

Of flat breads, Ma Ling, and Protests: A Travelogue on Migration

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We arrived at the neighborhood in Antwerp where our accommodation, Adagio Aprthotel, was located. The presence of immigrants was the one of the first things that caught my attention. They are everywhere. Enroute to the shops past the train station after dropping off our bags, Amiel and I passed a synagogue, and at McDonald's (yup, my first meal in Belgium was french fries!), seated at the next table were two Filipinos. Overhearing their chatter, I surmised that they have been living in Antwerp for some time. While intently exploring the surrounding streets, it became obvious that there is a profusion of migrant communities in Antwerp offering a multifaceted panorama of cultural diversity. This is underscored by the conspicuous presence of Orthodox Jews, Arabs, Africans, and Chinese, the latter ensconced in their own Chinatown. Our neighborhood afforded immersion within a milieu teeming with migrant-owned enterprises, from butcher shops and corner stores to quaint cafés and eateries, predominantly overseen by Middle Easterners and Jews. Our first communal meal was, in fact, at an Arabic restaurant just across our accommodations.

This demographic underscored by a notable increase in migrant populations from 11 percent in 2003 to 19 percent in 2023 (Clapson, 2024) serves as a testament to Belgium's evolving sociocultural landscape and probably much of Europe. A result of colonial guilt? Perhaps, considering the number of Africans among the immigrants, particularly in Brussels. Interestingly, Antwerp's symbol is a human hand, and a popular tourist souvenir is chocolates and biscuits made in its shape. While seemingly harmless, in the context of Belgium's excursions in the Congo in the early 20th century, the human hand evokes painful memories of decapitated Congolese hands—victims of the bloody diamond trade that brought Belgium to economic glory¹. Suddenly, buying those buttery cookies is not as neutral as they seem to be. How can something be both tasty and tasteless?

The ensuing ethnographic tapestry I found myself in proffered benefits, particularly for culinary pursuits, as I found respite from the monotony of frites, mussels, and salads in Middle Eastern and Asian delicacies procured from nearby establishments. This gastronomic odyssey afforded a fleeting semblance of comfort—a bridge to familiarity amidst the incertitude of foreign terrain. As Anderson (2006) articulates, the pursuit of familiarity intensifies in foreign climes. For me, the familiar is the green and white label of Datu Puti vinegar sitting on a shelf in an Asian store in Chinatown, and the comforting taste of home in a plate of rice or a can of luncheon meat. After all, nothing evokes the

¹ The 2006 film, *Blood Diamond*, though set in Sierra Leone, provides a good, fictionalized background of this colonial European trade.

feeling of home more than food. It is where heritage, history, and identity converge to construct memories of the motherland. As history scholar Axle Christien J. Tugano (2021) has observed among Filipinos in New South Wales, Australia, immigrants configure and assert their identity through the cooking, selling, and consumption of food. Eateries and bakeries function as more than just places to eat; they are spaces where Filipinos converge and reinforce their sense of community. Truly, home is where the food is. While my short stay has not allowed me to understand how this migrant food circulates in Antwerp, what I do know is how, as temporal members of the neighborhood, it has circulated among ourselves through food delivery and grocery shopping, bringing cheers to both our wallets and spirits. Beyond food, the familiar is also the skin color and features of our cleaning lady, a Filipina who has been in Antwerp for more than five years and who was the happy recipient of my stash of Lucy Me Instant Pancit Canton. While the joy of travel includes wandering into the unknown, one always seeks the roots one has left behind.

The Israel-Palestine conflict was the background for, perhaps, the most impactful experiences and perspectives I acquired from this trip. A geopolitical quagmire of global significance, it reverberates palpably in the streets of Antwerp and Brussels, emblematic of transnational discourses infiltrating local spheres. At the Brussels bus station, a group of impassioned youths—predominantly Middle Eastern—congregated in a display of solidarity, brandishing banners, and exhorting slogans—a testament to the indelible imprint of global struggles on local consciousness. It was a peaceful and non-disruptive gathering that attracted a curious crowd and was watched over by a few policemen. In Amsterdam in the neighboring Netherlands, a two-hour train ride away, there was a smaller but no less interesting protest at Dam Square. There was a pro-Palestinian display of flags, banners, and a recording shouting slogan (see Photo 1) while a few meters away was a lone man with his pro-Israeli signs (see Photo 2).



