men inhabit is a field from which possibility has been progressively subtracted. Not by their own failure of will or imagination but by the deliberate operation of governance instruments that have removed, one after another, the conditions under which a future could be built. The Dublin fingerprint closed Italy and then Germany, then Belgium and then France. The Königsteiner Schlüssel (German quota formula for asylum allocation) placed Dawit in a Bavarian town where time passed without accumulating into anything. The eviction along the E42 eroded the micro-social infrastructure through which the route could be navigable. What remains after this systematic subtraction is not aspiration. It is something anterior to aspiration, more primary, less optional. It is the insistence on having a future, prior to any specification of what that future contains.

This is fugitive orientation. It is distinct from aspiration in three aspects. First, where aspiration is expansive or oriented to the realization of possibilities, fugitive orientation is minimal, structured around the irreducible threshold of liveable life rather than its prosperity. Dawit does not imagine a career. He imagines a document, a day organized by his own will, the freedom to do his day as he wants. Farouq does not imagine comfort. He imagines the cessation of suffocation. The content of the imagined future is not abundance but elemental: right to work, a door that cannot be opened from the outside without permission. Second, earlier aspiration frameworks rest on an assumption of relative stability. Aspiration is conceived as a horizon that, however distant or deferred, persists across the duration of the migratory project and continues to orient its unfolding. Fugitive orientation does not persist in a stable sense. It must be actively and repeatedly reconstituted. It is not a given of the subjective landscape but a practice (Harney and Moten, 2013), an internal act of reorientation

performed in the context of dispersal. After each eviction or a failed attempt. What fugitive orientation names, then, is not a disposition one holds but a labour one performs. The labour of maintaining a forward orientation under conditions organized to dissolve it. The repetition of when I get there, of *nufukk min al-ḍīq*, is not the expression of a stable projection but the work of producing one, again and again, from the ruins of the previous attempt. Third, where aspiration is oriented toward a destination, fugitive orientation is oriented away from a condition. The United Kingdom is not chosen from among available options. It is the last door that has not been closed (or imagined to not have been closed). The direction is not freely selected but produced by the systematic foreclosure of other directions. This is what distinguishes fugitivity from aspiration as an analytic. It names not the pursuit of the better but the refusal of the intolerable, and it names that refusal as a structural position rather than an individual disposition.

To say this is not to diminish what these people are carrying. The orientation Dawit kept from Libya and the boat to Italy, from Bavaria to Calais warehouse is not a small thing. The bearing Farouq maintains each morning to assemble a site of living is not negligible. But to call these aspirations is to locate them within a framework of choice that the conditions of Dublinized migration have already eroded. To call them fugitive orientations is to recognize the way of being-in-the-world that dispersal generates. It is the minimum insistence of futurity that a self stripped of everything except its own intention can sustain, directed toward the threshold that remains open: that is escape. This is not maintained because the future is certain but because the present is, in the most precise sense of the word, suffocation.

The analytical move beyond aspiration is therefore not a rejection of the category, but a specification of its limits. The point at which the field of possibility has been so compressed that what persists is no longer the pursuit of a future but the refusal to have no future at all. This is close to what Hartman (2019) terms the 'wayward': the refusal to be fixed in place by the very system that has made emplacement impossible, opening onto the improvised and experimental making of life in its absence. Fugitive orientation names this remainder. Not aspiration's forward arc, but the insistence on being elsewhere when being-here has been foreclosed. It is at this limit that fugitivity begins, and it is here, along the Belgian-French route, in the encampments and the lorry parks, the ports, the squatted warehouses, after the failed crossings, that we find it in its most apparent form.

The analytical stance this carries into the broader discussion of this chapter is that fugitivity along the Belgian-French route is not sustained by hope in any simple or voluntarist sense. It is sustained but intolerable pressure of the conditions being fled, and by the vital imagination (collectively maintained, practically oriented, personally formed) of exiting them. The United Kingdom as imagined refuge functions less as a promised land than as a minimum condition of liveable life. A place where the Dublin fingerprint has expired. A place where the encampment is not the end. A morning without the imperative to run. The emancipatory imagination at work here is not fantasy. It is vital. It is what persists when alternatives have been subtracted. The fugitives along the route did not choose to become a fugitive. They were made fugitive by the Dublin system, by the organized abandonment, by the hunt along the corridor, by detention and release that changed nothing. They run because they have been left with no other direction. And in the running, they produce, collectively and imperfectly, the only geography of escape available to them. The route itself, with all its hardship, its improvised solidarities, its repeated failures, and its persisting orientation toward a place to be.

