



 **Opin vísindi**

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**“Europe is finished”:  
Migrants Lives in Europe’s Capital at Times of Crisis**

*Kristín Loftsdótti*

**Abstract**

Migration has become a key issue in the contemporary European context, with depictions of Europe as under ‘attack’ due to the mass movement of uprooted populations, especially from Africa and the Middle East. The current sentiment of Europe in crisis calls for a deeper understanding of how the idea of Europe is configured. This article focuses on the idea of “Europe” as seen from the point of view of Nigerien men who are living in Brussels without residency permits. Their voices reveal some of the gaps in contemporary discourses concerning crises and Europe’s predicament, especially in terms of terror and refugees. Their narratives point to how current debates on migration and crisis tends to rely on an image of a disconnected world, which obfuscate Europe’s historical interconnections with those now seeking entrance into Europe. Muslim migrants in particular are regularly portrayed as being incompatible with modernity, reflecting the persistent refusal to acknowledge their coevalness in Fabian’s [2014. *Time and the other: How anthropology makes its object*. New York: Columbia University Press] sense, that is to say their coexistence in the same time and space. One aspect of shared coexistence is “digitalized connectivity” where media representations of Europe in crisis are an integral part of the lives of these migrant men as others living in Europe.

**Keywords**

Migration; crisis; terrorism; West-African; Post-colonial Europe; Niger

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## Introduction

We arrive in Brussels less than three weeks after the March 2016 terrorist attacks on the international airport and the Maelbeek metro station. The streets downtown are empty; few people walk around and large military trucks with soldiers are parked next to the subway entrances. Also desolate is *Place de la Bourse* – the gathering point for people after the attacks to commemorate and pay tribute to those killed and injured. Decaying flower bouquets still lay on the ground, as well as wet banners and small personal objects. They have been placed there by someone remembering their loved ones, reflecting the lives lost and the shattering pain of those left behind. It rains softly while we stand there, my partner and I, and it feels like we have entered a space where things have already passed and are somehow fading slowly from view, while their impression on the present still lingers. The Brussels international airport also felt strikingly changed but in different ways. After passing through passport control, we struggle with our luggage in the underground garage. We are part of an irregular stream of people heading to the dark bottom level of the building, which has been transformed into a transportation hub. With no available trains or taxis, only buses, we enter a space of complete chaos, surrounded by other equally tired and confused passengers trying to find out what transport we can take, all under the gaze of men in full military outfit. The expression of these men is not hostile but blank, as they stand in pairs with large machine guns and heavy military clothing. To me they seem ready for anything. This feeling of everyday life having broken down becomes even more intensified when leaving Brussels several days later. As passengers, we have to wait in several long lines, both inside and outside temporary tents, as well as present our identification materials during several stages, once again in the presence of soldiers. All of this is new to us; the waiting in endless lines, the sense of being reduced to both a faceless crowd and an object of surveillance. These are, however, things which have become a part of the daily experience for many people in the world today. Some people – those that have been marked as different racially or culturally - have always been potential suspects of suspicion. Is this a new Europe, or just the old Europe with its insecurities and fears revealing themselves to larger parts of its population? Have particular layers been stripped away, momentarily

exposing to the more privileged parts of the population that which is a part of the everyday for many others? The atmosphere of terror in Brussels in 2016 follows a growing sense of crisis that is characterizing Europe (Jensen & Loftsdóttir, 2014), from the economic crisis starting in late 2000s, to the claims repeatedly heard in the media about a so-called crisis of multiculturalism (Kennedy-Macfoy & Lewis, 2014; Lentin & Titley, 2011). Recent increases in refugees and asylum seekers to Europe have intensified the sense of Europe in crisis and have been used to justify the intense fortification of Europe against this presumed outside threat (see Vacchiano, 2013). Thus, the sense of Europe in crisis has not necessarily challenged the imagination of Europe as a “bounded cultural community”, in spite of a continued lack of agreement on what kind of community it is (De Cesari, 2017, p. 19). With Europe’s ambivalence, manifesting “both as a concept and as a project” (Ponzanesi, 2016, p. 159), the idea of Europe has to be continually enforced and renegotiated by various parties.

