

## BEYOND THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA: THE RECEPTION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS OUTSIDE METROPOLISES

ARTICLE

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### State of the art

The arrival of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean goes beyond the sole involvement of states and is invested at the local level. While the literature on the governance of migration in Europe highlights a “local turn” (Caponio and Borkert, 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), this has been studied in major cities (Flamant et al., 2020), where the city councils are more powerful and have more possibilities to influence policy-making (Scholten, 2016). Yet, since 2015, the reception of asylum seekers in France has largely relied on non-metropolitan areas, with an increase in their reception capacities (Berthomière et al., 2020). Non-metropolitan areas, deemed to be “left-behind places” and to have a more fragile capacity for action (Dehne et al., 2022), are playing an increasing role in the reception of asylum seekers. In this context, there has been a growing interest in studying this arrival in spaces outside the metropolises. The recent literature attempts to address several issues, such as the challenge of diversity in rural regions (Glorius, 2017) or the “ethnic representations in refugees” access to housing in medium-sized towns (Gardesse and Lelévrier, 2021).

Using a mix-method approach, our paper asks the following questions: how do asylum seekers experience the spaces outside metropolitan areas? How does the arrival post-2015 contribute to the transformation of small towns and rural spaces? To address this question, this article focuses on the arrival dynamics in the Reception Centres of Asylum Seekers in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region (AURA).

### Case studies

This article analyses the actions of the reception of asylum seekers in two reception centres (*Centre d'Accueil de Demandeurs d'Asile* [CADA]). The scattered CADA Détours facilities (Photo 1), which opened in 2016, are located in the department of Puy-de-Dôme. The four municipalities of the CADA – Ambert (6,636 inhabitants), Arlanc (1,803 inhabitants), Cunlhat (1,319 inhabitants), and Saint-Amant-Roche-Savine (513 inhabitants) – are characterised by demographic decline and/or housing and commercial vacancy.

At the time of our field surveys (2017-2020), the mayors of the four municipalities were unaffiliated to any political party (Arlanc, Cunlhat) or were affiliated with left-wing (*Parti*

*Communiste* in the case of Saint-Amant-Roche-Savine) and right-wing parties (*Les Républicains* in the case of Ambert). According to the municipal officials we interviewed, this is due to the difference of the political challenges and discourses between the local and national levels. Taking this into consideration, the municipal officials of the four municipalities highlighted that their commitment for the reception of asylum seekers addresses issues such as the maintenance of public services (especially schools) and/or the social rental housing vacancy (Arfaoui, 2020).

**Photograph 1:** The CADA Détours in the territory of Ambert. Credit: Rafik Arfaoui, 2017. 1- The offices of the association Détours in Cunlhat. 2- CADA's facilities in Arlanc. 3- CADA's facilities in Saint-Amant-Roche-Savine. 4- CADA's facilities in Ambert.



The scattered CADA FOL 74 (Photo 2) facilities, which opened in 2016, are located in the department of Savoie, in three municipalities: Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny (3,825 inhabitants), Montmélian (4,083 inhabitants) and Val d'Arc<sup>1</sup> (1,987 inhabitants). The three municipalities have better access to public services and transport. The mayors of the three municipalities – part of the left-wing parties (Parti Socialiste in the case of Montmélian) or left-wing political orientations (Sans étiquettes-divers gauche in the case of the two other municipalities) – are less committed in the CADA's creation process, compared to the previous case.

**Photograph 2:** Accommodations and the direction of the CADA FOL 74. Credit: Rafik Arfaoui, 2018. 1- Facilities in a tower and the direction of the CADA. 2- CADA's facilities in Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny. 3- CADA's facilities in Val d'Arc.

