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Original
Vallée de la Roya and its opaque infrastructures of transit. Inhabiting the border / Mastromarino, S., Boano, C.. - In: FIELD. - ISSN 1755-0068. - 9:1(2023), pp. 47-63. [10.62471/field.117]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2984423 since: 2023-12-08T17:23:20Z

Publisher:
Sheffield University

Published
DOI:10.62471/field.117

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(Article begins on next page)

25 November 2026

field:
a free journal for architecture

PRINT ISSN: 2753-3638
ONLINE ISSN: 1755-0068
www.field-journal.org
vol.8(1)

VALLÉE DE LA ROYA AND ITS OPAQUE INFRASTRUCTURES OF TRANSIT. INHABITING THE BORDER.

Stefano Mastromarino and Camillo Boano

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a closer look at the French-Italian border and its violence. The border in the Vallée de la Roya exemplifies a complex set of conditions of rurality, transit, and danger to which migrant bodies are constantly subjected. In this context, different genealogies of displacement, social fabrics and spatial forms are forced to coexist and resist situations of crisis in different ways, contributing to ongoing processes of dematerialisation of the border. The southern French-Italian border and its valley are the stage where new forms of spaces and practices of holding are enacted amid simultaneous and ambivalent conflicts between support and hostility, mobility and immobility, visibility, and invisibility. The growing increase of transit and the subsequent enclosure of the internal borders motivate simultaneous military mobilisations as well as important acts of reception and solidarity. The valley and the experience of Le Camping encompass a new fragment of an infrastructure of solidarity that explains its performativity as a transnational system of protection, by enabling transits through informal, diffuse, and opaque dispositifs of collective resistance.

NARRATIVES AND LIQUIDITY OF THE FRENCH-ITALIAN BORDER

The French-Italian border marks a linear territory of approximately 515 km, starting from Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in France and Courmayeur in Italy. It embraces two French regions – Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes and Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur – and three on the Italian side – Valle d'Aosta, Piemonte and Liguria – and has its limits on the Mediterranean Sea, separating Menton and Ventimiglia. The current form of the border is the result of multiple changes that occurred over the past two centuries, such as the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713 or the Treaty of Turin in 1860. The 1947 Treaty of Paris ratified the definitive transfer of the municipalities of the Roya Valley to France, generally defining the outline of the border we know nowadays. These changes have reshaped the territory and contributed to ongoing social division between the two countries. Both the northern and southern side of the border have been defined by major population movements driven by labour, agricultural work, housing, or industry, particularly from the end of the nineteenth century; or wars and political conflicts from the twentieth century onwards, displacing Romanians, Kurds, Spaniards, and others.[1] As the most practical way to reach Northwest Europe from Italy, the area has remained a privileged route for people on the move wishing to reach France. As such, the French-Italian border is itself a border on the move, in its conflictual territorial configuration and ongoing scenography of displacement, an unstable and fluid territory often repressed by the French and Italian authorities. Along the border, various migratory hubs are visible and recognisable, often coinciding with the main infrastructures of mobility such as highways, main routes, and train stations. At the same time, the rural nature of this border allows the reproduction of more unseen migrant transits through mountain pathways and often dangerous trails along the coast. Overall, the main transit hubs since 2015 might be divided into three main territories: the valley of Nèvache and Briançonnais, Ventimiglia and Menton, and the Vallée de la Roya.

As an area strongly controlled by law enforcement, and yet an important transnational passage for refugees and people on the move, this territory raises epistemological questions about the ambivalent properties of the border. While borders pretend to maintain a certain objectivity through common international recognition, they remain entities that are always questioned by political agreement and susceptible to amendments and interpretation according to possibilities of crossing by goods and people.[2] Europe has a long history of border management as a geopolitical instrument of differentiality, from the borderlines of colonialised lands to the institution of the Schengen fortress and its gradual differential dissolution after 2015.[3] Sandro Mezzadra claims that the proliferation of borders constitutes 'the other side of globalization,' as produced by the crisis between the State and the territory, prismatically decomposed inside the territory and projected on the outside.[4] In the contemporary European geopolitical space, the border is not only materialised through its separation between countries, but also scattered in a series of patterns within and across cities and rural areas, namely in militarised hotspots, undefined passages, and transit hubs.[5] These expanded and mobile spaces of control make the borderland extremely diffuse, unpredictable, and opaque as they are constantly re-questioned and reconfigured through the perception of people in transit, law enforcement, and networks of solidarity. Displacements make this particularly visible, unfolding tensions and conflicts that shape the ongoing reconfiguration and its concurrent hardening and *dematerialisation* of borders and boundaries. By dematerialisation, we refer to the work of the collective Babels in defining the encounters between contemporary internal European frontiers and displacement as progressively diluted and extended in a multitude of material and immaterial dispositifs[6] of control towards the undesirables.[7]

Diaspora and trajectories are unpredictable and composed through a multiplicity of factors and models that relocate traditional routes, global hotspots, solidarity opportunities and even migratory intentions. In this sense, classic "migratory systems" – such as push and pull factors – no longer seem to respond to the comprehension of migratory dislocation, leaving space for complex and variegated dispositifs that allow passages while controlling; that protect while displacing; making inhabitation possible and impossible.[8] Controls are no longer confined to traditional spaces like customs and authorised crossing points. They have become more diffuse, relying increasingly on biometrics and administrative procedures that allow for the remote monitoring of illegalized individuals.[9] In this sense, borders like the French-Italian one are simultaneously thickened and multiplied – through the dispersed militarisation of the urban and rural territories that gravitate around them – and dematerialized through opaque dispositifs of control. These consequences explain the radical connection between displacement and borderisation, not only how such an opaque relationship influences transits, but also how the different forms and topologies shaped by this both material and virtual spatialisation of the border differentiate practices and spaces of displacement. The work of Nishat Awan is particularly interesting here, interrogating contemporary borders through practices and legacies that shape their limits.[10] Her term 'border topologies' looks at the border through a relational approach that includes human processes and ecological entities, including environments, as well as social systems reshaping the configuration and accessibility of the borderland.[11] Based on the concept of border topologies, borderscapes force us to reconsider the geopolitical contemporary space and its ongoing spatial reproduction based on the proliferation of conflicts, securitization, and the difficulty of movements and risk with which people in transit are confronted during their journeys.

