

AFFECT MATTERS



(this is an affectivist
autoethnography with asylum
seekers and refugees)

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Kim Tsai

I dedicate this book to my mum and dad

I love you both more than you can know

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AFFECT IS BELANGRIJK

(dit is een affectivistische auto-etnografie
met asielzoekers en vluchtelingen)
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit voor Humanistiek te Utrecht
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's morgens om 10.30 uur

door

Kim Enrica Tsai
geboren op 22 augustus 1966
te Liverpool, Verenigd Koninkrijk

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For Amir (and his absent mother)

You have taught me so much about the power of relationship to heal deep suffering, trauma and pain, and to promote growth and to foster life-saving resilience. I have learnt how an asylum system, which is devoid of care in relationship, leaves young people to fend for themselves, without adequate support and help, perhaps with re-traumatisation as a result.

With despair as a constant companion, you nevertheless forged on, and despite all the obstacles and barriers you faced in the Netherlands, you literally managed to stay alive.

Thank you for your immense trust and courage, your humour and your laughter. There will inevitably be dark days ahead, but we will now face them together.

I thank your mother for endowing you with the spirit to survive, and with love, amidst the most tragic of circumstances.

You are a gift to this world

For my boys Onne, Pier, Sybren & Idsert

My beautiful children, I hope that one day you will read this book and will take its message of social responsibility for the welfare of all human beings to heart. You know personally almost all of the asylum seekers and refugees in this book. Some have stayed with us, for shorter or longer periods; nearly all have been visitors to our home, and continue to be part of our lives. You know my work, and have welcomed all these beings of different cultures and religions to our home throughout the years, making conversation, cooking together, sharing a joke, or playing football or a game of rugby with them. I believe that you already understand the values of respect, sharing and kindness, and I hope you will continue to embody these values throughout your own lives.

May you see self as other and other as self

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My foremost wish for this book is that it will serve as a reminder that we are fundamentally connected to one another and that, as human beings, we all long for relationships which foster growth and development. Acknowledging that we are affective beings, whose affects are ambivalent and complex, is essential. It may not solve all our problems; but it could help us to navigate our relationships with more care, and less stinginess, and to mindfully engage with others in a spirit of openness, and with compassion. Relationship entails responsibility, towards ourselves, and towards one another, as fellow human beings. And I refer in particular to the Other who is the stranger, and not a loved one. After all, it's easy to feel connected to someone we already love and care about. But not as easy when it concerns someone we don't know; someone foreign. This book is about assuming responsibility for the suffering of others, even when we may not be the direct cause of that suffering. It is, I believe, essential, not to turn our backs on that suffering, but to stand up, bear witness and take appropriate action. We need to affirm that we are all affective beings, and to actively demonstrate that we are willing to take responsibility for each other.

SUMMARY

Life (and death) in an asylum centre

Moshtaba lay three, possibly four days, undiscovered in his room at the asylum centre in Oude Pekela, in the North of the Netherlands. He was dead. He had committed suicide. He was seventeen years old and came to the Netherlands with his older brother from a war-torn Afghanistan, looking for a place of sanctuary and a new life. According to official sources, he hung himself. The then Minister, wrote in a letter to the Parliament, that no further investigation into the death would be necessary.

Moshtaba's brother, and the family (who came after the suicide to the Netherlands), are trying to get a full copy of Moshtaba's dossier from the authorities, but to no avail. Moshtaba's brother told me that he doesn't understand why those working with young asylum seekers actually choose to do this work: the manager responsible for unaccompanied minors at the asylum centre in Oude Pekela, he says, **"is a monster. She has no heart. It's only a job for them. We are not important. They do their best to make our lives difficult. I just don't know why they work here"**.

In meetings I have had with that same manager, she has told me that it's against regulations to get involved in the lives of asylum seekers, and that all members of her staff are **"interchangeable"**. She informed me that she expects her staff not to think about what's happening at the asylum centre once they go home, **"that's work, our involvement with them is business"**, she said. She has no personal contact with asylum seekers at the camp, because she is a **"manager"**.

She vigorously repeated that I am not a professional, because of my [affective] engagement with asylum seekers and refugees. I told her that I am who I am all of the time; whether at home or visiting asylum seekers and refugees, I cannot switch off my professional experience and knowledge. I cannot pretend that I am not affected by others.