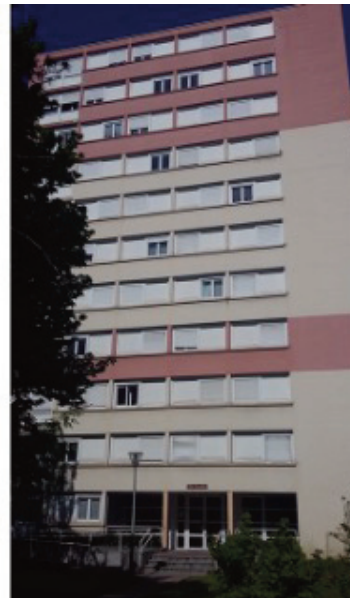
<sup>1</sup> The municipality of Val d'Arc was created in 2019, after the merger of the two municipalities: Aiguebelle and Randens. Our fieldwork was conducted before 2019 in the municipality of Aiguebelle.



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### Methodology

My research is qualitative, combining a classic ethnographic approach, using semi-structured interviews, and an experimental ethnographic approach using participatory and sensitive cartography (Mekdjian et al., 2014). This approach addresses ethical issues (avoiding the reproduction of symbolic violence raised by the asylum administrations through discursive face-to-face interviews), political issues (better understand the refugees' social and political demands) and epistemological issues (rethinking the map's production through its reappropriation as a "power tool" by refugees to produce a discourse on their experiences in the arrival spaces).

### Findings

This paper highlights two main results. On the one hand, the local solidarity with asylum seekers contributes to the transformation of small towns and rural spaces. On the other, the practised and perceived space of the asylum seekers is constrained by the time of waiting for the answer from the central state regarding their asylum applications.

### Territories of solidarity and rebellion

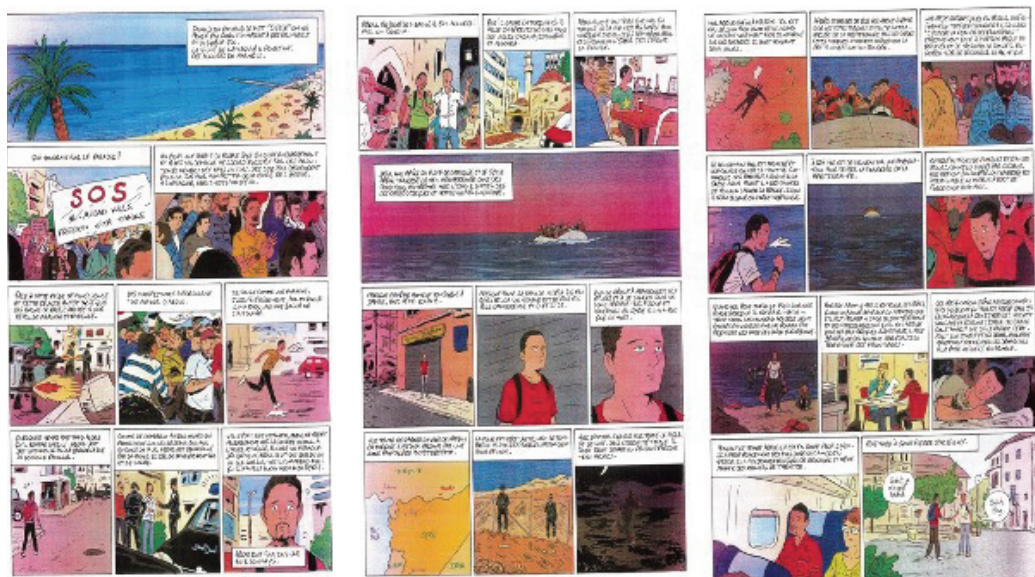
The territories of the CADA Détours and the CADA FOL74 have both experienced a surge of solidarity towards people seeking asylum, relying on a pre-existing associative network. Nevertheless, activities targeting immigrants in Savoie, such as language courses for women migrants from Morocco and Portugal, already existed.

### Adapting spaces for a new population

In Savoie, the *Association cantonale d'Animation Cœur-de-Savoie* (ACACS) has restructured its activities to the arrival of asylum seekers. The association's report titled "*Le Centre Social 'ACACS 2017/2020': Un des liens qui fait battre le Cœur de Savoie?*" raises the following question: "how to integrate new subjects/issues such as access to rights, mobility, service exchanges, and refugee reception into the ACACS project?" This

transformation aims to make the association a central actor for the reception of asylum seekers, incorporating French language courses for asylum seekers alongside existing programmes for both European and non-European immigrants. Beyond this adaptation, the actors tried to build a local political discourse to raise awareness among the local population about the arrival of asylum seekers. ACACS has produced a comic book narrating the journey of two Syrian refugees who met in Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny, connecting the small town to their departure regions and the Mediterranean area. These stories highlight the dangers of borders and the absurdity of international conventions when access to Europe hinges on minutes and geolocation evidence. The comic also depicts life fragments before the crossing, including participation in the 2011 Syrian demonstrations in Latakia and the despair of being a student in Damascus.

**Photograph 3:** The comic on the arrival of two Syrian refugees in Saint-Pierre-d'Albigny. Credit: Clément Rizzo, 2017.



### Creating new Spaces, rethinking space production

In the department of Puy-de-Dôme, a new facility has emerged: the residence *L'Élégante*. Created in 2017 to accommodate two families rejected from their asylum applications, the residence is located in a vacant building in the centre of Ambert. This facility, primarily funded by cultural activities such as music festivals, is a semi-public space that protects and welcomes refugees while offering cultural activities, festive events, and public debates on various topics. Besides promoting solidarity towards “neighbours”, the residence *L'Élégante* serves as a political expression venue addressing social issues in the public debate. These issues represent, individually and collectively, struggles that shape the identity of the *L'Élégante*. A common thread in these struggles is the collective awareness of injustices related to gender, social classes and climate.

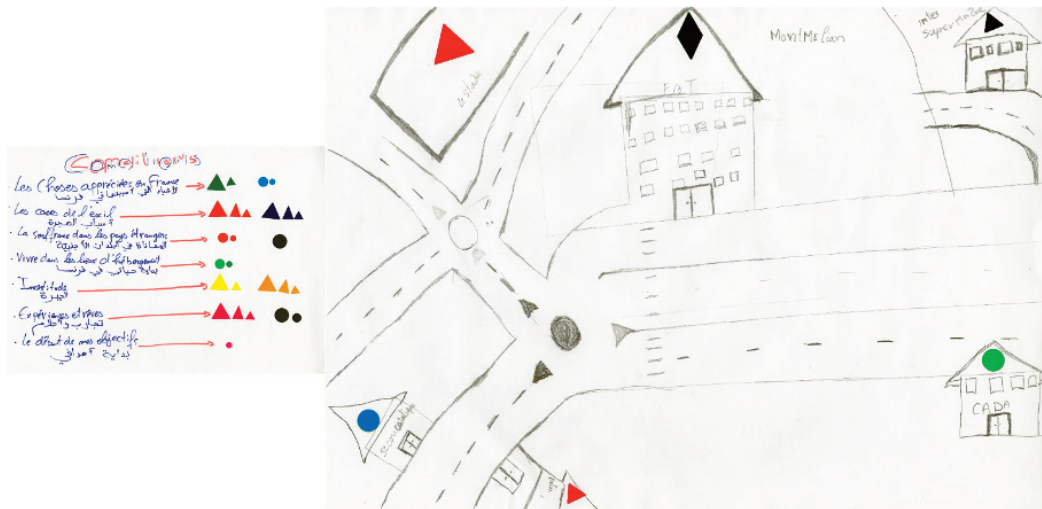
**Photograph 4:** Political, cultural and solidarity events at the residence *L'Élégante*. Credit: R. Arfaoui, February 2019, Ambert.



