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Enacting Citizenship in an Urban Borderland: the Case of Maximilian Park in Brussels

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between asylum seekers and Maximilian Park, a contested site in Brussels in terms of unresolved conflicts around migration, refugees and borders. By tracing the park's evolution as part of the North Quarter, and understanding the various transient trajectories that characterize this urban area, the paper will probe into the interaction between "full" and "temporary" citizens. Through spatial synthesis and mapping, the paper will first unpack the urban history of the North Quarter as part of the arrival infrastructure of the European capital. The connections between groups with varying degrees of vulnerability who claim spaces with more or less legitimacy will be explored through two main sources complementing ethnographic analysis. Firstly, narratives developed by the local press will be used as a means to unfold the main perspectives when dealing with the complex topic of migration and public space; secondly, the on-line organization of a key civil society organization active in the support of migrants will be interrogated. Building on the notion of "non-citizen citizenship" the authors will conclude by critically reflecting on what form the extension of rights could take to help craft a revised form of citizenship based on the politics of presence in the city.

KEYWORDS

Urban Borderland; Non-citizen Citizenship; Maximilian Park

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Nation-based notions of citizenship are increasingly confronted with the contemporary condition of mobile inhabitants in our cosmopolitan era. This tension has intensified in recent years in the context of asylum, challenging the sovereignty of states, their control of borders and their management of migration. In Europe, the unrecognized presence of displaced people defies state control. Their mobility manifests itself in public space, where they claim access to the urban sphere appropriating public amenities and infrastructure to their needs. In Brussels this condition has played out in the North Quarter. Over time, this area has been characterized by infrastructural accumulation, migration, social polarization, and aborted visions, leaving it with a character so ambivalent that it has presented itself as a place of welcome, hosting many asylum seekers moving through Europe during the recent migration wave. This group, the “non-citizens” referred to in this article, have taken shelter in Maximilian Park, as well as in the busiest station in the city, the North Station.

This contribution highlights the processes in which a specific group of non-citizens enact themselves as citizens by virtue of material presence and public space appropriation, with the help of recognized citizens performing acts (facilitated through an online platform) that challenge static notions of citizenship. It will touch upon the concepts of “non-citizen citizenship” and “acts of citizenship” as they relate to the specific urban context, in attempt to answer the question: is citizenship generated by administrative status or by material presence and participation in the urban realm?

The article first begins by describing the urban history that has led the North Quarter to take on its current spatial condition. It further highlights the discourse covering the topic of non-citizens in the area by analyzing postings of a local Brussels-based multimedia outlet, *BRUZZ*, known for its socio-cultural reporting approach. It then moves on to illustrate how a citizen group, Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés¹ (PCSR), have mobilized both virtual and physical public space, using Facebook to extend support to non-citizens. PCSR has been selected as a case of study due to its prominent position defending the claims of the non-citizen group inhabiting the public space explored. The research presented has used multiple approaches, from direct observation to media analysis, to digital (social media) ethnography. These methods have been integrated to show how public space can be used as a means to enact urban citizenship.

1. Citizen's Platform for Support of Refugees. Their official website is <http://www.bxlrefugees.be/en/>.

Enacting citizens, non-citizens, and public space

Several authors have written about the manifestation of Maximilian Park as a camp site for asylum seekers mainly from Syria² during the 2015 “crisis”.³ This “crisis” consolidated the North Quarter as a waiting ground for non-citizens and a space for citizens to creatively engage in social and political actions.⁴ Specifically, Maximilian Park and the North Station have become political sites that fall out of the control of the nation-state, and in which organizations such as PCSR, have emerged and operate beyond and despite the state, putting pressure on state institutions and challenging the notion of border-based citizenship and access to rights.⁵

We aim to move beyond the momentum generated by the “crisis” and engage in the contemporary condition of Maximilian Park by building on the concept of “non-citizen citizenship.” This contribution will therefore focus on the challenge that liminal and hard-to-govern subjects pose to citizenship, as an analytical strategy to redefine it in a dynamic way.⁶ Scholarship on “non-citizen citizenship” has challenged the way citizenship is tied to the idea of the nation-state. According to Stevenson, cultural versions of citizenship “need to ask who is silenced, marginalized, stereotyped and rendered invisible.”⁷ This form of framing citizenship is concerned with “who needs to be visible, to be heard, and to belong.”⁸ Stevenson insists that “ideas of cultural citizenship need to be able to define new forms of ‘inclusive’ public space... so that ‘minorities’ are able to make themselves and their social struggles visible and open the possibility of dialogic engagement, while offering the possibility of deconstructing normalizing assumptions.”⁹ In light of such emphasis on minorities, we follow Swerts’ indication that undocumented migrants, as persons residing in a country in which they have no legal permission to be present, are an extreme case of non-citizens, and as such particularly relevant to understand how citizenship is being transformed from below. In this paper, this social condition is analyzed in Maximilian Park.

2. Anika Depraetere and Stijn Oosterlynck, “I Finally Found My Place’: a Political Ethnography of the Maximiliaan Refugee Camp in Brussels,” *Citizenship Studies* 21, no. 6 (2017): 693-709; Dirk Lafaut and Gily Coene, “Let Them In! Humanitarian Work as Political Activism? The Case of the Maximiliaan Refugee Camp in Brussels,” *Journal of Migrant & Refugee Studies* (March 2018).

3. Several authors have shown that what came to be called as the 2015 “refugee crisis” in the EU was based on partial and decontextualized use of figures, usually presented in their absolute rather than relative value. It is widely recognized that the highest amount of forcibly displaced are not in Europe. See, for example: Migreurop, *Atlas des Migrants en Europe* (Paris: Arman Colin, 2017): 30-31.

4. Engin F. Isin, “Theorizing Acts of Citizenship,” in *Acts of Citizenship*, eds Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15-43.

5. Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, “Cosmopolitan Citizenship,” in *Citizenship & Identity* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1999): 91.

6. Thomas Swerts, “Non-citizen citizenship in Canada and the United States,” in *Routledge Handbook of Global Citizenship Studies*, ed. by Engin F. Isin and Peter Nyers (London: Routledge, 2014): 297.

7. Nick Stevenson, “Cultural Citizenship in the ‘Cultural Society’: A Cosmopolitan Approach,” *Citizenship Studies* 7, no. 3 (2003): 336.

8. Renato Rosaldo, “Cultural Citizenship, Inequality and Multiculturalism,” in *Race, Identity and Citizenship*, ed by R. D. Torres et al. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999), 260.