Photo 1. The Pro-Palestinian display at Dam Square, Amsterdam.



Photo 2. The Pro-Israel display at Dam Square, Amsterdam.

One could literally hear two sides of the conflict at the same time. This orchestrated display of civic engagement underscores the imperatives of a cosmopolitan ethos, wherein heterogeneous and dissonant voices converge in shared spaces, fostering a culture of dialogue and mutual understanding. On a personal level, this offered a shift on my purview on the conflict. I come from a Christian background and have long operated under the belief that Israel is invariably right and deserving of unwavering support, given its significance as the motherland of my faith. Although I have not personally experienced the conflict zone, an exposure to the most affected stakeholders has offered me a more nuanced understanding of their plight, of their struggles. This echoes the assertion made by Hadje C. Saje (2023) whose experiences visiting the West Bank, illustrated the substantial role Israel plays in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict thereby gaining a pivotal perspective of this conflict. Like Saje, it has prompted a critical reassessment of my own views.

It was within the hallowed halls of the Karel De Grot School of Art that the gravity of the Israel-Palestinian conflict crystallized. This was a departure from my college life studying my music degree in the 1990s where the need to practice at the piano, prepare for performance exams, and attend music theory and history classes took precedence over

anything else. At Karel De Grot, instructors, emboldened by a commitment to civic engagement, were very candid with their political positions. There was Anelys who opened her lecture with a formal statement calling for an end to the war in Gaza and Petra who reminded the school top administration that neutrality is a position that sides with the oppressor. Not far behind were the students who harnessed their creativity to hand-produce posters and stickers about the issue (see Photos 3 and 4).



Photo 3. Stickers printed by the students laid out on a table by the entrance to the printmaking room free for anyone to take.

