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«Fire becomes the symptom and material manifestation of the violence exercised by contemporary borders against illegalized migrants; and a medium of resistance and an active agent which in turn affects and reshapes the conditions of its emergence.»

SMOULDERING GROUNDS: FIRE AS SYMPTOM AND ACTANT AT THE MIGRANT CAMP OF MORIA Dimitra Andritsou

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«Fire is a privileged phenomenon that can explain anything. If all that changes slowly may be explained by life, all that changes quickly is explained by fire.»⁽¹⁾ When Bachelard was writing about «The Psychoanalysis of Fire» in 1964, he was commenting on the then «general prohibition» and exclusion of fire from the intellectual realm, an exclusion that he viewed particularly surprising, given its potential to provide modes of explanation for differentiated domains.⁽²⁾ While his dialectic of rapid/slow transformation requires a more thorough analysis, it has now become evident that fire, this «striking immediate object»⁽³⁾, cannot evade any more scrutiny as the earthly landscapes become entangled in «unstoppable spreads of chain reactions of material oxidation», as TJ Demos proclaims.⁽⁴⁾

In this essay, I explore the reiterative emergence of fire in a highly conflictual field; the migrant camp of Moria, on the frontier island of Lesvos, Greece.⁽⁵⁾ The camp was first established in 2013 as a First Reception Centre, and during the highly mediatised «refugee crisis» in 2015, it was transformed into a «hotspot», one of the very first sites for the implementation of the then-shifting European migration policies. Since its establishment as such, and until its complete destruction from the devastating fires of September 2020, the hotspot operated as one of the main carceral infrastructures in place, whereby thousands of people were detained for indeterminate, and often highly arbitrary, periods of time; an ever-present overcrowding which effectively led to its expansion into various overspills and makeshift settlements in the surrounding area.

Being one of the carceral «pillars» of the EU border regime, there has been extensive literary and media engagement with the camp, often unfolding in «spectacular» visual as well as discursive modes. Countless news stories, human rights reports, academic essays, documentaries, and other media forms have traced its operation. However, one defining phenomenon that has dramatically shaped the existence of the camp and of the people therein has been largely overlooked: fire. While being proclaimed as a border «hotspot», a zone «with high levels of activity of irregular migration»⁽⁶⁾, it would effectively be transformed as such in a literal sense; from 2014 until 2019, more than 100 fires had been reported to have broken out in the camp and its surroundings.⁽⁷⁾ With the reiteration of such a forceful event, it appears surprising — to recall Bachelard — that fire in migrant encampments, besides attracting circumstantial media attention, remains largely undertheorized in contemporary discourse.

In this essay, fire operates as an analytical angle in a twofold manner: as the symptom and material manifestation of the violence exercised by contemporary borders against illegalized migrants — a violence that is articulated through a precarious regime of malign neglect and enforced precarity in a site that is presumed to be an enclave of protection, as established by the various international conventions on human rights; and as a medium of resistance and an active agent which, in turn, affects and reshapes the conditions of its emergence.

Through these fire outbreaks, far from being singular, decontextualized accidents/incidents, the migrant camp of Moria appeared in a constant state of smouldering; not merely because of the ubiquitous presence of the provisional fires migrants maintained for cooking and warmth, but

also due to its tendency to discharge into frequent conflagrations. Smouldering, in combustion terminology, denotes a precarious state of slow, flameless burning, whereby the essential set of conditions that facilitate the chain reaction of combustion — oxidizer, heat, and fuel — are already in place, but not at adequate levels or in the right combination that could produce visible flame. What characterises this state of combustion is its volatility, as with a slight modification of its parameters it may display abrupt transitions to flaming blowouts or explosions.⁽⁸⁾ In the Moria camp, the amassing of matter-energy — an accumulation of combustible materials, faulty wiring, overcrowded and flammable shelters, European policies, governmental restriction orders, indignation, exhaustion, injury — was already in place, facilitating smouldering on the ground, which gained visibility with a minute change of its variables and its transition to sporadic flaming fronts.