Over time, this produces a structural transformation of migrant trajectories themselves. Rather than linear progression from point of entry to desired destination, movement along this route takes the form of prolonged escape, marked by repeated attempts, failure, and forced returns to earlier positions. The subtraction of space and ‘control on transit’ ensures that there is no outside to this condition in the Schengen space. No stable camp, no secure urban refuge, no institutional pathway that would allow movement to resolve into settlement. Fugitivity thus becomes both the means and the form of existence within the borderscape. It is through continuous movement that migrants avoid capture, yet it is this same movement that exposes them to further interception and dispersal. The escape becomes enforced: the more space is removed, the more movement is required, the more movement occurs, the more it is targeted and criminalized. In this recursive dynamic, fugitivity is not simply produced by the border regime, it is the very condition through which that regime sustains itself, ensuring that migrants remain perpetually in motion, perpetually provisional, and perpetually susceptible to renewed acts of dispersal.

Conclusion:

This chapter completes the thesis's movement from the governance formation to the dwelling circuits, to the capacity to sustain them, to the subjective and material condition those circuits produce and sustain. Looking at the migratory trajectory of Darou, Moussa, Farouq, Dawit through the lens of fugitivity developed within Black geographies the chapter argues that what Dublinized migrants carry along the route is not aspiration in the sense the migration literature has theorized it. Aspiration presupposes a foothold from which possibility can be imagined and pursued. What these subjects inhabit is a field from which that foothold has been progressively removed. The Dublin fingerprint, the zero point of fixation, the evictions that erode micro-social worlds and material resources with each cycle. Each subtracts from that foothold until very little remains. Moving in this field implies something anterior to aspiration: the irreducible refusal to have no future at all. It is prior to any specification of its content, and oriented away from an intolerable present rather than toward a chosen destination. This is what this chapter names fugitive orientation. It is distinguished from aspiration across three analytical dimensions: it is minimal rather than expansive, it must be actively reconstituted rather than simply carried, and it is oriented away from an intolerable condition rather than toward a freely chosen destination.

The chapter's final claim is that fugitivity is not a tactic or metaphor imported from elsewhere. It is the structural condition that the governance formation produces and then polices. These subjects are not fugitives because they have chosen flight. They are fugitive because the system of administrative ascription designated their presence (their rest, their stillness, the act of putting down a tent twice in the same place) as the transgression requiring pursuit, capture and dispersal.

In naming this structural production of fugitivity, the chapter ties all four threads of the thesis together. The governance formation of Chapter one, the circuitscape of Chapter three, the improvisational endurance of Chapter four, and the subjective and material condition that each of these produces and that animates all of them. The route does not end at the Channel. It ends, if it ends, in a life that is no longer organized by flight. A life that names the slow realization of the self away from dispossession, and that Dawit names, more simply, *when I get there*.

Final Conclusion

Final Conclusion

The central problem this thesis confronts is not migration per se, but the governmental production of a condition in which movement is simultaneously compelled and criminalized, shelter is simultaneously needed and destroyed, and migrants are simultaneously present in European territories and excluded from the legal and material infrastructure that makes presence viable. The Dublin Regulation III is the juridical architecture of this condition; the zero point of fixation is its spatial technology; the category of the ‘transmigrant’ is its discursive instrument. Together they constitute a translocal formation of organized abandonment and dispossession that operates not through the exception of detention alone but through the routine erosion of the conditions under which Dublinized migrants could stabilize their existence anywhere within Schengenland.

What the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom exposes is the internal logic of this formation: the unauthorized migration route is not a failure of governance but its product. Dispersal is not an unintended consequence of enforcement; it is enforcement’s mode. The migrant who moves without authorization, who rebuilds the encampment that eviction destroyed, who attempts the Channel crossing, each of these acts is a response to a governmental architecture that has systematically foreclosed every alternative. The thesis reads these acts not as deviance, not as resilience in the humanitarian register, but as the structurally produced form of life that the governance of asylum and migrants requires and then polices.

