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No Going Back

Ground-breaking lab sends
students to Balkan Route to learn
about refugees—and themselves

By Arne Norris
Opening Photograph by Bassam Khabieh



Imagine yourself stranded and alone. Reaching out around you is a chaotic city of 14 million people where, day and night, crowds fill the ancient streets. As you walk you hear a blend of many languages, the backdrop of urban life at the crossroads of Asia and Europe.

Turn down a side alley and at a café table under a cool cover of spreading green vines sits a small group engaging in deep discussion. Connected by an often invisible struggle and brought together by war and poverty, they are gathered to share their experiences. At the group's center is Chloé Powers '19.

This day in Istanbul, Powers poses questions—about their lives as refugees and members of the LGBTI community—that are difficult to answer. Doing so means reliving experiences all those at the table wish to someday forget.

“It’s incredibly human and incredibly personal in ways that are really hard to describe,” Powers said. “Half of us would end up crying, about issues of migration, gender and sexuality, discrimination, friends who had spent time in prison in their home countries on the issue of queerness, and were having a hard time finding a job in Turkey, trying to figure out whatever they could to get asylum somewhere else. And then ten minutes later be talking and joking—having more of a normal encounter and just living life as people living in a city.”

A double major in global studies and anthropology with a minor in women's, gender, and sexuality studies, Powers was in Istanbul networking, scouring the city, making contacts with LGBTI refugees and activists, finding people to share their stories as part of a project at Colby, the Insurgent Mobilities Lab. The lab, involving more than a dozen students, is researching the dynamics of migration along the Balkan Route that hundreds of thousands of refugees have traveled in a grave effort to seek a better life in Northern Europe.

Insurgent Mobilities is directed by Assistant Professor of Global Studies Nadia El-Shaarawi and Associate Professor of Global Studies Maple Razsa, who, in 2015, conducted fieldwork with refugees and activists in countries all along the route, stretching from Turkey to Germany. The goal of the project, they say, is to understand how, in an era of increasingly closed borders, refugees and activists struggled for freedom of movement along the route and, for a brief period, achieved it.

Insurgent Mobilities is about the political possibilities of movement, what happens when social movements come together with the (literal) movement of people.

MOBILITIES LAB TRAINS STUDENTS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS

Insurgent Mobilities: Migrants and Activists Building the Balkan Route is an ongoing ethnographic research project led by Assistant Professor of Global Studies Nadia El-Shaarawi and Associate Professor of Global Studies Maple Razsa to study the mobility of people along the Balkan Route.

Wars in Syria and Iraq, and instability in North Africa, triggered a wave of migration that saw more than one million refugees flee to Greece in 2015, the first stop in their journey to new lives in western Europe. In the spring of 2016, Balkan states began closing their borders, trapping many migrants en route and forcing others to search desperately for other paths to the west. Colby students traveled to stops along the Balkan Route to learn firsthand about migrants and their experiences—and the implications of this moment in history.



MIGRATION JOURNEYS

In the 2017-18 academic year, Razsa and El-Shaarawi launched the Insurgent Mobilities Lab as one of the inaugural DavisConnects Global Labs. In the yearlong class, students learn ethnographic research techniques, study the dynamics of global migration by reading the latest scholarship, analyze primary data, and create original research products.

Students who took the class, including Powers, Amya Bhalla '19, Julia Endicott '18, and Nora Hill '18, became immersed in the lives and stories of the people they met.

In the first semester, students begin working on original projects on topics related to the route and learn research skills, including data analysis and research ethics. Students may elect to pursue field research abroad during Jan Plan at one of many sites along the route, and in 2017-18 El-Shaarawi and Razsa worked with students to conduct fieldwork in Turkey, Greece, Serbia, and Germany. Support for students is a key component of the lab—preparation, connections with experts in the field, and mentoring throughout.

“They engage with real people, build relationships—they see how what they’ve read in class plays out in the real world,” El-Shaarawi said. “They are working with difficult topics. There’s the potential for it to be a real challenge for them.”

