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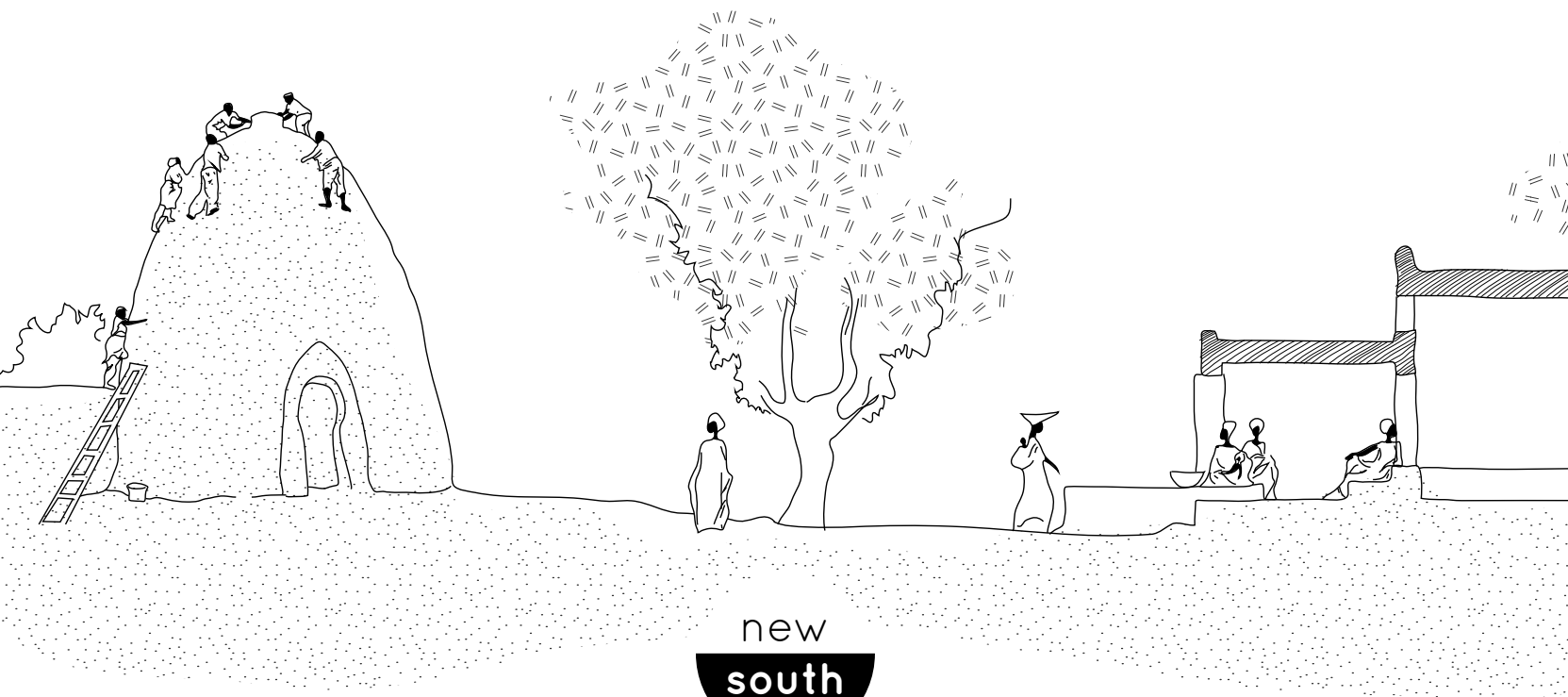## 4 African cities. 4 climates.
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(left & right) Container camp of the Calais' "Jungle"
Photographs by Léopold Lambert (February 3, 2016)

CALAIS

CONTAINMENT POLITICS
IN THE "JUNGLE"

BY MIRIAM TICKTIN

Countries of the Schengen space currently compete in deploying legal means against the thousands of migrants and refugees seeking shelter in Europe. Hungary and Slovenia built walls on their border, Denmark is seizing valuable objects from refugees, and French police makes sure that displaced bodies do not access means to reach the United Kingdom. This text by Miriam Ticktin examines how humanitarianism participate to these racist politics in the form of the container camp recently built in Calais's so called 'Jungle.'

The bulldozing by French authorities of the southern part of the make-shift refugee camp outside Calais, called "la Jungle," in early March, turned into a global spectacle. In its wake lay the humanitarian container camp assembled to replace it a few months earlier. About 1,500 people fit into the 125 available containers — about a quarter of the residents of the Jungle. The French authorities proposed that those who did not find or refuse a place could either apply for asylum (i.e. the "genuine asylum seekers"), or return back to their countries. Humanitarian logic was cited: the containers were a direct response to the current conditions of "inhumane and degrading treatment" active in the Jungle. As French Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated, they had to get people out of the "squalid" and "filthy" conditions of the Jungle, into these containers, "because we, in France, cannot allow people to live in such wretch-ed conditions" (September 2015). Valls made clear that people in this camp would be treated with what he termed, "humanity": "all migrants, regardless of whether or not they are seeking asylum, must be treated with dignity and live in decent conditions."