The political border is connoted by this ambiguous property of being both open and closed simultaneously, as it is always questioned, and can be crossed regardless of controls and evictions. As a liquid that takes the shape of its container, these collisions embody the fluidity of the borderscape as a territory of repulsion and support, visibility and invisibility, solidity and porosity based on what and who makes the transit. Zygmunt Bauman's intuition for modern times and society appears adequate when looking at borders, which are 'unable to keep any shape and any course for long' and 'prone to change'.[12]

1 Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset, 'Une mémoire transfrontalière', *Hommes & migrations*, 1313 (2016) 126-130 < https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.3578 >.

2 Étienne Balibar, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière ?', in *Asile, Violence, Exclusion en Europe*, ed. by Marie-Claire Caloz-Tschopp, Axel Clevenot et Maria-Pia Tschopp (Genève : Université de Genève et Groupe de Genève, 1994), p.335-343.

3 Étienne Balibar, *Le crainte des masses. Politique et philosophie avant et après Marx*, (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 382-387.

4 Sandro Mezzadra, 'Confini, migrazioni, cittadinanza'. *Scienza & Politica. Per Una Storia Delle Dottrine*, 16:30 (2004), 83-92. < https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-9618/2839 >.

5 In the case of the French-Italian border, this is testified by the presence of law enforcement around migrants' spaces, such as train stations, camps, the centres of Ventimiglia and Menton or certain mountain pathways in the valley.

6 We refer to the term 'dispositif' with the meaning provided by Foucault and Agamben, as "literally anything that has the ability to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control and ensure the gestures, behaviors and opinions and speeches of living beings". Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos'è un dispositivo*? (Milano: Nottetempo, 2006), pp. 21-22.

7 Selek Pinar and Trucco Daniela (dir.), *Le Manège des frontières. Criminalisation des migrations et solidarités dans les Alpes-Maritimes*. (Paris: Le Passager clandestin, 2020); Michel Agier, *Gérer les indésirables. Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

8 Saskia Sassen, *Migranti, coloni, rifugiati. Dall'emigrazione di massa alla fortezza Europa*, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999), p. 95.

9 Selek Pinar and Trucco Daniela (dir.), *Le Manège des frontières. Criminalisation des migrations et solidarités dans les Alpes-Maritimes* (Paris: Le Passager clandestin, 2020)

10 Nishat Awan, 'Introduction to Border Topologies', *GeoHumanities*, 2:2 (2016), 279-283 < https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1232172 >.

11 Nishat Awan, 'Introduction to Border Topologies', *GeoHumanities*, 2:2 (2016), 279-283 < https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1232172>.

12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.8.

This is testified by the encounters between the dispositifs of border control, transnational migration, collective hostility and "hostipitality," to borrow a term from Jacques Derrida, as well as political agreements.[13] It represents the contradictory management made by the exchange of goods but restricted movement of "illicit" bodies. It embodies the differential inclusivity between people of place and people out of place, people who have the right to cross and those who have to make so-called "irregular transits." At the same time, this liquidity includes the makeshift practices of people on the move in elaborating strategies of transit and finding new patterns of temporary inhabitation.

The French-Italian border makes visible the multifaceted, ideological, and imagined power of contemporary borders to reproduce new spaces of sovereignty. At the same time it allows reconsideration of the tactics used to assert people's autonomy in the face of state neglect, to inhabit and redefine their marginality, and to forge new identities and legitimacies across spaces of rejection and control.[14] In earlier works by Camillo Boano, to inhabit in displacement has been framed as a process of practices of care, repair, and imagination which forge a renewed politics of space. In this light, it can also be understood as 'a continuous creative process through which inhabitants withdraw from death in order to escort it, constituting an industrious community capable of building, maintaining and repairing its living space.'[15] Displacement can therefore be framed as a dual process of inhabitation, simultaneously as 'the impossibility of becoming home; of hosting futures; of dwelling relations and to inhabit political projects' and 'the preclusion of the material possibility of staying in a place,' as documented in recent work on extraction, destruction of camps, hypermobilisation of migrants, and the shaping of oppressive and racial border regimes.[16]

Thinking of border topologies introduces a nuance to debates around camps, which are often understood as contexts of emergency, relief, and securitisation, focusing on 'the spatial and legal strategies for channelling, containing, and selecting migration.'[17] The hardening yet opaque dematerialisation of the border into different patterns of border topologies might be seen as a process of shared exclusion and sovereignty, enabling new forms of unpredictable violence and rejection. However, in these topologies, displaced persons enact an infrastructure of solidarity which supports strategies to resist harassment and control. Looking at the border through the experience of ambivalent acts of hostility and solidarity allows for the unfolding of not only makeshift practices of support that enable this infrastructure of transit but also the ambiguous relations between space and identity that crash with the logic of displacement and policing at the French-Italian border and in the Vallée de la Roya.

