

Urban Traces

February–May, 2019



I Amy Foerster

My time in Brussels and at the VUB fell rather fortuitously in the months leading up to elections in Belgium’s regions and language communities, for the federal Belgian government, and for the EU Parliament—all held on May 26, 2019. This gave my work on municipal sanctuary and solidarity initiatives new resonance and also allowed for a crash course in the Belgian governmental and parliamentary system; assuredly a complex undertaking that might have comprised the entire fellowship period! I entered the field hoping to examine how municipalities within Belgium were responding to refugees and migrants, whether municipal initiatives and policy for migrants ever came into conflict with federal or regional goals, and how the presence of populist, nationalist and right-wing parties in Belgium were affecting both migrants within municipalities and the humanitarian organizations and NGOs working with and for them. The project was, by nature, intended to be comparative, as I planned in the succeeding months to examine the Belgian situation with that of Germany (where parties such as the AfD have seriously impacted the debate on migration) and in the USA (where the “economic nationalist” agenda of Donald Trump has completely reshaped the debate around migration as well as US immigration law).

The weeks leading up to the elections, then, provided ample opportunity to attend public lectures and debates regarding migration; some were “candidate forums” in which local officials were questioned by residents regarding their “solidarity agenda,” some were events intended to debate the Dublin Regulation and how it might be altered under a new EU Parliament, and others were planning meetings held by various collectives of the *sans-papiers* who hoped to use the elections as a springboard through which to discuss and promote regularization for the undocumented in Belgium. When paired with a weekly volunteer shift at the Porte d’Ulysse, the overnight shelter for “transit migrants” run by the *Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés*, I obtained quick immersion in local migration politics and activism, which was paired with in-depth interviews with local communal politicians, activists and residents involved with the *commune hospitalière* program, and representatives from several migrant-rights organizations and Brussels-based “welcome programs.”

Examining only Brussels and the Brussels-Region, though, would provide an incomplete picture of both the field of migrant-rights activism within Belgium and of its municipal politics and policies. During the fellowship period, I also spent one or two days a week in Ghent and later, in Liège. And while conducting interviews with municipal officials in both

cities gave a fuller picture of how Walloon and Flemish municipal policy and practice toward migrants differ, it was not until attending a city council meeting in Ghent that I experienced firsthand how explosive the debate around solidarity, migration and hosting practices could become: as activists from *Solidair Gent* and the *Asielcoalitie* presented a resolution to the city council asking it to vote against the proposed “achterhuiswet” law, counter-protesters from *Voorpost* attempted to enter the council chamber while carrying torches and yelling “Geen illegalen in onze stad!” Although quickly shown the door by local police, they remained outside, and activists presenting the resolution inside the council chambers were offered police protection upon leaving.

While not every day in the field provided such unexpected and exciting ethnographic experience, meeting and collaborating with municipal officials and activists in my three field sites provided both rich comparative data and a deep respect for Belgium, which although often downplaying its role as a “tiny country” on a world stage, is one that struggles with outsized divisions: linguistic, racial, economic, religious and political. The work of my “host” and research partner Dimokritos Kavadias and the entire team in Political Science and BRIO (Centre for Information, Documentation and Research on Brussels) was invaluable in helping to contextualize these divisions, and to specifically explore the ways that engaging questions of migration and welcoming refugees might help to challenge or overcome them. Dimo’s work with the Flemish Education Council (“[Education for refugees: warm welcome, smooth learning trajectory and sustainable future perspectives](#)”), which was undertaken during my research stay, provided an important primer on how reception and integration differs between the Flemish and French language communities and institutions, while discussions with other faculty and graduate students within Political Science, Ilke Adam, Elly Mansoury, Annette Nöstlinger, and Nohemi Vicente, provided additional insight into questions of sub-state nationalism in Belgium, solidarity initiatives within Brussels, as well as residency requirements and policing for and of migrants.

Photo: FVV/Het Nieuwsblad,
25.3.19



My second research host, Cosmopolis, also offered the opportunity for sustained discussion and intellectual community. David Bassens, René Kreichauf and Hala El Moussawi were all extraordinarily helpful in gaining entrée to my field sites, in comparing the context in Brussels with that in New York and the US, and for providing much-needed

explanation about the ways the city of Brussels works. Conversations at the Lunch Seminar Series, the Stadsalon and over lunch with 2019 Research Fellows Deniz Ay and Alejandra Trejo Nieto also provided intellectual and emotional sustenance; learning about their projects and discussing the shared challenges and rewards of comparative urban research has only enriched my experience.

In all, I completed eleven in-depth interviews and over 70 hours of field observation during the fellowship period, and have begun to replicate the research both in Germany (Munich and Regensburg, May and June, 2019) and in the United States (New York and Philadelphia, pending). Preliminary results from the Belgian component of the research will be presented at the 69th Annual Meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (August 9-11, 2019, New York, USA) and then further developed following a follow-up visit to Brussels planned for January, 2020. Because the May 26th election in Belgium only deepened divisions between Flanders, Wallonia and the Brussels Region, and since Vlaams Belang and the N-VA surged dramatically in multiple levels of government, the *achterhuiswet/visites domiciliaires* proposal is back on the table, and communal activism regarding hosting, migrant rights and regularization is surging. My hope is that my project results will serve as a form of “best practices” research for municipalities and activists within them who seek to provide both sanctuary and solidarity to the most vulnerable members of our communities; that in the face of nationalist, populist and right-wing movements across the globe, migrants, refugees and their allies can also form cross-national bonds of solidarity.

My hope is that my project results will serve as a form of “best practices” research for municipalities and activists within them who seek to provide both sanctuary and solidarity to the most vulnerable members of our communities; that in the face of nationalist, populist and right-wing movements across the globe, migrants, refugees and their allies can also form cross-national bonds of solidarity.

Photo: Amy Foerster.
Coordination des Sans-Papiers,
Manifestation nationale contre
le racisme, 22 March 2019

