

“Homeless in the house of God? An investigation of home and homelessness among undocumented migrants living in a Brussels church.”

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted from January to June 2015 with a group of undocumented Afghan men who were living, or had lived, in a church in Brussels. This study is part of my larger PhD project in which I investigate young, first-generation migrants' home-making practices and home connections in Belgium, and whether or not their migratory status, if they are undocumented or have some kind of formal permission to stay, impacts these practices. When I first arrived in Belgium in 2013 the plight of the Afghan asylum-seekers was made clear in the local media, and it was even clearer in the streets. I was often bumping into protest marches and demonstrations and later I began seeking them out. As I carried on with my larger project and finally started my fieldwork, I realized that talk of the Afghan asylum-seekers had grown quiet, so I went to the church where they were known to be living since January of 2014. At one point there were hundreds of men, women, and children were living in the church. The men told me that initially the priest and church officials welcomed them in the church and were vocal about their distaste with how the refugees were being treated in Brussels. By the time I began my fieldwork there were only around 14 single men, mostly in their late twenties to thirties, still residing in the church. After conducting several interviews, engaging in conversations, being welcomed as a guest in the church, and accompanying the men on protest marches, what sparked my interest in this particular group was that their homes reached far beyond the walls of the church, and the city and the church itself were both sites of home and homelessness for these men.

In order to discover how and where they 'felt at home' and made home connections/created a sense of home, I first had to ask myself a more fundamental question. What is home and how should I define home in this instance? Home is most assuredly multi-scalar (cite), can be both physical and imagined, and is linked closely with memory and idealized visions of what a home

should be. For the purposes of this paper, I will use a combination of different definitions of home that seem to fit the reality of the lives of the men residing in the church.

Definition and explanation of home

A robust scholarship has been growing around the concept of home in social sciences for the last 10 to 15 years. I draw from works of sociology, anthropology and human geography in order to come to a fuller understanding of the implications of the concept and its value as an analytical tool. Its definition is, of course, different among various disciplines and in different contexts. It has recently been an increasingly important concept in migration studies, and it is through this lens that I will focus my treatment of the concept. In the case of the Afghan migrants, I will further focus this definition to highlight the migrants' connection to the church and the city of Brussels. Although this study is mainly anthropological in nature, my understanding of home in this particular context starts from human geographers Blunt and Dowling's definition of home-making as a continuing process of the making and remaking of relationships between people, spaces, places, and culture (2006:2-3). Many scholars now recognize home as a process (Cieraad 2010:99) and as temporal, including nostalgia, the present connections one makes, and the "projection" of a future imagined home (Cieraad 99). "Home' brings together memory and longing, the ideational, the affective and the physical, the spatial and the temporal, the local and the global, the positively evaluated and the negatively" (Rapport and Dawson 1998a:8). Cieraad further explains that home connections are "created and maintained through objects, relationships, and routines" (Cieraad 99). In addition to these ideas, I will also speak about the importance of the space of the city in the men's lives, and how their struggle in connecting to past and future homes in the ways they would find most fulfilling.

The scale of home may encompass everything from the nation or a group of nations (i.e. Europe) all the way to a specific object or set of practices and homemaking may begin "by bringing some space under control' (Mary Douglas 289). It cannot be simply equated with shelter, house or household" (Mallett 2004:79). Rapport and Dawson propose a definition of home as being "where one best knows oneself" (1998a:9) and they also describe home as being a site where issues of "incorporation and exclusion" come into play (1998a:8). What becomes particularly significant in the case of migrants then, is that "transnational movements 'involve a

splitting of home as a place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience' (Ahmed, 1999:341)" (in Liu 2014:19). As Liu points out, there is also the possibility that many first generation migrants are not able to leave a past home in the past and are also unable to fully create home in the current place of residence (2014:19). This is where the concept of homelessness comes into play. For the above reasons, in this paper often use home and belonging interchangeably.