Within such a contested territory of enquiry, this paper explores the inhabited and politicised nature of borders and the coexistence of marginalised bodies and spaces within contemporary European internal borders. Our investigation focuses on spaces where new and imperfect modes of inhabitation are constantly negotiated to safeguard the existence of fragile and communal lives. The main aim is to analyse the border as a platform for amplifying minor, autonomous voices in the fields of architecture and urban planning by examining the ever-changing categorisations of border infrastructures, continuously repositioned, reconsidered, and reactivated. Borders not only perpetuate the marginal state of opacity but also create conditions where people assert their right to space as a form of autonomous resistanc and legitimate expression. The Vallée de la Roya territory, due to its intense condition of rurality, grants opacity and assistance to people on the move. Here different situations of displacement and resistance, social tissues, and concurrent dynamics of holding found themselves coexisting and resisting multiple crises in multiple ways. Acknowledging its violence and opacity, we present the border as an occasion to enact weak and minor projects able to keep alive those areas in which plural lives are held with different degrees of protection and legitimacy in their spatial expression. The first part of the paper will describe the Roya, delving into the ambivalent proliferation of diffuse forms of holding at the border. Subsequently, the case of Le Camping will testify to the entrenched latencies of support that the valley has sedimented over time, dwelling on new architectures of care and non-differential hospitality. This analysis is the result of participatory observation in the valley during the months of April and May 2022, collecting data through interviews, volunteer collaborations, and affective experience. Finally, we will conclude by interrogating the border as an ambivalent geopolitical infrastructure of care and control, a generator of spaces and practices of differential hostility and support that hold bodies and migrant trajectories. It will look at how the existence of the border is negotiated by the strategies elaborated by people on the move and supporting actors to overcome dictated boundaries and form new spatial configurations of transit.

ROYA: *LA VALLÉE SOLIDAIRE*

The Vallée takes its name from the river Roya, which runs along the traces of the French-Italian border and culminates into the Mediterranean Sea, in Ventimiglia.[18] Despite beginning and ending in Italian territory, the valley is essentially made up of five French villages: Breil-sur-Roya, Saorge, Fontan, La Brigue and Tende. Surrounded by Italian soil, the site has a strong infrastructural dependence on the neighbouring country: to cross the villages or to exit the valley, the main road is via the D6024/SS20, beginning and ending in Italy between Limone and Ventimiglia. Public transports are also mixed: some villages are in fact accessible by train, either via the French line TER or via the Trenitalia line, which starts in Cuneo and culminates in Ventimiglia, via the Roya Valley. The bus itinerary necessarily implies crossing the border multiple times, linking Tende and Breil-sur-Roya to Menton, via Ventimiglia. The Ligurian border town of Ventimiglia probably remains the most important large urban centre of the valley. This junction between Alpes-Maritimes, Liguria, and Piedmont remains an area of daily mobility.

The complex spatial practices and conformations of the valley, as well as its social and material infrastructures, testify to the close dependence of the French on Italian soil, weakening the political and geographical border between the two countries.

13 Jacques Derrida, 'HOSTIPITALITY', *Angelaki* 5:3 (2000), 3-18 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250020034706 >.

14 Matthew Longo, *The Politics of Borders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021); Martina Tazzioli, *The Making of Migration. The biopolitics of mobility at Europe's Borders* (London: Sage, 2020).

15 Camillo Boano and Giovanna Astolfo, 'Inhabitation as more-than-dwelling. Notes for a renewed grammar', *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 20:4 (2020), 555-577 < https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2020.1759486 >.; Camillo Boano, Beyond violence. Toward the politics of inhabitation, *lo Squaderno*, 59 (2021) 67-71 (p. 68) < http://www.losquaderno.net/?p=2174 >.

16 Camillo Boano, Beyond violence. Toward the politics of inhabitation, *lo Squaderno*, 59 (2021) 67-71 (p. 69) < http://www.losquaderno.net/?p=2174 >; Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli, Claudia Aradau et al, 'Minor keywords of political theory: Migration as a critical standpoint', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40:4 (2022), 781–875 < https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420988563 >.

17 Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli, Claudia Aradau et al, 'Minor keywords of political theory: Migration as a critical standpoint', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40:4 (2022), 781–875 (p.851) < https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420988563 >.

18 Information in this paragraph is the result of our fieldwork and data taken from: Luca Giliberti, *Abitare la frontiera. Lotte neorurali e solidarietà ai migranti sul confine franco-italiano* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2020).

The rituals of inhabitants show the contradictions of the valley when considering past and present hostility and acts of resistance around crossings. The political environments of the border collide into practices of rejection and welcoming, peaking during the 2015 so-called 'migration crisis' and performed by those reclaiming their belonging to the territory and those who believed in a valley of solidarity.[19] Unquestionably, even though the Roya had never experienced a lack or decrease of controls at its frontiers, they intensified and multiplied after 2016. In the spring of 2015, the prefecture of the department announced that every train arriving from Ventimiglia had to be subjected to reinforced controls in the station of Menton-Garavan. Additional controls were then implemented along the highways and main roads linking the two countries, and the first months of 2016 marked the beginning of extraordinary control and militarisation of the Vallée de la Roya. 1,200 pushbacks were implemented at this border in 2015; 32,285 in 2016; 48,362 in 2017 and 23,695 in 2018.[20] According to data provided by associations and militant groups active in the territory, on average between thirty and sixty pushbacks took place per day during the year 2019 – with peaks of around a hundred.[21] With acts of hostility and militarisation scattered across the territory, studying the border means analysing its close relation to social and environmental topologies, an analysis which often reveals the unexpected places and configurations borders take, and suggesting the need to look at it from a planetary scale.[22] In Figure 2 we have spatialised the militarisation in the valley (cross area), showing how different hubs of systematic law enforcement control reshape national borders. The permanent and non-permanent control on roads (blue and pink triangles) and at stations (blue and pink squares) create newly detached and diffuse spaces of differential transit that not only disperse the border in a vastly controlled borderland, but also generate patterns of danger and strategies of resistance and networks of support for people in transit.

