

Friedberg Travel Fellowship Report

During the summer of 2018, I was privileged enough to intern at the Central West Justice Center in Pittsfield. As a volunteer, I helped clients from francophone countries apply for asylum, many of whom were women my age. In one case, a 24-year old woman fled the Democratic Republic of Congo to escape persecution. She had not seen her family in over five years. Her story remains with me, reminding me of the horrors and sacrifices immigrants have to endure to survive. My experience at CWJC led me to enroll in an anthropology course focused on how citizenship rights and immigration policies shape the experiences of migrants worldwide. At the end of this course, I wrote a research paper on how the Parisian newspaper rhetoric on immigration has changed since the French 2017 presidential elections, highlighting the policies of both Marie Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron; however, I was left wanting to increase my knowledge on this topic. With a global rhetoric on stricter border control and over 400,000 immigrants living in Paris, immigration has become a central aspect of French society. In recent years immigrants have been coming into France from Islamic countries — Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. However, despite the increasing number of female immigrants, they are rarely the focus of research. While these countries carry gender inequities, institutionalized through Islamic tradition, France subscribes to equality. As a French major who would be studying abroad in Paris for the spring semester, I knew that I could delve further into my research. After much support from my professors and the Center for Foreign Languages, I received the Marguerite W. Friedberg Memorial Travel Fellowship to pursue my interests.

My project centered around how unmarried Muslim immigrant women adjust to French society; in particular, how they navigate in between a traditional restrictive culture and a new progressive culture. To better understand how women see themselves within their context and how they envision their future, I focused on the smaller and larger impacts of

social constraints, family, and cultural obligations, and normative notions of how these women hoped to build their lives. At the end of my program, I set about contacting organizations and students from Parisian universities who might know of groups or clubs on campus. Unfortunately, after writing countless emails requesting meetings, I was met with refusals. Most of the organizations, such as *Lallab* and *Utopia 56*, were either preoccupied or unable to divulge personal information on their members. Nonetheless—with the help of the Sweet Briar Director—I was able to communicate with an all-women's support group called *Maison de Femmes* (House of Women). The group's director invited me to their weekly meeting, where I could hear from members and other organizations who gave courses on how to manage in the city as a refugee. From this primary meeting, I was fortunate enough to speak with two Muslim women about their journeys and experiences in Paris. As mentioned in my proposal, I wanted to develop a meaningful rapport with these women, allowing for a richer understanding of their situations. As such, I met with these women several times over the course of my final weeks in Paris. Due to the limited access to organizations and local support groups, I also decided to draw a different population from undergraduate and graduate students at the Sorbonne University. Although this demographic group differed from my initial proposal, I was still able to learn about their stories and dreams, many of which were in fact common.

I would also like to share some of intricacies of the interviewing process; for me, the most important part of the process is trust, and to gain a stranger's trust is no easy feat, especially since I was asking them to talk about intimate and personal stories, which included struggle, loss, and stress. Drawing from my previous interviewing techniques, I relied heavily on creating a connection through shared experiences—I too was Muslim and living (temporarily) in a new environment. In addition, these conversations took place at their preferred location as to ensure their comfort; in the process, I discovered new coffee shops,

markets, and parks in the greater Paris area. Due to personal reasons, my informants did not want their photograph taken; however, I was able to take photographs of the places where we had our conversations.



Square de la Roquette, a park that used to be a prison for women in 1932 and was until 1973.



