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Violence, state cruelty and (un-)institutional
resistance**

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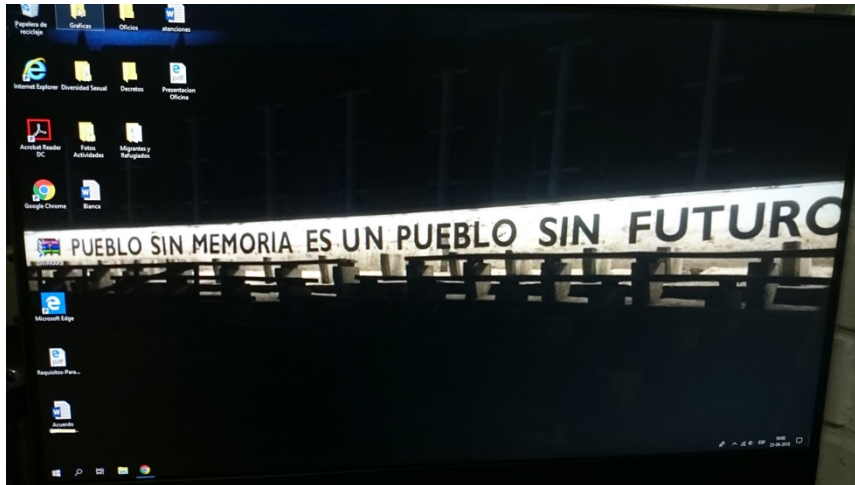
**The story of a municipal migrants' and refugees' office in
a Santiago de Chile suburb**

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The story of a municipal migrants' and refugees' office in a Santiago de Chile suburb



Picture of a computer's screen. Chile, October 2018 – Credit: Charlotte Grégoreski

Above, you can see a picture: it represents what the head officer of a municipal migrants and refugees office in a Santiago de Chile suburb saw every day, when he turned his computer on, throughout 2018. The Spanish sentence you can read means 'a people without memory is a people without a future'. It is an invitation to not forget what happened, in this case with the Pinochet dictatorship. It actually reminds us of the Chilean news (political situation and important protests from October to December 2019). The findings presented in this paper are part of an ongoing investigation in social anthropology. Two ethnographic stints of fieldwork were carried out between 2015 and 2019, in France and in Chile respectively. More than 70 persons (migrants, social workers, State or United Nations officers, etc.) were interviewed in this investigation.

Just a couple of words about the two places I have studied: in France, my work took place in an Emergency Migrants Center, in a Paris suburb. This centre hosted migrants who had been evacuated from Parisian migrants' camps. It provided accommodation and social services. Although a French NGO managed it, all the grants were provided by the French state. This centre, just like this specific State programme, no longer exists. In Chile, and it is what interests us today, I have been working in a Municipal Migrants' and Refugees' Office, in a Santiago de Chile suburb, in 2015 and 2018. Thereafter, I am going to call this place 'Song office' and 'las Violetas' the town where it is located. In addition, all the identities of the persons interviewed have been changed (names, sex...). The Song office is a local and public service for migrants and refugees living in Las Violetas, in Chile. It is a local initiative: it has been developed by Las Violetas' city hall. Occasionally, for the past couple of years, it has got some state or international organisations grants (for specific programs). Its main activities are providing social and legal advice for migrants, giving Spanish classes, organising intercultural activities, and participating in the migration policies' discussions in Chile. The Song office still exists today.

My interest for these two places arose from different reasons. The main one is even if they are not State offices strictly speaking; they are both places where State policies are designed, materialised and implemented

on the ground. The simultaneous distance and proximity this kind of places have with the State allow us to glimpse different tensions, fights, and struggles around the state and its migration policies.

More specifically, in these two locales meant for welcoming migrants we can touch upon the following three analytic points:

- The different scales of the political (inside/outside, local/ national/ international/ global, private/public, individual/ institutional/ political);
- The different temporalities of migrants' reception policies (past/ present/ future);
- The interactions between different 'actors' interacting on the scene of migration (State, N.G.O., United Nations, O.I.M., local governments, universities, individuals, etc.).

The story of the Song Office brings all of this out. It invites us to observe, from the ground, how local migrants' reception connects with individual, national or international representations and practices of migrations; how different institutions (local governments, State government, international organisations, United Nations services...) place themselves (or not) in this field; how the analysis of the Song Office reflects past and future practices of migrants' reception.