It is in these new forms of scattered borderisation that people in transit assemble infrastructures of solidarity and strategies to resist harassment and control of police and state powers. The Vallée de la Roya stands out particularly in this context, with a great number of citizens engaging in some form of solidarity, such as hosting people privately or contributing to food distributions and outreach. The progressive mediatisation of practices of reception and the acquisition of certain notoriety around specific spaces of support increases the new connotation of the valley not only as a migratory hub but firstly as a *vallée solidaire*.[23]

The solidarity in the valley is a latency of a general territorial sensibility that has continuously manifested its presence on different occasions: it is part of the larger series of mobilisations around the extractive practices in the Vallée des Merveilles, the gatherings for the revendication of essential public facilities and services in the villages, or the construction of the Tunnel de Tende.[24] More specifically, it echoes the radical past of the neo-rural immigration that settled in the territory in the 1970s and which drastically influenced the historic connotation of the valley as one of resistance and activism.[25] In addition, resistance in the valley responds to the entrenched local commitment of inhabitants in the rural environment. Compared to cities, meeting people, exchanging information, and coordinating local actions are eased in the villages of Roya. Knowledge and awareness of collective help, crucial in a valley where facilities and necessities are not always available, facilitate the emergence of acts of resistance and porous and informal networks of solidarity. In a rural context, different and multiple battles converge and create new spaces of maintenance and fertile ground to recognize that forced migration, extractive practices, and marginalisation are linked to spatial dynamics of dispossession and displacement that are far from unique, new, or over.[26] Thinking of the valley of resistance reframes the often labelled "refugee/migration crisis" as the effect of ongoing "multicrisis": housing, food, climate, refugee crisis which find spatialization in what many have described as a "crisis of reception."[27]

19 We refer to the so-called Europe's "migration crisis" of 2015-2016, in which people fleeing from wars, conflicts, political persecution and hostile environments sought refuge in Europe. This situation has been questionably defined as one of crisis, although it is by no means new and exceptional.

20 The term pushback refers to a range of actions taken by states with the goal of expelling people on the move from their territory and impeding their access to relevant legal frameworks of assistance and refuge. We draw on the works of Tazzioli and De Genova in: Nicholas De Genova, Martina Tazzioli, Claudia Aradau et al, 'Minor keywords of political theory: Migration as a critical standpoint', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 40:4 (2022), 781–875 < https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420988563>, as well as local reports at the French-Italian border and EU reports, such as: Hope Barker, Milena Zajović, *The Black Book of Pushbacks*, (Brussels: The Left, 2022), < https://left.eu/issues/publications/black-book-of-pushbacks-2022/ > [accessed 20th December 2022].

21 Anaïs Lambert, Loïc Le Dall, Laure Palun, Emilie Pesselier, *Persona Non Grata. Conséquences des politiques sécuritaires et migratoires à la frontière franco-italienne, Rapport d'observation 2017-2018*. (Paris: Anafé, 2019); Selek Pinar and Trucco Daniela (dir.), *Le Manège des frontières. Criminalisation des migrations et solidarités dans les Alpes-Maritimes*. (Paris: Le Passager clandestin, 2020).

22 Nishat Awan, 'Introduction to Border Topologies', *GeoHumanities*, 2:2 (2016), 279-283 < https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2016.1232172 >

23 Luca Giliberti, *Transits. La Vallée solidaire*, online video recording, YouTube, 4th October 2018 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dwJ4b4oCRA> [accessed 15th May 2021].

24 In 1979, the General Company for Nuclear Materials (COGEMA) commenced research in the Vallée des Merveilles for the extraction of uranium. In this occasion, five thousand French and Italian inhabitants gathered to protest against the plan in what has been named the "Hiking for life" - *randonnée de la vie*. See: Guy Porte, 'Cinq mille marcheurs français et italiens manifestent contre les mines d'uranium dans le Mercantour', *Le Monde*, 26th June 1979, < https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1979/06/26/cinq-mille-marcheurs-francais-et-italiens-manifestent-contre-les-mines-d-uranium-dans-le-mercantour_2775591_1819218.html >; Catherine Lioult, Mobilisation des opposants au doublement du tunnel de Tende, *Franceinfo*, 15th March 2015 < https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/alpes-maritimes/mobilisation-des-opposants-au-doublement-du-tunnel-de-tende-675593.html >

25 The valley experienced an unusual arrival of people – soon labelled "néoruraux," neorurals – coming mostly from middle-class backgrounds and large cities. Most of them are associated to 1960s and '70s alternative political movements, from squatting, to radical left-wing or anarchist ideologies. See: Luca Giliberti, *Abitare la frontiera. Lotte neorurali e solidarietà ai migranti sul confine franco-italiano* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2020).

26 Vicki Squire, *Europe's migration crisis. Border deaths and human dignity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2020)

27 Heaven Crawley and Dimitris Skleparis, 'Refugees, migrants, neither, both: categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's "migration crisis"', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(1), 48–64. (2018) https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1348224; Annalisa Lendaro, Claire Rodier, Youri Lou Vertongen, *La crise de l'accueil. Frontières, droits, résistances* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).