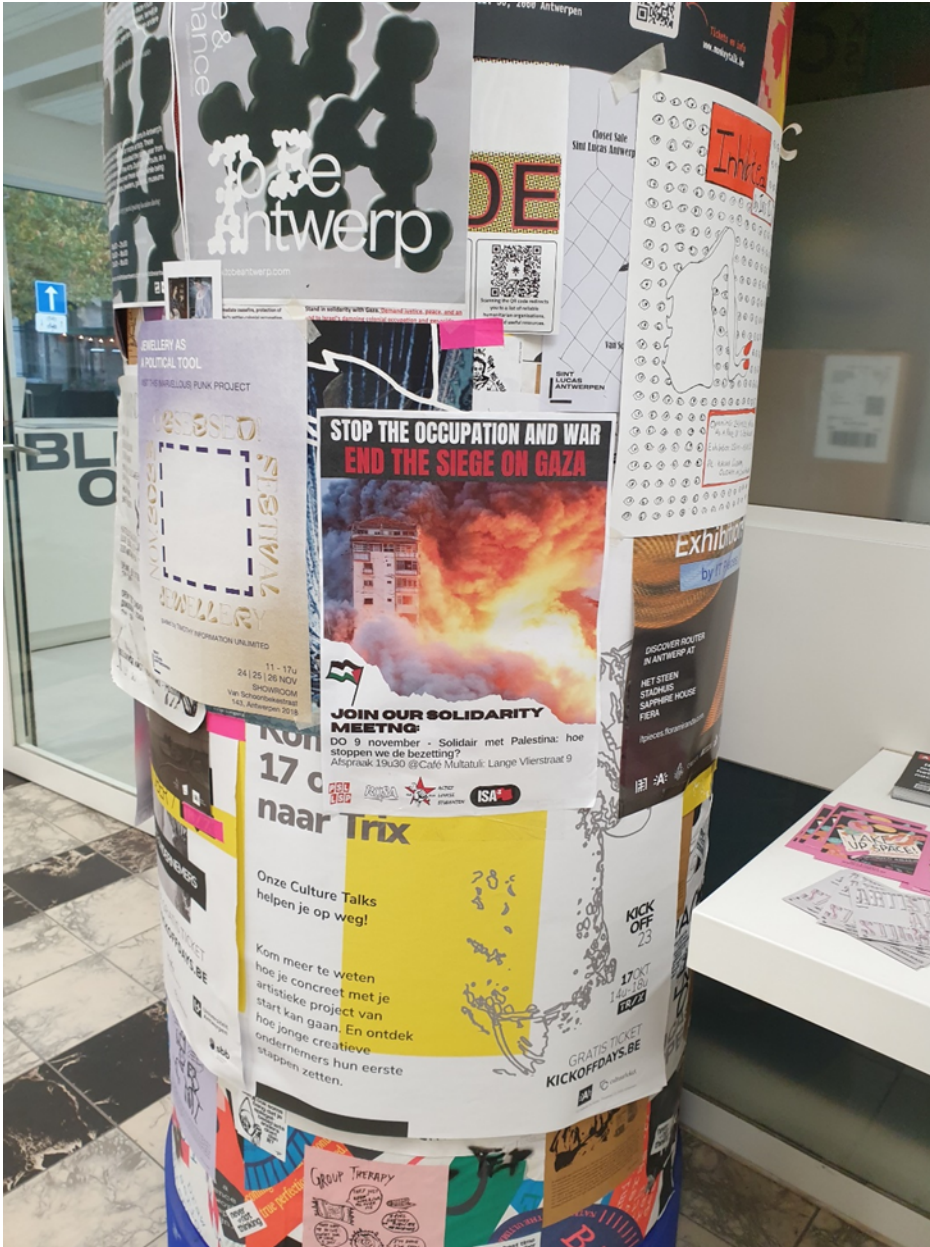


Photo 4. A poster calling for the end of the Gaza occupation on display at a pillar at the school entrance.

The latter were perhaps the most meaningful memento I have had of my two weeks of studies at Karel de Grot. Attached to the cover of my medicine box which I take with me all the time, it reminds me that in global conflict, the only medicine is peace (see Photo 5).



Photo 5. My medicine box with a sticker made by the students at Karel de Grot.

This institutional ethos of socio-political engagement shows how art transcends its aesthetic moorings to confront prevailing issues and injustices. As a social product, art is not disengaged from it. Rather than a way of escaping the world, it confronts it; holding up its image to the world (Ranciere, 2004). The pervasive presence of political discourse within the academic echelons of Karel De Grot stood in stark contrast to the muted sociopolitical landscapes characterizing certain sectors of Philippine academia, underscoring our global citizenship and the imperative of taking interest in events happening in an increasingly interconnected world. It is inevitable then that my ways of knowing artistic research is shaped by my confrontations with political issues both within and outside the classroom as I experienced in the different projects and lectures at Karel de Grot.

In summation, my reflections on Belgium's multicultural tapestry offer novel insights into the dynamics of sociocultural coexistence, wherein diversity serves as a catalyst for dialogue and mutual enrichment. The seeming harmony between locals and migrants—manifest in convivial interactions and shared communal spaces—heralds a promising trajectory toward inclusivity and acceptance while it is undeniable that a level of discomfort, fueled by the refugee crisis sweeping over Europe, does exist between locals and migrants (Sadje, 2023). I would like to believe that such discomfort and tension are more prevalent on the institutional level, as Sadje highlights in his experiences with refugee camps, and less so in

ordinary day-to-day neighborhoods, as my own experiences suggest. In addition, my experience at Karel de Grot further bolstered the transformative power of art as a platform for the marginalized and the disenfranchised.

As I departed, buoyed by the uniqueness of my encounters, I am left with an abiding conviction in the transformative potential of multiculturalism, wherein difference ceases to be a source of discord, but rather a wellspring of collective resilience and vitality. As a traveler, the presence of fellow migrants and the opportunity to glimpse their lives, albeit fleetingly, engenders a palpable sense of solidarity, particularly in Antwerp, a locale seemingly steeped in a veneer of quintessential European whiteness. If travel is supposed to widen one's purview of the world and of humanity (at least to me), then discarding the tourist lenses and peering beyond the manufactured gloss and veneer of tourism allows us to truly inhabit, though fleetingly, the places we visit. Traveling should be more than seeing places. It should be more of sensing and "reading" people.

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