Just as home is multilevel, ranging from the individual/personal to the national or even global, so too is the sense of homelessness. Despite the fact that home can be carried with people, can exist in their minds and imaginations, and that mobility does not necessarily undermine a sense of home, people can still feel out of place or be homeless. "It is not that in an age of global movement, there cannot be a sense of homelessness –far from it- but that a sense of home or of homelessness is not necessarily related in any simple or direct way with fixity or movement" (Rapport and Dawson 1998b:27). Blunt and Dowling explain that places traditionally considered to be home-sites can be 'unhomely' and vice versa (2006:121). Homesickness is also a key part of the discussion of home. People can be homesick for a house, a country, a feeling, other people, and even the ways in which life is lived in a different place (Blunt and Dowling 2006:204). "But, as Thomson argues, homesickness is not only about a remembered and imagined home, but also about life in the 'here and now'"(Blunt and Dowling 2006:204). If the current way of life is lacking something, a sought after and remembered feeling, family, a sense of belonging, then people will long for a different home. It is also essential to remember that, "it is possible to be homeless even while physically sheltered" (Blunt and Dowling 2006:127). Blunt and Dowling cite various official entities' definitions of homelessness and explain that these definitions place too much emphasis on the absence of something. However, many dwellings and conditions that would be described by the state and other official entities as substandard, thus making the person in them 'homeless' by official definition, are indeed homes for the people living there (Blunt and Dowling 2006:128). In fact, "senses of home and belonging are created by those without shelter, in many and varied ways" (Blunt and Dowling 2006:129). Ultimately, the feeling of home might be about how much and in what way one feels at home, and there is often no hard and fast answer to the questions of 'if or 'where' someone feels at home. Instead, this paper investigates people's feelings of being at home and their ways of creating these home connections. In this paper I will be focusing on the men's experiences of

home and homelessness in relation to their past, current, and future imaginings and connections to home through routines and practices, objects, and overall relationships to places, spaces, and people in the church and the city of Brussels.

INSIDE THE CHURCH

The first time I went to the church I was pleased to see that there was a sign displayed inside the open doors that said “Afghan info point,” with an arrow indicating where to go. Upon entering the building I saw a cluster of tents and wooden frames covered in plastic in the back corner. As I made my way there I passed by the posters and boards displaying photos, articles, and facts about the situation in Afghanistan and the efforts of the Afghan asylum-seeking community in Belgium. I was lucky that in the otherwise empty church (aside from people that were perhaps inside the tents) there were two men standing outside of one tent. I heard one of them speaking English on his mobile phone and I struck up a conversation and asked if we could do an interview. If he hadn’t been standing there I’m not sure how I would have gotten someone’s attention or alerted them to my presence. Would I have called out? Waited for someone to emerge from a tent? Or would I have simply left and tried again later. I knew people were living there, and despite the fact that the building was open to the public and the ‘info point’ seemed to welcome people inside, I felt like I had to adhere to the kinds of protocol and respect for privacy that would I observe upon visiting someone’s house.

During future visits, usually before protest marches, I was invited into the tents and makeshift structures and was able to observe the living space the men had created for themselves. In the framed structure that I was usually welcomed into, there were six or seven mattresses on the floor and some rugs to make things warmer and more comfortable. The mattresses, placed side by side so they were touching, took up most of the floor space, and it was on these mattresses that the men said they slept, but guests were also invited to sit there during visits. There was a small empty space where they stood to make tea on a hotplate at the feet of a statue of Jesus and when guests were offered tea the residents of the church often went without tea themselves, or shared one mug because there weren’t enough mugs to go around. There were coats and clothing hanging from the wooden frame over the beds and also some decorations, like a kite that one of the men had made and which was adorned with Afghan and Belgian flags.