For Powers, the responsibility is demanding—ethically and personally.

“I’m here as a student researcher,” Powers wrote from Istanbul, “but I am also someone with a stake in this as a queer person, and someone who has been involved with queer, anti-racist, migration, and feminist politics in the States. When I introduce myself, I am careful to always acknowledge that orientation.”

Alongside her academic research, Powers has also become personally involved in helping the communities she studies. She has participated in protests and events, taught English, and worked at a shelter for the LGBTI community. The shelter’s work is geared toward challenging systemic forms of discrimination and violence on a micro level. “It’s not a radical, large action against state forms of discrimination,” she said.

“Increasingly,” Powers said, “I think that is where the really incredible and powerful work can be done.”

Working and living in Istanbul has made an unforgettable impact on her life as well. “I showed up as this kid asking a lot of questions a year ago,” Powers said, “and people took the time to talk to me and trusted me with responsibilities, and so many incredible opportunities to learn.”

Raised in a suburb outside Washington, D.C., now Powers considers Istanbul to be her second home.

Amya Bhalla '19 traveled, not across the world, but back home to begin to understand issues of migration and resettlement—uncertainties her parents had faced as immigrants from India to Germany before she was born.

Choosing her focus for research was personally significant for Bhalla, who was born in Frankfurt and raised in Delhi, then attended an international embassy school prior to Colby. “It is kind of a trope—the ‘Third Culture Kid.’ You know you’re not really from anywhere,” she said. “I think that’s why I’m so interested in diaspora studies and the idea of culture, as I’ve been so aware of it my whole life.”



The route isn’t over once you reach Germany. The struggle continues, trying to get citizenship, to form a community and feel safe. I think it’s important to have different parts of the route, so that we can conceptualize this as a long process.”

—Amya Bhalla '19

The anthropology major sees the long-term difficulties faced by refugees and migrants settling in Germany as critical to understanding the impact of migration along the Balkan Route.

The focus of her research emerged during the first semester of the lab as she connected through Skype with an Afghan-Greek refugee, now working in Berlin to help migrants, one of the many contacts El-Shaarawi and Razsa developed through their fieldwork. What Bhalla learned led her to Frankfurt, and to the mosques and Hindu temples of the Afghan communities there.



“

Trying to figure out the ways that you can help one person that helps the whole structure is how I see myself doing a different type of activism.”

—Julia Endicott '18



Frankfurt is an increasingly culturally diverse city—with the majority of its residents now from non-German backgrounds—and a hot topic in world news given the massive impact of migration along the Balkan Route.

During Jan Plan Bhalla initiated a series of interviews with Afghan migrants there. After she gained the trust of the first person she interviewed, more migrants came forward. People recounted their journeys, spoke of their current lives, and described their efforts to help others reach safety. Bhalla wrote meticulous field notes about each of her encounters, then came back to campus for her final semester in the lab to contribute her ethnographic analysis to El-Shaarawi and Razsa's project.

"The route isn't over once you reach Germany. The struggle continues, trying to get citizenship, to form a community and feel safe," she said.

Bhalla's experiences in the lab—and the skills she developed—are only part of her story, a beginning. The unfolding story is the experience Bhalla has gained through Colby connections that have nurtured her passions, including interests that intersect with anthropology. She worked with Oak Fellows Khalid Albaih, who she considers her mentor in political cartooning, and Jinyan Zeng, an activist in whose Oak Institute class Bhalla experimented mixing filmmaking and poetry.

A citizen of the world, Bhalla is discovering a shared identity rooted not in a place, but in the people around her.

Julia Endicott '18 came to a place on the Balkan Route through which more than a half million refugees have passed—the Greek island of Lesbos.

The island has become one of the most compelling symbols of forced migration along the Balkan Route, largely because of a place called Moria, home to the largest and most notorious refugee containment camp along the route. The camp, designed for 2,000 people, currently confines more than 7,000 people. Conditions are widely reported as humiliating and dangerous, with poor sanitation and hygiene, and reports of sexual assault and suicide attempts.