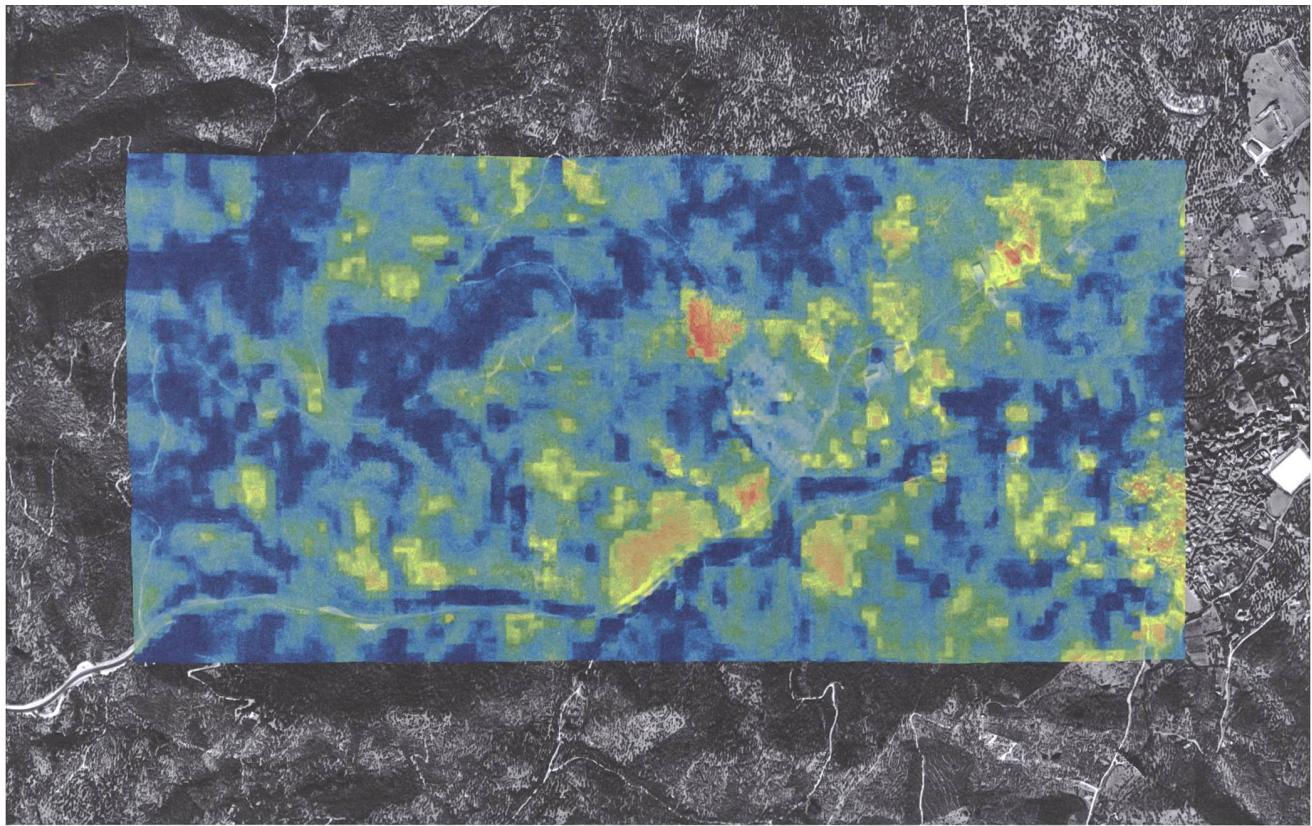
I

LATENT BURNING: FUEL ACCUMULATION AND FIRE ACCELERANTS

Since its establishment, the camp of Moria was in effect a large complex operating under a fragmented and overly complicated jurisdictional structure, and attained diverse layers of containment — overlapping «concentric cages», as Tazzioli would put it.⁽⁹⁾ Containment, in this sense, includes but is not limited to spatial confinement or detention, but rather incorporates a proliferation of governmental mechanisms deployed to disrupt, immobilise, divert, decelerate and at will accelerate migrant movement.⁽¹⁰⁾ Moria operated as a node within this proliferation; it functioned as an «airlock», whereby «the question is to break or reorient the trajectories of immigrants, basically to control them more closely, rather than make them absolutely impossible.»⁽¹¹⁾ Thus, it encompassed containment strategies that functioned not only on the spatial, but also on the temporal, legal, as well as existential register.

These overlapping logics of containment appeared co-terminous with a liminal form of (ill)-care, fuelled by structural indifference and solidified through a series of deliberate omissions and «active inactions.»⁽¹²⁾ These «active inactions» were deployed by an orchestrated multiplicity of actors, through a hostile nexus of infrastructural collapse and enforced precarity. At the same time, though, they were situated within a complex structure of neoliberal policies and structural adjustment measures — at an intricate intersection whereby various manifestations of «crises» collided. When, for instance, in 2015, fourteen regional airports — including Lesvos — were privatised as part of the third Memorandum for public debt alleviations, a contested prerequisite came with it: the shrinkage of public services at the service of private capital. In early 2017, half of the permanent staff of the island's fire brigade were requested to be transferred for the exclusive protection of the ceded airport of Mytilene.⁽¹³⁾

Through this questionable measure, the already understaffed local fire service was further debilitated to reinforce protection, paradoxically, for a site-emblem of mobility: the airport. Thus, the hierarchized regime of (fire) protection that has been developed on the island through another form



(fig. a) Sentinel-2 L1C satellite imagery from 25.9.2016, band combination (B8A-B11)/(B8A+B11) [moisture index], with warm colours corresponding to the driest vegetational areas and cold colours to the most humid ones. 2019. Image: by the author