The welcoming of guests, and the offering of tea and coffee, seemed to be the recreation of cultural practices that the men were accustomed to performing in Afghanistan. In addition to things like the 'flag kite' they also wrote things in Arabic script that they taped to the plastic sheeting that served as a wall. This could be seen as an important connection to Afghanistan and cultural belonging as described by Vanessa May. She explains that "cultural belongings are experienced in an embodied manner, for example when singing a national anthem, wearing a familiar piece of clothing or eating a national dish" (May 2013:131). While May describes this as a type of belonging, I also see it as a type of home-making on a collective and cultural level, or at least an exhibition of a degree of home-like connection, that the men were creating inside the church. The actual embodied (May 2013; Pink2009) practice of writing Arabic script to display, making the flag decorations, and making, serving, and drinking tea, are all examples of the men creating cultural belonging, and home connections, both to Belgium and Afghanistan.

According to Fiona Parrott (2005) the objects that people choose to display, and the ways in which they are displayed, speak to the level of attachment people feel and wish to create to the current space. She explains that people in her study in a medium-secure psychiatric facility, were focused on their future and past homes, and did not wish to make strong connections in the institution. For this reason, patients were reluctant to 'fix' things to the walls because "fixing objects to the walls of these rooms metaphorically fixed them in the institution" (2005:250). The Afghan men in my study appeared to be ready to fix themselves in the space, but the space itself was already temporary and the shelter of the tents and plastic sheeting was both metaphorically and physically flimsy. Their willingness to fix themselves in the space of the church was, in my estimation, more representative of their wanting to remain in the city, than of their desire to remain in the actual space of the church, which they and the church officials deemed as a temporary solution.

The church offered little in the way of physical comfort and several of the men spoke about how cold it was in the winter, and the fact that they didn't have electricity at night and they had no access to toilet facilities. Some of them also mentioned that when they were feeling sick, or wanted to shower and do their laundry, they found friends to stay with. Some of my participants moved out of the church altogether, staying with different friends and moving around quite often. One participant said he left the church and moved between friends' houses

because his health suffered too much when living in the church. After moving out he would go back often and visit those who were still residing there. Once when I showed up I saw my participants cleaning sand off the floor of the church. They told me that it was part of a project at the church, but they didn't know the purpose. They simply took it upon themselves to help clean it up, even though it was not close to the space where they had their tents and shelters. Also, when they went out as a group for a march/protest, they always left someone behind in the church to make sure everything was ok. Despite these examples of attempts to appropriate the space and have some kind of control, the men were not allowed to control the space past a certain point. I describe the space of the church as only fulfilling the role of dwelling place in the men's lives, in the way described by Heidegger (in Rapport and Dawson 1998a:3), or an example of an "unhomely home" as described by Blunt and Dowling (2006), because the men were barred from creating any other type of attachment there.

The inability to cook, maintain personal hygiene routines, and welcome guests in the way they would wish, seems a denial of the ability to create home through routine practices, and bringing the space under control in some way, which Douglas cites as a factor in creating home (in Mallett 2004:289). As I mentioned previously, home does not necessarily indicate a physical place. As Rapport and Dawson state, "one is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated – and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed" (Rapport and Dawson 1998a:10).

Matters became further complicated for the current residents of the church when a tragic event occurred on the church premises. For reasons of privacy and anonymity, I will not go into details about this event, but this upsetting event evoked a public statement from the church spokesperson, who stated in a newspaper article: "churches are not areas of settlement, but it can be understood [why this happens], on a temporary basis. This tragedy will not change the priest's 'welcome principle'." (translated from French). Even before this tragic event Sam and Amir had told me that the church officials had been trying to force the men to leave, and had even tried to get the police involved. According to them, the police refused to get involved because they did not want to interfere in church matters. After the aforementioned event, the men decided finally to leave the church and find other places to live. They currently

live in small groups in different areas of the city, but they have said that they would once again like to find a place where they could live together.

CAFÉS

Stepping outside of the church, the city, from its houses and cafés to its very streets, seemed to offer more opportunities for the men to make connections and create a sense of home. It's fitting to begin with the first experience I had with my participants outside of the church, having coffee and tea in cafés. When I set up interviews with two of my participants, Sam and Amir, they both suggested that we meet in a café. In fact, I've never conducted an interview inside the church even though I've been there several times. The first interview I conducted was with Sam and he took me to the café where the men from the church were able to use the bathroom facilities. They paid the café a monthly fee in order to use the sink and toilet as much as they needed. Sam knew the wait staff and after the interview he insisted on paying, which made me a bit uncomfortable. A few days later I had some follow up questions for Sam and he took me to the same café. This time I made it to the counter first in order to pay for our drinks. When we left the café Sam looked upset and told me that in this place I should never pay anything. I told him that for me, and in the US, it's very normal to take turns paying for drinks. He shook his head and said again that in this place I should never pay. The motivation for my insistence on paying my own way may be apparent. I wanted to avoid any situation that could be misconstrued as a date or a meeting with romantic intentions, and I also didn't want there to be any sense of obligation. For example, if I'm not able to interview someone again, I do not want that person to be waiting for the coffee or drink that I "owe" him or her.

A few weeks later I had another interview with a resident from the church, Amir, and he took me to a café that he said he visits often. After the interview I was prepared. I dropped my change onto the tray before it was even out of the waiter's hands. I nearly threw it at him in the hope of avoiding the issue I had encountered in the previous interviews with Sam. Instead, I received the same reaction from Amir. He said that when we come to this place I should never pay. Amir said, "This is my café." I asked if I could buy his coffee if we went to a café that I chose, and he said "of course." The interviews in these cafés show how I was viewing the interaction and the places very differently from the men I was interviewing.

The conclusion, or at least the preliminary conclusion, that I have come to, is that these men were treating me as a guest in their home. It seems that living in the crowded church with very little privacy and personal space has led them to appropriate spaces in the rest of the city. I think the cafés can be viewed as a type of living room, an extension of their domestic space. As May explains, “Although we are born into a world of ready-made structures, which inform how we interact with our environment as well as the meanings we give it, there is room for individual creativity in everyday life (de Certeau, 1984). People can subvert expectations by using space for their own means...” (May 139). In these instances I also see my participants creating routines and connections and in some way taking this domestic space under control. The domestic sphere of their lives spills over the ‘living space’ of the church and into the cafés.

Veena Das et al. explore the idea of the flows of domesticity that I also find useful in regard to the cafés, and other spaces in the men’s lives that I will discuss further in the next sections. Das et al. state that there’s the possibility for there to be “multiple domesticities that emerge at different times and are neither coterminous with family nor indeed with household” (2008:349). Cafés are public places, but Sam and Amir conduct private business there and create a kind of personal space and claim ownership over ‘their’ particular café. Amir also described the difficulty of speaking with his family and how little he was actually able to contact them. When he did speak with them, this communication usually occurred in internet cafés. The computers that Amir uses in the net café could be considered in the same way as the telephone in Das et al.’s study. They describe the telephone in their study as an “object through which the boundaries of prison and home are constantly negotiated” (2008: 356). In the case of Amir, I see the computers in the net cafés as the conduits through which Amir connects to his family and a past ‘home’. In this way, Amir’s home in Afghanistan is being incorporated into the city of Brussels. It is also another instance of private life being lived in a public space.

NEIGHBORHOODS, HOUSES, THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Proximity to the city and friends was key for Amir and Sam. Both said they spent a great deal of time at friends’ houses, both Belgian friends and Afghan friends who have received some kind of permission to stay in Belgium and so have a place to live more permanently. Sam never had to spend much time outside of Brussels, but expressed a sense of comfort in knowing he could go to his friends’ houses when he wanted to take a break, have a shower, and do his laundry.