The Song Office's trajectory

First, for a general understanding, below is a diagram of the Song office's trajectory from its inception. I divided it in different phases. I like to imagine it as some kind of human development: like a person, a place appears, is born, and then grows up, step by step, with important developmental phases. It has a '(His-)story'. The dates you can see on the diagram above are approximate: it is not that easy to distinguish between all the phases, because most of the time, they overlap. Nevertheless, the goal here is to present a general idea about how this place has been growing and developing. Therefore, I am going to present you all these phases shortly first, and after that we are going to go into each one in depth.

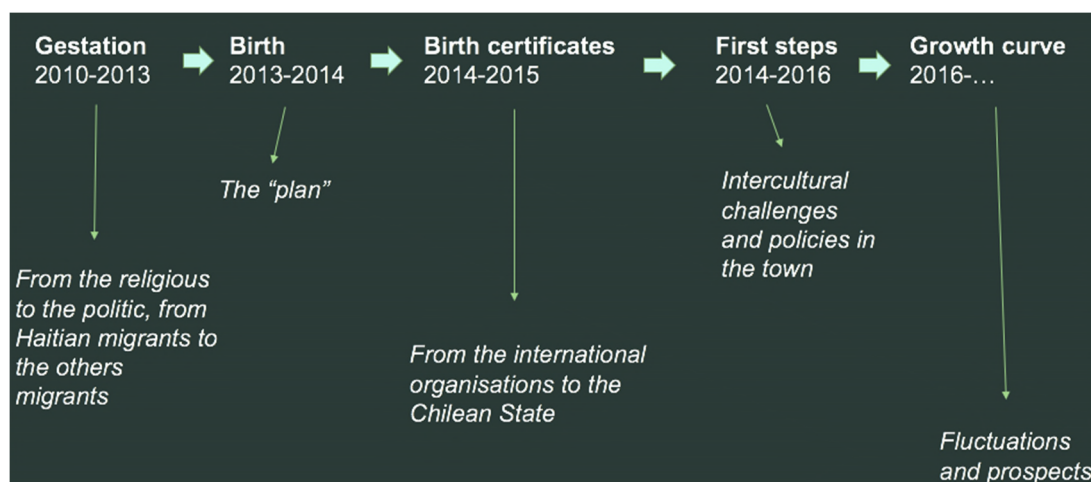


Diagram of Song Office's trajectory, December 2019 by Charlotte Grégoreski.

Briefly, the trajectory starts with a first phase going back between 2010 and 2013. It is a kind of gestation of the Song office, the time the Song Office emerges and shapes itself. I call this phase, 'from the religious to the politic, from Haitian migrants to the other migrants', we are going to see why shortly. Then we have the birth, so a phase where the outlines of the Song office appear more precisely and where we can observe a first attempt in formulating a local policy. I call this phase 'the plan'. After the plan, we have the 'birth certificates', or some official and public recognition, first from the international organisations then from the Chilean State. The Song office's 'first steps' start at the same time. Activities around intercultural challenges in Las Violetas gets further strengthened devising and implementing a local policy. From 2016 until now, the Song Office continues its activities with important variations, depending on different political aspects. That is why I called this phase 'fluctuations and prospects'.

Gestation: from the religious to the politic, from Haitian migrants to the other migrants

First phase: the gestation. I would like to start with a couple of quotes. Therefore, first we have a quote from Miguel, a city hall worker in Las Violetas. When we met, in 2018, he explained to me that the emergence of the Song Office was connected with the arrival of Haitian people:

The story says that here, in Las Violetas, migrants as a topic started to be evident especially with the Haitian community, after Haiti's earthquake (2010). At that moment they've started seeing that here, in Las Violetas, there were, not as much as today, but there were a lot of Haitian people. Then, the municipality, to support Haitian people in one way, put a phone so Haitian people could communicate with their families in Haiti. Here we started working.' (Miguel, Chilean head officer in Las Violetas' municipality)

Later in the interview, Miguel also importantly said that this kind of migration was very unusual in Chile. As he tells us, before, it was a sign of 'good luck to come across a black person in the street':

