

# One Night in Belleville, Paris, 2011

**Joseph Heathcott**

Belleville is one of the world's great neighborhoods. Traditionally a working class redoubt, it straddles four Paris *arrondissements*, and has long provided a refuge for the disaffected, the poor, and the recently arrived.

Unlike the great *Faubourgs* of Second Empire Paris, Belleville began life much earlier as an independent village on the far outskirts of the metropolis, where it housed artisans, traders, and yeoman farmers. Incorporated into Paris in 1860, the neighborhood retained a deeply independent mien, harboring trade unionists, freethinkers, anarchists, anti-clerical Catholics, and other radicals. Belleville housed many of the key activists and supporters of the 1871 Paris Commune.

Numerous waves of immigrants have folded into and remade the streets and shops of the neighborhood, from Greeks, Armenians, and Jews in the late nineteenth century, to West African, Maghrebi, and Chinese families today. Belleville has long presented a laboratory for the concoction of the "New Europe", even as the idea of what constitutes the "New Europe" changes from generation to generation. It is at once an ordinary Parisian neighborhood and at the same time an astonishingly flexible, absorptive, and multifaceted place.

Like Montmartre, Whitechapel, Kreuzberg, and the Lower East Side, Belleville comprises a historic geography of intense human interactions across multiple lines of difference. With its cabarets, burlesques, theatres, *cafés*, *bouquinistes*, meeting halls, broadsides, and radical clubs, Belleville has been one of the great generators of French popular culture throughout the twentieth century. Birthplace of Edith Piaf, it has also been a setting for musical diversity and experimentation, from the *valse musette* and chansons to jazz, folk revival, reggae, raï, metal noir, and punk rock. And the neighborhood has long served as a the power base for Socialist and Communist Party candidates for municipal office.

Today Belleville rides the fault line of gentrification. As housing prices skyrocket in the core neighborhoods along the Seine, and with living conditions in the periurban banlieus deteriorating, the population of the outer *arrondissements* swells from both ends. With the French government retreating from commitments to social housing,

Belleville and other working-class neighborhoods are caught in a vice of competition over scarce resources and rapidly escalating rents.

Gentrification brings new creative energies and opportunities to Belleville, adding yet another layer to an already complex and diverse settlement culture. But gentrification also brings something quite new to Belleville—people with plenty of disposable income, attracted to Belleville not for its cheap rents, but for its historic architecture and bohemian caché. Whether the neighborhood retains its standing as a great nexus of working-class cultural formation remains to be seen.

In the meantime, it is night in Belleville, and the music begins.



"Bus." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Menu." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Shops." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Neon." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Tags." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Outline." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Couture." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Cabaret." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



“Corner.” Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Palais." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Dentist." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Mural." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Pavement." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Music." Joseph Heathcott (2011)



"Dumplings." Joseph Heathcott (2011)

**Statement**

My work examines the urban condition through a range of scales, registers, and media. The primary focus of this work is on the everyday life of cities and the ways in which human creativity shapes urban form and meaning over time. I am interested in how the past haunts the city, and the varied ways in which we accommodate and contest the ruins around us. These passions lead me to search the interstitial spaces, fragile moments, odd corridors, and recombinant environs that best reveal something of the urban. Ultimately, the whole of the city is unattainable, so I look for it through signals, noise, layers, jagged edges, soft wares, connective tissues, ghosts, hoaxes, fetishes, archives, dreams, and buried treasures.

**About the author:**

Joseph Heathcott is Associate Professor and Chair of Urban Studies at The New School in New York, where he teaches in Eugene Lang College and Parsons School of Design. His latest work considers the role of collective memory and creative expression as everyday civic practices that shape the contemporary metropolis. His most recent photography exhibit *Post-Acropolis Metropolis* was installed at the Town Hall Gallery in Stuttgart, Germany. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Center for Urban Pedagogy, and frequently gives his time to neighborhood groups and community organizations around issues of planning, preservation, and urban design. His work has appeared in a wide range of venues, including *Metropolis*, *The Next American City*, *On Site Review*, *Planning*, *Antioch Review*, *City and Community*, *Camera Obscura*, *Art Documentation*, *Winterthur Portfolio*, and *National Civic Review*. Currently he holds the U.S. Fulbright Distinguished Chair for the United Kingdom at the University of the Arts in London, and is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics.