

# Suelí – Should I Stay or Should I Go?

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By Andrea Latorre

Suelí is a 29-year-old, of Brazilian origin, who has lived in Barcelona since the age of 24. She was contacted by members of the EUMARGINS team on two occasions, approximately one year apart. On the first occasion a long biographical interview was realized, and the second took place in her neighbourhood, visiting places that she chose as examples of her own from daily life, impregnated with her working life. During this last interview she took photographs that illustrated her story.



She always showed a great willingness to cooperate, and interest in letting her voice be heard. She has a marked accent and expressed herself by blending Portuguese and Castilian words and syntax, though refusing the option of doing the interview purely in Portuguese. The effort to overcome cultural, economic and socio-affective barriers are significant in her migratory history, but also the awareness of the limits and rejection, all of which led her to what she calls an internal "revolt"<sup>1</sup> at the time of the second interview.

*I used to come here to take the air, a quiet place ... I love PSJ [street name]. I also brought my children here, the children that I care for, I've been with them for six years, I am their mother (laughs) ... I care for them more. After all, if it wasn't for us, how would the Catalans work? How would they earn money?*

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## Migratory History

Suelí is the second of three brothers and sisters, from a middle class family, from Sao Paulo, Brazil. She had a happy childhood and adolescence, beginning to construct hopes and dreams regarding her future as any teenager might. But her life was changed drastically by the sudden death of her mother. Her father, after a time, left his children alone, when they were between 15 and 20 years old, to start a new life with a young girl.

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<sup>1</sup> A significant word in her story that she always says in Portuguese: "revolta".

*When my mother died, we didn't know how to wash clothes, because my mother did everything. We didn't know how to cook food, we didn't know how to do anything! And we had to learn, we had to learn everything. We had a very bad time, but we also learning to be young, but with the mind of 30 to 35 year olds.*

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**A photo of Suelí**

Suelí and her sister had to work hard to maintain their home and a few years later, when her sister got pregnant and she was fired, she fell into a depression, and had to emigrate, looking for a better future. Her destiny would be Barcelona, since she had an aunt living in the city since the 1980's her arrival would be facilitated; her aunt bought her ticket and promised that she had a job for her, but this was not the case. With the following words she describes this time of drastic change and the dreams she harboured:

*S: My sister says: "please do not go!", she asks this of me while crying. And I said, "we have to ... Our lives must change. We cannot live like this anymore." I no longer have any clothes left to wear. That is to say, I had a pair of trousers, and I came to Barcelona with just two pairs of knickers.*

*S: The worst thing that's happened in my life was the death of my mother. And the second was leaving my family behind. I'm not going anywhere. Because on the day that I went to bury my mother, I told her, although she no longer heard me, but I promised her and I'm going to keep my promise, "I'm not leaving this place, until I've achieved my dream". I am getting somewhere: that is I'm paying my Sister's University fees. She goes to University. I just want to see that through and I want to have ... My big dream in Brazil is a great country house and to have three horses. That's what I want.*

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However, in the last interview, she ruled out her great dream and said she no longer had a future plan. Following the financial crisis in Spain it had become more difficult for her to save money and what she manages to get together she uses to travel to Brazil every two years to be with her family. Neither does she know for sure whether to continue living in Barcelona, although she likes it and feels adapted to the local conditions, she has failed to establish social networks: her work does not leave her with any leisure time, and the Catalans seem "very closed" to her.

## Work and Education: "My life is just work"

In Brazil, after the death of her mother and while still very young she began working as a receptionist, in a nursery school, devoting many hours to her work and earning minimal money, but managing to balance work and studies until she completed high school.

Upon arriving in Barcelona, she moved among the low-skilled and low-paid jobs circuit, until she managed to reach an acceptable standard of living at which point she obtained her residence permit on account of the housework, something she continues to do to this today.

