

# “Nothing Is Expensive, Everything Cheap, Nothing Explosive!”

## Side Stories from Molenbeek, Brussels

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■ **ABSTRACT:** More than a year after the Brussels district Molenbeek came to international attention as “ISIS’s European capital,” an unplanned encounter during a visit at my former field site leads to a conversation about the struggles and concerns that people are facing in this much-talked-about place. The discussion on a small restaurant terrace wanders off into disappointments and adjustments during research and life and is marked by a shared feeling of uncertainty that mirrors the atmosphere of a city that has seldom been portrayed beyond ephemeral media descriptions.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Brussels, fieldwork, media representation, migration, Molenbeek, storytelling

### **They Are Stuck There: Returning to the Field**

The clattering of the heavily filled shopping trolleys on the concrete cobbles mingles with the competing announcements of the market sellers. With a repetitive “Nothing is expensive, everything cheap, nothing explosive!” one of them advertises his colorful products. People living in Molenbeek, Brussels, are well aware of their persisting international reputation. “Europe’s jihadi central” (Traynor 2015), “the Islamic State of Molenbeek” (Cohen 2016), and “Crucible of Terror” (Jones 2015) are only some of the many depictions that decorated front pages across local and international newspapers for more than a year. Here, at the weekly Thursday market, the collected publications are for sale alongside fresh fruits and vegetables, the newest, most fashionable headscarves, prayer rugs, and whatever one would need to save space in the ever-so-small apartments in the area.

I returned to Molenbeek’s market in order to meet my main research participants, Cise and Hamuda. We had shared much the previous year, in a carpentry center close to the market designed to improve the chances of the capital’s marginalized population—mostly people with a migratory background—within the labor market, where I conducted fieldwork for my PhD dissertation, “Crafting Lives in Brussels: Making and Mobility on the Margins.” Out of ten participants, it was these two middle-aged men from Tunisia and Guinea who were eager to tell me their stories. Since the end of our shared carpentry training, we had been in touch via social media frequently. They had kept me updated on their everyday working life, on the ambience of the quartier during the lockdown, on their failed attempts to meet each other. Now that I was gone, nobody had resumed the initiative and organization to meet up, as they wrote me with a slightly accusatory undertone via Facebook. “Anthropologists go away: the people you



**Figure 1.** You are here! Photograph by the author.



work with know you are going to go away. They are stuck there,” writes Mark Hobart (1996: 15), describing the process of distancing ourselves, geographically or not, from the people and places that guide our writing.

### **Molenbeek’s Fame**

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of selling, buying, chatting, and surging, I stumble into Yunus, who is spending his lunch break on the terrace of the restaurant Al Andalus. He and Hedi, the owner of the area’s popular meeting point, known in the neighborhood for its delicious as well as surprisingly affordable food, welcome me wholeheartedly. “You are still coming here? You are not afraid of entering Molenbeek? Then maybe you could bring along some of your blond friends next time so that they see that one can continue eating good food safely here,” Hedi jokes, while serving me my favorite soup. It was Yunus who introduced me to the Al Andalus at the beginning of our shared training in September 2014. “You cannot leave your scooter like this on the street! Don’t you know that you are surrounded by criminals here?” was the first sentence he said to me with a big grin on his boyish face—already back then making fun of Molenbeek’s fame.

The events occurring during my year at a carpentry center in Molenbeek started with the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January 2015 in Brussels’s “bigger sister,” Paris. Molenbeek has since then occupied a prominent role in the Belgian and European imagination, often described as a “no-go zone” that reached international attention after its association with the November 2015 Paris terror attacks and March 2016 attacks in Belgium. The consequences of these events remained not only visible outside on the streets, due to the constant military and police pres-

ence, but were also a reoccurring topic of discussion within the training center. Yunus took part in this training to use one of his last chances to obtain a professional degree despite having dropped out of school. He was the youngest of the crowd, 19, clumsy and skinny, one of the many sons of Moroccan "guest workers" who had settled down in the district known as Molenbeek, at that time largely deserted. As in many other European cities, this desertion had a particular socioeconomic reason.

The economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s saw Belgium's middle-class families enter a period of increasing affluence that was followed by their move from the central areas of Brussels to the suburbs. Simultaneously, the government pursued several bilateral agreements to facilitate labor migration, first with Italy in 1946, and then continuing with others, including Morocco (1964), Turkey (1964), and Tunisia (1969) (Martinelli and Rea 2013). Blue-collar immigrant workers, like Yunus's father, subsequently settled in central neighborhoods like Molenbeek, saving the inner city from massive depopulation and abandonment (Van Criekingen 2006: 2). Further migration was generated through family reunifications that resulted in migration-dependent communities that often had limited access to language training in their new countries. "I have to go and help my parents translating at the town hall," I heard Yunus say more than once, leaving the carpentry studio one or two hours before our official end at 5 p.m. Living just opposite our working place, he often told us about "his" neighborhood. One scene remained especially vivid in my memory: At the very beginning of our apprenticeship we all took a minibus with our teacher to drive to the nearest sawmill to select and buy wood for the first piece of furniture. Along the way Yunus commented on every corner.

"Here you can buy white powder"—shouting and honking from outside—"Look over there, they have the best weed"—voices of parents and kids in front of a school—"I had a fight there, see, over there, it was last year"—he went on and on.

The ride was cheerful, Yunus's descriptions motivated others, the mood built up, stories got wilder and more varnished and were mostly addressed to me, the anthropologist and only woman in the car. Yunus was cheerful and enjoyed his telling during our ride.

Now, more than a year later, Yunus is rather serious. "What do you think? How will they look at me now when I apply for a job, with my Arab name and Molenbeek as home address?" he asks while lighting his cigarette. Six months after I proudly received my carpentry certificate, he still works, just like before, in a little corner shop not far from his house. Yunus dropped out of the apprenticeship after about a month. At first, he continued passing by for short visits, but increasingly we met outside, having a coffee and a little chat after I finished work. He never really answered my question regarding why he had quit so suddenly. Once he mentioned, "It's just not my thing," another time he said, "I have to help my relatives in the corner shop, you know!" While I was eager to discover his story in detail, he preferred to keep our relationship on the level of superficial encounters, albeit knowing about my research and laughing about my sometimes seemingly spontaneous note taking.

## **The Most Beautiful of All the Ugly Cities**

While I am drifting away, thinking about all the brief encounters with Yunus during my time of field research when I secretly wished that he would tell me more about himself, he now bubbles along on Hedi's terrace. Sooner or later, he assures me, he will be self-employed, he will start to be his own boss and drive around in a minivan. "Well, hopefully you will not have the same experience as Hakim, when you drive around in Uccle with your van!" mentions Hedi, overhearing the conversation while passing by our table. Hakim, like Yunus, born and raised in

Molenbeek, works at Sibelga, the city's distribution network operator for electricity and natural gas. Within the last months two house owners called the police, when Hakim, wearing his official work uniform, tried to enter their apartment buildings in Uccle to read the meter.

Uccle, a quiet, leafy, and affluent district at the other end of the city, is home to an increasing number of EU diplomats and other employees in its orbit. Their earnings are 26 times higher than the average income of a person living in Molenbeek, who has to get by with 776 euros per month. An estimated 55,000 people live below the poverty line in the most densely populated borough of Brussels (Laumonier 2015). The most beautiful of all the ugly cities, as its inhabitants describe it sometimes cynically, contains 19 districts with 19 city halls and 19 governing mayors. They act largely independently. There is, for example, Saint-Josse-ten-Node, the smallest and poorest district, where the second generation of former "guest workers" is jostling for space. There is the city center with its old town, where the mostly Flemish-speaking population meets in bio-bakeries and organic food chains, slowly expanding into newly renovated lofts across the canal. Likewise, the two southern boroughs, Ixelles and St. Gilles, form the hideaway for overwhelmingly young French-speaking students, artists, and families. In day-to-day life, there is little interaction between people living in these distinct neighborhoods. This might be the case in many large European cities. The feeling of exclusion from the inside is not a unique Brussels phenomenon, but in Brussels, this segregation was enhanced by the construction of the European Parliament district that figures quite centrally in the city's landscape.

### Lived Segregation in a Global City

As the globally most well-known corner of Brussels, the EU quarter is a steppingstone for international careers. Here "intermingling" is a daily practice; people come and go, make connections, and travel in and out. The aforementioned presence of a large number of highly paid international officials has contributed to the social and spatial division of the region. The EU as a global stakeholder has become embedded in the local context of Brussels and has exercised a strong impact on its urban environment and its housing market (Corijn et al. 2008). As a consequence, Molenbeek remains one of the few districts where newly arrived migrants can afford to rent accommodation. The socioeconomic and cultural patterns in play have produced invisible boundaries between communities living next to each other with little interaction.

