

February
2024

GENERATIVE NARRATIVE WORKSHOP

SOLROUTES

Squatting, Solidarity and the Right to the city

I. Oubad

Funded by the European Union (ERC, SOLROUTES, 101053836). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

First node: Brussels

Generative Narrative Workshop: Squatting, Solidarity and the Right to the city.

Generating Narratives in the workshop and beyond: adapting to mistrust and uncertainties, drifting in the city with informants and the artist.

The Generative Narrative Workshop in the Antennae of Brussels was envisioned to involve an artist, a researcher and people directly concerned with realities of autonomous accommodation spaces for undocumented migrants. For the GNW to take place, concerned people are expected to develop a common interest not only with the artist and the researcher but also with the general framework of the project, a project funded by the European research Council.

Despite the researcher having developed interpersonal relationships with individuals involved in contentious and criminalized practices like squatting over a period of two months, there appear to be limitations when trying to transmit these relationships to an artist who is not familiar with the people involved and has only come to Brussels for 6 days of fieldwork.

As the workshop flyer was distributed bearing the tagline 'funded by the European Union' to the four individuals committed to attending, it sparked a range of reservations. Some voiced concern saying "how can the European Union be responsible for my situation, and yet send a workshop to fix it?" Despite our efforts to emphasize that our academic and artistic work operates independently from European institutional agendas and is critical of EU migration policies, some participants opted to withdraw from the workshop.

To mitigate the limitation of mistrust with people bearing experiences relevant to our artistic and research interest, we privilege drifting in different realities not only through observing related situations in action and speaking to people but also circulating in the city of Brussels with two *bearers of experience* who told stories on their experience of the city, their experiences with squats and occupation but also with police violence and expulsions. Drifting with these individuals and passing through spaces of their everyday life have allowed a narration of given situations with multiple voices, gazes and languages (that of the person directly involved, the artist and the researcher).

WORKSHOP DE DESSIN

EXPERIENCE DE DESSIN SUR
L'EXPERIENCE PERSONELLE



7 et 8 FÉVRIER
15-17h

LE FOYER WZW,
Rue des Ateliers 25,
10080 Molenbeek-Saint-Jean

SOLROUTES

Funded by European Union
(ERC, SOULROTÉS)

L'activité est appuier par l'université de Liège

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Fig1. Flyer of the workshop GNW. Distributed to the potential participants.

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The impressions and observed scenes are destined to take shape in the form of **storyboards** and **postcards**, encapsulating the experiences of these individuals as they navigate the city of Brussels throughout their day. As the narrative unfolds during encounters, we arrive later at the moment of the actual GNW workshop, where our initial impressions and envisioned stories awaited further refinement. During the actual workshop, our depictions and imagined stories were not left to wander aimlessly. Instead, they found a compass. *J., a Palestinian newcomer* in the course of asylum procedures and *A., a newly arrived squatter* in Brussels who shared similar lived experiences became our guide, directing our imagery towards the intricacies of factual occurrences and the underlying structural configurations that gave rise to them. The fusion of artistic vision and firsthand insight promised to breathe life into a narrative that resonated with the authenticity of lived experiences. This implies that our GNW experience extended beyond the confines of the workshop itself. It wasn't tethered to a singular moment but rather unbounded, circulating around and intertwining with various situated moments. The essence of our GNW transcended the workshop's spatial and temporal boundaries, weaving itself into different episodes of the fabric of unfolding experiences.

