

## Reflections

# Emplacement in hostile spaces: hopeless notes – commentary to van Liempt

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Lounasmaa, A. (2023) Emplacement in hostile spaces: hopeless notes – commentary to van Liempt. *Fennia* 201(1) 112–117. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.129570>

In her keynote lecture from the Finnish Geography Days in 2022 Ilse van Liempt offers a hopeful and useful approach to understanding refugees' processes of belonging and home-making. She focuses on arrival infrastructures, which encompass both the formal and the informal processes and structures that greet migrants as they arrive. Important part of these is emplacement, where the focus can turn into how migrants themselves become part of creating arrival infrastructures and making home in new environments, including the public spaces they inhabit. My commentary draws from my experiences of the United Kingdom (UK) hostile bordering practices, and I am reminded that hostility, policing migration and migrants and bordering practices are not only present, but often framing both the formal and informal infrastructures. Secondly, I reflect on the meaning of home here: the patriarchal and heteronormative home can follow a migrant on their route, as well as become part of the bordering practice for new arrivals. Hence for some, home itself becomes a prison, a site of violence or a place of non-belonging. Finally, the emergence of the techno-borderscape (Godin & Doná 2020) has moved large parts of arrival infrastructures, both the bordering and the support that these represent, and possibilities of home-making online, with many migrants simultaneously having reduced access to the digital spaces.

Keywords: bordering, hostile environment, forced migration, arrival infrastructures, home

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## Introduction

After years of working with refugee students in the United Kingdom (UK) and experiencing the effects of its increasingly hostile environment policies towards all new migrants as well as existing minority populations, I was relieved and hopeful when listening to Ilse van Liempt's (2023) *Fennia* lecture during the Geography Days in Tampere in October 2022. Van Liempt, who has conducted observations,

semi-structured interviews and photo-voice workshops with recently arrived youth and refugee women in Amsterdam, found that forced migrants find ways to participate and contribute to informal arrival infrastructures, which in turn help emplacement in new urban environments. In her research, she found that public and semi-public places became important places of emplacement and belonging, and that the concept of home was often stretched to gain new meanings outside the house, bringing wider communities into the sphere of family.

Arrival infrastructures, introduced by Meeus, Arnaut and van Heur (2019) provide a useful lens for understanding the formal and informal networks, support services, connections and places that new arrivals navigate in order to find the information, human connections and resources they need in order to settle into the new society. By focusing on emplacement, van Liempt highlights that arrival does not, nor should it, lead (uniquely) to integration. Integration here is understood to mean a version of assimilation, where the newly arrived begins to contribute to the existing societal and economic structures, evident for example in the Finnish integration law and programmes (Finnish National Agency for Education 2022). Emplacement, on the other hand, allows those arriving to participating and cocreate the arrival infrastructures and begin to shape the places and societies where they settle (or pass by).

### **Hostile arrival infrastructures**

Van Liempt describes the typical process of arriving, being registered, getting placed in a reception centre, waiting, (hopefully) receiving refugee status and being housed, usually far away from the reception centre they initially stayed in. She explains how this process is disruptive and violent, but mostly so due to practical, administrative reasons. After the extreme violence of UK migration policies I have navigated in my years of supporting refugee students, I ask myself immediately, where in this process does European rising nationalism, violent border practices across the European Union and hostile immigration policies reside? UK's latest "illegal immigration bill" introduced by the Tory government in March 2023 and currently (May 2023) awaiting ratification, "extinguishes the right to seek refugee protection in the UK" (UNHCR 2023) and follows a deal in 2022 with the Rwandan government to deport all asylum seekers who have arrived through irregular channels to Rwanda. UK's extreme violence towards migrants and efforts to stop anyone from seeking refugee protection in the country have been escalating steadily since 2012, when Theresa May, the then Home Secretary announced her plan to make UK into a hostile environment for migration (Kirkup 2012). UK is not alone. In Finland, the 2023 parliamentary election saw the far-right party True Finns campaign largely on promises of further immigration controls and reduce even work based immigration to Finland rise to the second largest party in the parliament. Finding a joint programme for a government may prove to be impossible, as all other parties see work-based immigration as necessary for the Finnish economy (Uusi Suomi 23.3.2023). In the Netherlands, de Jonge and Gaufman (2022) note that media has normalised populist radical right politicians such as Thierry Baudet, and hence moved their views closer to the mainstream. What do these anti-immigrant politics do to the arrival infrastructures?

Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019) show how hostile immigration policies move through administrative processes and everyday encounters by deliberately obfuscating the rules governing migration, thus implicating health care providers, employers, educational institutions and landlords in border governance. The authors call these processes everyday bordering. Instead of trusting border guards and immigration officials with policing the entry of non-nationals through the state borders, the UK immigration bills of 2015 and 2017 have made people with little training and access to legal advice personally responsible for checking whether individuals have the correct immigration status to access services and institutions. As the risk of misinterpreting the rules benevolently is too high (personal fines of up to £10,000), the research shows that both individuals and institutions err on the side of exclusion and deny access to services and jobs for those who look or sound like they might be migrants. This way hostile environment begins to affect not only migrants, but also racialised nationals. And these everyday bordering practices do not end where legal personal liability for erroneously welcoming a migrant does. ExaminerLive reported in 2021 that 4 in 5 immigration raids in Yorkshire resulted in no detentions, something migration experts believe is due to large number of raids being conducted

based on unverifiable tip-offs (Brooke 2021). The Immigration Compliance and Enforcement (ICE) receives approximately 50,000 anonymous tip-offs annually (Corporate Watch 2018), demonstrating that people will go out of their way to police border regimes in their immediate environments.

Van Liempt focuses in her lecture on the ways in which new arrivals become part of the arrival infrastructures, shaping them and creating their own informal arrival infrastructures to catch those spaces where formal infrastructures or the existing networks are insufficient. This allows arrivals to begin to shape their cities, not just for themselves but also for their neighbours, creating new and expanding existing spaces of connection and belonging that benefit the whole city. We must, however, understand, how some of these new arrival infrastructures stem from the hostility and existing bordering practices. As formal arrival infrastructures, such as housing support and access to health and education are reduced and the system increasingly directed towards detention and deportation, migrants are left with no choice but to create their own networks of support and information. Many civil society initiatives, such as university access programmes (e.g. [Open Learning Initiative at Central European University](#)) and Mediterranean sea rescues arise from the same place: when states become more hostile and refuse to provide the support that new arrivals need, civil society and individuals feel compelled to take action, even if this means the action is criminalised. Furthermore, as Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019) show, hostility, bordering and racial profiling is built into some of these arrival infrastructures. Arrival infrastructures is a useful concept, which allow us to see the different formal and informal practices that surround (forced) migrant arrivals. Understanding this concept in the context of hostile environment and everyday bordering policies allows us to see arrival infrastructures as more nuanced network of practices, which are simultaneously used for supporting and policing arrivals. We should indeed celebrate the ways in which arrival infrastructures make the newly arrived participants and authors in some innovative emplacement activities and spaces, without losing sight of how these practices arise from unfulfilled needs, gaps left in services and outright hostility by the state and non-state actors.

## Hostile homes

My second point of sadness arises from research that queers the home. Quintero (2021) has studied the meaning of home for LGBTQ+ refugees in London through poetry and participatory action research. Many of the poems written by the participants talk about being homeless or having never had a home, because their sexuality has made them invisible, unlovable or dead to their families. The concept of home is still presented as desirable, even though some have never had this experience in the places that have been called home in the past. Home is something that needs to be built around the people who love the writers; somewhere they can be themselves.

The construction of home around patriarchal, heteronormative structures that idealise nuclear family make home also unsafe for all of those, who are living with domestic or intimate partnership violence. One of Quintero's participants also shares their experiences of abuse, and in this poem home becomes 'my hell home'. Here, home is no longer a positive, safe place, but the place where the participant is subjected to violence, feels unsafe and tries to kill themselves at Christmas. Migration brings further issues to those for whom the home is not a place of safety and belonging. Several studies have highlighted the difficulty of migrants to leave abusive homes or relationships, because the victim's immigration status may depend on the abuser; because the victim may not be entitled to any public funds or support; because of language and cultural barriers in reporting abuse; lack of social support networks; because of mistrust of authorities and a myriad of other reasons why victims are either not reporting abuse or not receiving support (e.g. Voolma 2018). Heteronormativity is often reinforced by faith groups, and individuals may need to negotiate belonging in diasporic communities, stuck between hostile public spaces and dangerous homes. This point is presented harrowingly in Razeman and Nyoni's (2014) short film *Listen*, where a woman tries to report domestic abuse to the police through a translator, but both the translator and the woman's young son interfere on her behalf, applying their own cultural frameworks and understanding to what is best. The woman returns 'home', where her life is at risk, while avoiding deportation to 'home', where her life might equally be at risk.