#### **Time and space: lived and practised spaces of asylum seekers**

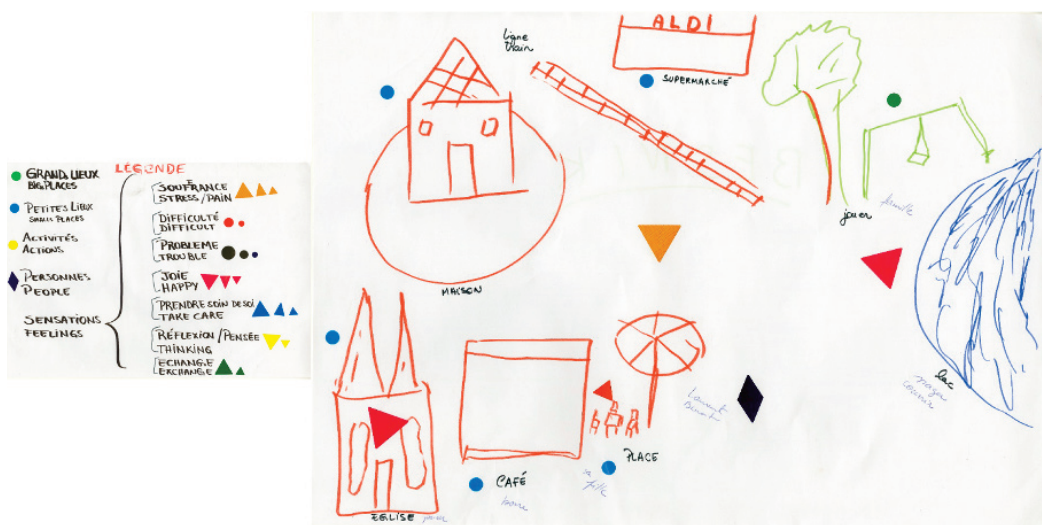
Beyond the impact of asylum seekers' arrival in non-metropolitan areas, the waiting time characteristic of the asylum process (Kobelinsky, 2012) affects the practised and lived spaces of the persons seeking asylum. Map 1 was drawn by a person, 18 years old, who is living in Montmélian, depicting the locality as structured around four types of spaces: domestic, commercial, administrative and recreational. The *Foyer de Jeunes Travailleurs*, where he is accommodated, is the most significant building due to the time spent in this private space where he occupies a studio alone. The commercial space (*Intermarché*) where he shops, the football stadium where he plays with friends, and the administrative and solidarity spaces (CADA, *Secours catholique*, *Relai Alimentaire*) are also depicted. Roads, devoid of vehicles and people, connect these buildings, representing the solitary distances travelled for administrative appointments, aid, shopping, or playing with friends. This map omits Montmélian's restaurants and cafes, public squares frequented by youth after school or during weekends. The asylum process's anxiety and spatial projection limitations result in a lived space of dependency, or even alienation (Simon, 1976), reducing space to necessity rather than joy.

**Map 1:** Sensitive cartography produced by an asylum seeker living in Montmélan representing his lived and practised space. Credit: Photo taken by Rafik Arfaoui, 2018.



Map 2 was drawn by a person who is living in Ambert, with his wife and two children. Unlike the previous map, his practised and lived space includes public areas (church, cafe, supermarket, square, public garden, and lake); the private space (the house) being less significant. This is due to the primary activity of accompanying his children, with emotional attachment to these spaces tied to family presence. Here, waiting is a moment of social reconstruction, allowing exploration of the town, local society, and interaction with residents. In the centre of this map, where nothing is drawn, an orange triangle represents suffering, symbolising the uncertainty and potential abrupt shift from protection to exclusion upon rejection of the asylum request.

**Map 2:** Sensitive cartography produced by an asylum seeker living in Ambert representing his lived and practised space. Credit: Photo taken by Rafik Arfaoui, 2017



## **Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates that the arrival of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean extends beyond the Mediterranean area itself. Rural areas and small towns, not primary arrival points, are also affected. These spaces adapt to new arrivals, fostering rural cosmopolitanism in non-metropolitan areas (Woods, 2022). The practised and lived spaces of asylum seekers highlight trajectories where the belonging process remains marginal, with borders extending into rural spaces and small towns, with the asylum administration decisions acting as spatial control agents.

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