In this article, I focus on “Europe” as seen through the perspective of outsiders, with a focus on the outlooks of Nigerien irregular male migrants in Brussels. This current sentiment of ‘crisis’ calls even more strongly for a deeper understanding of how Europe is configured by those ‘outside’ of Europe’s privileged space (Herzfeld, 1989/2016, p. 72; Ponzanesi, 2016). Based on interviews with Nigerien men in Brussels, a majority of whom are without residency permits, I show how the voices of these men expose some of the blind spots in contemporary discourses about crisis and Europe’s predicament, especially in terms of terror and refugees. First, their narrative points to how current debates on the refugee crisis often rely on the image of a disconnected world, where Europe and the global South are seen as separate entities, which obfuscate Europe’s historical interconnection with those now seeking entrance into Europe. The renders furthermore, invisible how colonial connections of the past are reproduced in global connections of the present (Mignolo, 2000), with the ‘after-effects of colonialism’ retaining its continued salience (Colpani & Ponzanesi, 2016, p. 3).

Secondly, current European discussions often portray Muslim migrants as incompatible with modernity (Bunzl, 2005), reflecting long standing notions of modernity as created by Europeans (Dirks, 1992), and the persistent refusal to acknowledge coevalness in

Fabian's (2014) sense, i.e. coexistence in same time and space. The narratives of these men that address Europe's multiple crisis tease out the coevalness of those inhabiting 'Europe', even though it is clear that different subjects have radically different positions within current 'crisis-talk' (Loftsdóttir, Smith & Hipfl, 2018). One particular important component of their life in 'crisis' is how they are connected into a wide media influenced conversations which take place in today's globalized and digitalized world. Part of these discourses in various mediums in Europe today frames refugees and Muslims as potential risks to European nation-states (Fassin, 2011; Midden 2016). These men's narratives reflect "digitalized connectivity" (to utilize phrase by Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014) as one aspect of the shared coexistence between those often defined as "illegal migrants" and those seen as Europeans. Migrants are no less intense users of digital technologies than their non-migrant peers in Europe, both engaging with digitalized discourses (Ponzanesi & Leurs, 2014), and living within space of "digital connectivity". Here I am not just concern with media related practices of the migrants themselves or their direct engagement with these stereotypes but use 'digitalized connectivity' to capture the creation of these subjectivities within digitalized discourses and to draw attention to how this creates shared space of coevalness.

This discussion is based on a series of brief ethnographic visits in Brussels which I conducted during 2012, 2014, and 2016. Short research trips were also conducted in other European cities, such as Antwerp in 2004 and Milan in 2016. During these trips, I interviewed men of different ethnicities who all have in common to originate from Niger, most of whom self-identified as WoDaaBe, Hausa, and Tuaregs. Some had wives and children back in Niger, but all had Nigerien extended families which they tried to give financial support to if and when possible. My insights are also based on longer research in Niger where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for two years from 1996 to 1998. While my research is shaped by field research in these diverse locations I will in particularly here contextualize these migrants' lives in Brussels. As a city, Brussels exhibits many different global migration paths, while also evidencing how they link to power disparities. Brussels is

often referred to as the “centre of European culture”<sup>1</sup> – or the ‘capital of Europe’ (Jansen-Verbeke, Vandenbroucke, & Tielen, 2005, p. 119), due to its position as hosting key EU institutions. This means that part of the city is home to a more privileged migrant population who are working in relation to the various EU institutions and other international organizations (such as Nato, Eurocontrol) (Jansen-Verbeke, Vandenbroucke, & Tielen, 2005, p. 119). These foreign dignitaries, along with Brussel’s tourist population, migrate under extremely privileged conditions. Others, like those I spoke to, arrive in Brussels under precarious conditions and face a constant threat of deportation. While the city is often seen as presenting a “unified Europe” (Baeten 2001, p. 118), spatially it not only segregates non-European immigrants from a predominantly privileged European population, including native Brusselians, a wealthy class of internationals, and tourists, but also more affluent ‘Europeans’ from an increasingly disenfranchised domestic workforce (Baeten, 2001). As stressed by Salazar and Smart (2011), while the mobile population is differentiated in terms of power, mobility itself needs to be understood as interlinked with immobility, where the ability to move is also unequally distributed.