Episode 1: Immersion in anti-expulsion manifestation of undocumented women and their children

The encounter between the researcher and the artist commenced amidst a poignant manifestation orchestrated by the Committee of Undocumented Women. Their collective aim was to resist the forceful expulsion from an occupied hotel, an order issued by the Justice of the Peace in Brussels during the unforgiving cold of February. The perceived unjust order sparked mobilizations from various collectives and citizens' support in solidarity with the undocumented women and their children. This moment unfolded as a vivid scene, with occupiers, citizens' support, and police entangled in the complex dance of solidarity and the looming threat of expulsion. The researcher and the artist were intricately entwined in the unfolding events. Grasping impressions of the scene, the artist captured the palpable impressions, echoing chants, meaningful discourses and the nuanced conversation between the police and the solidarity actors. This experience became the foundation for the artist's creative endeavors. It will unfold on a *postcard* and vivid **storyboards**. These artistic expressions, soon to be shared with those who were present. These *artistic representations were generated within the situation* and aim to illustrate not only the struggle for housing faced by illegalized individuals but also to crystallize the spirit of solidarity that enveloped the moment.



Fig 2. Citizens' support blocking police from entering the hotel and enacting expulsion.

Episode 2: Drifting in the Maximilian park, shadows of eviction

In the heart of the Maximilian park, the artist and researcher embarked on two visits, exploring a space marked by the ebb and flow of lives, disrupted by multiple police evictions. This park used to accommodate hundreds of illegalized migrants and people in the course of their asylum procedures. After the major eviction in 2021, police only 'tolerated' few people, dispersed in the bush and under the trees.

As we entered the park, the remnants of its occupants were subtly present. Faint traces lingered, testament to a community that still considered this patch of unsheltered greenery their main place in the city, a place for rest and sustenance... often policed and controlled, if not constantly evicted. The police held a particular concern: the park must maintain an air of 'propriety' throughout the day, seamlessly blending into the aesthetic of a hyper-administrative and institutional neighborhood. Gazing to the sky is often constrained by the imposing presence of the European Commission headquarters and major corporations. The authorities were resolute in ensuring that the park adhered to a standard befitting its 'prestigious' surroundings.



Fig 3. Remnants of people's belongings left in Maximilian Park.

In that cold morning as we arrived at the park, the park became a storyteller, traces of those who had sought refuge under its trees overnight have conveyed the people forced to morph into transient shadows as dawn broke. Force to leave the park upon the morning. For what? To keep the park a fitting piece within an administrative décor? The people we noticed were not visitors

like us, they were compelled to become transient into the city. With the new day, their quest unfolded like a circuit. With no fixed abode, no fixed place of dwelling, from the park, they navigated to the Humanitarian Hub, a place where sustenance in the form of food, clothing and medical checks awaited. Then, an exhausting pilgrimage to the Petit Chateau followed, a site where updates on their asylum requests informed. The day's itinerary continued with a circuit around Gare Noord, a perpetual search for opportunities, events, or favorable situations. Surrounding of Gare Noord encompasses street-based economies, such as sidewalk sex work, sex-shop-window with female body presentation, substance transaction. In this urban ballet, transition was the name of the game, a daily movement from one place to another, from the sheltering branches of the park to the crucial checkpoint that offered sustenance and hope. The rhythm of their existence echoed places they passed by and purposeful wanderings as they navigated the cityscape, persisting until the next sunrise.



Fig 4: remnants of people sleeping under the train-bridge in Gare Nord

These impressions and observed situations will form **storyboards on the experience of these people throughout their dispersed circulation**. Be that as it may, later during the actual workshop of the GWN our impressions and envisioned story to be illustrated by the artist were shared with a witness of similar experience to guide and direct our imagery towards factual occurrences and structural configurations producing them.

Episode 3: Drifting with A., squatting the colonial legacy and autonomy of action

The following day, A., a Moroccan friend of the researcher, eagerly joined the promenade through the heart of Brussels, becoming the protagonist of our urban exploration. A., is an experienced squatter who moved from Lille, France to Brussels. He had a fair experience of squatting empty buildings. As we strolled, A., guided us to two formerly vibrant squats, unraveling tales of his experiences within their walls. Amid the narratives, A., unveiled their confrontation with the police, sharing insights into the strategies and tactics used to demonstrate their prolonged occupancy and avoid potential expulsion. He also illuminated ways they negotiated with owners and authorities and manners to play on this partition. Interestingly, A., will tell us stories showing their ability as Moroccans, some of them are also undocumented and yet they sustain themselves in squats for important periods, independently, without requiring the support of Belgian citizens or 'white' collectives as A., refers to this form of support to squatters.