Amir cited his health as a main reason for staying with friends, and he even said we could have future interviews in the house where was staying at the time. He said we could have tea there and I could speak to him and his Belgian friends about their views concerning the immigrant situation in Belgium. This shows his sense of home and belonging at the interpersonal level, which was much clearer and uncomplicated than his sense of belonging and home at the level of the city streets mentioned above. My conversations with Amir often revolved around his friends in Belgium and his participation in a music group. I found this significant because, as Vanessa May explains, “musical experiences have also been known to play an important part in relational and cultural belongings” (May 2013:135). The music was something he was not able to do when he lived farther from the city. He said that the people in the group are from all different countries and that their singing together was “like a solidarity action!” “Music can also form part of collective experience and identity, as evidence whenever Liverpool Football Club fans sing ‘You’ll never walk alone’” (May 2013:135). These small group interpersonal relationships were very important in Amir’s life in Brussels, but his involvement also points to the value he placed on creating a routine in Brussels.

Another example of the importance of routine in Amir’s life was one I discovered when I was half an hour late for our interview. This was a complete misunderstanding on my part, and when I asked Amir about meeting again in the future he stressed that it would be important that the time fit both of our schedules. “Because even I am an illegal guy, but I will try to make schedule for my life. It’s better, yeah?” Amir’s routine helped him to create a sense of control over life, and the space of the city of Brussels. It also made a difference that Amir no longer lived in the church, allowing him the time and space to focus on other issues and priorities. He would come to some protests and to visit the church, but he did not feel the need to come to every demonstration and march and was able to have other priorities. Feeling welcomed in his friends homes and having the ability to create a schedule and set of routines helped Amir to treat their current space in Brussels as his home, at least to some degree and showed that he was trying, and sometimes succeeding, in making connections in Brussels.

On the other hand, Amir cites feeling detached when he lived in social houses that were far away from cities.

Yeah. Inside the center there was too many [meaning a lot of] people from Afghanistan, but the problem of the center was quite far from many places that I would likely to go, for example to library, to internet using, to have a contact with my family. But it was really far, even the cell phone sometimes have no signal there, to contact someone you have friends in Belgium. It was too difficult.

In this description Amir explains that while living in the social house he had trouble connecting with people both back in Afghanistan and in Belgium. Most of his friends lived in Brussels and he wasn't able to easily make it to a net café to contact his family or use his cell phone to call his friends. He was not able to participate in practices that would foster home connections either to Belgium or to Afghanistan.

THE STREET

Protests

The streets themselves are another example of public space that may be surprisingly described as spaces for home-making. For this section, which includes the appropriation of public space on the part of undocumented migrants and the social significance of public space, I draw heavily on the work of Becerra. She conducted fieldwork with the Mexican immigrant community in New York, many of whom were undocumented, and looked at the significance of their use of public space for parades and soccer games. She explains that “public space serves as the terrain where urban dwellers engage in contestations over the meaning(s) of belonging and nonbelonging; it is where membership-in it's multiple expressions – is enacted, negotiated and embodied” (2014:332). The examples she uses in her work are similar to examples of the expression and claiming of belonging and membership that I witnessed during my time with my participants.

Becerra details an instance in which a group of young Mexican men, many undocumented were playing soccer on a field, and the police were called by the nearby Irish-immigrant community who complained that the men were too loud. The men were asked to leave and they went to another location, where they were more hidden, in order to play. When finally the police learned of this location, they told the men to apply for the proper permits, and ultimately the permits were granted and the men were able to play more freely. “Being able to play sports regularly in public parks is a contested affair that requires Mexicans know ‘the rules of the game,’ adhere to them, organize to be able to claim space, and appropriate and transform

urban public spaces, such as parks” (Becerra 2014:337-338).