(fig. b) The amassing of combustible materials within the *pyrophile* agricultural landscape of the olive groves surrounding the migrant camp. 2019 Image: by the author

of infrastructural collapse — the financial «crisis» of neo-liberal capitalism — was manifest, in this case, within two sites that embodied the «deeply hierarchized and segmented mobility regime» (14): the airport and the camp. On the one hand, the airport exemplifies the «speedy and secure [mobility] for certain goods and privileged passengers» (15) but also articulates a certain form of insularity; the island as an idealized, objectified heaven. On the other hand, the camp instantiates the «slow and deadly [mobility] for the unwanted» (16), whereby the insularity is instead weaponised to act as a hostile containment mechanism within the «enforcement archipelago» (17) of the border apparatus. In a way, this double regime of (un)protection seemed to epitomise what Michel Feher calls the «toxic mix of never-ending austerity and ever-increasing inhospitality» (18).

The ever-increasing inhospitality in the camp was further exemplified through the materiality of the structures — as well as their close, tense distribution in «cramped spaces» (19). The tent has come to symbolise the abandonment inherent within the border regime, while, at the same time, with its light polystyrene skin and tarpaulin covers, constitutes a flammable build-up. By navigating through the map of the burned areas of the several fire occurrences, one can identify unfolding spatial patterns; within the institutional hotspot, the areas more «vulnerable» to fiery outbreaks were the ones occupied with more precarious humanitarian infrastructure. While this by no means implies that a mere infrastructural «upgrade» could serve as a «technical solution» while the underlying structure remains ignored, it is nonetheless important in its manifestation of the «(re)produced and enacted» precarity (20) that encompassed life on the camp.

The enforced precarity inherent within the border regime does not only concern state actors or even state-sanctioned non-governmental organisations; rather it is enmeshed within predatory corporate interests as well. A prominent example of this conflictual overlap was a newly designed temporary shelter — called «Better Shelter» — which came as the sponsored output of a partnership between UNHCR and the IKEA Foundation. (21) The shelter incorporated all the logistical as well as architectural elements that are characteristic of IKEA's brand identity, including «manufacture (cheap), delivery (fast), packaging (flat), and assembly (easy)» (22).