Four claims are at the core of this thesis: First, the *Dublin Regulation operates as a technology of suspension, not of governance*. The Regulation assigns juridical responsibility of asylum claims to first-entry states while producing, at scale, a category of persons for whom that assignment opens no protection. Daoud was Italy’s ‘responsibility’; Italy had definitively closed his case. Belgium issued a transfer request; Italy failed to respond within statutory deadlines. The procedure continued. No state was enforcing its obligations, but the system of exclusion was enforcing itself, producing the Dublinized migrants as an administrative non-person whose presence in any jurisdiction triggers inadmissibility procedures without generating any enforceable claim of protection. The Belgian institutionalization of this suspension through the ‘transmigrant’ designation converted a

structural dysfunction into a political category: it declared the Dublinized migrant inherently nomadic and therefore exempt from the right that asylum seekers in Belgium are formally owed. The analytical claim this generates is precise: Dublin does not manage asylum, it produces abandonment as its operational output.

Second, *the subtraction of migrants' precarious dwelling through the zero fixation point is a spatial epistemology, not merely a deterrence policy*. French and Belgian authorities did not simply evict encampments, they operated on a governmental theory of migrant organization: that organization requires consolidation, consolidation requires physical stability, and physical stability can be prevented through continuous material destruction. The twenty-four to forty-eight hour eviction cycle documented in chapter three is not a security response to criminal activity. It is a deliberate temporal technology targeting the social and material sedimentation through which dwellings become collective life. To destroy the tent is, in this logic, to destroy the migration network. This theory is structurally incorrect. Chapter three demonstrates how encampment is not actually a fixed site but a trajectory within peculiar conditions. It signals the circuitscape of cherkbet, mahettat, kharabat, transit-oriented squats, civic hosting, and emergency shelters that reconstitute themselves after every eviction. Be that as it may, the partial ineffectiveness of dispersal does not diminish its operational damage. Every reconstitution is more scarce in resources, more socially fragmented, and more temporally compressed than the last.

Third, *dwelling persists through improvisational endurance, not despite dispersal but through its recursive capacity to reassemble what was taken*. Chapter four identified three modes through which the infrastructure of dwelling is maintained under conditions of systematic erosion: calibration and relocation, which negotiates spatio-temporal tolerance in the gap between municipal complicity and federal enforcement; commoning rehearsal, through which iterative mutual aid practices substitute for the institutional anchoring the state actively erodes; and co-optation and repurposing, through which migrants and solidarity actors appropriate the material resources and logistical channels of the route's economy of border-crossing toward the ends of survival. Drawing in Abdulmalik Simone's proposition that people themselves become infrastructure when formal arrangements are absent or destroyed and the making of endurance in conditions of marginality, Chapter four argues that the dwelling circuits along the Belgian-French route constitute a form of infrastructure defined not by durability but by the capacity for repeated reconstruction. This advances

reflection of the migration-infrastructure nexus. All in all, this is not a celebration of resilience. It is an account of the labor imposed by dispossession on those it targets and those who refuse to abandon them.

Fourth, *what Dublinized migrants orient themselves toward is not aspiration but fugitive orientation of escape; a structurally distinct subjective category*. The aspiration literature in migration studies theorizes forward-oriented dispositions shaped by imaginative resources and relational networks within a given field of possibility. That framework presupposes a field. Darou, Moussa, Farouq, and Dawit do not inhabit a field of possibility; they inhabit a field from which possibility has been progressively subtracted by the very governance strategies this thesis analyzes. What persists in that subtracted field is not aspiration (which requires options to select among) but the irreducible insistence on having a future, prior to any specification of its content. ‘*Lazem nufukk min al-ḍīq*’ (I must break out of suffocation); ‘*I kept it with me*’; ‘*when I get there*’; these formulations do not name destinations. They name a direction maintained against organized capture and enclosure. Fugitive orientation is distinct from aspiration in three respects: It is minimal rather than expansive, oriented toward the threshold of liveable life rather than its quality; it must be actively and repeatedly reconstituted rather than simply carried; and it is oriented away from an intolerable condition rather than toward a freely chosen destination. The analytical category proposed here does not diminish the subjects who carry this orientation. It locates their projects adequately within a system of enclosure; within the structural conditions that produced their insistence as a necessity rather than a preference.