9. Nick Stevenson, “Cultural Citizenship,” 333.

Maximilian Park and its surroundings have been significantly re-signified by the multiplicity of practices performed by non-citizens and their many related networks. By claiming these spaces and appropriating them for their use, non-citizens operate outside the normative sphere of what their illegal status allows, acting both as citizens and agents of contestation.¹⁰ In that sense a double enactment manifests itself in this condition, an enactment of the citizen and that of the non-citizen, both of which could not happen in the same way without the enactment of Maximilian Park itself. The public park has shown its full capacity in this sense: it is not only a neutral, open space concerned with the intermixing of various groups, but it becomes a space entangled with the cosmopolitan posture of PCSR and the non-citizens it supports, who are "not only concerned with the ethical relations between self and the other, but seek an institutional and political grounding in the context of shared global problems."¹¹ The contemporary cosmopolitan condition, in which the movement of people and information across borders is amplified, becomes an instrument for such enactment and contestation, and through which new spaces are defined so that they are "neither describable nor governable from the perspective of the fixed and self-contained boundaries of the nation-state."¹² This not only holds true for social media outlets, but also in physical public spaces such as Maximilian Park. Furthermore, this cosmopolitan condition challenges a "deep moral contradiction at the heart of the modern state" shedding light on its incompleteness and the ethical ambitions that still lack at the institutional level."¹³

This takes us to a last point worth noting in the context of this contribution, which concerns the forms of action and mobilization of migrants. As has been noted, these cannot resemble that of collective political subjects,¹⁴ because they do not form classical social movements, but instead have to operate differently because of their unrecognized status. As such, this paper sets in conversation the notion of "non-citizen citizenship" with the contributions made by scholars on "autonomous migration," to focus on mobility's social aspects rather than on the ruptures performed by protest marches, occupations and other comparable expressions relying on the self-organization of undocumented migrants and on the advocacy efforts of human rights activists.

10. Swerts, "Non-citizen citizenship," 297.

11. Stevenson, "Cultural Citizenship," 332.

12. Isin and Wood, "Cosmopolitan Citizenship," 93.

13. Andrew Linklater, "Cosmopolitan citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 2, no. 1 (1998): 24.

14. Dimitris Papadopoulos and Vassilis S. Tsianos, "After Citizenship: Autonomy of Migration, Organisational Ontology and Mobile Commons," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no. 2 (2013): 187.

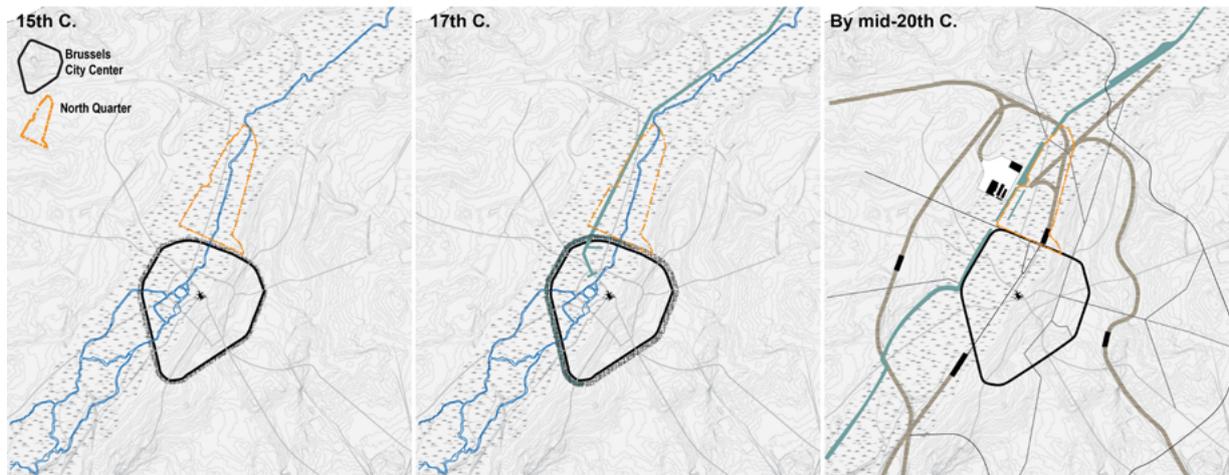


FIG. 1 Infrastructural sequencing in Brussels. (1a) Brussels was a walled city in the valley of the Zenne River. (1b) A canal system parallel to the Zenne River supported economic activity. (1c) By the 20th Century the Zenne river was completely covered and the floodplain occupied by rail and road infrastructure. Maps by Racha Daher, based on historic maps by the Cartographic Military Institute.

The North Quarter, Maximilian Park and the North Station

The North Quarter's urban history has much to do with its position as a place of arrival. Brussels developed where the navigability of the Zenne River ended, as its watershed was composed of unsuitable swampy land. As the city grew, the river became insufficient for the economic purposes of the time, following the technological innovation of transport modes. The floodplain was continuously reshuffled by infrastructural upgrades and shifts: first, river transport was transferred to a canal; then, the canal was extended, to be substituted by railways, railyards and train stations; the rail system was in turn challenged by a widened sea channel, deep sea docks, quays, and warehouses; the railways were electrified; and finally, the subsequent prominence of cars and trucks turned boulevards into urban motorways with viaducts further expanding the city. Throughout this process of infrastructural sequencing, all competing in function and sharing the North-South Zenne watershed, the insalubrious river was covered and a major watermark erased [Fig. 1].

The North Quarter, a fin-shaped territory just north of the pentagon,¹⁵ lies at the confluence where this infrastructural sequencing and its remnants co-exist. Throughout the last century, the quarter has featured disease, disrepair, decay, and societal destitution. The area is also marked by the incompleteness of projects that never came to fruition. The most prominent vision took place in the end of the 1960s, when 53 hectares of urban fabric were razed to make way for economic and commercial development in the name of progress and prosperity. Squeezed between the canal and the rail line, and marked by the World Trade Center, the "Manhattan

15. The historic-walled city of Brussels formed the shape of a pentagon in plan. While the walls are gone today, the morphology of the pentagon remains through a ring road encircling what is now the city's centre.

Plan” intended to create a world-class economic hub and attract international businesses. The project never reached the overestimated potential it aimed for and it was never completed. Instead, it created a quarter full of vast land and vacant buildings. The razing of the old fabric resulted in an erasure of the layers that formed the area’s identity over time, but also in the mass expulsion of local residents. Following this displacement, the Manhattan Plan was aborted, leaving the wiped-out fabric empty for many years. Alternative housing was provided to only a small portion of displaced residents, and “compensations”¹⁶ ended up materializing in the form of undefined and fragmented patches of green area all labeled as Maximilian Park.

The area known as Maximilian Park today is composed of vegetated surfaces, playing areas, shaded walks and a didactic farm. Before the park’s establishment, the area was occupied by an international passenger heliport inaugurated in 1953 to accommodate intensified service for the 1958 World Exposition. The heliport was closed eight years later, remaining abandoned until the Manhattan Plan’s troubled execution. The plan’s partial implementation created a commercial district, and mono-functional office towers today cast their shadows on an area where tens of thousands of synchronized employees march at peak hours through the otherwise desolate Simon Bolivar Boulevard that marks the entrance of the North Station. They head forth to catch one of the many trains passing through the most active station of the Brussels Capital Region. Their daily procession to and from the station proceeds largely uninterrupted, and few existing food joints are active at lunch break and no further, since after-work gatherings are seldom amongst a largely commuting population.

The aborted plan also produced a distinctive and omnipresent vastness, creating the conditions for harboring several groups with weak legitimacy by implicitly offering its oversized infrastructure to homeless people, asylum seekers and “transit” migrants.¹⁷ The quarter today is especially entangled with migration, and the park has unconditionally offered the right to its usage, along with a strong co-dependence on the nearby North Station’s facilities. The station is a main hub for multi-modal transport combining city metro, national rail, and international bus lines. It has a history of demolition and construction closely related to that of the long gone Allée Verte Station constructed in 1835, and whose site today partially coincides with that of Maximilian Park. The Allée Verte Station was the earliest passenger rail in Brussels and the first to connect to other European cities.

16. For a detailed chronicle of the North Quarter’s transformation, see Nicole Purnôde and Albert Martens, *Renovation du quartier de la gare du Nord dans la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale* (Brussels: Brussels Region, 2010).

17. In Belgium today, “transit-migrants” or “transmigrants” are terms being used for migrants that postpone their asylum application to their intended place of arrival as a consequence of the Dublin Agreement. For the large majority the UK appears as an important destination. Due to its negative connotations and high politicization, the authors will refrain from using this term and employ the more general ‘migrant’. For a critical discussion see Franck Düvell, “Transit migration: A blurred and politicized concept,” *Population, Space and Place* 18, no.4 (2010): 415-27.

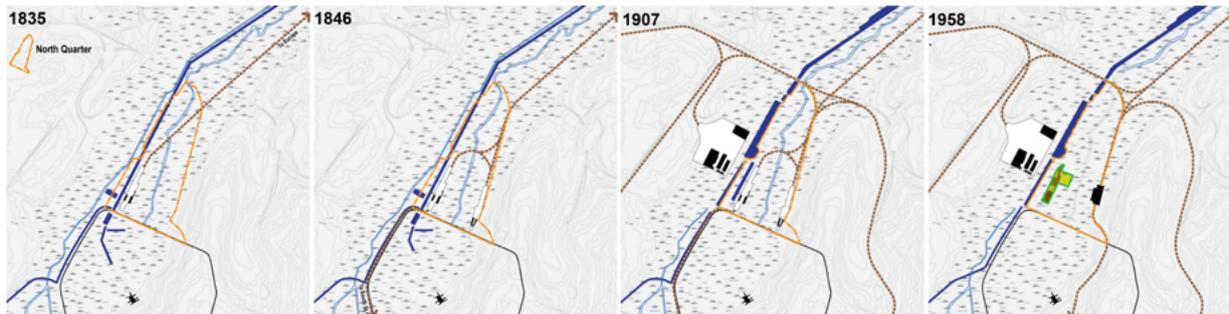


FIG. 2

The North Station has a history of relocation linked with the Maximilian Park site, the former site of the Allee Verte Station. (1a) Allee Verte Station: the first station on the passenger rail connecting Brussels to Europe is constructed. (1b) The first North Station is constructed to increase the passenger capacity not fulfilled by Allee Verte, which soon became exclusively used for freight. (1c) Tour et Taxis becomes the major freight terminal, diminishing the role of the Allee Verte. The canal is widened, the industrial port expanded and the basin constructed. (1d) The new North Station is constructed to increase passenger capacity. The first North Station is gone and the river is covered. The Allee Verte and the basin are replaced by a heliport, where Maximilian Park is today located. Maps by Racha Daher, based on historic maps of by the Cartographic Military Institute.

As the need for more capacity arose, the North Station opened a few blocks away, resulting in the use of the Allée Verte exclusively for freight transport which in turn, further shifted west as a new larger terminal, Tour et Taxis, opened at the turn of the 20th century, accompanying canal widening and the establishment of a port. By mid-century, the Allée Verte made way for the aforementioned heliport. As the North Station became saturated, it was demolished and a larger building was constructed a few blocks north, further adding the role of passage and multi-modality. The new North Station was part of the “Jonction Nord-Midi” plan, which created direct rail connection through the old city, linking the North and South stations of Brussels. It is this North Station building of 1952 that stands today to provide its infrastructure to the temporary migrants of the North Quarter [Fig. 2].

Upon exiting the station into Simon Bolivar, two blocks down, one turns a corner around one of the World Trade Center¹⁸ towers, where metal barriers make the sidewalk almost impracticable. They are placed in correspondence with the secondary entrance to the Immigration Office, where applicants have to queue to file for asylum. The paving shows signs of lengthy waiting and is constellated with disparate materials for overnight shelter, from cardboard boxes and blankets to leftover meal packaging. On the other side of the street lies the most defined patch of the Maximilian Park, making up a full block as one of the main public spaces of the North Quarter of Brussels. At around 7 pm, the park is at its busiest. A long line forms for the provision of food. A few women can be spotted amidst a definite majority of young men from sub-Saharan Africa—if one is to judge from the languages spoken, from Tigrinya to Zande.

A walk through the park illuminates how its infrastructure is being used at

18. The World Trade Center has recently been re-baptized, World Transformation Center, by the creative community occupying part of the vacant skyscrapers.

its utmost by the same demographic waiting in line, from teams playing in the football field to a smaller group using the public water fountain to wash themselves and their belongings. The gentle slopes at the opposite end of the food distribution point host young men who rest in the shade surrounded by empty containers of various kinds: from Styrofoam hamburger boxes to sandwich paper bags and a wide array of take-away cups and paper towels. Waiting seems to be a major activity in the park: for access to drinking and bathing water, for food delivery, for rides to safe havens across Belgium or to the Porte d'Ulysses, the newly re-opened accommodation shelter¹⁹ where 300 overnight stays are catered for by volunteers of the citizen-led PCSR.

Investigating cultural discourse and mobile commons

Foregrounding autonomy in migration means to acknowledge and build on the capacity of migration to develop its own logic, made obvious by the "multiplicity of actors who install relations of justice on the ground in the midst of [...] sovereign control."²⁰ Such actors contribute to the construction of "mobile commons" that in turn contribute to "creating conditions of thick everyday performative and practical justice so that everyday mobility, clandestine or open, becomes possible."²¹ Mobile commons constitute the infrastructure that un-recognized citizens navigate and utilize to access information and build the networks they need to get by. The effective reservoir put in place by this multi-faceted community, involving the politics and infrastructure of care, as well as the invisible knowledge of technological connectivity (to name some of the more central components of such commons) will be highlighted in the next two sections. These will delve into the analysis of cultural discourse on the topic through media coverage by BRUZZ, as well as in the virtual realm of the activist citizens of PCSR operating on Facebook.

Views from BRUZZ on Maximilian Park

As the previous section has highlighted, the North Quarter's development was contentious because of the district's specific urban history and socio-economic evolution. This section focuses on how the park became a visible manifestation of the struggles between solidarity movements, migrant agency, and governmental action, and how this was reported on

19. The Porte d'Ulysses reception center was part of an agreement PCSR negotiated with the Mayor of the City of Brussels to utilize a vacant office building. It was initially opened for a few months, then closed and is now re-open.

20. Papadopoulous and Tsianos, "After citizenship," 192.

21. Ibid.

by the local media *BRUZZ*²². This choice rests on the fact that *BRUZZ* is an important Brussels-based, trilingual paper with an emphasis on culture. It focuses exclusively on events taking place in Brussels itself, and is thus distinct from national headlines that have been analyzed in prior studies on migration. As the official website of the Brussels-Capital Region states, “*BRUZZ* is the reference for everything that is happening in Brussels.”²³

Due to the proximity of Maximilian Park to the Immigration Office, various spontaneous encampments were installed in this area between 2000 and 2013, usually as a consequence of chronically unresolved difficulties around migrants and bordering policies. In the course of the so-called “refugee crisis,” an encampment was formed again, largely due to the decision to limit the number of applications that could be processed daily.²⁴ Asylum seekers waited in the park, even overnight, and subsequently attracted support to make their waiting dignified. This situation resonated with a comparable surge of solidarity by private citizens on the occasion of asylum seekers from war-torn Syria reaching Europe.

In late 2015, *BRUZZ* provided consistent coverage of the park’s transformation and the park-neighborhood relationships when migration patterns were subject to change in the aftermath of the “crisis”. The North Quarter and Maximilian Park were not only influenced by the numbers of Syrian asylum seekers, but also by how other migratory routes passed by Brussels after the closure of the Calais “Jungle” in October 2016. Prior to 2015, among other topics treated under the rubric of *samenleving*,²⁵ *BRUZZ* had reported protests by the Front des Migrants, a network of asylum seekers whose applications had been refused but who remained in Belgium nonetheless. Its earliest online post about the park, however, dates back to 2005, and concerned the proposal to install an open air swimming pool.²⁶ Five years later, reporters followed forty undocumented migrants, “victims of a failing asylum policy,” who camped in the park until they were relocated to a former office building.²⁷ In 2011, refused asylum seekers were expelled from overcrowded reception centers, and 150 of them ended up camping in the Maximilian Park, to be forcibly removed after a few

22. *BRUZZ* was born in 2016 from the merger of different channels (FM Brussel, TV Brussel, Brussel Deze Week, Agenda and brusselnieuws.be) and is the media brand of the vzw Vlaams-Brusselse Media. It offers news online, on radio, on TV and on print with entries in Dutch, English and French. Two thirds of its funding is public, and 20,000 out of the 62,000 issued copies are distributed freely in more than 700 distribution points across Brussels. More at www.bruzz.be.

23. “The media in Brussels,” *be.brussels*, <https://be.brussels/culture-tourism-leisure/media>, accessed on December 17, 2018.

24. In August 2015, Immigration Office stated that no more than 250 applications a day could be processed. Due to an administrative safety condition, this number was lowered to 150 and later to 60.

25. Literally translated as “living together”, the term is commonly employed in Dutch to mean “society”.

26. Steven van Garsse, “Openluchtzwembad in Maximiliaanpark,” *BRUZZ* 15 July 2005. Retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/politiek/openluchtzwembad-maximiliaanpark-2005-07-15> on 27 July 2018.

27. “Asielzoekers Maximiliaanpark in Jetse loods”, 12 September 2010. Retrieved at [<https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/asielzoekers-maximiliaanpark-jetse-loods-2010-09-12>] on 27 July 2018.

weeks.²⁸ Yet, most of *BRUZZ*'s pieces focus on the month-long existence of the Maximilian camp that hosted over 5000 asylum seekers thanks to 9000 estimated days of voluntary work.

At the time of the 2015 camp, intense public discussion was generated "by creating links between different marginalized groups and by putting 'outsiders' at the center of the debate."²⁹ *BRUZZ* entries concerning this debate reflect frictions between various actors dealing with migration. Besides covering the different views of the federal government, the Brussels Capital-Region, the City of Brussels and the multiple caretakers involved, the local media outlet followed the development of volunteer response. Once the camp had completed its month-long existence, *BRUZZ* published an account of its last 24 hours³⁰ and a yearly overview that questioned the political polarization between Secretary of State for Asylum and Migration and the refugee organizations like PCSR.³¹

In contrast with other organizations, PCSR had accepted the camp to be vacated, on the condition that the Federal Government would take the responsibility for providing longer-term infrastructure for sheltering the migrants. Other actors, such as many undocumented migrant networks operating in Brussels refused to leave the camp.³² Following the eviction, they installed a protest camp along the Willebroeck dock where assistance was still available to those in need, but they were ultimately arrested.³³ These various "acts of citizenship" relied both on the advocacy efforts of human rights activists and on the self-organization of undocumented migrants.³⁴ As expressions of "non-citizen citizenship," they are part of "the plethora of political practices through which non-citizens make claims to belonging, inclusion and recognition in their societies of residence."³⁵

By early October 2015, *BRUZZ* reports how Maximilian Park is reinstated as a public space for the neighborhood. A first initiative concerns an outdoor work-out area installed after a public call for "cool initiatives that could improve life in the city."³⁶ The artistic project titled "Nature-Art-Cohesion,"

28. "Opnieuw kamperende asielzoekers in het Maximiliaanpark," 10 May 2011. Retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/opnieuw-kamperende-asielzoekers-het-maximiliaanpark-2011-05-10> on 27 July 2018.

29. Lafaut and Coene, "Humanitarian Work," 6.

30. Jean-Marie Binst, "Even het hart van Europa: de laatste 24 uur in het Maximiliaanpark," *BRUZZ*, 08 October 2018, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/even-het-hart-van-europa-de-laatste-24-uur-het-maximiliaanpark-2015-10-08> on 29 July 2018.

31. Christophe Degreef, "Jaaroverzicht: Tentenkamp Maximiliaanpark wordt stad," *BRUZZ*, 06 January 2016, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/jaaroverzicht-tentenkamp-maximiliaanpark-wordt-stad-2016-01-06> on 29 July 2018.

32. Lafaut and Coene mention that estimates by relief workers range between 60,000 to 80,000 undocumented migrants, many of which with an Arabic ethnic background. Lafaut and Coene, "Humanitarian Work," 6.

33. "Symbolisch tentenkamp Willebroekkaai opgedoekt," *BRUZZ*, 05 October 2015, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/symbolisch-tentenkamp-willebroekkaai-opgedoekt-2015-10-05> on 29 July 2018.

34. Isin, "Theorizing acts of citizenship," 18.

35. Swerts, "Non-citizen citizenship," 299.

36. "Street work-out in Maximiliaanpark," *BRUZZ*, 19 April 2016, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/street-work-out-maximiliaanpark-2016-04-19> on 30 July 2018.

expected to improve the “living together” of social associations, companies and artists in the area, and was later exhibited in Maximilian Park.³⁷ In early October 2016, however, the main focus changes again, aligned with the increased numbers of migrants using the park’s infrastructure. Journalists reported that between 20 and 40 migrants had been sleeping in the park since the end of June 2016.³⁸ By the end of the year, their number had risen to 75, 60 of which from Sudan.³⁹ As a consequence of the park’s use as a site to rest, camp, and benefit from basic assistance near a major transport hub, police raids became commonplace. Their increased frequency, *BRUZZ* reports, is due to “the persistent complaints from local residents about heavy nuisance. Every night people sleep on the street, the bushes serve as a toilet.”⁴⁰ The presence of asylum seekers sparks objections from longer-term residents of the North Quarter, including shopkeepers of migrant origin along the nearby Brabantstraat.⁴¹

The intensification of police activity coincides with an increase in brutality, as documented by several online articles on *BRUZZ*. This escalation triggered the sympathy towards the asylum seekers by North Quarter residents who witnessed the ill-treatment, balancing those complaints that had generated police intervention in the first place. Likewise, artistic practice expressed solidarity by means of an installation in the park.⁴²

The period ranging from June 2017 until the re-opening of the Porte d’Ulysses a year later is particularly revealing of how Maximilian Park became the central stage for embodied claims between policing actions, vulnerable claimants and caretakers of a different demographic than the asylum seekers from war-torn Syria.⁴³ The change in origin of asylum seekers from mainly Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans to Eritrean and Sudanese men aspiring to reach the UK, meant that the contested term “transit migrant” became widespread in describing displaced people using the park’s infrastructure and the related solidarity networks. Articles in *BRUZZ* adhere to this vocabulary, and alternate accounts of police identity controls, arrests, and confiscations of migrants’ personal belongings. Confrontations

37. “Ecologische kunst om iedereen in Noordwijk te verenigen,” *BRUZZ*, 28 May 2016 retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/ecologische-kunst-om-iedereen-noordwijk-te-verenigen-2016-05-28> on 30 July 2018.

38. Sam De Ryck, “Opnieuw dertigtal overnachters in Maximiliaanpark,” *BRUZZ*, 06 October 2016, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/opnieuw-dertigtal-overnachters-maximiliaanpark-2016-10-06> on 1 August 2018.

39. “Tientallen Soedanezen overnachten in ijskoud Maximiliaanpark,” *BRUZZ*, 1 December 2016, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/tientallen-soedanezen-overnachten-ijskoud-maximiliaanpark-2016-12-01> on 1 August 2018.

40. “Politie voert controles op aan Maximiliaanpark: ‘Vooral signaal geven,’” 12 June 2017. Retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/politie-voert-controles-op-aan-maximiliaanpark-vooral-signaal-geven-2017-06-12> on 2 September 2018.

41. Toon Hendrickx, “Les commerçants rue du Brabant se plaignent des migrants,” 13 April 2018. Retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/fr/videoreeks/donderdag-12-april-2018/video-les-commerçants-rue-du-brabant-se-plaignent-des-migrants> on 2 September 2018.

42. “Des artistes implantent le message ‘Welkom’ au coeur du parc Maximilien à Bruxelles,” 22 September 2017. Retrieved at: <https://www.bruzz.be/fr/des-artistes-implantent-le-message-welkom-au-coeur-du-parc-maximilien-bruxelles-2017-09-22> on 2 September 2018.

43. Lafaut and Coene, “Humanitarian Work,” 9-10.



FIG. 3 A view of Park Maximilian. Photo Stéphanie Marques dos Santos.

between supporting organizations and police intervention significantly transformed the park's physical space. Medecins du Monde (MdM), for instance, increased its medical assistance two-fold, without any influence on repressive police action.⁴⁴ Rather, an opening was provided by the City of Brussels, granting temporary space in the park for medical assistance, in alliance with MdM.⁴⁵ Moreover, volunteers and citizens begin to denounce the inhumane treatment of migrants by means of legal action, and PCSR intensified its lobbying through demonstrations and expanded its protection of migrants by hosting them in private homes. From September to November 2017, 50,000 overnight stays were facilitated by PCSR, while tensions continued between various government levels either in favor of or against the opening of the night shelter in Haren.⁴⁶ As contentions persisted, in the space of a few days PCSR mobilized Maximilian Park again as a space of visible migrant support [Fig. 3]. Firstly, hundreds of tents were installed in the camp to symbolically re-create the Jungle of Calais, to which the spontaneous encampments in the park have been approximated by Theo Francken, the Secretary of State for

44. "Dokters van de Wereld verdubbelt acties Maximiliaanpark," *BRUZZ*, 7 September 2017, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/dokters-van-de-wereld-verdubbelt-acties-maximiliaanpark-2017-09-07> on 4 September 2018.

45. "Stad Brussel geeft Dokters van de Wereld tijdelijk lokaal aan Maximiliaanpark," 15 September 2017, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/stad-brussel-geeft-dokters-van-de-wereld-tijdelijk-lokaal-aan-maximiliaanpark-2017-09> on 8 September 2018.

46. "Burgerplatform verzekert 50.000 overnachtingen voor migranten," 04 January 2018, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/actua/burgerplatform-verzekert-50000-overnachtingen-voor-migranten-2018-01-04> on 9 September 2018.

Asylum and Migration.⁴⁷ Secondly, it launched a human chain of solidarity surrounding the park against the transfer of undocumented migrants to closed asylum centers which, however, did not have significant impact on reducing eviction actions in the park.⁴⁸ The re-opening of the shelter in Haren and the establishment of a humanitarian hub within the North Station itself will confirm PCSR as a key caretaker for migrants in Brussels, awarded in February 2018 with the *Bruxellois de l'Année* prize.⁴⁹

Accounts by *BRUZZ* help to illustrate how Maximilian Park has become a contested public space by providing unconditional provision of infrastructure to both non-citizens and citizens alike. As a vegetated and equipped playing area, it has no physical enclosure in itself, but lies adjacent to the strong institutional border of the Immigration Office. While spatially porous, it nonetheless features the liminality of what Michel Agier has termed “borderland”. In his words, the liminality of a borderland can be felt when “at the moment one arrives at the actual place of the border, one ‘becomes’ a foreigner and even momentarily—but sometimes for longer—without status.”⁵⁰ The park is actually enclosed when it becomes a place of sanctuary for the migrants camping there, either by the protective gesture of human chains, or by a political decision led by the City of Brussels to keep police out of its perimeters. The sanctuary is thus intermittent and supported by different actors in the park, testifying how borders are reinforced to mark the “inside” and the “outside” of a political community and to delineate where citizenship originates as a status and where it is governed.⁵¹

The analysis of local media showed how the same police forces that had assisted citizen-led organizations during the 2015 refugee camp would become antagonists, rather than facilitators, of grassroots action. Similarly, residents of the North Quarter who had initiated complaints against the overwhelming presence of migrants in the park, stepped in against police brutality. While the exceptionality of the 2015 Maximilian refugee camp as a “contested space for citizenship” and a “stage for a different kind of politics to take place” cannot be understated,⁵² the shifting roles of residents, volunteers and police following the camp’s dismantlement are emblematic of the additional challenges that the new migration pattern brings to the fore.

47. “Duizenden mensen trekken op in Human Wave tegen migratiebeleid regering,” 25 February 2018 retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/actua/duizenden-mensen-trekken-op-human-wave-tegen-migratiebeleid-regering-2018-02-25> on 10 September 2018.

48. “Symbolische ‘jungle van Calais’ in Maximiliaanpark,” *BRUZZ*, 21 February 2018, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/symbolische-jungle-van-calais-maximiliaanpark-2018-02-21> on 10 September 2018.

49. “Vluchtelingenplatform is ‘Bruxellois de l’année,” *BRUZZ*, 28 February 2018, retrieved at <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/vluchtelingenplatform-bruxellois-de-lannee-2018-02-28> on 11 September 2018.

50. Michel Agier, *Borderlands: Towards an Anthropology of the Cosmopolitan Condition* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016): 35.

51. Linda Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006): 126.

52. Depraetere and Oosterlynck, “I finally found my place,” 693-709.

Challenging borderlands through online organization

The previous section has illustrated how PCSR's action expanded from having a role of caretaker of Syrian asylum seekers occupying the park in 2015 to become an agent for the creation of new forms of cosmopolitan citizenship in Maximilian Park. The actions carried out in the urban realm, however, are made possible through PCSR's virtual organization, which this section will focus on.

PCSR was initiated by "volunteers, students, action committees of undocumented migrants, and political activists."⁵³ The group self-organizes online mainly via Facebook, functioning through a closed group with more than 43 thousand members. The members⁵⁴ seem to be composed of citizens of both migrant and non-migrant backgrounds as well as residents from all over Belgium. To make organization manageable, different local groups are set up by area, rendering communication area-specific. From May 2018 digital ethnography was performed by the corresponding author as a non-participating follower of the main and the North Quarter area-based groups, in order to study and analyze the activity.

Active online organization allows local group members to offer sleeping space in their private homes all over Belgium, so that people do not have to sleep in the park exposed to the elements; they act as hosts to those in need of shelter for as many nights desired. To facilitate this, chauffeurs volunteer to drive recipients to and from the park. A daily online poll [Fig. 4] sets the goal of the day (200 places in the case of the figure), and members notify the organizers of what their daily possibilities are: whether they continue to host someone they are already hosting, whether they will start hosting that night, or whether they will act as drivers within or towards Brussels.

Since Maximilian Park has become a borderland, it has also become the platform's main meeting point for the dispatch of action. Every night at 7 pm, a Facebook-organized group meets at the park to deploy its activity between those that host, drive and distribute. Their meeting point has been re-named by one of the organizing members as "the intersection of solidarity". Facebook announcements say that "the citizen hosting begins" [Fig. 5]. In this comment, citizen hosting has a double meaning—the *citizen who hosts*, and *the citizen being hosted*; the former has legal citizenship that secures some form of permanence; the latter is the current non-citizen temporarily residing in Brussels.

53. Lafaut and Coene, "Humanitarian Work," 10. Also see a description of the two main founding figures, Mehdi Kassou, at the time, a telecommunication professional, and Adriana Costa Santos, a student, <http://www.imagine-magazine.com/lire/spip.php?article2440>.

54. This refers to the members of the Facebook group, not of the PCSR. Undocumented migrants do not seem to be present as members on the Facebook group probably so their identities are not to authorities.

created a poll.

Moderator · July 5 at 7:00 AM · SONDAGE & POST H...

Jeudi 5 Juillet

!! Sondage HEBERGEMENT du jour !!

Day Goal 200 places

« Si nous baissons les bras, nous sommes complaisants envers les mauvais traitements, ce qui les rend encore plus oppressifs. » (Rosa Parks)

OBJECTIF DU JOUR : 200 places chez l'habitant !!