However, when in late 2015 municipal authorities in Zurich assessed the shelters' flammability, they concluded that they are «easily combustible», and do not meet the Swiss fire protection requirements. (23) This failure, along with other structural design flaws, was reportedly detected in trials back in 2014, but was not included in the official reports, «for fear of losing funding.» (24) The admission of the flaws by UNHCR was followed by a demand for the re-design of the shelter, although hundreds of them had already been in use in Greece. In fact, almost all such units employed in Moria in 2015 had since then been burned, particularly through extensive outbreaks in late 2016.

While corporate engagement with the intricate humanitarian complex is by no means new (25), it becomes even more evident that this conflictual overlap of governmental and corporate actors increasingly blurs the boundaries between consumerism — and the predatory interests that it encompasses — and humanitarianism, while effectively

«normalising precarity» (26), as Andrew Herscher explains, «by integrating it [the refugee shelter] into the housing market». (27) As corporations and private actors are themselves deeply enmeshed within the production and maintenance of all sorts of «crises» and emergencies around the world, to which humanitarian aid, in turn, responds, it is precisely «this status of business», as Herscher proclaims, «which is to say, the status of capitalism's structural violence — that is effaced in the privatization of humanitarianism. The inequalities, deprivations and oppressions of this violence, business as usual in the frame of capitalism, thereby become business as usual in the frame of humanitarianism as well.» (28)

The structural inadequacies and permanent state of ill-care that encompassed the encampment apparatus in Moria led in turn to the increasingly commonplace «precarious, insecure, or clandestine forms of subsistence» (29) in order to substitute for the deficient provisions. In and around the camp, these forms of subsistence constituted, amongst other practices, the daily use of fire as a medium for cooking and heating, through makeshift stoves and other ad hoc spatial arrangements; alongside the periodic use of fire as visible means of protest. This visible form of protest against the enforced incarceration regime operates, following Agier, as the «political moment»: «the breakdown of a given order and a dissonant and granting voice.» (30) While Agier uses the notion of the «breakdown» in order to define «full-blown political action», he continues adding that it also manifests «resistance as daily survival». (31) Following Agier, I argue that fire, used as a means of subsistence in the camp operated as the «political moment»; a form of everyday resistance against ill-care and abandonment.

However, all these different manifestations of fire usually overlapped — rather than being distinct, separate entities that can be used to identify «the two ends of a smoking gun». (32) Considering that fire is first and foremost a biochemical reaction that interacts with the very materiality its surroundings, it is imperative to attend as well to the biophysical parameters that influenced its emergence within this complex site — even more so, considering contemporary processes of rapid climate change, whereby fires appear as the most hyper-visible symptom, providing effectively, as Nigel Clark denotes, «the graphic interface, the infernal iconography fitting for an era of runaway planetary heating» (33). And that is because, in addition to the diverse spatio-temporal elements already noted, the camp of Moria was situated within a rural area of agricultural fields in close proximity to forests, on an island in South-Eastern Europe with Mediterranean climate — where distinct fire ecologies have been developed through the millennia, which have, however, become more and more volatile in the past years, erupting in extensive outbreaks, whereby firestorms and megafires are increasingly commonplace.