This thesis asked *how Dublinized migrants dwell, move, and sustain orientation along the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom under conditions of systematic dispersal*. The answer it produces across six chapters is this: dwelling along this route is not a settled condition that dispossession interrupts, it is a practice constituted through continuous confrontation with dispossession. It takes the form of circuits, distributed across the route, that are perpetually reconstituted through improvisational endurance. These circuits are not fixed; they are mobile assemblages, organized by migrants’ knowledge of what is temporarily available and by the relational labor of solidarity actors who exceed their institutional authorizations in order to sustain what the state has abandoned and eroded. Fugitivity is not a strategy migrants deploy within this space. It is the form of existence this space produces: the

only viable mode of inhabiting a geography structured by subtraction, where movement is simultaneously the means of avoiding capture and the condition of continued exposure to it.

The thesis answer can be articulated as follows: The migratory route produces fugitivity recursively. The more terrain is removed, the more movement is required; the more movement occurs, the more it is targeted and criminalized. The escape becomes enforced. What the thesis established is that this recursion is not incidental. It is the operational logic of a governance formation whose interest lies not in the resolution of the Dublinized migrants' condition but in its indefinite maintenance as a zone of suspension at the margins of protection. A growing strategy seen to serve the intentions of migrants deterrence.

This thesis makes three connected theoretical contributions. *First*, it extends and sharpens the concept of organized abandonment and dispossession (2008; 2022), developed by Ruth Gilmore in the context of racial capitalism and carceral geography, into the specific field of European asylum governance. Organized abandonment and dispossession, in this application, names not only the withdrawal of state provision from racialized populations but the active orchestration of their exposure. That is the construction of legal non-categories, the pressure on solidarity, and the systematic destruction of the material conditions of viable life. The contribution is to demonstrate how abandonment and dispossession operate translocally (across Belgian, French, and British jurisdictions bound together by treaty) rather than at the scale of the nation-state, and to show how its instruments are administrative (Dublin), spatial (zero fixation point), and discursive (transmigrants) simultaneously.

Second, it contributes to migration infrastructure studies the concept of improvisational endurance as a form of infrastructure. The existing literature presupposes institutional anchoring and material sedimentation as conditions for infrastructure; this thesis demonstrates that infrastructure can be constituted through their absence, organized instead around the recursive capacity to improvise, reconstitute, and maintain circuits of dwelling after every act of dispossession. This is not a contradiction to the existing frameworks (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014; Meeus et al, 2019; Schilliger, 2020) but a specification of their limit: what do we see when the conditions that framework takes for granted are precisely what governance has organized to prevent.

Third, by introducing fugitive orientation as a category distinct from aspiration, the thesis makes a contribution to the study of migrant subjectivity and migratory projects (Squire,

2017; Duran and Massey, 2004). The aspiration literature (Appadurai, 2004; Carling and Collins, 2020) has produced a strong account of the imaginative dimension of mobility. The contribution here is an articulation of what happens to those imaginative dimensions when the field of possibility there presupposes has been systematically closed. Fugitive orientation names the subjective remainder: the minimum insistence on futurity that persists when every alternative has been foreclosed, directed not toward a freely chosen destination but toward the only threshold that structural closure has left open. This category connects subjective analysis to structural conditions without reducing the one to the other.

The thesis also contributes to the study of fugitivity itself, a category developed within Black geographies and abolitionist thought (Hartman, 1997; Walcott, 2021) and recently extended into migration studies by Gross-Wyrtzen and Moulton (2023). The contribution is to demonstrate that fugitivity, in the context of Dublinized migration, is not an optional tactic but a structural condition. Not something migrants choose but something the border regime produces and then polices. This reading moves the analytic away from its occasional voluntarist understanding toward a more precise account of how the governmental formation itself generates the flight it claims to manage.

For what concerns the methodology. The mobile-activist ethnography developed in the methodological chapter (following circuits rather than bounded sites, engaging through solidarity labor rather than detached observation) was not simply a methodological preference but an epistemological necessity. A site-based ethnography anchored in one site would have documented a space of abandonment while people this thesis is about were actively leaving it. Following the route was the only way to attend to the phenomenon under study, which is not a place but a form of movement.