I start this discussion by providing the broad social geopolitical context of these men’s migration to Europe, and then explain how the discussions of crisis in Europe form a part of the migrants lives in Brussels.

### **Migration and Niger**

Migration as a key issue in the present is coupled with vibrant depictions of Europe as under attack due to uprooted and displaced populations from North Africa and the Middle East. Marginalized West African countries are, simultaneously, pushed into the spotlight by international news, which designates them as places which breed terrorism and Islamic radicalism (Walther & Retaillé, 2010), further enhancing the sense of Europe under siege by outside forces. Simultaneously, the long and continuous involvement of Europe with Africa is often forgotten (Bakewell & de Haas, 2007), alongside the fact that countries outside of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.brussels.info>

Europe carry the major brunt of refugees and asylum seekers (Koser, 2011). Migration constitutes an integral part of West Africa's history and survival in the constantly changing Sahara<sup>2</sup> and Sahel environments, but its intensity has increased in the present and manifests in specific formations. The increased securitization of Europe's borders and spread of terror following the so-called Arab Spring has been especially significant for people in West and North Africa. Niger's geopolitical location, as situated between sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, makes it a major transit zone for migrants either on their way to Europe or returning home from Libya and Algeria. Thus, the migrants coming to Niger are either Nigeriens returning home or displaced people of other nationalities escaping the war in the north (Koser, 2011, p. 3). The end of Gaddafi's regime in Libya meant that in the Sahel and Sahara region small arms and weapons became much more readily accessible. While some of these weapons had been originally provided by the US and Europe to those protesting in Libya, they are now used by rebels and terrorists (Danjibo, 2013, p. 17-19). Coupled with the extreme conditions of poverty that leave Niger in the bottom bracket of the 2015 UNDP report on developing countries (Human Development Report, 2015), these circumstances have led to increased insecurities in Niger.

Ali has lived for eight years in Brussels and has a wife and children back in Niger. He tells me on several occasions that most of all he wants to go back. "But you know the situation in Niger" he explains, "There is nothing for me to have there." His words are echoed by many others whom I spoke to; they explain their stay in Brussels as primarily due to necessity, not because they have an interest in Europe or Belgium per se. They left Niger due to its poverty and lack of opportunities and want nothing more than to continue with their lives back home. Again and again in my interviews, different individuals emphasized that if things were not so difficult back home in Niger, they would prefer to live in the

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<sup>2</sup> For some of Niger's population migration is integrated into their lifeways such as the nomadic population Tuaregs and WoDaaBe. After colonialization, Tuaregs' land became divided between several states, which hindered people's mobility. Reciting the importance of mobility for Niger's populations shows the need to not fall into normalization of national boundaries, which Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) have warned against (p. 184).

vicinity of their extended families. I was asked several times: “You have seen circumstance in Niger, yes?” This was not a question so much as a reminder that as someone who had once lived in Niger I should be able to understand the reasons for their departure. Even though poverty and loss of hope for the future seems to be the main mobilizing factor for these men, people’s desires can be both intersecting and contradictory. The quest for adventure is often one of many overlapping reasons for people’s migration (Schapendonk 2008, p. 20).