Much of the media coverage concentrated on the fact that residents of the Jungle did not want to leave the temporary homes they had built in anticipation of making the crossing to the UK, to move into what many called "prison-like" conditions — protesting, for some of them, to the point of sewing their mouths shut. In this article, I want to shift the focus slightly to think about the humanitarian designs on offer, to preserve the so-called dignity of migrants. Why are shipping containers the new design of choice to house refugees and migrants? I want to examine the relationship between humanitarianism and racism by thinking about the nature of this politics of containment on the edges of Europe. What can the design of these spaces tell us about how people are sorted and classified today, all in the name of humanity?

First, a few words about the logics of humanitarianism are in order. While humanitarianism works to address the urgency of suffering (offering emergency shelter, food and medical care), it is based on a dual logic of protection and surveillance. In order to make sure that there is enough water or food, and to protect people from danger, humanitarians find themselves in the position of governing the people they seek to help, creating apparatuses to monitor and deliver what people need, and to secure the areas in which they are working. In this sense, humanitarianism works to protect people, but as an inherent part of this, their systems of governance include logics of counting and control.

But the dual logic is not limited to humanitarian government, and its infrastructures and apparatuses. It is embedded in our understandings of humanity itself as an object of humanitarian governance. That is, humanitarianism works to take care of those who are in urgent need, and in particular, those who are under threat: they may be asylum seekers with well-founded fears of persecution; they may be fleeing war or violence; or they may be under threat from their environment, i.e. cold, lack of shelter and food. But in working to address suffering, it is not always clear where or from whom the threat comes. That is, often the same people are seen as both threatened and threatening (Feldman and Ticktin, "Government and Humanity," 2010).

Container camp of the Calais' "Jungle"
Photograph by Léopold Lambert (February 3, 2016)

Container camp of the Calais' "Jungle"
Photographs by Joséphine Larere (February 3, 2016)

The migrants who need protection from persecution, from the elements and from inhumane conditions in Calais are simultaneously seen by the French media and public as a potential threat to the French nation-state, and to Europe. As Ilana Feldman has shown in the case of Quakers working in the Palestinian Gaza Strip in 1948, even in its early forms, humanitarianism produced a set of intractable contradictions: their limited means meant that Quakers policed the names of those on the ration rolls, treating the refugees as suspect, even as they were primarily there to help them. ("The Quaker Way: Ethical Labor and Humanitarian Relief," 2007) This ambivalence between humanity as innocent and as threat is part of the history of the concept of humanity itself and, as such, it is an irresolvable tension at the heart of humanitarian work.

These dual logics — protection/surveillance, and innocence/threat — are built into humanitarian designs. The Calais container camp, as we know, has promised to offer protection to migrants. There are 125 units of 14m2, lined with bunk beds, each of which house 12 people, along with 3 larger containers to be used as social spaces. They offer electricity and heat, and a solid, dry, non-permeable interior, sheltered from the rain. They are aligned in ways so as to offer as many places as possible while keeping the space orderly and predictable. But as we can see, protection quickly bleeds into surveillance: to protect the inhabitants from danger, the camps are equipped with video surveillance, in the way of CCTV cameras. There are biometric controls for people to get in and out, admitting inhabitants by way of morphological hand recognition — these are far from innocent technologies, insofar as they can allow migrants to be tracked in the future. TThe camp is surrounded by a fence, and patrolled on occasion by the many police vehicles present in the Jungle. Here, it becomes harder to recognize whether the technologies work to protect migrants from threat, or to contain the threat of migrants. Who is innocent, who is threat? Is the threat inside the camp, or outside?

These containers have been not been perceived by migrants and people standing in solidarity with them as welcoming; on the contrary, they have been likened to prisons, and even to concentration camps. The biometrics and technological control, the uniformity, sterility and modularity, along with the lack of light and running water, all indicate that the camp has tipped toward a politics of containment and repression, rather than one of protection or dignity. This camp, with its arrangements of people in space, and with security at its heart, recalls earlier formations of the camp and colony (Ann Laura Stoler, "Colony," 2011), which embody familiar racial hierarchies. Indeed, many of the people being enclosed here come from other (former) colonies and camps, demonstrating the durability of racialized relations.

If the spatial layout and morphology of the humanitarian camp already enact racialized distinctions and enclosures, I want to turn to think about the materiality of the containers themselves, and the fact that people are actually being housed in shipping containers. What can this tell us about the politics of the humanitarian camp?

There are a few points to make here. The first is about the paradoxical relationship between mobility and immobility in container camps. These are not new containers; they are repurposed — they were designed to carry goods across the sea, or land. They have already lived a mobile life.

What does it mean that migrants are not being transported, but actually stopped in and by these containers? It can only be seen as a great irony that they are being rendered immobile by containers designed to travel, despite the fact that these migrants are only in Calais, because of a desire to move, to relocate — they are all en route to somewhere else. Second, and perhaps more importantly, what does it mean that people are now being placed into containers designed for goods? In fact, not long ago, emergency goods for refugees traveled in these containers; now the refugees and migrants themselves are warehoused in them.