Relationship and Affect

I contend that relationship is at the heart of working, researching and living with asylum seekers and refugees. **Affect Matters** is a book about relationships. It's about how affects are central in our lives and in our relationships with others. Affects not only prompt us to engage with others in ways that are empowering and imbued with solidarity, trust and compassion; but they can also be vectors for separation and distance between beings, grounded on hatred and aversion, greed and cruelty.

Very often we don't acknowledge the ambivalence which pervades our lives and our affects. It's not easy to be reflexive; we don't want to face up to the ambiguities and absurdities present in daily living. For researchers especially, reflecting on our affects and emotions during research, is not obvious. The same applies to professionals, and especially to those who work with populations on the margins of society. Full with good intentions to 'save' the other, those working in helping professions are hopeful that they can 'do good' in tragic situations. All too often, however, they find themselves overwhelmed with feelings of hopelessness, or they become disappointed that the other is not 'grateful' enough for their help, or dismay sets in because bureaucratic systems are impenetrable. Welfare workers, and even researchers, may feel the effects of 'secondary trauma', and in an effort to relieve their own suffering, they dissociate or numb their affective lives, so as not to be affected by the circumstances they face. In all cases, suffering increases.

Suffering

A., slept a whole night in a cold bus shelter when he was fifteen, because he missed the last bus to the asylum centre in Oude Pekela. Nobody from the asylum centre, nor his guardian would pick him up and take him back to the camp. It was his own fault; his own responsibility, he was told.

Lianne and her two young children have moved more than twelve times in the past six years, with just as many school changes. When they were placed in the detention centre (prison) in Rotterdam, there was no school. They were locked up, without freedom, but also without a crime. Were they a danger to Dutch society? No. Her children are now doing OK at school, but Lianne is a nervous wreck. According to their lawyer, they fulfil all the criteria for the Amnesty for children of asylum seekers¹, but their asylum claim is continually being rejected by the Dutch immigration authorities. **"They want to destroy me and my children's lives"**, Lianne repeatedly tells me.

A teacher who works at a school for children of asylum seekers says **"you need to put a bomb under them"**, where **"them"** is the "COA", or national body responsible for housing asylum seekers, and "Nidos", the guardian organisation for unaccompanied,

¹The 'Child Pardon' regulation: The 'long-term resident children' transitional regulation, better known as the 'Child Pardon', is a regulation dating from 2013. The Pardon is intended for alien children who, as a result of protracted procedures, have been in the Netherlands for years and are now settled in the society, but have no residence status. There was and still is broad social support for allowing these children to remain in the Netherlands. The Ombudsman for Children has monitored and has recently evaluated the application of the regulation. He concluded that the criteria and the implementation of the Child Pardon were not consistent with the CRC (Child Rights Convention). Some criteria used, have not been concurrent with the best interest of the child", (Ombudsperson report on children's rights in The Netherlands, NHRI Report, 15 August 2014).

underage asylum seekers. This teacher, and many others, have to deal daily with the frustrations of an asylum system that offers far too little care and attention to asylum seekers.

Ambivalent Affects

Throughout the period of this research, which spans several years of intensive daily contact with a group of asylum seekers and refugees, and with organisations which work with this group, I have come to appreciate the role affect plays in relationship. In this book I critique affect literature which idealises affect, by attributing inherent qualities of goodness and beauty to the poor and marginalised. I argue that romanticising affect in this way is dangerous and simplistic. It is violent, and can even cut us off from the reality of poverty and oppression.

Whilst acknowledging the complexity of the asylum system and the multiple networks of relationships operating within it, I suggest that we must take account of negative affects, and of their capacity to damage relationship and to do harm. Asylum seekers and refugees are 'lost', and far from providing a sanctuary which promotes growth fostering relationships, I contend that the Dutch asylum system is seeped with negative affects, resulting in relationships which not only reinforce mistrust and frustration, but which also lead to greater pain and brokenness of all those involved. The system itself is traumatised.

This book aims to add a new dimension to the discourse on affect by highlighting the ambivalence of our affects and by placing the spotlight on how affect in the Dutch asylum system has been institutionalised into harmful practices and violent relationships, numbing and dissociation. Too often we feel done in, overwhelmed and dismayed at situations which we believe are beyond our control. And in our despondency, we activate self-protection mechanisms which switch off our capacity for caring and relationship. I argue that, as researchers, we should not only bear witness to the suffering of those involved in our research; we also have a moral duty to enter into caring relationships and to do something about the suffering. For this reason, I call this book an '**affectivist autoethnography**', combining the words 'affect' and 'activist'.