The men’s depiction of themselves as having no future in Niger repeatedly drifted into discussions about Libya’s desolated state after the civil war. Kohl (2002) points out that reform policies initiated by Gaddafi in the 1970s and 1980s led to a ‘modernization boom’ where Libya changed from being one of the Africa’s poorest countries into one of its richest, boasting a strong social security system. Bøås and Utas (2013) argue that after the mid-1990’s, Gaddafi’s Libya provided stability to the area, and that even in some cases it was a “constructive actor in peace agreements in neighboring countries”. This stands in sharp contrast to Gaddafi’s earlier actions in the region (p. 4). Starting in 2008 when Italy and Libya signed the *Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Co-operation*, Libya was recruited in the fight against un-documented migration to Europe. This agreement included a provision accepted by both parties that Libya would accept those migrants who were attempting to enter Europe without permission and were intercepted by Italians at sea (Bialasiewicz, 2013, p. 853). It has been estimated that 2.5 million migrant workers were in Libya in the beginning of 2011 (Koser, 2011, p. 2).

For my interlocutors, the fall of Libya symbolized a loss of their dreams for a better future in West and North Africa, and demonstrated that powerful forces within Europe seek to stop “African” prosperity. They explain that Nigeriens went to Libya because work was plentiful there, the pay good, and conditions of living reasonable. Many of these migrants were young men who were able to send money back home (see also Bøås & Utas, 2013, p. 6). When the war started, some of the Nigerien migrants in Libya were unwilling or unable to return home, while others still went back to Niger after the war. Many face unemployment in Niger, and like those that I spoke to, mourn the loss of Gaddafi’s regime (Puig, 2015). Ali explains to me the decision of these Nigerien migrants to go to Europe in

the following terms: “Before [the war] they helped their whole family [in Niger] and now had no work. How could they go back [to Niger]?” To the Nigeriens in my interviews, the loss of Libya was directly linked to the destructive actions of the global North, as reflected in Ali’s blunt comment that the future looked much better “before white people killed Gaddafi”.

Babouli, a Hausa man in his late 30's, was one of those who had migrated from Niger to Libya to seek employment. When I met him in Brussels in 2016, he stressed that life was good in Libya for those coming from West and North Africa; and that this prosperity had ended because the Europeans did not want to see Africa fully developed. He explains that when the civil war broke out, the route back to Niger became dangerous. He felt that the best option to escape the war was to take the sea-route to Italy. He went to Lambdousa with two other Nigeriens who were in the same situation and from there he traveled to Napoli and sought asylum in Europe. Like the others, he firmly stressed that he is not living in Europe because he wants too, but rather because of the lack of other options. He stresses that even though it is difficult to find work in Brussels, it is even harder in Niger.

This lack of future in Niger was also expressed in discussions about Niger’s natural richness. Ali explains to me in one of my interviews with him and two other Nigeriens,

They [France] do not leave Niger in peace because there is too much wealth there. They only give problems to the country. They believe that if they leave Africa alone to develop, then later they will not be able to benefit from its richness.

I remind Ali that when I lived in Niger twenty years ago, some of my friends had extremely favorable views toward ‘white’ people, who were uniformly seen as bringing development and prosperity to the country. He nods as if agreeing with me that people saw it differently in the past and explains patiently: “But in those times, people did not understand anything. It is now that people understand. Now, everyone is on their way to understand how the world functions”. Even if not explicitly stating it, I surmise that he is probably referring to the digitalized revolution that has occurred globally since I was in Niger, thus making information about both current and past events more widely accessible. Ali’s explanation for the motivations of France and other European countries in maintaining Niger’s position as