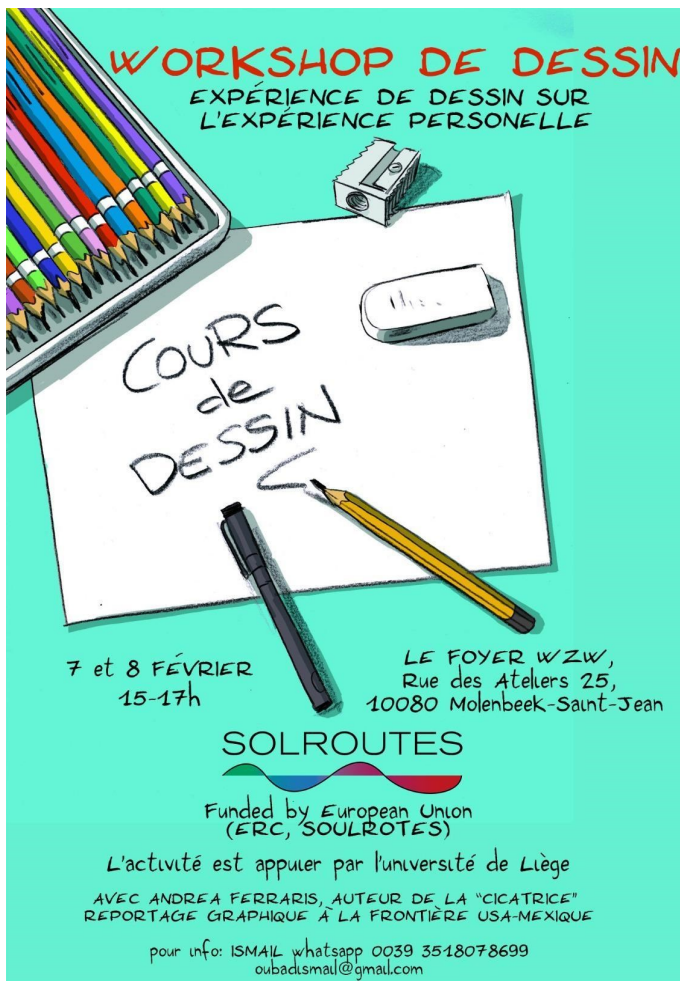
A., will go further to unveil the story of a recently squatted villa, a unique piece of Brussel's heritage tied to a renowned architect of Tropical Modernism. To A. this architectural marvel held a deeper narrative) a colonial legacy. He explained that Tropical Modernism had its roots in the colonial powers in West Africa, embodying a form of colonial imposition in 'British' West Africa.

In A's eyes, squatting this villa was not merely an act of claiming space; it was a profound statement of «colonizing back the colonizer » and « bringing back justice to our ancestors». To him it was about seizing control of spaces of power and transforming them into realms of their own. As we listened to A's account, some cityscapes became a canvas, each story brought about a narrative of resistance and reclamation of their right to space of colonial legacies.



Fig 5. the demolished building they used to squat before eviction. A tag on the wall for Omar Radi, journalist and political detainee in Morocco.

The Workshop: « the experience of drawing on the personal experience » animated by A. Ferraris and I. Oubad



Flyer of the workshop with A. Ferraris

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Confronted with this complex situation in regards to people's privacy, their trust in a project funded by the European research Council and the project-associated audit constraints requiring the researcher to fulfill a specific set of activities, a nuanced scenario unfolded. However, amidst these challenges, a mutual understanding emerged. The consensus was that the workshop would refrain from delving into what participants deemed sensitive topics and criminalized occurrence.

It would shift into a drawing workshop, where the artist would transmit illustration techniques. The participants, in turn, retained the autonomy to choose what they wished to draw and discuss.

Profile of the participant:

Confronted with this complex situation, we eventually connected with J., a Palestinian newcomer who undertook the underground routes from Gaza to Egypt, then flew from Egypt to Turkey, only to face multiple failed attempts to cross into Greece through the Sea. Following his arrival in Greece and subsequent acquisition of international protection, he traveled to Brussels, seeking protection once again in Belgium. J. disposes of a direct experience of dwelling, followed by a period in an occupied squat supported by citizens' urban movement collectives. Currently, he resides in a hotel managed by an NGO initially designated for Ukrainians but has since extended its reception to Palestinians as well. Entry into this facility hinges on deservingness, as communicated by FedAsile.

Unfolding of the workshop:

For the workshop we expected both J., (Palestinian newcomer in the quest for asylum) and A., (Moroccan newly arriving in Brussels with a fine experience on squatting building). At the end it was only J., who showed up to the workshop.

It's important to note that J. primarily communicates in Arabic with limited proficiency in English, whereas the artist is fluent in Italian with limited proficiency in French. Driven by the commitment to craft an ethnographic account and delve into research-related concerns, I had to immerse myself in real-time interpretation, ensuring communication between J. and the artist.

As we started the workshop, the artist asked that we can draw what suits us. J., would propose to draw the Toyota Tundra 2014. J. explained to us that this car is often used by Palestinian resistance. It symbolizes a leverage of resistance to the Israeli occupation. As we engaged in drawing it, the artist crafted a sketch, pleasing to J.,

Following that. J., will engage in telling about his aspirations from migrants. Therefore, we proceeded to depict a significant moment in J.'s life—the initial squat where he resided. He shared narratives of his experiences with solidarity collectives, detailing both the support they provided and the compelling reasons that necessitated their departure from that particular squat.

Afterwards, we will introduce our impression and artistic imagery we have developed throughout our drifting in Brussels. J., will tell us his experience with a similar situation in Brussels. Following the story proposed by A. Ferraris, J. would add « *the story must not draw the migrant as only a victim. You have to tell me in the story how the state is responsible for that situation* ». J., engaged with the story we proposed for the storyboards. He would direct your imagined tales. He directed our artistic and ethnographic imageries not only towards the nuanced details of real occurrences but also revendication and claims he seeks from the story we are trying to tell based on his experience and that of people like him. This fusion of artistic creativity, firsthand insight and ethnographic reflexivity promised to infuse vitality into a narrative resonating with the authenticity of lived experiences and claims.



Fig 6. the car with J., in it as illustrated by the artist



Fig 7. A. Ferraris and J., illustrating the squat where J., used to live.



Fig 8. the facade of the squat with J., knocking on its door upon arrival

The squat remains active, and after the workshop, J. proposed that we visit it to hang the drawing on the wall. This held significance for him, a way to leave his mark in a place where he had passed through and lived. It also served as a means to convey the potential artist's contribution to the residents of the squat and their reality. Accompanied by the artist we went there, with drawing in J., hand, and were welcomed at the door by one of the citizens' support. However, as we tried to enter, we faced a hurdle. The person at the door explained, "I cannot allow you to enter; this is a living space. Only residents are allowed in." Surprisingly, even J., who had previously lived there, was denied entry. Despite this, we left the drawing, hopeful that it would find its place on the wall, preserving traces of J.'s presence in that lived space.

In this terms we have concluded the actual day of the workshop. With many insights and tales from J., on his personal experience but also with suggestions to align our artistic and ethnographic portrayals with the demands and advocacies of those we encountered. It was a day filled not only with narratives from those who willingly shared their stories but also with guidance on capturing the authentic essence of individuals navigating similar situations.