We need to find ways to accept that all human beings are affective human beings. That means that we all hold the capacity for great love and compassion; as well as for hatred and cruelty. Acknowledging this ambivalence, and learning to balance our affective lives in relationship with the other, in ways which engender solidarity and mutual recognition are, I argue, the **greatest challenges of our times**.

PART ONE

Affect Matters

“Being serious about research and teaching means offering evidence that one possesses an intellectual project that really matters to oneself and to others”

Kleinman, 2006, p.194

(what) MATTERS?

The Research Question

"How is it possible to do social studies research in a way that does justice to the researcher/researched relationship, from the perspective of the turn to affect?"

This book's message is likely to be contested by many scholars. It's controversial appeal flies in the face of conventional 'scientific' wisdom, in its call for a new approach to social studies research which is underpinned by relatedness and engagement, and above all, activism. This book is as much the result of one researcher's quest to find out what matters in research with vulnerable populations, as it is an appeal to other researchers to take affect seriously; their own and that of their research participants.

I advance a research position which renounces an idealised, distant, abstraction of values, in search for a means to manifest what we most care about. To arrive at what matters most, we must also engage with our shadow side. And with that of others. Mutual recognition entails turning our attention to the ambivalence of our affects, whilst remaining connected with the other. We have to be willing to examine that which is usually left unexamined, untouched or unfelt in our research projects. We are affected by our research, and we affect others; in ways we cannot know in advance.

This research explores a terrain of possibilities for conducting affect driven social research, and confronts the multifariousness of affect's challenges as it proceeds. The territory of affect is constantly shifting, making it difficult to draw a definitive map. Nevertheless, the research is sustained by a commitment to interconnectedness and by a conviction to neither look away, nor to remain silent in the face of the suffering other. I explore whether it is possible for the researcher to be both researcher and activist, affective and affected, at the same time, and question the tenability of this research position.

I challenge the reader to ask him or herself the question: do you know what matters to you? It's reasonable to say that this research matters to me. It matters to me that much of what I've witnessed during this research project points to violence in our asylum system, as well as to a tendency towards numbness or dissociation, so that we don't have to see it; so that it doesn't disturb us. As humans we seem to have difficulty acknowledging our ambivalences. Our personal capacity to commit harm instils such a fear in us that we settle quietly

into the role of bystander, or better still, we deny that any harm is being caused, whether deliberately or not.

I was already involved with asylum seekers and refugees in a professional capacity, as well as informally, before I started to undertake research with them. I knew that I was interested in their lives; that somehow what they experienced and how they were treated, mattered to me. But, in terms of this research project, finding out what mattered most was a lengthy process.

For a long time I felt good about being seen as a helper by many asylum seekers. I sought to help as many people as possible and found it really difficult to say no. I didn't want to admit that there were asylum seekers whom I felt were manipulating me; I was romanticising their position, and my own; with all the dangers implicit in that. And whilst helping others continued to matter; I realised that if I didn't attend to my feelings and affects around that help, I too could numb out, or become overwhelmed.

For years I have seen how the asylum system is fuelled by fear and anxiety, at all levels, but I was an optimist, full of good will and hope that everybody working in the system wanted the best for the asylum seekers and refugees. However, I realised that my 'best' is not the same as that of many others. Of course, that sounds rather conceited. But the more I worked with asylum seekers, the more intrigued I became about how people relate to one another within this system. I don't have a conclusive answer, and the last thing I want is for this to be a self-praising, indulgent, narcissistic text. My point is that pretending that we are untouched by what we do, or denying that we affect others, can lead to untold suffering and harm.

On a daily basis I experienced the suffering and pain of asylum seekers and refugees; the pain of loss of just about everything they once possessed, including their own self-esteem and dignity. And I experienced the numbness effectuated in an asylum system whose primary goal is deterrence rather than care and compassion. I also saw the aversion and frustration of many of those working in the system, and how their inability to cope with helplessness and distress only serves to increase their own suffering and that of others.

What mattered was finding a way to balance my own affects, and to stay present with the suffering of others. I needed to find a way to protect myself, without distancing myself from the encounter with the other. That's one of the reasons why I embarked on a Buddhist path of mindfulness in 2010, and on a Buddhist

Chaplaincy programme in 2015. I'm trying to find out how I can best serve, whilst acknowledging my own fears and anxieties, and doing my best to understand the causes of suffering and the path to its alleviation.

This research is also important for the journey it has taken me on, of self-understanding and transformation, and more especially for the relationships it has engendered. These relationships have, in turn, brought about a greater depth of knowledge about trauma and loss, but also about resilience and hope. And at the heart of relationship lies affect; the power to affect and to be affected.