locked up in poverty and marginalization, was repeated in other interviews. It is probably no coincidence that the uranium mining in the northern part of Niger was often mentioned in this context, interpreted as iconic of Europe's relationship with Niger. In their discussion on Niger's uranium production and international development, Larsen and Mamouso (2013) point out that Niger has become one of the world's largest uranium producers, with the export value of the uranium consisting of 348 million Euros in 2010. Ironically, this is more than twice the total financial development assistance received by the state during the same year (Larsen & Mamouso, 2013). Larsen and Mamouso (2013) argue that the industry has primarily brought benefits to those outside Niger, with the majority of the uranium being exported to the European Union and mainly to France. In recent years, they argue, the revenues received by the state of Niger only correspond to around 20% of the export value and the revenues have "not yet responded to the increase in sales prices" (Larsen & Mamouso, 2013, p. 18). The grim consequences of this reality were referred to in my discussion with a young man from the Arlit region where great deal of the uranium production takes place. He explained his loss of faith for a future in Niger by citing radioactive pollution, violence against local people, and land dispossession as characterizing his life back home. His account, furthermore, corresponds with what has been well established in NGO reports over the years in regard to mining activities in Niger (see discussion in Larsen & Mamouso, 2013). Larsen and Mamouso put these human rights violations into the context of activities of the diverse organizations conducting international development in Niger by claiming that these organizations have had a strong focus on the economic aspects of the uranium sector in Niger with little regard to the cost of the local people in terms of their environment and health. They state:

In the joint evaluation of the 2000-2008 cooperation with the European Commission, Belgium, France, Denmark and Luxembourg (SEE, 2010) attention is paid to the economic potential of the uranium mining sector and concerns are raised regarding transparent and democratic revenue distribution. However, no reference is made to environmental impacts or risks associated with uranium mining (p. 22).

When placed in the context of a wider European discussion of migration, these ideas of my interlocutors provide an important contrast to the popularized views of faceless migrants pushing at European borders trying to escape Africa's intrinsic poverty. The narratives of my interlocutors foreground how the European and West African shared history of colonialism has shaped migration in the present (Bakewell & de Haas, 2007) and draw attention to how the persistent poverty of countries such as Niger cannot be divorced from actions and politics in the present. Even though these conditions in Niger are not the object of analysis here, this discussion draws attention to Stoler's (2013) term "imperial formations" as referring to ongoing processes of "ruinification", and the sustainability of vulnerability and damage (p. 7-9). Thus, Niger not only deals with its legacy of colonialism and its various implications in the present (for example, Alzouma, 2009), but with continued ruinification of the country through militarization and environmental violence enacted by forces both within and outside of Niger.

### **Living Together in Crisis**

The recent crisis of refugees and asylum seekers constitutes a large part of the current experience of these men, as a part of their mediascape and everyday experiences. While West-African men are generally characterized as one of Europe's most urgent threats in the international media (Oelgemöller, 2017, p. 7) – Ali and the other Nigerien migrants that I talked to become a part of the Brussels' diverse community. They join the city's precarious workforce, characterized by high levels of unemployment and growing income inequalities (Swyngedouw & Baeten, 2001, p. 838), even though living in neighborhoods mainly populated by other immigrants and Muslims. Some of these neighborhoods are also populated with Belgian natives who are unable to afford housing on the outskirts of the city, which is generally occupied by the more affluent "natives" (Manço & Kanmaz, 2005, p. 1107). Recent migration to Brussels is facilitated by strong support of family and friends, and thus individuals often stay with migrants of same nationality or ethnic origin (Tragiki & Rovolis, 2014, p. 294), which can strengthen the sense of migrant specific neighborhoods. Brussels' official bi-lingual policies, where French and Flemish are the two key languages,

make the city appealing for migrants from countries that were colonized by France and have knowledge of the French language. Most of the migrants I spoke to lack a stable income or steady employment, but make a living by doing whatever jobs are available at that moment. They thus share in some sense an economic precarity with many other resident in Brussels. To find these irregular jobs, connectivity with other Nigeriens and West Africans within Brussels is crucial. Digital technologies allow people to stay constantly connected both within the city and with friends and family back in Niger. More generally, in the Sub-Sahara, texting and taking photos or videos has become the most important use of cell phones (Poushter & Oates, 2015), which creates intimate links between families and networks, both in Niger and abroad (for detailed discussion see Youngstedt (2004) on Hausa in the USA). Mirjam de Bruijn (2014) stresses that we should not glorify these changes as automatically transforming social relationships, since they have also allowed for continuity in social relationships by disperse communities (p. 332). For the men that I spoke with in Brussels, cheap phone apps, such as Whatsapp, provide what Vertovec (2004) has called the “social glue”, which connects “small-scale social formations across the globe” (p. 220). These apps make it possible to stay constantly engaged with a network of family and friends within Brussels, as well as across Europe and West Africa.