When I was a child, and I was walking in Santiago's streets with my mum, in those days, black people here in Chile was very rare/unusual. It was very, really very hard that you could interact with, and actually, when I was walking in the street, each time a black person came across us, I remembered my mum saying to me: 'look! A little black for good luck!' Because they were rare! (...) But now, now, for example, you walk around here, in Las Violetas and it is a mix of colours. Do you get it? (Miguel, Chilean head officer in Las Violetas' municipality)

Yet, the mayor of Las Violetas also importantly said, in 2018:

Before 2008, there was migration. It was just hidden 'under the carpet'. No one spoke about it. It was...it was a problem, seeing like a problem. Something like, we are not going to, we are not going to see that! (Laura, Chilean Mayor of Las Violetas)

Therefore, Miguel and others inform us that, in Las Violetas, something special, disruptive, happened with the arrival of a new form of migration in the city: there were more black people, from Haiti. This was unusual in Chile. This 'event' led to 'the work', that is to say the municipal interest in doing something for the migration on a local scale. The mayor tells us: there were some migrants before in the city, but they were hidden. Therefore, the idea of the Song office starts with this new migration, which reflects itself in this old one. It also starts with a new mayor. Because before her, a mayor was in place since the return to democracy in the nineties.

The new mayor declared her interest in doing something. She asked a nun, Sister Inés, to investigate the topic, for the municipality. It is important to say that Sister Inés is someone from Las Violetas, who had been travelling and working abroad with migrant people. At that moment, Sister Inés started to explore who could help her, whom she could work with, where she could find support for this local initiative. For the State, it was not yet a topic: in fact, Chile was a country people used to leave (because of the dictatorship), rather than migrated to. There was more interest in the comeback of Chilean exiles than in migrants. Sister Inés connected with people she used to work with, here and abroad: religious and international organisations. At that moment, in Chile, these were in fact the only ones providing a few services for migrants. They were the first who supported Sister Inés and Las Violetas municipality in the creation of the Song Office. To be fair, there was also a municipal migrants office in Santiago where Sister Inés got some inspiration as well. So, in partnership with some of them (Jesuits Migrants Service, UN Refugee agency, local churches), Inés started on her own, with grants, to carry on some activities in las Violetas: mainly Spanish classes and social services. Felipe, a Peruvian resident of Las Violetas, remembered the time Sister Inés went to reach out to them in a local church:

The head office of the 'Señor de los Milagros' (which is a Peruvian religious ceremony) is in Maria's church. And Inés knew that there, migrants were getting together. So she went to get us. We were Peruvian people, people from Colombia, from Dominican Republic, and we've been slowly joining Song office like this.' (Felipe, a Las Violetas' Peruvian resident, 2018)

Birth: the 'plan'

Then came « the plan » phase. It originated from different things. First, the mayor got another mandate, from 2012. In the same year, Sister Inés joined a year's training about public policies and migrations, offered by a foundation that was connected to the United Nations. Indeed, at that moment, Chilean Universities did not offer this topic in their academic programs. Concurrently, the Song office started to increase: a new worker was employed by the municipality to help Sister Inés; various interns from universities took part in the work, as well as volunteers. The Song office continued to provide social and legal advice, Spanish classes for more and more people, mainly Haitian. Students helped to establish short evaluations as well. However, the Song office did not exist in a juridical way: there was no legal document about its existence. To try to formalise and organise Song office's activities, Sister Inés asked an academic, Carol, to help her. She said, back in 2018, 'The

Sister told me: “I want a policy. I want a document with guiding principles.” The Song office got some grant from the United Nations Refugee Agency, and some support from the municipality. Then Carol started drafting a general strategic document. In this process, the representation about the other side of the Atlantic Ocean is interesting to highlight. Thus, Sister Inés tells us that looking at European policies was not an alternative because of the then ongoing economic crisis:

‘When I prepared the local policy in Las Violetas, I said to Carol: “Don’t look at Europe.” Do you get it? Because there was an economic crisis happening in Europe. I said to her: ‘Before that, Europe had very good policies’. Spain, for example: I read five local policies for migrants and refugees elaborated by municipalities. Brilliant! But at that moment, Spain was deporting Ecuadorean people. It was leaving all the social aspects out. There was a crisis in France: they were throwing all the Muslims out, they were removing all the religious things, taking the headscarf from the little girls, removing the crucifix from classrooms... then, it wasn’t an alternative. So I said to Carol: ‘If we are Latinos, we have to look around’. (Sister Inés, former coordinator of the Song Office, Chilean Nun)

In 2014, a document called ‘plan of reception and recognition of migrants and refugees in Las Violetas’ (‘Plan de Acogida y Reconocimiento de Migrantes y Refugiados de la comuna de Las Violetas’ in Spanish) was officially finalised by Carol. It was presented and validated by the municipal authorities. The Song office was officially born.