It is not my intention to meter out blame in this book. Rather, I attempt to show interdependence in our affects and in our relationships. I try to articulate my own affects (negative and positive) and to bring to light the ambivalent nature of everyday life. What we do as individuals really does affect the whole. I am critical when I highlight the dangers of the idealisation of affect, and the denial, or underestimation, of its violent capacities. And I argue that we must acknowledge how close the monstrous (in us) lies next to the awe-inspiring, and look towards strengthening our capacities to develop growth fostering relationships based on our common humanity. Ignoring my own ability to cause injury, whether wilfully or not, is to carry a heavy burden of expectation which I can never fulfil. Idealising my own affects, or those of others, is toxic and malignant. Therefore I entreat us to admit the "gray zone" of indeterminability and incongruence, which is arguably only absent in utopia; and to resist the temptation "to turn away with a grimace and close one's mind", (Levi, 1989, p.53).

"Compassion and brutality can coexist in the same individual and in the same moment, despite all logic; and for all that, compassion itself eluded logic."

Primo Levi, 1989, p.56

Researchers like Stewart and Agee don't divulge their own affects (see Part One and Part Two of this book). In fact, the affective lives of researchers, or the challenges they face in dealing with their affects (as researchers), are not normally addressed at all, (see Warden, 2012, on the risks to researchers of secondary trauma, when conducting ethnographic research with vulnerable groups). Behar (1996) notes that self-disclosure by ethnographers is taboo; the scientific validity of texts which are subjective and intimate, rather than objective and generalisable² are deemed questionable. And in "The Ethics of Ethnography", Murphy and Dingwall limit the question of ethics - non-maleficence, beneficence,

² See the methodology chapter in this book for a discussion on the validity of autoethnographic texts. Also, Reed-Danahay, 2001.

autonomy or self-determination and justice - to the research participants (2001). There is no discussion whatsoever of what these topics might mean for the researcher.

When was the last time you read a piece of research on refugees or asylum seekers in which you got to know the individual human being, rather than a mental health statistic or a dead body on a boat in the Mediterranean trying to get into Europe; faceless and emotionless? I think affect-directed research matters. That is, affect-directed research which is engaged and committed, and which does not skirt around the discomfort of our shadow side, or try to camouflage it in romance or alternatively, just deny that it is there.

Talking about our affects is the first step towards opening up discussions not only in the academy, but also in other arenas. This research has a practical orientation. This is not a philosophically-oriented text, nor is it an intellectual contemplation on epistemological questions of the nature of knowing. It addresses our social responsibility towards a vulnerable group of fellow human beings. Asylum and who has a right to claim refugee status is a hotly debated topic. The asylum system is complex and asylum seekers are affective beings, just like those working within the system, be they politicians, professionals or volunteers, and just like the researchers researching it.

We can't afford to ignore affect. Its denial is not acceptable. And its idealisation leaves important, ethical gaps in social studies. I attempt to close some of those gaps with this research. Gaps in how we understand affect in social relations and in how we acknowledge its presence and its potential to preserve human dignity, or to destroy it. As a researcher I have a responsibility towards myself and towards my research participants to not become what Jessica Benjamin calls the "*failed witness*", or a "*half-conscience*" (Levi, 1989, p.68). In this book I show a way of doing social studies which I call "*Affectivist Autoethnography*". It is a social studies that combines affect with activism ("*affectivist*") and which turns an autoethnographic I/eye onto the affective relations between researcher and researched.

The institutions of asylum are caught up in an affective turmoil, fuelled by mistrust of the other. Their refusal to see the suffering of the other not only perpetuates, but actively discourages ethical engagement with the other. In fact, they have become masters at changing the "moral codes" by which we measure our transgressions³. It is therefore of crucial importance not to stand back and

³ According to Primo Levi: "We endured filth, promiscuity, and destitution, suffering much less than we would have suffered from such things in normal life, because our moral yardstick had changed", (1989, p.75).

become the neutral bystander, but to take action to alleviate suffering. I adopt Jessica Benjamin's concept of the "Moral Third" (or the 'third'), to exhort a position which has been described as that of 'mediator', or as "*sympathy, flesh and blood, that by which I feel my neighbor's feelings*", by Peirce, (c.1875); and whose function Benjamin describes as "*acknowledging and actively countering or repairing the suffering and injury that [we] encounter as observers in the social world*", (2014).

Ideally, our individual responsibility should be supported by something much broader; in the case of the asylum system, the state also has a responsibility to fulfil the role of protector of the weak and the vulnerable against violence and injustice. However, where the state fails to uphold its moral duties, I contend that my task as researcher is not only to bear witness to the injustices committed by the asylum system, but to go beyond the 'primal witnessing' of Benjamin's Moral Third, by becoming a social activist (affectivist) researcher.

I start this book with Affective Matter (1). These "Matters" that I introduce at various intervals in this book are recollections of experiences with asylum seekers and refugees, or institutions. They are affective interludes which highlight engagement and relationship as vital aspects of the research process, whilst relaying the importance of recognising the full scope of our affects. They incite us to open our eyes and to dare to 'see'.

"The Dutch act as if they don't see anything, but in fact they just don't want to see our suffering. They behave as if it's got nothing to do with them. They don't care about us, as long as they can go home in the evening to their own families. It doesn't make any difference to them if we lose ours," (Rami, Syrian asylum seeker, 2014).

Affective Matter (1)
"Unseen"

(IN MEMORY OF) MOSHTABA
DIED JULY 2014
AGED 17 YEARS OLD

NATIONALITY AFGHAN

APPLIED FOR ASYLUM IN DECEMBER 2012
GRANTED ASYLUM IN JANUARY 2013

FOUND DEAD IN HIS ROOM AT THE ASYLUM CENTRE IN OUDE PEKELA
(DEATH 18 MONTHS AFTER BEING GRANTED RESIDENCY)

HE LAY UNDISCOVERED FOR 3 DAYS, OR THEREABOUTS
THE SMELL OF HIS DECAYING BODY LED OTHER RESIDENTS TO CALL THE STAFF

HE WAS APPARENTLY FOUND HANGED

"For the most part, we have lost our awareness of the true social nature of human existence, of tragic consciousness, of the "tragic sense of life". Now we largely and erroneously choose to believe in a just world, where each individual person gets what he or she deserves, a world of inevitable progress in which the just are justly rewarded. Sickness is the problem of the individual, probably genetically and biologically based, and the concern only of the medical and psychiatric experts assigned to ameliorate it or simply tolerate it. Poverty is the fault of the impoverished. Crime warrants punishment. Within our segregated, individualized, demystified, and fragmented lives we avoid resonating with the suffering of others. We are not our brother's keepers."

(Bloom, 2013, p.262/263)

“Unseen”

I cannot say I was devastated when I heard the news of Moshtaba’s death. I think you might call it a feeling of hopelessness, and despair. Like when you know that these things happen, but usually there’s some kind of self-denial going on to protect us from reality. Benjamin calls this denial a dissociated state of self-preservation, (Benjamin, 2014). I didn’t want to believe it was true, but at the same time I had come to expect the worst.

Another young Afghan asylum seeker, Mostafa, told me about him. I’d met Moshtaba and his brother very briefly at a meeting to mark the end of a project in which Mostafa had taken part. His two friends had been in the audience, when Mostafa showcased his rapping skills. I was with Mostafa and A., when Mostafa noted wryly that Moshtaba was dead. He showed me and A. some photos on his phone, to remind us who Moshtaba was, and then he recounted the story, as he knew it.

Moshtaba was seventeen when he committed suicide in his room at the asylum centre in Oude Pekela (North Netherlands), where he was living with his brother. Mostafa didn’t know the exact details of how he died, but kept stating how he knew the brothers well, and that they were friends. Mostafa was shocked, he said, because Moshtaba was a cheery boy; *“but they didn’t know why they still lived in the asylum centre, because they have both had a refugee permit for a long time”*, Mostafa told us.

I noticed in myself an initial aversion to hearing about the suicide; I didn’t really want to know about it, but I had to listen. What a waste; a futile waste of a young life. I could imagine the torment that their parents must be in, on learning about the suicide of their young son. It was the worst thing I could picture happening to me as a mother.

Despair was superseded by anger and rage. I had flashbacks of incidences with the authorities whose job it is to care for these youngsters. I remembered the stories of Hafid, walking home from the hospital when he’d been severely intoxicated, or self-harming; as well as the many accounts of A., whose experience with his mentors was none too positive; not to mention Mostafa himself, whose request to see a psychologist was only honoured after his own, second, suicide attempt.

The frustration blurted out like a torrent of recriminations which, whilst accusatory in tone, were also trying to make sense of the situation. Mostafa and

A., clearly blamed the authorities, and I could see no reason at that moment not to do so either. I knew the people working at that asylum centre, and many others who were still living there, or had lived there in the past; my own experiences, and theirs, were not positive.

Trying to reconcile why a young asylum seekers would want to commit suicide, with the fact that he had had a refugee permit for more than a year already, was not easy. I couldn't imagine what would make him so desperate as to want to end his life. I just couldn't fathom it. Mostafa continued to show us photos of a young, smiling boy, and to play videos of his raps, whilst I let the notion sink in. We continued to bandy blame around, and then the anger and blame retreated into incredulity and disbelief.

On the way home I was quieter than usual. For A. it was just another horror story, to add to the many that he already had told me, or to join his own experiences of distress and pain. I was still thinking about the parents, and especially Moshtaba's mother. I didn't know her, but it didn't stop me from imagining her initial shock, and grief, at such a big loss. I wondered how I would feel if I'd consented to let two of my children leave, thinking they were going to a place of safety, only for one of them to kill himself less than two years later. It seemed inconceivable, yet it had happened.

Moshtaba, only seventeen years old, committed suicide and was only found three to four days after the event. Nobody knows for sure how long he'd been lying there. According to the then Secretary of State for Security and Justice, Mr Teeven, there was no need for a further investigation into his death. The government was entirely satisfied that everything possible was done to prevent it.

The letter addressed to the Dutch Parliament from the Secretary of State, dated 22nd September 2014 stated in the first instance that it was not possible for the Secretary of State to answer the majority of the questions asked on the case, as he could not go into the individual details. He did answer questions 7 and 8⁴:

⁴ Letter dated 22nd September 2014: "Antwoorden kamervragen over de zelfmoord van een 17-jarige Afghaanse jongen op de campus voor alleenstaande minderjarigen in Oude Pekela", (Answers to Parliamentary questions about the suicide of a 17 year old Afghan male, on the campus for unaccompanied minors in Oude Pekela).

Question 7:**Which measures will be taken to avoid such instances in the future?****Answer 7:**

Suicides always have a big impact on the environment; close friends, family and professionals. This is also the case now. Residents, COA workers, but also me personally, experience suicide as a very tragic happening. There is attention to the risks of suicide throughout the work chain. Despite an adequate organisation and access to medical care, as well as care and attention from workers in the workplace, suicide cannot always be prevented.

Question 8:**Will there be an inquiry by the Inspectorate for Youth?****Answer 8:**

The Inspectorate has informed me that they were informed of this case and they have asked NIDOS and COA for further details over the circumstances of those involved and over the work methods of COA and NIDOS. Based on this information, the Inspectorate has concluded that there is no need for an inquiry into this case.

I felt shame, guilt and sadness, that a young man was so hopeless that he took his own life. I wondered if anybody noticed distress signs: the staff of the asylum centre, his mentor, or his Nidos guardian?

NIDOS is the organisation for guardianship and supervision of unaccompanied minors requesting asylum in the Netherlands. They employ juvenile protectors who are appointed as legal guardians of the minors in their care. See www.nidos.nl

I wondered how much contact Moshtaba had with the people who were supposed to be caring for him, and to what end? The young unaccompanied minors I know personally, many of whom are also from Afghanistan, have a long history of absent contact, lack of caring and care, a lot of frustration, annoyance, pain, suffering and sadness. Hardly any of them has a good word to say about the 'professionals,' pitiful as it may seem.

When I first met Hafid, he hadn't seen nor heard from his Nidos guardian in more than six months. She was 'sick'. A. has had different guardians, and an array of mentors; none were able to see in him the true extent of his trauma, and the suffering and anguish it produced. Despite a long history of self-harming, he was left to his own devices, or moved from location to location, with no real support or assistance. "My guardian came occasionally to the housing unit at the asylum centre,"

M., another youngster from Afghanistan, told me. He said that was the maximum he could expect. None were capable of getting behind M.'s sombreness, or of drawing him out of his shell. So a cup of tea and some small talk was just about as much as the guardian could muster.

Many of the guardians are not much older than their pupils. Young girls probably fresh out of college or university, a psychiatric nurse recently commented:

"It's a disgrace. When I see them sitting in our waiting room, most of the time I presume they've come here with their girlfriends, but then they introduce themselves as the Nidos guardian".

It pains me to know what the hiring policy is of Nidos; I get riled when I consider that what most of these youngsters have gone through in their short lives is more than any one of these guardians is ever likely to experience in a lifetime. Yet here they are, armed with their book of methods and interventions, legally in charge of several young asylum seekers at a time and literally able to make decisions which may affect the outcome of each one of their pupil's lives.