Comme demain il y a match, soyons prévoyant, hébergeons ce soir pour éviter un détour par le parc demain. On profitera même de la victoire des Diables avec nos invité-e-s 😊
RDV 20h au parc, chaussée d'Anvers 59.
❤️💛💜💖💗

Comme d'habitude, veuillez remplir le sondage ci-dessous ET le formulaire du jour en suivant ce lien : <https://goo.gl/forms/Jb2d3TIM0CekOPT2>

Comme d'habitude, 3 options sont proposées dans le formulaire :

Host

1) HEBERGEUR/HEBERGEUSE
Cocher l'option qui vous correspond dans le sondage ci-dessous ET remplir le formulaire le plus tôt possible via ce lien : <https://goo.gl/forms/Jb2d3TIM0CekOPT2>

Driver

2) CHAUFFEUR/CHAUFFEUSE
Vous pouvez faire chauffeur-euse ce soir : merci de cocher la case qui vous correspond dans le sondage ci-dessous et de vous arranger avec les personnes sans voiture via les commentaires ci-dessous (contacter directement les hébergeurs par MP).

Continuing Host

3) CONTINUITE D'HEBERGEMENT (ou relais)
Vous avez déjà hébergé hier et vos invité.e.s restent chez vous sans revenir à la gare (ou reviennent par leurs propres moyens). Vous prenez le relais d'un/une autre hébergeur/euse en récupérant ses invité.e.s sans passer par le parc.
Merci de cocher la case qui vous correspond dans le sondage ci-dessous ET de remplir le formulaire via ce lien : <https://goo.gl/forms/Jb2d3TIM0CekOPT2>

Signed as 'Park Team'

Merci à tous et toutes !
L'équipe du parc

Continuité / relais. Mes invités restent à l'abri ce soir

J'héberge ce soir !!!

Je suis chauffeur/euse sur BXL

Je suis chauffeur/euse vers le BW et E40

Je suis chauffeur/euse vers le BW et E19

Je suis chauffeur/euse vers le BW et E411

12

16 Comments 1 Share

Like

Daily Poll

FIG. 4 A daily poll posted on the platform allows members to self-organize their evening work. Retrieval, selection and notation by authors from the Facebook groups.

Sharing alerts of police presence in the North Quarter is another frequent activity that takes place on the platform. "North Station is surrounded by police. They are at all the entrances. Alert the guys. No Station!", and "Now at 18:50... Federal police are at the station... At the park, they are confiscating bags," are two such instances, dating from June and July 2018 respectively. In the first quote, a message from one of the organizers was received that the North Station is surrounded by police. He in turn posts to the group in a plea to citizens to warn migrants in the area. In the second quote, an alert of federal police is posted. Because of the conditions described before, the park and station are main target points for policing. In response to this, warnings of police presence in real-time are posted to the group pages to notify those at risk. When neither the park nor the station are safe for migrants, PCSR opens the night shelter in Haren during the day.

Group events are organized online in various forms: community events like cleanups, meals, and parties, or an assembly or protest for a certain cause, or volunteering efforts for a certain action [Fig. 6]. A telling example is the call for a collective cleanup of waste in Maximilian Park which addresses a direct spatial and neighborhood issue. The call also displays a clever play on words acting not only as direct response to Francken's



FIG. 5 The Park Team Commences its Daily Action—Relevant information for the daily mobilized group. Retrieval, selection and notation by Authors from the Facebook groups.

rhetorical call for “cleanup”,⁵⁵ but also to the complaints by local residents of littering in the park due to repressive measures forcing migrants to abandon their belongings on site. By rallying heterogeneous groups of citizens around a public space and its maintenance, PCSR shows how non-citizens can exercise civic duties and contribute to the park’s upkeep, after having benefited from its amenities. Another telling example is a call to assemble against the imprisonment of migrant children in response to the detention of undocumented minors. Taking a shrewd stance to combat this, the platform organized a rally in front of the Manneken Pis, the famous child symbol of Brussels.⁵⁶

Online contact also allows members to share articles and important updates to create awareness among members about legal frameworks related to migration policies. In one posting, a legal advisor for the platform specifically states that there is misinformation in the circles of those attempting to seek asylum in the UK, and that part of the platform’s goal is to provide correct information, not to convince migrants to apply in Belgium, but to help them make well-informed decisions. According to the Geneva Convention, once in the UK migrants have the right to apply for asylum, but there is a good chance they will be refused and returned to the country in which they first entered the EU, abiding by the Dublin Con-

55. Francken used the hashtag “#opkuisen,” which translates as “clean up” in reference to the asylum seekers in Maximilian Park.

56. The Manneken Pis is a small statue of a child urinating into a fountain and a very well-known symbol of Brussels.

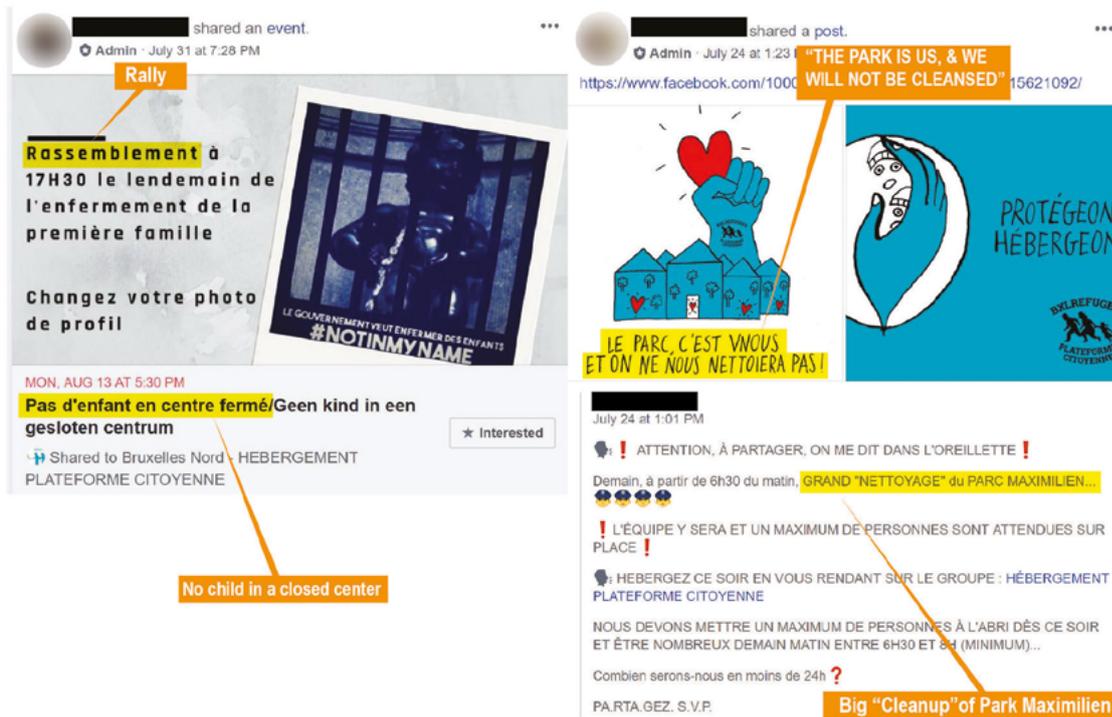


FIG. 6 Organized Events. Two instances of gathering: a rally and a cleanup. Retrieval, selection and notation by Authors from the Facebook groups.

vention. Many asylum seekers refuse to apply in Belgium due to lack of information, putting them at risk of ending up in a detention center.