*I learned a lot then: now I know my own worth. If you want the cleaning done, well it's twelve euros an hour, or ten, and if not, end of discussion. You can look for someone else who wants to do it for you for seven euros. Now I know my own worth, now I know my value. Before I lived in fear of the police, as I didn't papers.*

*And people here do not think about a cleaning lady. People will pay if you work, if you do not work, you are not paid. If you're sick, it is your problem: get on with it! So in August they all go off on vacation to enjoy themselves, but although they may have money they will not pay you for the month of August and will not let you clean the house either. So I was obliged to accept, except in the case of my boss, that is my boss now, as we've now entered into an agreement that she'll pay me my holiday pay. But she didn't ever pay me that, no holiday pay, or pay in December, never. I've always been a girl that has had to know how to get on with it.*

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The precarious employment conditions go hand in hand with her time spent at work and the difficulties for her inclusion in the host society, all of which generate frustration and resentment inside of her. Over time this has settled in and Suelí perceives strong barriers in regards to her social and employment mobility. Through her narrative the weight of social and migratory politics is clear in the processes of inclusion/exclusion and their potential as tools of cohesion or social fragmentation.

*My life has become this way, and that is the "revolt" that I have inside of me: You get up early, you go out with a coffee here, you get to work, you put on the work t-shirt, you start work and all you get is orders: clean this, clean that. How can you integrate in society like that? If the government does nothing to help integrate immigrants within it, it is hypocritical. It's all a lie, they'd do nothing for a cleaner, if you fall and hurt yourself you're no right to have time off, or to unemployment benefit. So when I go to work, with whom shall I talk? With the toilet? It is very sad to put it like that, and more so for a person like me who had so many friends in Brazil. Maybe it's my fault for coming here and saying, "I came to work and then go back", but that's a lie, today I realize*

*I need to have friends here, to have my social life, but it is very difficult. I leave for work early, at six in the morning, and I get back at eleven at night, my life, my time for me, is the gym.*

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Suelí's wish is to continue her studies and to go to university, but working conditions and language requirements limit her potential.

*I worked regularly as a receptionist and administrative assistant and was climbing the ladder in Brazil and it is very painful to see the girls here going to university while you're not able to study. Because you have a different view in Brazil, that when you come here you'll have money and you will be able to study and it is a lie, a lie, because you're not going to study, you're going to work and if you do not work ...*

*So, it is not that I am not an intelligent person, I'm smart, I studied up to university level, but everything will stagnate here if you do not activate your mind, everything ends up inside a box, and my life is in a box today. Yes I can make the most of my intelligence, but right now it is very difficult, even simple reason, as my life is based on cleaning and babysitting, cleaning and babysitting. "Ah, you don't read!" I try, but I fall asleep. "Ah, but you're not looking for training." I looked, but there's nothing that I can fit into my schedule. I don't have a grandfather to help me here, because here if you have mum and dad you have everything, and I don't have that.*

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**The street where Suelí lives, situated in the same neighbourhood where she works**

## **Civic-political participation and stigmatization: "Why do we have to become garbage here? If we are intelligent, if we are beings capable of anything?"**

Suelí is an immigrant with a certain status that corresponds to a hierarchy built in the interplay of the social and historical context, the social places assigned and assumed, as reflected for example in the workplace.

*An Englishman, a German ... for them they are not immigrants, they are the society. The true trash for them are Moroccans, and South Americans (Ecuadorians, Bolivians). But this garbage is what lifts up the country, it's the trash that, when they go to expensive restaurants, are out in the back, cooking with swollen feet, but they do not value this, this is my "revolt."*

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She questions and resists the place that is assigned to her, and the stereotypes that accompany it, and she wonders about how to reclaim her rights, but above all from whom. She does not believe that immigrants are important to political parties and does not plan to participate in other organizations, in contrast, she proposes concrete actions to gain a voice and "to do justice", although maintaining: "I do not think anything will happen, it's more to calm my ego."

*With my friend, we always go flying about, we wanted to make a t-shirt as a way of reasserting our rights, saying: "I'm an immigrant, so what?", "We are Brazilians but we are not whores," the internal revolt is this, you would not understand, but it's true. Sometimes I'm on the metro and I think, if only that shitty Catalan was here now that hit that female immigrant in the face. Because I promise you, as I have blood in my veins, that I could take him, with this loaded backpack, because I live on the street, I'd give to him in his head. Because the fucking Catalans did nothing to defend that girl, because they're plain shit, a bunch of shitty nothings, it's true. They did nothing because they hate immigrants. In my country, if they did that to you as you are Uruguayan, I promise you that the first one to stand up would be a Brazilian, to go and hit the boy.<sup>2</sup>*

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## **Language and exclusion: "So it will be, if you do not speak Catalan, you have to clean up other people's shit."**

Catalan, which together with Castilian constitutes the official languages in Catalonia, stands as an obstacle that limits opportunities for education and employment when there are no real opportunities for its learning.

*Why did I not look for another company? Because you have to have Catalan, everywhere you go. I understand everything, but I do not open to it as I feel blocked out by it, I am blocked in by society, because the anger I have inside*

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<sup>2</sup> She refers to a racist attack involving a young Ecuadorian girl happened on October 2007 in the Barcelona's metro; it was documented by video.



*me will not let me drop it. And all of my bosses are 'Catalanistas' and they see this. I've taken a certain telling off from the Catalans. It's not that I don't like it, I want to learn, I have books, I can read in Catalan, and when I listen to it I understand everything, but I don't seem to be able to speak it, except for when I am alone with the children I work with, but with other people, no. It's a trauma.*

*I started ... I don't study Catalan as there is no way to fit it in with my timetable. They want us to learn but they do not know ... They know well enough that we are the slaves of twenty first century. They set the courses for people at, well ... up to seven, or six is the entrance time, and they have to learn that immigrants work until eight or nine at night. They do not give these courses, it's a lie that the government does this, that it is going to give immigrants access to Catalan. Then they claim that we do not know Catalan and don't integrate into society. If they want us to learn it they have to set up courses for working people. I went to look at the schedules, it was not due to a lack of interest on my part. I went to look at the schedules and they were up till six and I work until half past eight and on Saturday there is a waiting list of up to 6 months and so I told him not to put me in that queue or anything, I don't want to learn this anymore.*

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## **The weight of social networks in projecting the future**

This is a crucial aspect for Suelí. She recognizes many positive aspects of her life in Barcelona that make her feel part of the general social life.

*You work more and you earn, the organization of the city, of the police, recycling ... In Brazil it is starting, at the moment it's not as dangerous here as it is there, I like living here and miss it when I'm there.*

*Here everyone can do what they want, that's a major difference.*

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However, the limits she encounters for the construction of social networks lead her to question her staying here in the future, even when considering how difficult it would be to return to Brazil. She tells us of her efforts and frustrations when trying to make contact with other people on the bus, at the gym and on the internet, where she curiously runs searches for: "integration of migration", or "fatties."

*S: We are so integrated ... we recycle, if I see litter in the street I pick it up. So, we're integrated, but not in so far as the subject of friendship goes, because if people do not want to make friends with me I don't have to roll out the red carpet for them, I live as I do and that's that.*

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*E: Why?*

*S: Their friendships are circular: from this school and onto University, it's not that they don't open, but they are so closed... Not that they're bad people, there are ways of living. We gratefully smile to the world. I do not know if it's because life is more difficult and we don't have everything we want, and here they do, and are egocentric. I have wonderful bosses, and the only people I talk to. On the weekend my life revolves around the inside of my house and my Brazilian friend with whom I live. In 6 years I have made one friend, a Mexican girl. E: And the future? Can that which causes your 'revolt' change?*

*That would be complicated. I want it to change, but it is not easy, people will not give you a break, you cannot enter something that does not allow you to. I do not want to make a friendship at a party, in a club. I would like to go somewhere and start as a whole person, little by little.*

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In her case the significant role of social networks as a basic survival aid are clear, particularly in a context where the welfare state system is based on help from the family. The relationship she had for 6 years with a Moroccan boy was very important to her, but due to religious differences they are no longer together.

*It is a forbidden love. It's a story. We love each other very much, we love each other madly. Yesterday was his birthday, we went to dinner. He was everything to me. My changes of flat ... he arranged for me to get this flat too, as he spoke for me, because he speaks perfect Castilian. If I had spoken for myself I'd be on the street below under the rubble. They judge you by your mouth.*

*At this point I can only count on my legs, nothing more, I can't count on anyone. In a very complicated situation I would have to go back, even without money. I think you should always have enough in the bank for the ticket, € 1400.- in case you need to go back.*

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Gymnasium where Suelí goes