Figure 1 Vallée de la Roya. View over Tende.

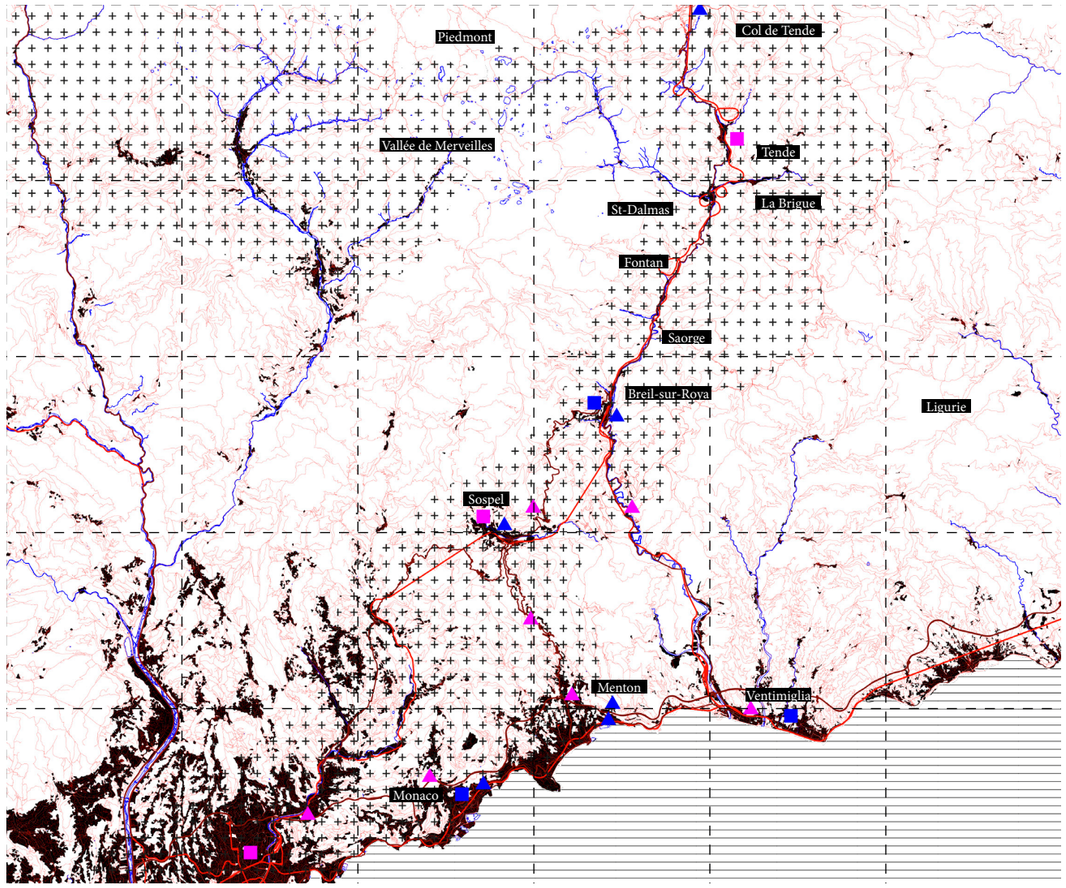

Figure 2 Militarisation at the French-Italian border.

From the experiences of the solidarity of the Vallée de la Roya not only do different images of reception emerge, but also new aspects of confronting the territory and its transnational dimension. Compared to humanitarian practices in urban environments, in the valley new categories and dichotomies emerge, namely those related to the rural, the border, and the opaque. With opacity, we refer again to an ambivalent category of differential interpretations. Opacity suggests that borders embody 'the grey area of migration governmentality' as a scenography of violence, refoulement and exception that 'remains under the threshold of political visibility'; as a spatialisation of blurred biopolitical technologies entangled with racialisation and capitalisation that 'inevitably generates disorientation for the migrants, making it hard to grasp how the EU border regime works.'[28] At the same time, the space of opacity is what allows migrant bodies to transit, inhabit and *wander*, enabling the generation of an archipelago of coexistences and practices of support as a form of resistance against domination.[29]

As depicted in Figure 3, the main spaces of support tend to concentrate on the coast, where the majority of people in transit stay for days or weeks until they are able to cross the border. However, throughout the years, various new spaces of support have developed in the villages, especially when the valley began to be actively populated as a point of passage for people in transit

Valley dwellers put into action an infrastructure of solidarity made up of different hotspots, such as the centre of Roya Citoyenne, or the private houses spread through the valley with hundreds of people willing to help.[30] The entire village of Saorge – 455 inhabitants in 2015 – welcomes nearly 60 people in private houses, and other villages support food distribution and general outreach throughout the territory and on the coast. The territory of activity of this infrastructure again has very fluid and opaque borders, with the network of support travelling and operating across the main hubs of emergency: on the coast, helping associations in Ventimiglia; on the border, monitoring pushbacks; in cities, such as Nice and Ventimiglia, organising demonstrations to defend people's freedom of movement and demand institutional support. The infrastructure in the valley performs as a significant transnational dispositif of connection and support, enabling transit through an informal network of diffuse houses and people willing to help. In a process that might be paralleled to the Underground Railroad of the nineteenth century in the United States, this resistance represents a relationship and attachment to the borderland that is not limited to local resistance but claims a degree of universality.[31]

The years 2019-2020 marked a substantial shift in patterns of transit and acts of solidarity. The increase in law enforcement, as well as the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, greatly contributed to reducing the number of people migrating across the valley. However, this situation pre-empted a new state of crisis in October 2020 as a result of Storm Alex. The storm led to exceptional rainfall in the Alpes-Maritimes during the night of 2nd October, which devastated several lands and valleys of the borderland. Considerable human and material damages occurred, with many casualties and missing people. The valley saw multiple crises converging and intersecting: on the one hand, the so-called "migration crisis," on the other, the disasters of the storm. The capillary associative network that had assisted people in transit in the valley was at the centre of the management of a new crisis which entrenched a vigorous inter-municipal solidarity. The constant reactivation of practices that the valley has experienced through time, taking different forms and responding to different needs, reveals an additional gaze to look at the dynamics of resistance that they have generated.