Endicott volunteered at a warehouse located near the Moria camps that outfits about 30 refugee families a day with necessities like clothing, towels, soap, and diapers. That's 1,800 shirts, 1,800 pairs of pants, 900 coats, 900 pairs of shoes, 120 sleeping bags, and 300 packs of disposable diapers a week.

Between shifts at the warehouse, Endicott interviewed her fellow volunteers, mostly refugees from the camps. "People who were strangers at the beginning of the month became like my family by the time I left," she wrote in an email. "I think about them constantly, about where they are or what they are doing or if and where I may ever see them again. I strongly hope to see every person I met on Lesbos again in decidedly different circumstances." The research she did on Lesbos culminated in an honors thesis. But the people she

met there that January became much more than part of her research. She had learned, as she said, to “treat people like people, treat them as equals—that is the least I can do.”

Endicott came to Colby interested in public health and considered becoming a doctor. Seeing firsthand the daily arrivals of refugees on Lesbos and the volunteers struggling to help, combined with mentorship from El-Shaarawi and a wide range of courses across disciplines, had made an impact.

Yet Endicott was still searching.

“I like tangible results, and knowing that you’ve done something for one person—for me it feels bigger. I know I can’t solve the whole problem. ... Trying to figure out the ways that you can help one person that helps the whole structure is how I see myself doing a different type of activism,” Endicott said.

Since Lesbos, she has done an internship with a nonprofit organization that provides free civil legal assistance to low-income people in Maine. It’s the right fit, she says, doing work that will make a difference, not globally, but locally.

In January 2017 the *New York Times* published a story of refugees caught in limbo in Serbia, living in unheated barracks, without regular access to running water or toilets, surviving on one meal a day. While most of the world turned the page, Nora Hill ’18 felt compelled to go to Belgrade to see if she could make sense of it all.

Hill, a double major in art history and anthropology, found her chance as a member of the lab. She realized that the perspective her art history background could bring to the team’s anthropological framework was valuable and timely. “The visual analysis tools from my art history background were essential to the way I approached images—looking at them not only as documentation of people or events, but also about the choices made by whoever created the image, about framing, medium, what was included or left out. Thinking about how things are depicted rather than just what is depicted, and what the implications of those choices are for the power of the image.”



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—Nora Hill ’18

Through Razsa, Hill found a mentor in Marta StojićMitrovic, an anthropologist working at the Ethnographic Institute in Belgrade and one of the key people on the ground doing research on migration in Serbia. Mitrovic connected Hill to migrants, local activists, and aid workers from Doctors Without Borders. Hill immersed herself in anthropological fieldwork—conducting interviews and collecting examples of artwork, graffiti, and images made by refugees.

Hill’s experiences in Serbia that frigid winter ultimately changed not only what she sees as art, but the power of images. “I thought a lot about the relationship between art and emotion, how art can be used to manipulate emotions, create a sense of

distance from intensely emotional events, of becoming desensitized to violent or cruel events when we see them over and over.”

Days before Hill was scheduled to leave Serbia, she interviewed a migrant from Pakistan who had been on the move for almost three years. “I remember walking back to my apartment after that interview feeling very heavy with the weight of all he had been through. I talked to Chloé that night about how I wasn’t sure if I wanted to get on the plane back to the States.”

She wondered whether she would be able to do more good by staying and working directly with migrants. But ultimately Hill’s journey through anthropology and the Insurgent Mobilities Lab led her back to what had brought her to Colby—her love of art.

Hill says she now knows that the way she can make an impact is to help people make sense of the images that flood past us every day. It is another connection to Serbia and the migrants she came to know there. “When I was leaving Serbia, people I had been working with and interviewing and doing research with kept telling me I would be back sooner or later, and I think they’re right,” she said.

During the course of the first year of the lab, El-Shaarawi already has seen the impact the project is having on students. “Ultimately, it’s so personal,” she said. “The experience ... changes them as a person.” ©