

LOOKING FOR PARIS

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“Paris may be a capital famous for cosmopolitan exiles, but it is also a city where unknown men and women have spent years of miserable loneliness: Vietnamese, Algerians, Cambodians, Lebanese, Senegalese, Peruvians.”

—Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (2000)

The metro doors shut behind me. I cling to the passenger pole in the centre of the carriage as people push past, step on my toes, crowd into the space. I can't breathe in here. I wonder again why I live in a city, why this city. Close my eyes to block out sight; but sound, smell, touch, invade the senses instead. Especially sound. Snatches of conversations, the whoosh of doors opening and closing, loud American voices. And then...the strains of a melody played by a lonely keyboard, so out of place not because it's music, but because of the tune it's playing. I look over to where it's coming from but can't see the player. Too many people crowding the carriage, too many backs of heads. All I can do is follow the sound.

The music continues, lamenting, lamenting. A voice picks up the strain. It's so different to what is usually heard on the metro that others turn to look. Parisians are used to people busking in the carriages of the metro. Not only buskers, also beggars. Sometimes there is no difference: a young man, barely a man, with a stereo blaring out techno music, dancing to it and then going through the carriage to collect money. Is that busking or begging? The voice is singing in another language, a man's voice. It cracks and strains and reaches out over the metro noise like a prayer. Like a call to prayer in a mosque. Do I find it poignant because so many buskers and beggars in this city are foreigners, like I am? Not only in exile from their own country, but also living in exile in this city; occupying a separate stratum: same city, same metro. Another world.

The carriage stops and the doors open. It's La Muette. Most people get off, including the bearer of the music and the voice. I don't see who it is but I imagine he is a foreigner. Like me, but not like me. I imagine that he will move on to the next carriage to start again, or perhaps wait for the next train. He will do this over and over, all day before returning 'home'.

I wonder if he has a family, or if he came over here alone. What was his homeland like. People get on and off, but he is always in transit, playing his music; always between stations.

As you travel on the metro from one end of the line to another, you notice the difference in how people dress themselves. For example, the line 9 goes from the wealthy bourgeois west of Paris where you will pass through the 15th and 16th arrondissements of La Muette and Trocadero, the site of many Embassies and within walking distance to the Eiffel Tower. Mingled with the tourists (in their comfortable sports shoes, t-shirts, cameras and unsightly parkas) who get off at these places, you can find Parisians who epitomise the stereotype: expensive handbags, designer clothes, slim, fashionable.

As the line passes through central Paris, the change is imperceptible at first but gradually, the clothes change, as do the people who wear them. People of different sizes and colour board the train. More sports shoes. Hooded sweaters. Not a designer handbag in sight, unless it's a knockoff. Line 9 ends in the poorer eastern suburbs of Paris where a lot of immigrants and diverse communities live, though increasingly you have the bobos (bourgeois bohème: the hipster, organic-food loving, artsy version of a yuppie) encroaching and hiking up rent prices in areas that used to be poor; the kind of gentrification that happens everywhere now.

In a way, the metro is a great social leveler as people from all social classes use it. But in other ways, it reflects the existing social stratification in the city by the stations in which people stop off—or in terms of the buskers and beggars, those who never get off.

The internet is adrift with endless blogs by (white) anglophone expats who have made their home here, mostly American and English, who seem to be living and espousing that well-rehearsed story about Paris that is quaint, cultured, exotic. Their lives are spent surrounded by cheese, wine and summers in the countryside, gallery visits and sitting in cafés. Reading these blogs, I realise that Paris represents something in the imagination for a lot of expats who come to visit or live here. It's as if Paris has been sprinkled with magic fairy dust, where a life less ordinary and more whimsical can be lived (think of the movie *Amélie*), where you can almost be trapped in a time or cultural zone. Exotic, but at the same time not too exotic as to be completely alien to the anglophone expat—after all it is still Europe.

The archetypal Parisien is still imagined to be a white person. Even when the reality of Paris includes high levels of immigration, diverse ethnic quarters —and a working class you

can see immediately once in certain areas of the city but also outside of Paris, particularly in the sprawling concrete banlieues, the suburbs. Why can't the reality sear itself into our imaginations of this city? Why do we cling on to a particular dream of Paris?

When the Paris attacks occurred in November 2015, many in the media touted it as an assault on French culture and values. It was not only the extreme brutality of what happened in the attacks that struck a chord with many Westerners—it was the fact that it happened in Paris and what this city represented, for its residents and for the rest of the world. The fact that the attacks mainly targeted the 10th and 11th arrondissements, the gentrified areas inhabited by mostly progressive middle-class young hipster bobos, was, according to one journalist, evidence that the terrorists were aiming to attack 'the embodiment of French insouciance and joie de vivre'. And as reiterated by a resident who was interviewed in another article, 'we feel that what was attacked is youth, freedom but also more specifically, smoking cigarettes with a beer on a terrace in Paris, which pretty much equals our daily life'. This was further echoed in a comic that was widely shared in the aftermath of the attacks by Charlie Hebdo artist Joann Sfar. Its eighth panel read: 'Friends from the whole world, thank you for #prayforParis, but we don't need more religion! Our faith goes to Music! Kisses! Life! Champagne and Joy! #ParisaboutLife'

I talked to many white Parisians afterwards, mostly students who were in my English language class. Many echoed what was being said in the media—that the terrorists hated their culture of freedom and wanted to destroy it, that the French were simply being hated for their 'civilisation'. But this line of thinking conveniently ignores the fact that all of the terrorists were either French or Belgian nationals who grew up in Europe. It ignores questions of migrant young people's experiences of growing up in France, and how they actually experience the touted French values of liberty, equality and fraternity. It sidelines the question of who has been given 'freedom', both within the country and outside of it. How many people in Paris were actually sipping champagne and living 'a life of music' before the attacks? How many people outside of Europe are able to live in freedom with the consequences of both French foreign policy and a history of French colonialism?

And what's on the other side, in the shadows of this City of Light? There roam the outcasts, so many in number that they could constitute a city in themselves. The shadows include the homeless, the 'illegal' immigrants, the mentally ill, the beggars, the prostitutes, the buskers, the legal immigrants, the elderly, the poor. They live in shadows not because they

are invisible (sometimes they are highly visible, like the homeless), but because they cannot exist in a city that culturally denies the parts of itself that doesn't fit its own glorified image. The City of Light casts a shadow over those who do not live up to this vision; it can then continue projecting the image we all know of Paris to tourists and expats who lap it up, while those outside of that definition are conveniently thought of as not being part of the 'real' Paris, not truly Parisian. Tourists can dine in a typical French bistro, ignoring the fact that in the kitchen cooking up their typical French cuisine are often underpaid and undocumented African workers.

I visited Paris for the first time when I was living in London over ten years ago. I came over for work and they put me up in one of those hotel chains like the Mercure, near the centre of the city. When I went down to the dining room for breakfast, I walked past the kitchen and with shock, saw that all the kitchen staff were black. In contrast, the front desk staff were all white. I remember feeling like something was completely wrong with this picture; the subtle, hidden racism shone through like a blight in the landscape. Was I the only one who could see this? More than that, I felt like I was on the wrong side. I'm one of you guys, I wanted to say to them, I'm not a privileged white guest. My parents are like you. I would discover once I moved to Paris that in most middle and upper-class cafes and restaurants, including trendy hipster ones, it would be rare to see a person of colour as a waiter or front of house staff.

And perhaps the shadow people of Paris par excellence are that of the immigrant, the perpetual outsider.

What I find particularly disingenuous is that those usually celebrating the 'good life' of Paris inevitably ignore the role of the migrant and their exploitation in upholding the functioning of the city. That in order for some people to have a life of champagne and kisses, there is a much larger group of underpaid, usually migrant, underclass that is cleaning their offices, looking after their children, and cooking their food. Refugee, immigrant, asylum seeker, economic migrant, illegal alien. In France there's the term *sans-papiers*, literally meaning without papers or visas. There are simply those with proper documentation, and those without. But what I see is a homeless man sitting on a grill vent to keep warm, his sole possession, a suitcase with a label that says 'Paris, France'. Or the young African men who sell Eiffel Tower key rings to tourists near the monument, the bunches of key rings rattle like chains around their wrists. On a boulevard in the mixed migrant area near metro Strasbourg

Saint-Denis, the Chinese street prostitutes stand waiting in their high heels, their pimps lurking nearby. I try to hurry by so as not to be mistaken for one of them.

This is the other side of Paris, and with each of them, I wonder, what mammoth Odysseus-like journey did they have to go on to get here?

I came to Paris on the back of a cliché: I married a Frenchman and moved to Paris over ten years ago. But contrary to the cliché, I had married a Frenchman of Asian origin, also Chinese–Cambodian whose family came to France as refugees. His family live on a housing estate in one of the less depressing banlieues and when I first moved to Paris, non-French friends assumed I lived a life drinking wine and visiting museums. Instead I was eating at McDonalds and watching DVDs at home because it was cheaper.

How different would my first experience of Paris have been if I had married a white, bourgeois man? Class is another unspoken aspect of the city, unspoken aspect of French culture. When class is raised in conversation at all, it is often assumed that the working class are predominately white, that it is a white experience even though migrants make up a large part of the working class, especially in this city. Paris, like many European cities, has endured immense waves of immigration over centuries, but the influence and physical manifestation of this migration is confined to the suburbs or to pockets of the city and not to touch the collective imagination. Where my husband's family lives and where he grew up, Bagnolet, is so different from the picture postcard of Paris, so far removed from the novels, movies and blogs that depict life in Paris. It is a mixed community of African, Asian, and Arab migrants, amongst others. It is dominated by concrete government—subsidised apartment blocks, a garish shopping centre, depressing café bars—but is still considered one of the 'better' working-class suburbs because it has a metro station and the bobos are coming in to open their hipster cafes.