Through their online communication, the platform members have coined some new terms that showcase their approach to those displaced. The words *amigrant* and *vnous* are the most commonly used neologisms on the platform: *amigrant*, a play on the word immigrant using the prefix, *ami* (meaning friend in French), and *vnous*, a composite of the plural form of “you” in French (*vous*), and “we” or “us” (*nous*). Group members also regularly post stories of the migrants they encounter without revealing their identities, sharing specific happenstances with them that highlight their common human characteristics and interests defying the bordering of citizenship and illustrating the idea that “we are not so different after all.” They also expose the difficult realities migrants have faced as encouragement toward action. Such accounts foreground the intentionality of individual migratory projects, that are often obscured by structural accounts of state policy which neglect the agency of non-citizens. With solidarity and human value as its motivation, it is through the full practice of citizen rights at the core of its effort that has made the evolution of PCSR as a platform possible.

PCSR’s action holds both the virtues of cosmopolitanism, and the limits of humanitarian discourse that focuses on individual cases and the everyday living conditions of non-citizens. Its members are varied and hybrid, personifying diverse degrees of recognized citizenship, and is thus well-versed in challenging repressive bordering practices. PCSR pursues its

action under increasingly repressive circumstances, but through its activism it problematizes the categorization of “citizen” versus “non-citizen” and stretches the boundaries of citizenship. This occurs by negotiating and contesting the borders enforced by specialized agents through material practices such as identity checks. These enforcements are, therefore, considered social constructions that can be challenged inside and around a public space that in its recent past embodied widespread solidarity. This embodiment is protracted and used as a launch-pad for further claims.

Public space as a device for cosmopolitan citizenship

Various authors have highlighted the importance of Maximilian Park's central location⁵⁷ in the city. Situated on a powerful institutional border in a global city, it operates as a key political space for the action of new and incompletely formalized subjects.⁵⁸ The same authors focused on the momentum generated by the refugee camp set up in the park in September 2015 at the peak of the “crisis” in Belgium. The current migration trend in the park has taken on its own autonomy, moving beyond the camp and the state of emergency; yet, the post-camp life of the park has remained unexplored to date. By spatially recording the North Quarter's historical changes, this contribution further contextualized the significance of the park and neighboring North Station in the complex relationship between migration and public space in Brussels. Space is indeed not only the stage for the manifestation of spatialized politics,⁵⁹ but is also a palimpsest where materiality plays its part.⁶⁰ The layered presence of erasure, vacancy, connectivity and reinvestment in the North Quarter are distinctive assets for non-citizens.

Local media analysis has exposed the shift in vocabulary and policing actions after the momentum of the 2015 refugee camp faded. As stated in *BRUZZ*, “Maximilian Park has become a familiar name in recent years as a result of the refugee crisis. The green space has become the home of many looking for a permanent residence on a regular basis.” Both the park's non-citizens of today and the volunteers supporting them have consciously engaged with the solidarity that it has repeatedly embodied by reiteration through timely acts and events, thus continually evolving with the issues of the time. This testifies the capacity of public space to engage with the needs of different user groups from diverse walks of life as a device for cosmopolitan citizenship.

57. Lafaut and Coene, “Humanitarian Work,” 14; Depraetere and Oosterlynck, “Political Ethnography,” 696.

58. Saskia Sassen, “The repositioning of citizenship and alienage: emergent subjects and spaces for politics,” *Globalizations* 2 no. 1 (2005):89.

59. Mustafa Dikeç, “Space, Politics and the Political,” *Environment and Planning D* 23, no. 2 (2005): 171-188.

60. André Corboz, “The Land as Palimpsest,” *Diogenes* 31 no.121 (1983): 12-34.

Such cosmopolitan capacity is all the more relevant under the present migratory challenges represented by a more transient demographic than the asylum seekers of war-torn Syria. The case of the so-called 'transit' migrants challenges state-bound interpretations of citizenship even further, seen the heterogeneity of their profiles and migratory projects. This heterogeneity questions mainstream notions of integration which pose long-term goals for newcomers, directly tied to fixed place and set along a linear path. While there is in the field of integration policy a clear recognition of the challenges of "temporality of refugee migration,"⁶¹ integration efforts continue to pursue strategies that are tied with nation-state ideas on citizenship, as well as or with the specific status of "refugee".

In Brussels, the autonomy of migration has created new migration trends that have made public space the place which non-citizens appropriate as their own and where they navigate using their own mechanisms facilitated by mobile commons. Their material presence, ability to contextualize themselves within certain networks, and capacity to access amenities render them de facto citizens, although non recognized; on the other hand, this claim to citizenship is substantiated and emphasized through solidarity with recognized activist citizens, who, with their place-based know-how, have facilitated the agency of non-citizens. In turn, non-citizens (by enacting themselves as citizens) and citizens (by enacting themselves as activists), have challenged their nation-state bounded notion of citizenship. Their insistence on the need for alternative forms of citizenship through solidarity and the application of human rights, is rooted in the fundamental idea that citizenship goes beyond administrative status, and is enacted by material presence and participation.

This paper set out to engage in the discussion of nation-bound citizenship by forefronting processes that challenge it. Through investigating cultural discourse and mobile commons emerging in the aftermath of the alleged refugee "crisis," it demonstrated how the autonomy of migration calls for alternative forms of citizenship that can be performed, even if not officially recognized, by mobilizing solidarity networks. With the belief that public space is produced by people claiming their place in the city, it illustrated how a specific group of non-citizens enact themselves as citizens, supported by a unity operating under a collective citizen's platform that self-organizes online. Such networks have been able to morph their roles and ambitions to be responsive of the most current aspects of migration.

This dynamic ability to modify themselves and engage with recent trends epitomizes the cosmopolitan condition, and is critical for their permanence.

61. Peter Scholten et al., *Policy Innovation in Refugee Integration: A comparative analysis of innovative policy strategies toward refugee integration in Europe*. (Rotterdam: Dutch Department of Social Affairs/Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2017): 10.

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