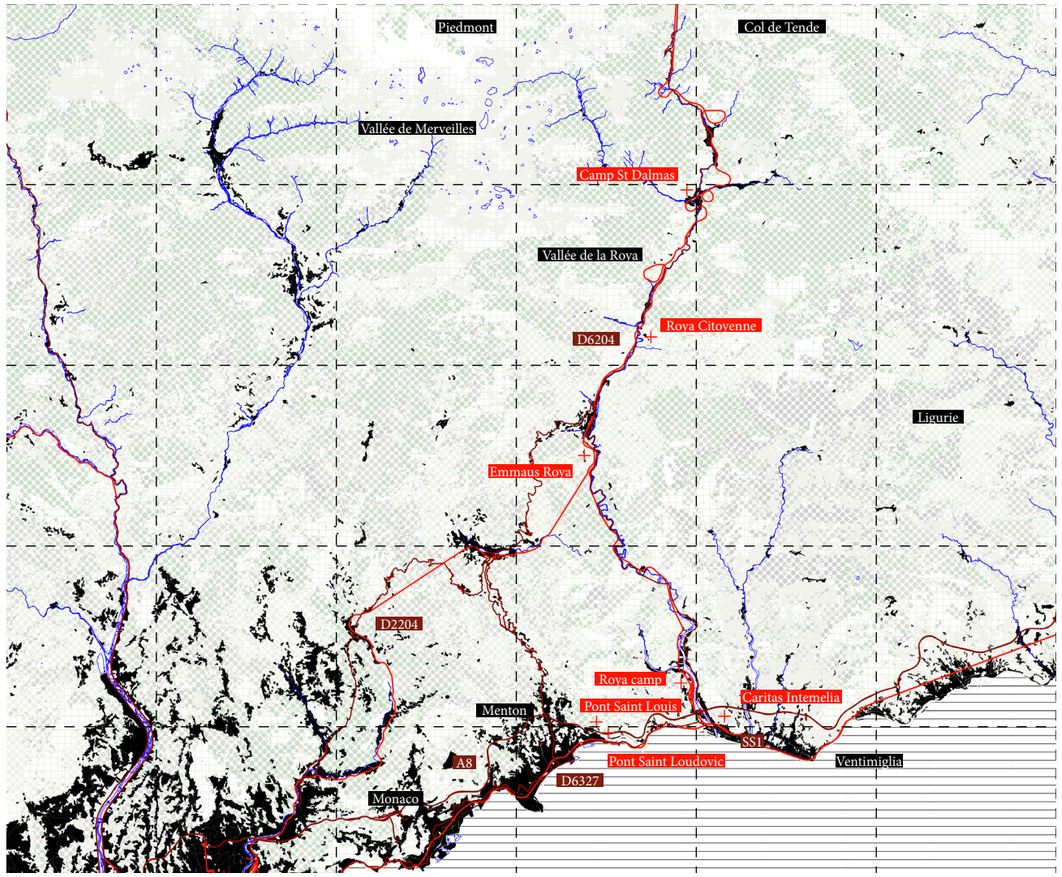

Figure 3 Main migrants routes (in dark red) and former and current places of support to people in transit at the French-Italian border.

28 Martina Tazzioli, "'Choking without killing": Opacity and the grey area of migration governmentality', *Political Geography*, 89 (2021), 102412 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102412>; Claudia Aradau and Martina Tazzioli, 'Biopolitics multiple: Migration, extraction, subtraction', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 48 (2) (2020), 198–220 (p. 208-209; p.203) < https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819889139>/

29 Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

30 Gala Nettelbladt and Camillo Boano, 'Infrastructures of Reception: The Spatial Politics of Refuge in Mannheim, Germany', *Science Direct*, 71 (2019), 78-90 < https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.02.007 >

31 The network of safe passages and houses established and supported by abolitionists, used by enslaved African Americans to escape into free states during the early to mid nineteenth century. See: Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

LE CAMPING

The following narrative emerges from fieldwork carried out in the months of April and May 2022 at the French-Italian border. In this period, observations were made by talking with citizens throughout the villages and Ventimiglia, and participating in the local network of support in food distributions, outreach, and general assistance. These have been essential to understanding the stories, acts of resistance, and perceptions of the borderland of people on the move and people supporting them, discussing their routes, fears, and hopes. Immersion in the everyday life of Roya, although for a very limited period, allowed us to experience past and present spaces of displacement at the border and the infrastructure of solidarity that progressively morphs around them.

An important example of hospitality in the valley is the farm of Cedric Herrou, an organic farmer from Breil-sur-Roya. Preoccupied with the situation in Ventimiglia and the increase of people transiting through the valley, Cedric started collaborating with the association Roya Citoyenne, involved in aiding people crossing on the coast. Like many others in the villages, the farmer soon decided to host people at his place, equipping the fields with tents and roulettes. In order to provide decent shelter and essential facilities to anyone, various wooden constructions have been co-built by the farmer and volunteers, such as dry toilets, showers, and a communal area.