"I don't remember if I have ever been in Ixelles before, but I don't think so!" was Yunus's surprised reaction when I invited him to my place in Ixelles for an interview. The anthropologist Jacinthe Mazzocchetti gives insight into the difficulties, resources, and strategies of resistance, as well as their own interpretations of obstacles, faced by adolescents from African migrant backgrounds in Molenbeek. One of her research participants, the 20-year-old Medi, describes the felt boundaries around his neighborhood: "Until recently, I thought that Brussels was like this everywhere—that it was dirty and had no gardens or detached houses" (Mazzocchetti 2012: 3). And indeed, walking from my neighborhood to the place where Yunus grew up and lives, the scenery changes within only 20 minutes of walking, from charmingly narrow redbrick houses into grim streets, unrestored buildings, and run-down factories that remain largely unoccupied. Broken plasma TVs and old plastic furniture line the streets. At first sight, Molenbeek gives the impression of a small-scale version of Paris's banlieues (suburbs), a parallel that has often been drawn (Schram and Fredericks 2016). Yet contrary to the suburban belt of poverty that surrounds the French capital, Molenbeek is only a five-minute walk away from the historical center of the city. In Brussels, one can hardly speak of a "French-style" spatial banishment of poor peo-

**Figure 2.** Crossing bridges—the channel between Molenbeek and the Brussels city center.  
Photo by the author.



ple to the margins, when in this case they are located so close to the heart of the city. However, as Mazzocchetti (2012) points out, there are similar dynamics of ghettoization at work. Although no “ghetto” surrounds the city as such, people living in the marginalized areas around the center are largely separated from the rest of the city. Living in areas where encounters with the police are frequent, people have the strong feeling that there is no room for them in Brussels, Belgium, or in Europe, outside of the space they have created for themselves in the few run-down and familiar streets in their neighborhood (Mazzocchetti 2012: 3). The feelings of anger and injustice are enforced by dynamics of discrimination, racism, and the stereotypical images conveyed by, lately also international, media.

### Uncertain Futures

“There is no future here, not enough help, not enough support. Half of the youngsters growing up here feel alone, not approved of and without any chances. Of course, the politicians talk a lot about changing things,” says Yunus, “but we only see them before the elections. Afterwards they disappear and we are not heard anymore.” A policy of looking the other way is a long-practiced political method in Brussels, some might say in the whole of Belgium. “Dat is ver van mijn bed!” (That is far away from my bed!) is a widespread Flemish saying. Since the attacks in Brussels itself in March 2016, the problem moved visibly closer.

“Just look around here, you have a cafe on every corner, but very few youth and cultural centers. We need more of those and also more chances for education,” continues Yunus. Mean-

while, Hedi, visibly exhausted from serving dessert and tea to the satisfied-looking customers around us, joins our table and adds, “These kids cannot read Arabic and never read the Koran. Everything they know comes from interpretations of somebody that suddenly gives them the feeling to be important and valuable.” He himself has four children. Three are not going to school in Molenbeek anymore. His 15-year-old son asked him the other day why he should still be studying. He used to think his chances in the job market were low. Now he thinks they have dropped to zero. When Hedi himself came to Brussels in 1991, he planned to study medicine. This proved to be financially impossible while still supporting his family in Morocco. He then opened his restaurant, Al Andalus, more than ten years ago. As a meeting point for the community that inhabits the surrounding area, he knows about the ongoing difficulties: “Many parents cannot help their children in school because they are illiterate themselves, or at least have trouble reading and writing. If things do not change soon here, everything will worsen. We are talking about a generation that doesn’t feel at home here or anywhere else!”

While Yunus confirms Hedi’s fear with a continuous nodding and quickly packs his backpack to return to his afternoon shift, Cise and Hamuda arrive to Hedi’s terrace. Hedi proudly shows us a new app on his smartphone. As of late his menu is also available online. While delivery is offered for all of Brussels, the orders mostly come from Molenbeek. “If your friends do not come here, you could at least promote our online service a bit!” He winks at me and serves the usual peppermint tea that he, as usual, sweetened a little bit less for me. “Only if you tell me your recipes in exchange!” I propose before saying goodbye to Yunus, who is off in a rush.

Meanwhile, the market square is slowly taken over by young boys and their football games, left over fruits and vegetables are sold for half the price, and the rusty iron bars create a rhythmic clinking while being dismantled and packed. Surrounded by the bustling honking of delivery vans, Hamuda, Cise, and I start one of many walks we shared in this city. On our way, we pass by the meat shop where I frequently got ingredients for my unsuccessful attempts to copy Hedi’s menu. My scooter was parked in the backyard of the very same shop during my year at the carpentry center. Yunus and the butcher brought it there to “keep an eye on it,” as they assured me, when they found me looking for it, slightly worried after the end of our training day. A few months later it was stolen during the day in front of my house in Ixelles. But that is another story.

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