The men in my study had a similar experience in dealing with the official channels of the city of Brussels. When accompanying my participants on protest marches I learned a bit about the procedure that goes into getting a permit to have a demonstration on the street. The men were always sure to have a permit for their demonstrations and they coordinated with the local police to organize their marches. One of the men told me that he got to know some of the police officers through this process, and a couple of the officers told him that if he ever got picked up for not having papers then he could give their names and they would try to help him out. The protest marches seem to be a way of appropriating the space of the street and turning it into a meaningful place (Tuan 1977). They were also creating social connections, learning about the legal system in Belgium, and claiming the right to demonstrate/protest by going through the same official legal channels that Belgians and others have to go through in order to organize a demonstration. The Afghan men were comfortable in the street and even in the very act of protesting their official and bureaucratic exclusion, they were finding some level of inclusion and acceptance. As Becerra states for her own participants, this could be interpreted as “a movement that led to the official recognition of a group by the state. In granting a permit to allow this practice, the state recognized not only its existence, but gave Mexicans a legitimate place within public parks” (2014:352). It is also significant that the Afghan men felt safe and secure enough to organize and carry out these marches. “...if a person feels unsafe or otherwise unable to access a space, they are likely to avoid it. If too many public spaces are like this, this reduces not only people’s sense of belonging, but also their sense of a ‘right to the city’ or citizenship (Young, 1990)” (May 2013:143). In other instances, the men worried about being picked up by the police, *as in the example of Amir I will describe below*, but during the marches they felt they had official protection and this contributed the sense of ease they seemed to feel, and ease is one aspect of home that Tucker cites as being deeply significant (Tucker in Mallett 2004:82).

In addition to their spatial significance, protests were also clearly important to the men’s home creation because the men felt they had potential to change their circumstances and the circumstances of the others in the same situation and become rooted in Belgian society . Some of the marches only included the members of the Afghan community while others were for the

entire undocumented and asylum-seeking community. As Vanessa May claims, “Belonging is not merely a state of mind but is bound up with being able to act in a socially significant manner that is recognized by others” (May 2014:142). The protest marches clearly fit this description and the participants were also showing their attachment to Belgium as a current home, and their hope to create a future home there as well. Additionally, the marches added to the men’s sense of routine ability to structure and have control over their lives in Brussels.

Sam: They already several times asked asile from CGRA [Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons] and maximum four times or five times they got negative decision and the sixth time they asked also asile and some of them waiting for the result.

I: Ok

Sam: There are several person we already receive negative decision and we don’t have nothing, so another people are waiting for the results, yes.

I: So everyday you do something, like looking...

Sam: Looking for solution, yes.

I: So that’s your job right now? Everyday you look?

Sam: Yeah.

In the conversation above I put the word ‘job’ into Sam’s mouth, but I just wanted to make sure that it was clear what he did in his daily life. Even in informal conversations with Sam he almost always spoke of the next protest, the current and upcoming efforts to gain asylum status, and the outcomes of his friends’ recent appeals. Clearly Sam had a routine, but this routine did not seem to aid in the creation of any home-ly feelings or connections. Instead, this routine appeared to be part of Sam’s struggle to bring the space under control. He wanted to have control of his movements and choices in Belgium and the lack of documents and rights made this impossible.

The protests were also significant in terms of the men’s relationships with members of the surrounding community. When marching to the Office des Etrangers (foreigners’ office) with my participants I noticed them waving to and chatting with people they met on the street and having short conversations with people who were not involved in the march. Some scholars, May (2013) for example, argue that these kinds of meetings and relationships with acquaintances may lead people to feeling that they do not belong, but in this instance I see the men’s relationships with neighbors as adding to a sense of routine and comfort in the neighborhood space. They also knew the way to the office by heart and chatted and joked the

whole way. There was a sense of ease and routine in the act of walking to the office to protest, and indeed, these marches occurred regularly. At certain times they happened once a week, and sometimes even more often. While these marches were not parades in the display of ethnicity and community that Becerra studied in her work, the marches do fulfill some of the same purposes. Becerra explains that, “parades are performances as much as they are spectacles because participants engage in acts of representation as they walk down, past, or through a public space with the explicit purpose of being seen” (2014:342). The men wanted to be seen and recognized as having the right to the space they were using, and even more deeply, the right to stay in Belgium. The members of the community that recognized this right, and greeted and encouraged the men, were in some small way accepting them into the community.