Soon the site started to represent a point of reference for those wishing to help people in transit in the valley. The site, labelled "Le Camping" or "Le Camp," was completely self-sufficient and managed by the farmer, volunteers living in the valley, or those coming from the neighbouring territories, as well as the people welcomed who actively took part in the self-management of the shelter. Various associations started to assist in place, providing legal aid, French language courses, artistic ateliers, and medical aid to the vulnerable people, managed by Médecins du Monde. Around 2,500 persons have been hosted on the farm since 2015, with peaks of arrivals in the summer of 2017. The farm was also one of the most emblematic case of the intense militarisation and control by law enforcement in the valley: the strong mediatisation of the figure of Cedric Herrou and the importance that his farm acquired in the valley as the main space of reception led to remarkable police pressure in close proximity of the site, with up to five police checkpoints surveilling 24/7 at one point. The constant militarisation of the farm has highly contributed to the general decrease of people transiting in the valley, significantly reducing numbers in the shelter.



Figure 4 Dry toilets and showers installed on the farm



Figure 5 The common area, full of decoration, drawings and memories left by former inhabitants and volunteers in the Camping



Figure 6 A common area in La Tuilerie with a large kitchen, sofas, toys, etc.



Figure 7 Volunteer workshop for the reconstruction of a burned henhouse

In 2019, when transit had consistently diminished, the farm developed a new project, Emmaus Roya, conceived to assist people who wished to settle in the valley and regulate the very informal experience of the former years.[32] The urge for a shift originated from questioning how to move from an emergency reception to a persistent housing facility. In 2019, activists and volunteers on the farm found in Emmaus France the possibility to establish a *communauté agricole* – an agricultural community – that allowed people to inhabit the farm while participating in agricultural activity. The association Emmaus Roya was created by some former militants of Roya Citoyenne, notably including Cedric Herrou. Still now, following the acquisition of a vacant building in Breil-sur-Roya, named *Le Tuilerie*, the association welcomes people in different situations of precarity (Fig. 6). They are given a house with all facilities and food, and receive social and administrative assistance. People sheltered in Le Tuilerie participate in a social reinsertion program through agriculture, contributing to self-production and management of the community that hosts them.

The association also organises volunteer self-construction workshops to transform the spaces of Le Tuilerie and the farm, attracting a large number of people from Nice, Menton, and all over France to help the community. The workshops involve cooperative design development through local and durable materials. The construction of fences around La Tuilerie, the arrangement and design of the rooms, as well as the reconstruction of a burned henhouse on the farm, follow this commitment (Fig. 7). Furthermore, when the crisis of Storm Alex began in late 2020, the network of volunteers and activists in the farm played a remarkable role in the reconstruction of the valley, building dykes and supporting vulnerable inhabitants in the most affected villages. The association is still engaged in supporting unsheltered people but, as transits have drastically diminished in the Valley, they mainly operate in Ventimiglia and on the coast, providing weekly food distribution, border monitoring and outreach in collaboration with other local associations such as Kesha Niya, Roya Citoyenne, or Caritas Intemelia.

32 Information here is taken from an interview with volunteers and founders of Emmaus Roya, as well as participation with the network of support during the months of April and May 2022.

DWELLING IN THE OPACITY

The investigation at the French-Italian border makes visible the complex interplay between practices of control and care.[33] Building on the concept of opacity and dematerialisation on European borders, we aim to explain what has been previously referred to as an architectural embodiment of some form of holding.[34] Here the term "holding" refers simultaneously to the act of taking and keeping something in your hand or arms and supporting something, to keep someone in a place so that they cannot leave. As explained by Christina Sharpe, although the term might be associated with "care," it also represents a 'door of no return,' as a 'way to tend to the living and the dying.'[35] In the specific case in analysis – a border continuously re-questioned by opaque methods of displacement, control and assistance – practices of rejection and reception give rise to inevitable and ambivalent infrastructures of holding manifested in different ways. The assistance at Le Camping, the militarisation in the valley and Ventimiglia, as well as the silent solidarity in the villages over the years, are some of the patterns through which this holding is manifested across the border. They represent the institutional manifestation of "hostipitality" on the edge, as well as the architectural capturing of less-than-human beings, creating spaces where containment, dispossession, and prolonged displacement coexist with the emergence of collective resistance and solidarity.[36] Drawing on the works of Sharpe, Simone and Boano and Bianchetti, we claim that inhabiting the border through such opaque infrastructures of transit is a form of holding that captures the ambivalent gesture operated by concurrent acts of care and control.[37]

Law enforcement acts differently here, through constant mobile surveillance that shapes the borderland as camp-like.[38] The reintroduction of the internal frontiers in 2015 completely transformed the dynamic of transiting at the border. People who arrive in Ventimiglia are coming from the Central Mediterranean or the Balkan route and for most of them, the primary intention is to settle in either France or the United Kingdom.[39] In fact, the controls and pushback at the border oblige them to temporarily settle in the makeshift camps of the city, with difficult conditions of shelter and coexistence with locals. Harassment, pushbacks, and systematic control as acts of repression in the vast borderland penetrate through a system of movable hubs, able to delocalise spaces and times of migration. Looking at the controls and differential management at the border only highlights one aspect of the crossing rituals of people in transit, as it omits their role in conceiving new ways to overcome this violence, often supported by volunteers and activists. Practices of solidarity here act as infrastructure through a network of houses, people, and actions that constantly dismantle the political division of the border and silently enable prohibited transnational passages through Europe. In this way, Le Camping, like many other informal shelters, acquires a crucial transnational dimension, activated by porous and interconnected solidarity. The ambivalent infrastructure of holding generated by these two interwoven practices takes back the strict conflictual bond between vulnerability and resistance and gives power to the progressive dematerialisation of the border. Collective resistances remain sedimented practices in the territory and are able to strengthen a mutual relationship with it, as well as to unfold knowledge of the site and therefore reproduce tactics to tackle diverse conflicts and situations of crisis. The commitment during the storm, which followed the solidarity towards people in transit, is one example of this capacity.

When studying territories of transit, it is crucial to look at borders to fully comprehend people's states of impermanence and violence, and the ambivalence between resistance and exclusion. This method reveals that although these spaces and practices are similar to what happens in urban displacement (especially regarding their holding dimension) this response is to a radically different environment confronted with peculiar logics of holding, opacity, and refuge. In the first place, dimensions and density play a remarkable role in shaping the phenomena, by simultaneously allowing shelter yet increasing distances and expanding times of support and eviction. The peculiar rural nature of the French-Italian border, as well as the heterogeneity of its alpine topography, intensify the spatial violence of the border and the fatigue of the route. It is also important to acknowledge that border violence emerges from the tension between the need to find and sustain refuge and the impossibility of accessing it. An alternative involves opening a temporality between the permanence of the constructed border and the impermanence of the political condition of refuge and its absence in order to create a different political mode of dwelling 'not with the camp as a paradigm or exemplum per se, but as a material force of an enduring colonial history.'[40] The territory here is 'a tenacious struggle to resist the violent subtractions of future, of space, of possibilities, creating space and forms of life. Such struggle, in the complete anonymity and opacity, it is continually inventing an inhabiting life and practice an exceedance of inhabitability and the politics of inhabitation.'[41]

In this context, the border space is the epistemic element, "heuristic space," generator of the multiple and subjective gazes through which the territory can be perceived. It becomes "interactive architecture" that porously 'constructs and deconstructs itself depending on the relationship that each individual has with the state; a regulating device that mediates between birth and nationhood.'[42] Despite the geographical and historical background, the border here embodies recurrent forces of resistance to mechanisms of exploitation and dispossession. It generates a series of spaces on the edge where 'living is not (only) a question of survival but a process of continuous adaptation between protection and freedom, between care and control.'[43] It is precisely through this controversial reflection that the border space is the backbone of practices of differential inclusion that enable dynamics of holding of *indésiderables*.[44]

We might assume that the case of the French-Italian borderland evokes archival practices of spaces and dynamics of holding that complete the fragments lacking other situations of displacement in France, as it is confronted with peculiar logics of opacification, differentiation, and resistance. At the same time, they present weak strategies of refuge rather than solutions, by making it concurrently possible and opaque, as hidden and protected. These places show the ability of displaced persons and associations to build spaces of maintenance, opacifying the threshold between legality and illegality or potential accessibility. They represent the effort to overcome a dictated life and produce new platforms of imperfect inhabitation that enable transit and different patterns of coexistence. They provide conceptual paradigms to understand the spatial narratives shaped by displacement and sustain – through opacity – minor and weak architectures of transit.

33 See: Michel Agier and Stefan Le Courant, *Babels. Enquêtes sur la condition migrante* (Paris : Seuils, 2022).

34 Stefano Mastromarino, 'Inhabiting spaces of holding. Practices of reception and rejection in Greater Paris and at the French-Italian border' (Unpublished MSc thesis, Politecnico di Torino, 2022) in *Webthesis Polito* < https://webthesis.biblio.polito.it/23923/ >, Stefano Mastromarino and Camillo Boano, 'Makeshift borders in Porte de la Chapelle. Strategies of imperfect weak inhabitation across Paris' Boulevard Périphérique', UOU Scientific Journal, no. 05: 124-137 (2023) < https://doi.org/10.14198/UOU.2023.5.11 >.

35 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.139 n 28

36 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

37 AbdouMaliq Simone, 'The Uninhabitable', *Cultural Politics* 12 (2): 135-54. (2016) < https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-3592052 >; Camillo Boano and Cristina Bianchetti (eds.), *Politics, Ethics, and the Affective Economy of Inhabiting* (Berlin: JOVIS Verlag GmbH, 2022).

38 From an interview with a citizen of the valley made in May 2022: 'We thought that this situation was going to finish. Now migrants are no longer present in the valley, but law enforcement is still here, and it feels like they will never leave […]. I don't know if they're here to control or simply to discourage arrivals, I know that the constant feeling I have as a citizen is living in a militarized camp.'

39 Livio Amigoni, Silvia Aru, Ivra Bonnin, Gabriele Proglio, Cecilia Vergnano, *Debordering Europe: Migration and Control Across the Ventimiglia Region – Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

40 Nasser Abourahme, 'The Camp', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 40:1 (2020) 35-42 (p. 38).

41 Camillo Boano, 'Urbanism of exception: Camps and inhabitation', *Revista Jatobá*, 3 (2021) < https://doi.org/10.54686/revjat.v3i.68984 >.

42 Saskia Sassen, *Una sociologia della globalizzazione* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007); Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, *Permanent Temporariness* (Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2019), p. 78.

43 Camillo Boano and Cristina Bianchetti, *Lifelines: Politics, ethics, and the affective economy of inhabiting* (Berlin: Jovis Verlag GmbH, 2022), p. 10.

44 Michel Agier, *Gérer les indésiderables. Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire* (Paris : Flammarion, 2008) .

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