II BURNING RESIDUES: TOXIC FUMES AND TOXIC TRIALS

The consequential nature of fire, however, did not end with the quenching of its flames; the return to the «smouldering» state in the camp of Moria was marked by the residues that

burning leaves behind — in a material, as well as immaterial sense. On the one hand, as TJ Demos proclaims, «[t]he immediate meaning of fire is its very physical transformation of material existence, which is rapid, final, and non-negotiable»⁽³⁴⁾, a transformation that marks its presence as far as within the molecular manifestation in the toxicity that encompasses its aftermath. This propagated toxicity acted as yet another symptom of the precarious governmental mechanisms of life and death manifest in the camp. In January 2017 — one of the coldest winters of the last few years in Greece — three people, two of whom were residing in the same tent, died within one week as a result of asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide poisoning, following the burning of fuel, including plastic, in makeshift containers inside the tent.⁽³⁵⁾ The toxicology reports were released more than two years after the deaths, and were followed by suits filed by the victims' families, who contended that their death «due to the use of a makeshift stove, was the result of dire living conditions at the camp and the criminal negligence of the authorities»⁽³⁶⁾. As often occurs within the contested field of state accountability, the legal cases advocated by the families have since been left at a standstill.

At the same time, fire has always been enmeshed in political complexities which influenced and in turn were reshaped by interpretation, whereby public as well as legal discourses surrounding its emergence reified and perpetuated toxic narratives of criminality, thus maintaining the (re)production of migrant «illegality». Following Mike Davies, such blindfold discourse has «long been obsessed with identifying an *<incendiary Other>* responsible for fire destruction».⁽³⁷⁾ To that effect, since 2015, dozens of migrants had been prosecuted with the accusations of arson, often accompanied by a complete lack of substantiating evidence, and by severed, if not inexistent, legal aid and judicial provisions for the migrants. This criminalisation culminated in the wrongful arrest and conviction of six young asylum seekers for the fires of September 2020, a still ongoing legal case whose trials have been characterised «a parody of justice».⁽³⁸⁾ Activist human rights groups working on the island have attempted to document these reiterative instances of violent scapegoating, which often took the form of collective punishment against resistance and direct action, and has had devastating effects on the further legal procedure of people's asylum claims; leading effectively to elongated detention and, sometimes, deportation.⁽³⁹⁾

III

CONCLUSION

The staggering reiteration of fire outbreaks in and surrounding the Moria camp, rather than being isolated incidents or «regrettable accidents», unravels inter-scalar patterns and demonstrates the collapse of diverse forms of «crises»; from the failure, inadequacies and overlapping complexities of the humanitarian infrastructure — be it the precarious «housing» infrastructure or parts of the supply networks such as electricity and the provision of food — to the violence of the legal, administrative and bureaucratic framework that has operated to restrict, channel and immobilize migrants, to the macro scale and the long durée of environmental destruction.

In fact, notwithstanding its particularities, fire is not an exclusive characteristic of Moria; rather, it emerges in reiteration as well in Kara Tepe, Samos, Chios, Leros, Kos, Amygdaleza, Lampedusa, Calais, San Ferdinando, and other asphyxiatory sites of the border regime. It is a frequent attribute of this phenomenon that its narration «typically points to singular occurrences, displaying an emergency temporality but a forgotten history, a negated context.»⁽⁴⁰⁾ Yet, in all these diverse — yet commonly articulated — sites, it seems that the future fires have already been planned; the violence that is exerted through the accumulation of these instantiations, similar to the manner that Heller and Pezzani describe in relation to the death of migrants at sea, «is exercised less by effecting a destructive force onto a given actor, than by creating *the conditions* in which the sea becomes a liquid trap and restraining to help those who are caught in it.»⁽⁴¹⁾

In other words, the recurrence of fires denotes the occluded, lingering state of how indirect violence operates through the creation of the conditions within which harm is bound to occur, rather than only signifying singular causes or actions of harm. Within an inadequate and erroneous judicial register, the complicated nexus of agents, policies and (in)actions aforementioned that produce and sustain such a tense, volatile and fire-risk environment remain largely ignored, and zones of presumed protection are turned into areas of abandonment that not only bear witness to detrimental fires, but are also left criminalised for them.

This essay is accompanied by a public investigative platform that archives fires outbreaks as gathered from social media, official accounts, and sources living in the camp at the time, and locates them spatially and temporally: smouldering-grounds.com

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