Calais is not the first container camp for migrants. Turkish engineers built two-story container camps to house refugees fleeing from Syria to a camp in the south-central province of Kilis. The camp coordinator explained proudly, that, "the new accommodations have been developed using a sustainable and low-cost gravity-fed solar receiver and storage system. Electricity for the new part of the camp will be generated by solar energy." Montenegro also uses containers in its Konik camp, to house Roma who had fled the Kosovo war; however, they do not have electricity. These container villages have popped up all over to house refugees: from Austria, to Finland, to Germany. They are also used in the famous Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan.

How has this happened? Who made this decision? Who felt it was appropriate to put people into units designed to transport goods? The container camps are being constructed by companies such as the German EuroMODUL. Indeed, logistics companies have taken the lead: in the case of Calais, Logistics Solutions is the one with the contract. In other words, the building of humanitarian infrastructures is being outsourced to technology and logistics (and sometimes military) companies. We might say that the choice to use containers is simply an economical business decision, and has nothing to do with forms of exclusionary or racist politics. To be sure, container homes are the new trend in cosmopolitan cities like New York and Washington DC: modular housing is on the rise, not just as affordable housing, but as fashionable high-end housing. We might also see it as an ethical response to the failure of the state, part of what anthropologist Peter Redfield has called an "aid market" for humanitarian technologies ("Bioexpectations: Life Technologies as Humanitarian Goods," 2012). However, I want to suggest that, along the lines of recent arguments about "technopolitics," we must understand that politics takes place at the level of technology itself — technology is a terrain for the negotiation of moral and political questions. That is, how, in their very design, do technologies come to reflect specific ethico-political projects?

I am suggesting that the choice to use containers for migrants is politically meaningful: it is not simply a neutral economical or technical solution. It also works to create distinct human and social kinds. In global cities, where wealthy people choose to live in shipping containers, the containers are repurposed and altered in all the ways that allow for a particular humanity to show its ingenuity: in the gentrifying neighborhood of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, a building will soon open, combining 21 shipping containers, with balconies, outdoor pools and BBQ areas.

Entrance of the Calais' "Jungle." The fences along the highway have been built in 2015 in order to prevent migrants and refugees to access the harbor, two kilometers further. Photograph by Léopold Lambert (February 3, 2016)

When transposed to the context of migrants and refugees, rather than allow humanity to alter its environment, people are literally fixed and contained by these units. I want to refrain from romanticizing slum dwellers' ingenuity, as is too often done by well-intentioned persons; however, when it comes to the "Jungle," I think we can still safely say that people built their own shelter, and with the extremely limited means they had, they worked to arrange space in the ways that best exemplified their ideas of humanity and sociality. These might have lacked "dignity," but not because of their design; this was because there were no means to build in ways that kept people warm or dry, and perhaps more importantly, because people built in the constrained circumstances of heavy police presence. Containers, with their hard, unmalleable exteriors, and their cold metal interiors, are constructed to withstand easy alteration, and as such, force a particular way of being on inhabitants without means.

Because they inherit the materiality of shipping containers in their basic form, the refugees housed in containers must be thought about in relation to the effects they were originally designed to contain. They are lined up in identical rows, crammed together as tightly as possible, in ways that repeat the arrangement of goods in containers. In this sense, the humanitarian camps at the edge of Europe do not simply enact a racialized politics of citizenship, deciding who can enter and belong to Europe; they embody a politics of humanity, which works by constantly reordering the boundaries of the human.

Such ontological politics — shifting how we understand different kinds of beings — has a long history, and is intimately tied to forms of racism. Racisms also function by playing with the boundary of the human – to be turned into an inferior type of human, one is often likened to, or made into, a different kind of being altogether. We can turn for example to the colonial era, when in southern Africa, the treatment of people like animals became the treatment of people as animals, revealing an ontological shift. As historian Clapperton Mavhunga writes, the pesticides used to exterminate vermin in order to help agricultural development soon became the same technologies used to exterminate guerrillas fighting for independence, with the understanding that they, too, were subhuman "vermin beings" from which the white race needed to be protected ("Vermin Beings: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game," 2011).

The critiques of the container camp as prison and concentration camp have likened the treatment of migrants to cattle; however, in the case of this camp, to be human is not simply a product of the shifting cartography of what it is to animal, but also a product of what it is to be thing. Slaves in the Unites States were categorized as property, and regulated under commercial law. How does putting people in containers disturb their ontological status as humans, mixing them up with things? That is, does it enable people to think of refugees as things, as being-in-the-world in a similar way as things? The key difference between refugees and the goods in shipping containers is that the latter have commercial value; refugees are considered to have no value, and as such, can be grounded, taken out of circulation. Indeed, they lack not only value, but legal status as both persons, and goods. And as such, they can be tightly packaged and stored away at the edges of Europe.

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Container camp of the Calais' "Jungle" / Photograph by Joséphine Larere (February 3, 2016)