Current electronic globalization not only links these migrants to each other and with their communities back home, but to particular subject positions within a larger complex global mediascape. The strong insistence of these men that they are not interested in Europe, as has been discussed earlier, indicates how our conversations are unavoidably embedded within a larger global media discourse, which includes issues on migration, how Muslims are seen as a threat to Europe, and the framing of Muslims and migrants as possible terrorist threats. This mediascape has to be understood as institutionalized, commercialized and claimed by different subjects (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016, p. 1). Thus, these men in their discussions with me are speaking against these assumptions and addressing larger global media discussions that form as intense part of their intimate environment as it does mine – where migrants from Africa are portrayed in various media discussions as a danger pushing at Europe’s border, desiring nothing more than grasp the

native population's hard earned benefits. The strong reification of "Europe" in their conversations with me indicates an employment of the same discourse predominant in the current mediascape in that they are responding indirectly to these depictions of themselves as black Muslim and African men invading Europe. Often, these men were replying to questions that I had not asked, as if I had unwittingly entered in the middle of their conversation with someone else. Their responses to my questions can be seen as one form of resistance to current images of migration, Muslims and "blackness."

What is also significant is that through their discussions of Europe, such as "not wanting to be in Europe", or emphasizing of "Europe" as contributing to Niger's poverty, "Europe" becomes a 'tangible' construct, just as it becomes so in the contemporary discussions addressing negatively the "refugee crisis". This is similar to what Herzfeld (1989/2016) argues in relation to the nation state, that it becomes real through critics and supporters talking about 'it' (p. 6). By referring to "Europe" when talking about their different experiences in European cities, such as Brussels, Naples, and Milan, - even though Europe was addressed critically – these men as others living in Europe thus participate in the framing of "Europe" as a "real" and solid construct. Accounts of what constitutes "Europe" are still confusing in these men narratives about the "refugee crisis" in Europe and contradicts in crucial ways from the reification in more media generated depiction of Europe in relation to this crisis. Some, I spoke with, stress Niger's postcoloniality in this context and the differences in power between "Europe" and the refugees. For example, Babouli remarks somewhat humorously, when addressing the current refugee situation, that when people come from Africa to Europe, they are only offered the floor of the train station to sleep on and nothing to eat, but Europeans coming Niger are offered place to stay and food to eat. Others when discussing the refugee situation recall, however, Europe more as a place of modernity where they associate the concept of humanitarianism as belonging to Europe. By seeing modernity as emanating from Europe, they echo a hegemonic Eurocentric understanding of Europe as the starting point of history and of disseminating modernity and progress to the rest of the world (Bhambra, 2011). This sense of Europe as symbolic for modernity and human rights was most strongly evoked in my interview with Abdallah who

had recently moved to Brussels in hopes of gaining an income to send to his elderly parents, wife, and children back home. He states directly to me that Europe is a place of humanitarianism. The reaction to the migrant crisis of 2016 is, however, puzzling to him and he seems unable to reconcile the current reality toward his earlier conceptions of Europe in this regard. He explains that he understands that Europe cannot accommodate everyone, furthermore saying softly: “if the population [of Europe] increases suddenly, it might just destabilize the country and its economy. But I think a sense of humanity must be above some economic calculations”. He continues, almost as if pleading for my understanding of their predicament: “For many people in the world, Europe symbolizes humanitarianism, and people think that if they come to Europe, even without papers, they will be protected against war, against hunger, against all the problems they fled”. My feeling is that he is not posing judgment; it is more as if he hopes that I can provide an explanation for this that restores his faith in Europe as symbol of humanitarianism. Somewhat similarly, Mohammed, a well-educated man in his mid-30s who has stayed in Brussels for two years, explains to me that for him Belgium and Europe are places of “solidarity, unity where people’s human rights are respected”. Even though he also critically discusses what he sees as France's continued muddling in Niger’s affairs, his strong association of Europe with human rights and justice seems to go unchallenged.