It is also interesting to have in mind some of Sergio’s concerns at that moment: in fact, a very few global and local data were available about migrants then: the last national census dated back to 2002. Las Violetas’ new migrants plan appeared: it was based upon ‘unknown’ and ‘nebulous’ migrants’ realities, as Sergio said:

‘I said to Inés: “But we don’t know who are these peoples! It’s OK, we are going to apply the plan of reception, we are going to follow the protocols and the guiding principles, but, however, I don’t know who this Other is! This Other still being there, in the vague”.’ (Sergio, former employee of the Song Office, Chilean)

Birth certificates: from the international organisations to the Chilean State

The Song office continues its trajectory. Phase 3. It gets more and more visibility. Public events are organized in the city, as the refugee day or the migrant day, promoted by the UN. These official days will be celebrated every year from 2013.

The Song office is also awarded ‘honours’: first in 2014: the UN Refugee Agency named Las Violetas ‘Solidarity town’. Solidarity town (‘ciudades solidarias’ in Spanish) is a South American certification, promoted by United Nations since 2004 to support local government to get involved in welcoming refugees in their territories. Indeed, it is interesting to know that very few refugees were living and are living in Las Violetas. Therefore, I quote Inés: *‘but with these few refugees, we succeeded in doing interesting work’.*

The second award comes from the new Chilean government, in place since 2014, which created a new national certification at that time, the 'migrant stamp' ('sello migrante' in Spanish). For a United Nations officer I met in 2018, it is since 'Bachelet's second term that migration became a topic 'in vogue' in Chile. It is true that since 2014, not only State institutions, but also universities, media...are much more interested in migration in Chile. Las Violetas received the 'Migrant Stamp' in 2015.

The Song office also started collaborating with the International Organization for Migrations, which at the time was an independent organisation, trying to place itself 'in the game' in between migration and local governments in Chile.¹ For Las Violetas' municipality, the United Nation's certification meant an international visibility as this quote from Inés shows:

During the Day of the Refugee, we get the official certification 'Las Violetas United Town'. And this introduces us to an international level. Our plan of reception and recognition is assumed by Sao Paolo, for example. Mexico knows it. A city of Guatemala, Honduras know it. Do you understand?
(Inés, former coordinator of the Song Office, Chilean Nun, 2018)

Some Song Office's workers and local politicians started travelling around the world to speak about their migrant local policy or to attend some international training. Yet, state recognition points out how Chilean State gets inspiration from local government. As I said before migration was not a topic for Chilean State until then: the best illustration of that is the reference law about migration, which still is that created during the dictatorship, in 1975. This is what Inés tried to tell us when she said:

The 'Migrant's Stamp' doesn't come from Migration State Department. It comes from Las Violetas.'
(Sister Inés, former coordinator of the Song Office, Chilean Nun)

Tomas developed pretty much the same line of thinking in the following quote. In fact, there was not and there still is no State policy for migrants in Chile. 'Political practices are very improvised', as Tomas said:

Chile is different from what it was 10 years ago. Because of the migration. And the thing is there is not migration policy. There is no policy about migrants' integration. So municipalities did what they could do with what they had. (...) It often seems that policy is very, I mean political practices are very improvised. There are no...there are no guiding principles from the State. (Silence). This is anonymous, isn't it? (Tomas, Argentinean United Nations officer)

¹ The International Organization for Migrations is born in 1951. From 2016, it became a member of the United Nations. Its general policies and activities are criticized by several organizations. Cf.: Migreurop brief n°9. The international organization for migration working for (closed) borders. May 2019. <http://www.migreurop.org/article2927.html?lang=en>

First steps: intercultural challenges and politics in the town

Phase 4. In Las Violetas city, the local government continues to consolidate its migration plan. More people are employed to work in the Song office. New jobs are also created in some municipal services, based on real communicational issues: the 'intercultural facilitators'. These new jobs employ Haitian people to ensure mutual understanding between Chilean local officers and Haitian residents, in municipal schools and municipal health centres. A non-discriminative campaign was also carried out for all municipal workers. The Song office also started getting occasional grants from the State, because, as I said before, since 2014, the State started getting more involved and developed specific programs for migrant people.