This methodological choice carries costs that require acknowledgement. The thesis is shaped by the particular population encountered along the Belgian-French route during the specific period of fieldwork. Predominantly solidarity activists and volunteers in Brussels, Tournai, Péruwelz, Lille, Calais, and Dunkirk providing material support and information to sustain migrants in the face of dispersal along the route. In parallel, I followed men from Eritrea, Sudan and Ethiopia, in the 20-40 age range, navigating the Dublin system after registration in Mediterranean entry states. State agents enforcers, migrant women, unaccompanied minors, and migrants navigating other European corridors or other legal statuses are largely absent

from the ethnographic record, not because they are absent from the route but because the social dynamics of encampment life, fieldwork access, and my own positionality as a racialized male researcher structured the encounters available to me. The thesis does not generalize across these populations.

My positionality as a Moroccan precarious migrant, as an activist in solidarity networks, and as an institutional researcher produced both access and constraint. It enabled entry into spaces and relationships that would have been closed to a detached observer; it also produced alignments that shaped what was visible and what was withheld. The knowledge generated by this ethnography is situated and partial in the precise sense. Produced through intervention, not without it, and bearing the marks of the position from which it was produced.

The thesis does not systematically address the experiences of migrants who successfully crossed to the United Kingdom, whose trajectories exit the field of observation at the moment of their most consequential act. The imagined refuge and its actual content (whether Britain delivers what it is imagined to offer) lies beyond the analytical scope of this project, and deserves its own, perhaps a postdoctoral one.

To wrap up, four research directions follow from this thesis with particular urgency. The *first* concerns what happens after the route. The fugitive orientation analyzed in Chapter six is organized around a threshold (the English Channel, the British asylum system) imagined as the point at which the Dublin condition ends. Whether Britain delivers this imagined cessation, or whether it replicates in different form the structure of suspension that the Dublinized migrants has already traversed, is an empirical question this thesis cannot answer. Longitudinal research following migrants into post-arrival contexts in the United Kingdom – with particular attention to the Nationality and Border Act 2020 and the pressure on asylum as successive modifications of that threshold – would test whether the refuge yet to come materializes or whether fugitive orientation is simply transferred to a new geography.

The *second* concerns the solidarity actors who sustain the dwelling circuits analyzed in Chapter four. This thesis documents their labor, the conditions of permanent improvisation under which they work, and the structural tension between care as institutional authorization and care as political commitment. It does not analyze the long-term effects of this labor on those who perform it. Research on the experiences and endurance of activist-solidarity

workers along bordering routes (attending to burnout, criminalization, and the reproduction of care capacity under pressure) would address a gap this thesis has identified but not filled.

The *third* relates the gendered and racialized differentiations of fugitivity. The thesis establishes fugitive orientation as a structural position but analyzes it primarily through male subjects encountered in male-dominated encampment spaces. The ways in which gender, sexualized vulnerability, and racial differentiation within migrant communities shape access to the circuitscape, the modes of improvisational endurance available, and the subjective content of fugitivity orientation remains largely outside this analysis. A comparative ethnographic project that follows women and non-binary migrants along the same route (with the methodological adaptations that would require) would substantially extend the analytic developed here.

The *fourth* concerns the bilateral and trilateral treaty architecture that binds Belgian, French, and British border enforcement into a translocal formation. This thesis analyzes the effects of that architecture on migrant dwelling; it does not analyze the architecture's reproduction, contestation, and potential transformation. Legal-political research on the institutional mechanisms through which treaty obligations are negotiated, the actors who contest their terms, and the conditions under which the governance formation documented here might be destabilized or reformed would complement the ethnographic project with an analysis of the formation's conditions of possibility, and therefore of its conditions of change.

All in all, the route does not end. Migrants continue to assemble encampments that will be evicted, to attempt crossing that will be intercepted, to maintain orientation that the architecture of suspension has organized to enclose. The thesis has tried to account for these tensions without resolving them. It followed the material manifestation of organized abandonment and dispossession across the Belgian-French route to the United Kingdom.

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