This suburb is at the end of one of the metro lines in the east of Paris. Walking around, you will hear languages other than French being spoken. You will see people of all shapes and colours in the streets, so different from the stereotype of the chic Parisien that we have. No restaurants with haute cuisine, but rather brasseries and PMU's where mostly men go to bet on the horses. My husband's parents still live in the area in a thirty-story grey concrete apartment block, and it is in housing estates and in suburbs like these where many Parisians live, where the majority of migrants live. Not least because the rent significantly drops once you go outside the *périphérique*, the ring road that circles around the city like a dividing line,

like a physical barrier that encloses the city of Paris and separates it from the suburbs. You are not considered as living in Paris if you live beyond this ring road, and there could not be a better symbol of the divide between the city and the banlieue, between what is considered Parisien and what is not.

It was only in moving to Paris that I could really comprehend the uphill climb that is the migrant experience. The painful experience of trying to settle into a new alien country helped me to imagine my parents' experiences of migration from Cambodia, a country ravaged by the Cold War between the superpowers, to Australia when I was 3 years old. Coming over to Paris—without a visa, not speaking the language, having to look for a job—in essence, having to start all over again, brought me closer to what it must have been like for my parents, who as the cliché goes (which just happens to be true), arrived in Australia with only the clothes on their backs.

In reality, I experienced on a minuscule scale what many migrants like my parents experienced. Because I had the privilege of holding an Australian passport, had English as a native language, had a local (my husband) to support me, did not come here after war and trauma, did not come here with four children...the list goes on. Yet in the countless interactions over the years that I've had to have with French bureaucracy in my David and Goliath battle for French citizenship, struggling in daily life to communicate in French and being looked down upon for it, having to take lower position jobs that have been underpaid and menial, having periods of extreme anxiety about money—I did experience to a limited extent the alienation and the rupture that is moving countries in difficult circumstances. But even more than that, the everyday eking out of a living on a precarious, thin line of existence. Where all energy is put into building, constructing and consolidating in whatever way you can.

Paris is a city deeply stratified by class. As French writer Édouard Louis succinctly put it:

Among the Parisian bourgeois, I realised that politics is absolutely not about life or death, about being able to eat and afford medical care or not; that whatever the government right or left does will not stop them living, eating.

The migrant in Paris cannot afford to have such a laissez-faire attitude towards politics, with increasing government laws and policies cracking down on undocumented workers and ‘illegal’ migrants, as well as refugee and asylum seekers. In April this year, under Macron the French National Assembly passed a tough new immigration law that shortened asylum application deadlines, doubled the time for which illegal migrants can be detained from 45 days to 90 days, as well as introducing a one- year prison sentence for entering France illegally. The French Interior Ministry has also forcibly evacuated migrant camps in Paris, and has recently pledged to evict the 2,300 migrants camped next to Parisian canals many of whom are from Sudan, Eritrea and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the Macron government’s instigation of labour reform, including signing a wide range of decrees to make it easier for employers to hire and fire as well as reducing the power of collective bargaining, will also affect migrant workers disproportionately. It is indeed a privilege to be able to live as if politics does not affect your daily life, to continue living in a bubble of Paris as being primarily about food, wine, art, literature, cinema and fashion.

Of course, this illusion of Paris is something cultivated by the city itself and the tourism industry here. It reminds me of where I’m from, Sydney, where there too exists a contrast between the sprawling Western suburbs where I grew up and the postcard image of Sydney of sun, beaches and the Harbour. Maybe it is the dilemma of all global cities especially in the Easyjet age: so much a victim of its own aggressive marketing that its image never goes beyond the 2D one in the imaginations of most people. A city that is always gazing at itself, I sometimes feel trapped in this city and its cult of the image. Sometimes I walk around central Paris and I feel like I am walking in a city of symbols. There’s this and that monument, this one a reminder of a past event, that a reminder of another time. Like being frozen in a museum. I have an idea of the city’s past, but not of its recent history or future. I can’t perceive the layers of change that time brings or the way that diverse groups of people affect a place. Undoubtedly Paris has culture: but it’s largely a museum piece that has left me cold and untouched.

I long for authenticity—where there is some coherence between the image projected and the reality. Where a city reflects and manifests visible signs of a plethora of truths and a multitude of different lives. A city that embraces its changing nature, rather than always referring back to its grand past. Most of all, a city that gives cultural and physical space to its ‘shadow people’ so that they no longer occupy the margins. Because it is an inherently political act to recognise the shadows of a city, a culture, a society. To ignore it means to

leave unrecognised whole groups of people and their experiences, their struggles and their joys; to ignore how much we live off their backs.