Growth curve: fluctuations and prospects

Still, the Song office almost only depends on the local government and its political commitments. This fact became self-evident in phase 5. The Song office still did not have any legal existence. For different reasons, apparently financial ones, the Office got through some fluctuations. Its team got smaller within approximately a year. Thus, Rodrigo explained:

Some drops started to happen, small ones, in 2016. But the real change happened at the beginning of 2017. (...) Then the team has been lowered and hasn't been replaced. Then we have to appeal more to the force/power, as the conviction, rather than to the institutional structure in order to continue the job. No? (...) They told us they needed to lower cost and so people who were leaving weren't replaced. (...) It was a very hard time for the Song office.' (Rodrigo, Chilean former employee of the Song Office)

We are in the fluctuations and prospects' phase. The mayor gets her third mandate. During the years 2016-2017, there was a lot of turnover in the Song Office: Inés and other people left the place, some of them were not replaced, and head officers changed a lot, bringing different points of view about the Song Office's purposes. The Song Office came to a halt. From 2018, it went up again: more people were employed, which meant more activities could carry on.

A new Chilean government also took place in 2018, with different lines of acting in the field of migration, which resonate with a dominant global speech about migrations. The Chilean State then promoted a 'safe and regular migration', which had to be 'orderly'. The key sentence is in fact: 'put the house in order' ('ordenar la casa' in Spanish). Within one month of this new government, the State made a couple of administrative reforms: main changes concerned Haitian migrants. From then, they had to provide a Consular Visa to enter Chile.

The focus placed on Haitian migrants ripples down to what has been happening on a local scale, or vice versa. It is with the arrival of Haitian migrants in the city that the Song Office emerges. Throughout 2018, migration

realities seemed to change in Chile: many Venezuelan people were coming in, fleeing their country. Migration in Chile became an important topic, from State to media or other power institutions.

Therefore, in Las Violetas, people wondered how the Song Office had to continue its trajectory, how new local realities, connected to political stakes, could be integrated. What is the Song Office's purpose? What purpose do we want to give it or not, and why? Miguel illustrates all these local tensions and prospects very well, crisscrossing the past, present and future:

We want -how can I say it?- we want to expand on the subject of the migrants' office ('ampliar el giro' in Spanish). So we speak about emigration, human mobility. And that put the office on a distinct level and I think it is 'communicationally' valuable and we must know how to work on it because at present, look: in the migrants' office, the concept of migrants is already worn out! There are people...for them it is the 'Haitian's office'. I am going to say, it has a wrong sign/label, but it has a sign/label. Let's say that a Las Violetas' resident, common and ordinary, doesn't have anything to do with a migrant's office because it doesn't offer him anything. This is an office for migrants. And so, with the Haitian presence, or it's 'Haitian office', or for bad/wrong people it's 'black people's office'. Then, this generates a prejudice with regard to the office, it generates a weight to the office. That's why we have to expand on the subject of the office, where we can eventually connect people who want to go abroad. And I think this is showing a new face of the office. And then we are speaking about human mobility. And we leave the migration concept. And that how we extend the prospect, and if there is some real interest on that, then the same office may become a place where Chilean people and migrant people can meet. And it's this purpose we have to expect: that they meet and not that they walk apart.' (Miguel, Chilean head officer in Las Violetas' municipality)

I would like to finish with this quote. Miguel tells us: some racist perceptions of the municipal migrants and refugees' office in Las Violetas led to new local strategies and general thoughts around migrations' representations. The Song office has started changing its shape, its name, and its goals. The way to protect this place, or to use it politically, is 'expanding on the subject', ('ampliar el giro' in Spanish) as Miguel says, from a migrants' office to a human mobility's office, from migrants to Chilean citizens/local residents, from a restrictive concept of migration to a common one, a human one, maybe more even more: a human right. To provisionally conclude, Miguel's thoughts introduce us to a lot of interesting questions, about the political use of migration terms, the local tensions and challenges, the fragilities/the ephemeral/the force (all together) of local migrations policies, and other ways to look at it and which remain to be analysed in further depth.