The women and young people in van Liempt's study talk about the importance of public spaces in emplacement and homemaking. She points out how claiming public spaces as part of one's home is an act of defiance against state defined private spaces marked as the territory they are allowed to own and occupy. Claiming public space, existing out in the open and claiming space where migrants are expected to be invisible<sup>1</sup> are indeed important moments of resistance and agency in redefining the territories of belonging. Again, with the joyous; alongside the celebration of agency in building homes out in the public, I am reminded that some are forced to seek home outside of the walls of their houses as those houses are unsafe, or they are denied identity and belonging inside the family home. Yet others are unable to escape those walls and take refuge in the public space, and the concept of home becomes only hopeless: a loveless and dangerous prison. The concept of emplacement allows us to move beyond the home and thinking about belonging beyond (patriarchal) family structures. Of course, as Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us, belonging is always marked by exclusion, and so outside of emplacement exists a vast placelessness.

## Digital borders

Finally, when thinking about emplacement, I wondered about the role of digital spaces in the process. Digital spaces are important in every part of migration: connecting with families, friends and those helping migrants move and settle in new countries; finding information about routes, places to settle and legal and practical problems; moving money, phone credit or finding support (Godin & Doná 2020). After arrival, all state services from health care appointments, social security payments and school enrolments can only be accessed online. Supporting refugee students through UK lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 highlighted the importance and difficulties with emplacement in digital spaces. Refugees in our university access programme (OLive<sup>2</sup>) noted the practical limitations of connecting online, as internet connections and digital hardware are not part of what is seen as necessary arrival infrastructure and hence was not provided by the state as part of housing. Esenowo (2022) also notes that many refugees lack the digital skills that are required in order to study, find work or even to access basic services such as healthcare or benefits. Digital training is not provided and yet migration and bordering processes, as well as the arrival infrastructures, are largely digitised. Godin and Doná (2020) call this move of bordering into digital platforms a techno-borderscape. Where Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2019) describe the border as dynamic and penetrating all aspects of everyday life, the techno-borderscape moves those practices into the digital space. Surveillance and policing are digital, but so are the more supportive parts of arrival infrastructures. Yet, access to the technologies and digital skills is limited to many newly arrived.

The COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns highlighted the importance of digital spaces further. Some students organised mutual aid, peer tutoring and other support online (Lounasmaa et al. forthcoming). The isolation of lockdowns also brought some sort of justice to asylum seekers as the rest of the population was now placed on a house arrest and an indefinite wait just like them. As Ashen Fernando states in Masserano and others (2021, 162):

As an asylum seeker, you will see non-asylum seekers experiencing the same as us through lockdown: they will have to stay at home, they will not be able to travel and work legally.

Those who had access to hardware and internet connections were often relieved not to have to traverse public spaces, with limited funds for travel, in order to access education and peer-support. Some previous courses had seen students travel over night from Cardiff to London in order to access a day's teaching; with online teaching this was not necessary. Online teaching came with some issues of disconnect, and difficulties building communities, but for some refugee students it broke the isolation caused by remote housing and lack of nearby communities to connect with. Those who were excluded from previous, urban-centered projects and spaces where emplacement could happen, were now connecting to new opportunities and able to create communities online. The shared experience of being alone in a new, hostile country cannot necessarily be shared with families and friends far away, but housing policies that locate refugees far from each other, move them around often and disconnect them from already found communities reduce the opportunities they

have for emplacement. For some, digital spaces can offer alternative spaces for emplacement and important ways to connect with arrival infrastructures. Others are further isolated by their lack of access to these spaces.

Although in many places we have now largely moved back to the physical spaces and physical connections and the face-to-face encounter is prioritised, digital spaces remain important places of connection and information for new arrivals. It is important to keep thinking about how we create and maintain digital spaces and how they connect with arrival infrastructures. Questions of access and digital skill require more of our attention, as do questions of safety and border policing online. Digital spaces are also marked by hate speech and harassment, which are used to silence and exclude minorities. Yet, the techno-borderscape is now an essential part of arrival infrastructure and emplacement.

## Hopeful conclusions

I wish to end this paper in the hopeful notes that van Liempt's study offers. While it is important to keep in mind how hostility in its different forms frame arrival infrastructures, emplacement and home-making, van Liempt's participants share notes of hope in their efforts to occupy public spaces and build connections in their new neighbourhoods. Quintero's (2021) participants share this hope and sense of ownership in building new homes to replace the ones they were not welcome in. The new home, whether it is at an organisational space, a digital community, a new house or the people who make us feel safe is built by those residing in it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A Finnish Coalition Party member Mia Laiho tweeted on the 15 March 2023 while campaigning for the Finnish parliamentary election that the change in Finland has been enormous, in a shopping centre in Vantaa she could see "11-12-year old children hanging out without parents, migrants everywhere. One person with a bloody nose". The tweet was accompanied by #gangcrime.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Open Learning Initiative at University of East London see their [website](#) and [blog](#).

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