Babouli, however in his interviews with me, firmly positioned Belgian wealth, exhibited in places such as the Grand Place, as a consequence of the Belgian Congo and Europe’s colonial past. Babouli is unknowingly echoing postcolonial criticism that has stressed how the economic foundation for different European nation states is interrelated with the establishment of colonies (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 115; Mignolo, 2000). Now, Babouli asserted, Europe is “finished”. The economic crisis, he claims, indicating just one sign of European countries inability to maintain their economic and cultural hegemony. Somehow this reference to Europe as “finished” struck me because even though articulated differently still echoes the persistent current discourse in Europe and the global north as living in a stage of crisis, of a particular era or imaginings of a future as “finished” in some sense.

The wider economic crisis in the Eurozone after 2009 led to decreased possibilities for short term employment in Brussels, which was already facing high unemployment rates, thus further signaling coevalness within crisis. Those producing and selling crafts experienced both weak markets and an increased difficulty in finding jobs. As for other residents of Brussels, the intersecting crises of migration, economics, and terror create for these migrants a sense of living in the midst of crisis.<sup>3</sup> The increased securitization within Europe's cities in the aftermath of the 2015 attacks in Paris and the 2016 attacks in Brussels create a strong sense of rupture. Those who I spoke to in the spring of 2016 commented on how suddenly their movements became restricted and of the intensification of fear of being caught by the police and deported from the country. For these men – already living with economic insecurity – the difficulties of getting irregular jobs after the terrorist attacks further intensified their anxieties. One man explained:

It is as if all has stopped after the terrorist attacks. People don't go out to have dinner as much as they did before; they are also afraid to gather together and don't want to go where there are a lot of other people.

His description captures the intense fear in the aftermath of the attack and its effects on the everyday actions of migrants and non-migrants within the city space.

I thought that when I arrived in Brussels in the spring of 2016, that terrorism would be a sensitive topic to these Nigerien men, due to the connections often drawn in popular discourse between Islam, migrants, and terrorism. However, for those I interviewed, such associations were so absurd that they were beyond the need to refute or even debate them. When asking Ali and two other men, one from Niger and one from Burkina Faso, about the

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to many of the world's disadvantaged populations, life for undocumented migrants can, however, be understood as in a constant state of crisis, underscoring Henrik Vigh's (2008) claim that for some people crisis is the pervasive context of everyday life. Vigh argues that instead of merely emphasizing the need to subsume crisis into context, as scholars we should acknowledge that crisis is what constitutes *the* context for many of the world's disadvantaged population; they conduct their lives within a 'crisis' state instead of waiting for life to transition back towards what we would consider to be a normal state.

bombings at the airport and the train station, their expressions were of disbelief. While strongly condemning the terrorist acts, the disbelief was rooted in the illogicality that the terrorists were routinely portrayed in the media and popular discussions as non-Europeans. “How can they not be Europeans?” Ali asks me. “They are born in Europe, they are educated in Europe, they have always live in Europe. How can people then say that they are not European?” Another man stresses how the acts of terrorism make everyone afraid, not only those Europeans with white skin, because as he phrases it: “a bomb at a train station does not ask about a skin color or religion”. His remark succinctly captures how the fear of terrorism is something that the diverse residents of Brussels have in common. To some of the migrants who have recently arrived, however, this fear will be painfully familiar due to increased insecurity in the Sahel area. The recent establishment of a base in Niger for American drones, which is categorized by the American military as a part of the war against terrorism, has for example marked the country as a target for various rebel groups (Bøås & Utas, 2013, p. 12-13, see also Keenan, 2008 for stronger criticism on the active role of Westerners in making Niger into a militarized zone).

Most of the migrants I spoke with in Brussels, had little hope of transcending their lives of poverty, which seemed even more difficult due the sense of Europe in crisis. Prior to arriving in Europe, the continent seemed to embody for many a hope for a better future, not one within Europe but as a way to make life back “home” better. Mohammed, a Tuareg man in his late 40s, tells me almost eagerly, as if he is relieved to have someone to talk to when we are alone for a brief moment, that he feels unable to go back home with nothing. Generally, for irregular West-African migrants, a sense of failure and shame has been one of the central components preventing them from returning home even if they are facing unemployment and other difficulties in their “host” countries (Esson, 2015, p 523). Mohammed has been in Brussels for one year and while being told prior to leaving Niger by those already in Brussels that the economic crisis had made it difficult to find work, he had underestimated these claims. He felt trapped, but tried to hold on to a mask of optimism, speculating that he could possibly try to sell crafted objects, as other Tuaregs have occasionally done in Brussels. When talking about this lack of opportunities, Mohammed

oscillates between referring to 'Brussels' and 'Europe,' indicating how, as a reified place of aspirations, Europe stands also for a space of failure and broken hopes.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative of my interlocutors draws attention to missing aspects in the current depiction of migration and the current crisis in Europe. They firmly locate current migration from Niger, as embedded in Niger's colonial past and in Africa's postcolonial condition, while also drawing attention to interconnections of Europe and Africa in the present. Thus, they interrupt predominant narratives which are based on an erasure of the interlinked history of what we identify today as distinct and different parts of the world. Furthermore, their discussion draws attention to coevalness, as consumers of the same globalized mediascape on the crisis of migration in Europe that depicts migrants and in particular, Muslim men, as a threat to Europe, but their lives in Brussels are also shaped by a sense of crisis in Europe in a wider sense. Even though the experience of crisis is shaped by different positionalities based on the lines of class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Kennedy-Macfoy & Lewis, 2014), the economic crisis and the sense of crisis arising from recent terrorism activity forms as much a part of their lives as lives of others living in Brussels. The depictions of these Nigerien men ultimately contest narratives of Africa as a fixed space, notions that are often underlying the current depiction of the continent (Pype, Woputte & Mélice, 2012, p. 360-361). The narratives of these men are, nevertheless, contradictory: in some sense they are presenting Europe as a symbol of hope for a better life, while also expressing bitter disappointment at some of the multilayered involvement by European countries in their own continent, which they see as characterized by humanitarian discourse, despite a reality of blatant exploitation of people and lands. Ironically, at times when the project of Europe is largely seen as in crisis (Bhambra 2016) some of those who are often portrayed as its enemies – migrants seeking a new life and possibilities within Europe - are perhaps the ones who still have some faith in Europe.

When we came to Brussels in the spring of 2016, my partner was accompanying me for the second time. His intentions on both trips were to get away from his everyday office

environment and thus to better attend to tasks that he urgently needed to finish. However, this time around Ali explained that it was necessary for my partner to accompany him on a visit to his neighborhood. As Ali explained, this was because my partner had not been in Niger and thus he did not know how things were, as he phrased it, “for poor people and Muslims”. There was a firm urgency in Ali’s voice and I was somewhat surprised because this had not been an issue during his first visits. Together we walked around Ali’s neighborhood. Nothing was really happening; children were going to school, women and men were performing their mundane routines. When we sat down in my hotel room, Ali asked my partner rather abruptly: “What did you think?” My partner replied that this seemed just like any other neighborhood with people going about their everyday business. It was clear from Ali’s expression that my partner had passed the test. Going back to Iceland, through the checkpoints of men in militarized suits, this question of “what did you think?” lingered with me as a plea of recognition; not a plea to understand the racism and exclusion of this group but more a plea to understand that the people who live in his neighborhood are not faceless migrants, refugees or potential terrorists, but regular people living their everyday lives.

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