With numerous youngsters who now have a residency permit, the ex-guardian may even be the focus of ridicule, or a laugh here or there, but how many youngsters cry out for help, for a peaceful setting in which to acclimatise, or to work through their emotions and experiences and never get heard? How many desperately need to see a psychologist or psychiatrist, but are neglected, or ignored by the authorities? How many cry themselves to sleep at night, or drink themselves unconscious, deluging in alcohol and drugs in an effort to forget their pain? How many visit silent places, in a park, or close to water, and contemplate their own deaths, or seek out hiding spots where they can cry, without anybody else seeing them? And how many more end up in arguments and fist fights, because they know of no other way to vent their anger, than to shout and hit out? I know many who are like that. Many. At best they get some kind of sanction, at worse the police is called and it could mean a night in a cell, plus a fine.

The Dutch state is not a caring state. *"Our policy is one of deterrence. We shouldn't let asylum seekers get too comfortable, otherwise it makes it even more difficult to send them back when we have to".* It was common knowledge, and the workers didn't hesitate to point it out when asked. That was actually the most disconcerting thing; the lack of shame in the policies they were asked to implement.

It appals me to write about the experiences of these young men. It saddens me to

think of that young man, dying alone, and even more so because the system and those working in it may have been able to prevent his death, had he been seen.

Speaking to the brother of Moshtaba, who is now nineteen, and who was visiting friends at the time his brother committed suicide, I recognise the loneliness that he feels and the desperation. He told me that he can't stop thinking about how his brother died, questioning whether he really took his own life or not, and questioning his own guilt at not being there when it happened. His brother told me that despite having been granted asylum within about a month of their application in the Netherlands, the two brothers were left waiting in an asylum centre without being allocated a house. It is not unusual, in fact I know of several cases, of young unaccompanied brothers, where despite one of them still being a minor, they are given a house and moved out of the camp. This is apparently what the two boys wanted, but for some reason, unknown to them, they still lived at the asylum camp.

According to the brother of Moshtaba, this is what really drove them both crazy. Unable to attend normal Dutch (language) school, they were confined to living in an asylum camp and were unable to make a start at building their futures. Whatever was going on inside Moshtaba, it seems to have gone largely unnoticed and untended. Moshtaba's brother told me that he was generally the more pessimistic one of the two and that Moshtaba always put on a brave face. There was contact once every two months, for an hour or so, with the guardian and apart from that they were left to their own devices. There was no 'relationship' as such, with the guardian or with the mentors from the asylum camp, according to Moshtaba's brother. It was the same old familiar story.

I do not know the ex-guardian of Moshtaba, or the mentor at the asylum centre, but Moshtaba's brother has told me that they are trying to get hold of the complete file from Nidos and COA, with the help of a lawyer. To date, their attempts to get their hands on his dossier have been thwarted by both organisations. My own experience with gaining access to written files is that Nidos generally complies, as long as the minor in question signs all the necessary forms. Nidos might not be the most efficient of organisations nor the guardians the most competent of professionals, but COA is a different kettle of fish altogether. Despite asking almost a year ago for the file of A., we have been waylaid, put off, discouraged, refused, fobbed off with a 'file' of three sheets of A4, sent to COA's juridical department, had discussions on the law of privacy and transparency of information, exchanged emails and phone calls and been told that he doesn't have a right to his whole file. Almost one year to the date of first

asking, we received a half-baked, incomplete file, and have more or less given up thinking we may get access to anything else.

COA – Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers / Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. According to the website www.coa.nl: “We are responsible for the reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers coming to the Netherlands. COA, an independent administrative body, falls under the political responsibility of the Ministry of Security and Justice. COA gives account for its operations to the Ministry.”

But returning to Moshtaba; he was buried in an Islamic graveyard in Rotterdam. The family haven't yet managed to arrange a headstone, but they are working on it. His brother was moved very quickly to a house in Amsterdam, several hundred kilometres from where Moshtaba died, far away from the asylum centre where it happened. There was no publicity about his death, no newspaper articles, nothing. A local policy maker told me “COA didn't want any fuss. They kept it all quiet”.

A young Syrian refugee at the asylum centre: “Yes, that was next to my unit. We called COA because it was stinking. We couldn't sleep anymore because of the smell. When they came, they wrapped up the body and put it in a plastic coffin so you couldn't see anything. And they removed it. The place stunk for weeks. We complained a lot, and eventually they came and painted the walls and put new furniture in. Someone else lives in that room now”.