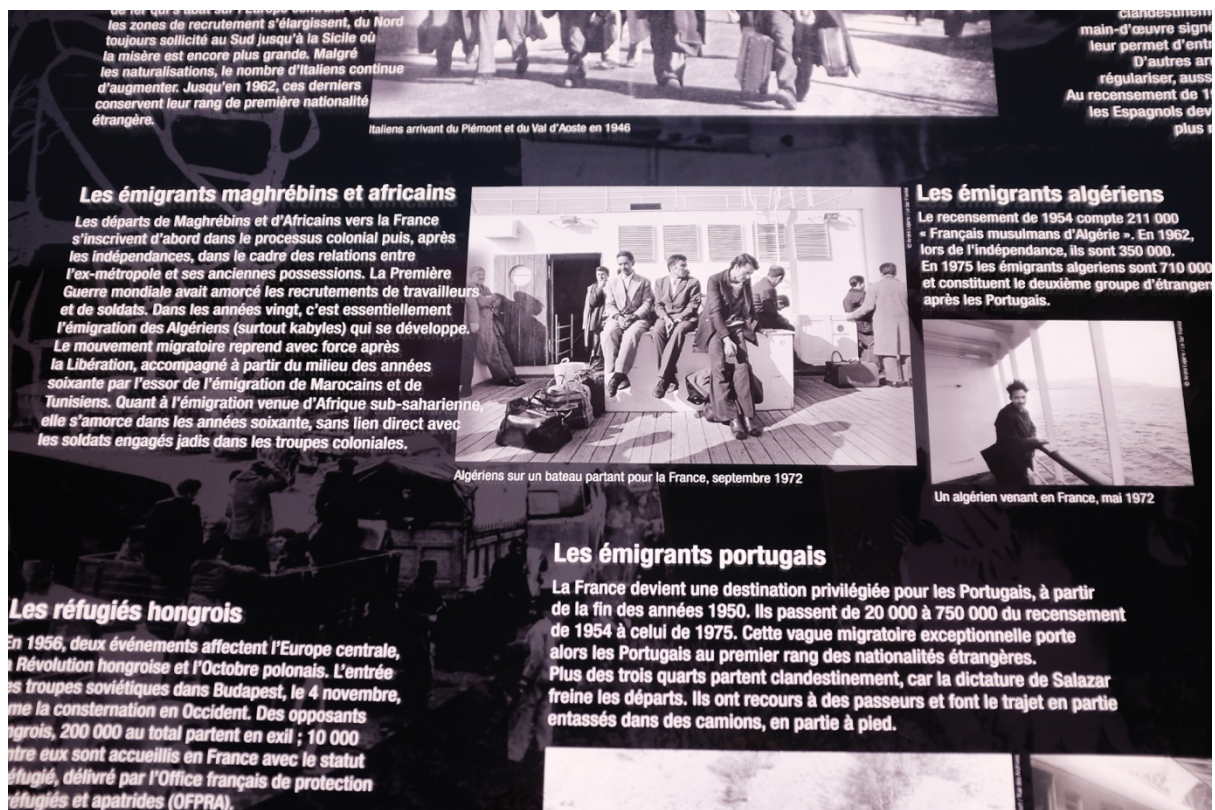
Benches by Les Invalides, a military museum.



A café in the 7th arrondissement that served the best hot chocolate. This man was not my informant, he just happened to be sitting there.

The Friedberg Travel Fellowship also allowed me to visit the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (Museum of Immigration History), a beautiful and educational institution on the history of immigration and refugee populations in France. During my visit, I was able to fully engage with the exhibitions, as I could read all the display signs in French. It was interesting to learn about the different ways that immigrants from different

nationalities were welcomed and treated in society, and how they have shaped the France we know today.



The museum had images from newspapers and magazines, depicting the immigration crisis, which I found very relevant to the research I had previously conducted in my anthropology course at Williams. This image below shows the front page of *Le Figaro*—predominantly left-centered newspaper—asking whether its immigration or an invasion?



I must admit at this project faced many complications, but such is the nature of fieldwork. I realized that even though things don't always go the way they were planned, the journey is still meaningful. Overall, I truly learnt a great deal from these women and their stories. I fully acknowledge that I was unable to create public articles for the Williams community to read, but this was because my informants had all asked me to respect their information and identity. Therefore, this project turned out to be one of personal growth, I was able to speak in a second language about conversations not usually had in a classroom, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to have met and understand these women, and I

was able to explore Paris in a unique and inspiring way, all of which shaped my study abroad into an unforgettable experience.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Marguerite W. Friedberg Memorial Travel Fellowship committee and Dr. David Friedberg who granted me the opportunity to turn my research interests into a reality. My project not only allowed me to engage more directly with the refugee population, but also allowed me to practice my French and learn from others. Such a diverse group of women have enriched my study abroad experience and pushed me beyond my boundaries, both of which have increased my understanding of French culture.

Please find below a few phrases and quotes from my informants that I found particularly touching. These conversations have been translated from French to English.

“There was not a lot of opportunity in Algeria, I left because I knew I would have a better education. But I left my mother, father, two sisters, and two brothers behind. It was the most difficult decision I have ever made, sometimes I regret it, but other times... [pause]. I hope I am doing the right thing.”

“The Parisians are very cold, they are not warm. In contrast, in Algeria, hospitality can be found everywhere. You laugh, you smile. Here, everyone is stressed. People run everywhere, no one knows how to relax or slow down. I feel lost sometimes, in a world that is too fast for me, in a place where no one has the time to understand me...you have to count on yourself, no one will help you. If you don't try, no one will try for you. It's different here.”

“Back home there's a big festival in the main square, where the people play, dance. My grandmother's cooking. Those are the things I miss...But I am happy here. There has not been a case in which I was harassed or troubled. But, I was underestimated at work, I heard

a colleague say “Oh she’s doing well for not being from here.” That annoyed me. Something else that bothers me is that all the immigrants in Paris are put in the “banlieues.” One area has all the Arabs, one has all the Turks, one has all the Malays. This is shocking, because at home we don’t have this segregation.”

“I never spoke French before coming here, but now I am fluent. Back home, I could only work at home, and now I live alone but at least I can do the work I want to... Ramadan is difficult here, the days are long and everyone, including myself, is so busy that there is no time to pray and follow tradition.”