One of the most intriguing moments of the protests was when one of the men, Abdul, held up the Afghan flag in front of the Office des Etrangers. He held it during the entire protest, around an hour, without putting it down. His arms were kept straight and he held the flag high in the air above his head. The flag was not light, the ‘pole’ being a thick wooden rod and the flag itself approximately two feet by three feet. It was cold during this particular protest and Abdul wasn’t wearing a coat. Eventually he began sweating and the muscles in his arms were quivering, but the flag stayed in the air. He switched arms once in a while, and he even let his friends help him put a coat on, but he did not lower the flag. When I asked Sam about it he told me that they made the flag by hand after their other flag went missing. Abdul did not speak English or French, though he did speak Flemish, so I was not able to ask him personally about his reasons for holding the flag aloft. Sam said that Abdul always did this and that it was because he was proud of being Afghan. In this instance it seems that we can speak again about embodiment. The men made the flags themselves and Abdul went even further by using his very muscles to display and maintain a connection to Afghanistan. It was an interesting display as well, because the men were trying to convince the Belgian authorities to allow them to stay in Belgium, but perhaps because they were, by their own explanation, forced to leave Afghanistan, they, and Abdul especially in this instance, wished to show that they maintained a very strong connection. They did not, of course, leave Afghanistan simply because they were looking for a change or because they disliked Afghanistan. This was a display of national belonging to Afghanistan in the streets of Brussels, where the men were also making different and numerous home connections to the city and as Becerra states, they were creating a sense

of unity after their sense of rooted community suffered in the act of leaving Afghanistan. “The parade then contributes to reunite and resignify space so that a Mexican community can be imagined within a new location” (Becerra 2014:345).

Favorite Place

As I mentioned previously, it appeared that my participants were more able to create ‘home’ in the city outside of the church, and this includes neighborhoods and the street itself. In terms of appropriating the space of the street, Amir, a former resident of the church, counts a section of the street as his favorite place in all of Brussels. Amir no longer lives in the church, but he is still undocumented and moves between his friends’ homes, staying a few nights here and there. In the following quote he recounts what his life was like when he first arrived in Brussels, even before he lived in the church and was still sleeping in the park near the Office des Etrangers.

“...Because when I reached to Brussels, I mean in 2011, so obviously during the day I was just free to make a walk so, just I was a little, I mean even have a little stress in my mind because I have no place to stay. I was [living] in park but my favorite place that I like in Brussels, and even after I would receive my document I would likely go off and visit this place because it’s a place that it’s like uh, what can I tell you? It’s a place that’s my favorite one. Maybe for some people it would not be favorite, but for me it’s the favorite place. It’s uh [he names a place with a view over the city]. Because there is a wall and you can see all the Brussels around, like all the place. Often I go around night. Before I mean, but not now, because when I am busy I couldn’t go there often. So I’m going there just to, I mean, sit over the all and look to the Brussels at night. It was really my nice place that I like it so much. But I like it around night. I just going on the wall in summer and spring and I likely to stay there maybe for one hour and sitting on the wall. I like it. And even after I receive my document still I will like to go, sometimes going, and visit there.”

Amir used this part of the city as a place of quiet reflection where he could be alone. In the park, and later in the church, he lived with many other people and did not have private space. In this example he was using the public space of the street to serve a ‘domestic’ purpose in his ‘private life’. He could come to this place, where you often find people taking in the view, anytime he liked, and he would not be questioned as to why he was ‘loitering’ there. In contrast, when we met for our interview I was very late (a complete misunderstanding on my part) and Amir remarked that he had been worried about standing outside the café and waiting for me. He said that he probably looked suspicious and he did not want the police to notice him. He tried looking at different things in shop windows to appear as though he was shopping. In

this was his relationship with the city, and his current homemaking was tenuous. He had a routine and a place that he felt was 'his', but his attempts at creating a home in the present place were tempered by the reminder that he was undocumented and had to be careful how he moved in the space. What is clear in this case is that "public space by definition can be used by all; yet it cannot be permanently appropriated by anyone" (353). I think it is the very act of having to reappropriate space on a daily and almost constant basis that contributes to the men's sense of homelessness. In fact, there is almost no space in their current lives that they do not have to reappropriate daily, or even more often.

OVERALL ACCESS

Unsurprisingly, access to services, housing, jobs and even recreational activities, were cited by all of the men I spoke with as their biggest problem in Brussels. As Amir says "Uh, actually in my opinion in Belgium, I mean, something interesting is document. To have it. Because you have enough access to many things." Amir chose the particular music group, mentioned above, because the teacher allows undocumented people to join the group. He also spoke about the inability to take language classes, and he thinks would really contribute to his life in Belgium.

"But I tell you something dislike about Belgium, without documents because, ok something just like about me, before Belgium even without documents, the problem for me is that I have no access for medical or school and every country the school, I mean the education is primary goal of me. It's my own opinion. I must have access for school. Even it's French or Flemish It's no different for me. If there would, I mean have the service to give me uh, I mean to give me opportunity to be in school, or education of uh Flemish Language, or French, it's uh something nice for me, but it's something that I dislike because in many other countries even you are negative decision as I listened from other guys you have opportunity to learn the language of other country. In Belgium it's a little frustrating. Yeah?"

When I asked Sam on several occasions about his future plans, he would only say that he would have to get his documents and that he would like to stay in Belgium. He didn't mention anything more specific. Similarly, Mohammed had trouble projecting into the future, and even in speaking about his current home-making practices. He completely rejected the possibility of achieving any kind of normalcy in Belgium without having documents.

Interviewer: "So, on a daily, a regular daily basis, what do you do in Brussels? What does a normal day look like?"

Mohammed: "I don't have any normal day because I am deprived of normal right. I have no right to do

study, to work, to have shelter. So how do you expect to have normal life?"

In Mohammed's estimation, he is denied what he considers the most important aspects of a home: the right to study, the right to work, the right to have shelter. Normal does not exist for him without the rights afforded to him by citizenship, institutional belonging, and the agency that accompanies these.

CONCLUSION

The undocumented Afghan men in my study were living a constant struggle for home and belonging. While they were physically sheltered in the church, the temporary nature of the situation, as well the efforts by the church officials to force them out, left them in a state of homelessness inside the church, even while they tried to create connections with Brussels. The streets seemed more welcoming than the church itself, and on the whole the church, while being a space the men appropriated, was mostly just a dwelling place in the way described by Heidegger (from May 2011:372) while the rest of the city offered more opportunities for routines, community building, and overall home connections. Even while undocumented they managed to gain official recognition of their rights and belonging by obtaining permits for their demonstrations, and unofficial membership granted by other community members (i.e. Belgian friends, Amir's participation in the music group, people met on the streets in the neighborhood, etc.). They were also able to demonstrate their continued connection to Afghanistan, even if they knew they were unable to go back and did not seem to ever speak about this possibility, through the marches and the display of cultural items such as the Afghan flag.

If we agree that homes are indeed temporal, existing in the past, present, and future, then my participants seemed to be trapped in their present struggle. The barrier of the lack of documents on one side, and the danger of returning to Afghanistan on the other, kept them from imagining a return or a future home in Belgium. Additionally, because no private space was available to them, the men were forced to constantly reappropriate the public space, in the way described by Becerra. While this allows them to create home connections in Brussels and feel a sense of home, it is tenuous, unsure, and easily undone, the same as their ability to remain in Belgium.

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