Moshtaba's brother broke the news to his parents. He didn't tell them how his brother died. They wanted to come for the funeral and were initially hampered in doing so because the Dutch immigration authorities wouldn't give them a visa to travel here. They were afraid the family would request asylum. In the end, they were allowed to travel – the mother and father, plus a younger brother and sister. They did request asylum and are waiting for their interviews. After a month Moshtaba's brother told his father how Moshtaba died. His mother hasn't been told.

I visited the whole family in their “Pipo-wagon”. Due to the war in Syria and an influx of asylum seekers from Syria and Eritrea, the government has been forced to look for alternative forms of accommodation for asylum seekers, as all the regular asylum centres are now full. COA has recently signed a three year contract with the owner of a holiday park and attraction park in the North, to take over the holiday accommodation for asylum seekers. It seems that the holiday park was facing a downturn due to the crisis and this was an unexpected windfall for the owner. He jumped at the chance.

My first meeting with Moshtaba's parents

Whilst I was driving to meet the family for the first time, I felt a sense of real destruction and despair at the situation. I phoned A. to ask for some advice on what I should or shouldn't do and say in the circumstances, but could not stop myself from crying at the wheel. It was the feeling of dread, compounded by sadness. What should I say to this mother and father who had lost their son? I could feel their anguish running through my body, and I felt a warmth welling up in me, expanding outwards, until it exploded in tears. A. kept saying: "are you crying, are you crying?", but I couldn't answer. I knew he knew I was upset, but I didn't want to worry him either. So I just stayed silent for a while, regaining a sense of composure, and mumbled that I would be alright. He said I should try to stay strong for the "poor mother. She's got so much sadness already. Think about her," he told me. I felt such deep compassion for their loss, and also for the suffering of Moshtaba. It's the hardest thing for a mother to bear, the thought of losing a child, and then in this way, at his own hands, frightened and alone, and in pain. Far from home, in a cell-like unit, in an asylum centre, with no other person around for comfort and to ease the hurt and sorrow. The thought alone was too much to bear. And now the family were flung into an asylum system that really couldn't give a damn about them and which, in fact, had never wanted them to come in the first place, and would be happier if they left as soon as possible. The Minister has already washed his hands of any responsibility for their son, so why take on responsibility for the family? How deep have we sunk, I asked myself over and over in the car. I too was guilty; at least it felt that way.

It was a slightly surreal experience, driving into a former holiday village, turned asylum centre, to be met by different groups of asylum seekers waiting at the reception area, which is now staffed by security guards. I gave the family's name and "villa" number and was met with curiosity. The staff weren't yet accustomed to having external visitors at this asylum centre, as it was only just opened to asylum seekers, so a long search took place to find me a visitor's pass. This, and the fact that there was a "notice" next to this particular family's name, led to a delay in being admitted to the centre. Had I just walked past, I thought, they would have been none the wiser.

Eventually the pass was found, and I could go. Waiting outside for me were Moshtaba's eldest brother, his father and the youngest brother. It was cold, and blustery, but they wore flip-flop type sandals with no socks. We made our way through the winding park roads, along the different holiday homes, to their place. The homes are a kind of hexagonal shape, brightly painted in pastel shades of green, blue, yellow, and pink, with a sort of wagon wheel painted on the outside,

with clowns. Inside, there's a very small reception area with a bar, table and TV, and a kitchen. The bedrooms and bathroom lead off on the sides of the kitchen. It was warm inside.

It was an emotional meeting. They didn't know me, but I had spoken several times already on the telephone to Moshtaba's brother, who speaks good English. He had invited me to visit his family. Father was visibly moved and mother could hardly stop crying. She ushered a large photograph of her dead son into my hands, and asked if I had known him. She talked about him, and about not having seen him for several years, only to now be confronted with his death. *"We sent our sons away from our country because of war," she said, "and we thought they would be safe here, and now look what has happened. One of them is dead," she cried.*

Moshtaba's brother told me that his parents first didn't believe that they both had refugee status, but thought he had lied and that they had been living on the streets. *"She asks me the whole time what we were doing every day in the three years that we have been gone. She wants to know where we were, how we filled our days, and what my brother was like. She can't believe he's gone. But we don't dare tell her the truth. She cries the whole time, she can't sleep at night and she's so depressed. We don't know what to do," he said, talking about his mother.*

The whole room was filled with sadness, and a sombreness that is without hope. The youngest brother looked on slightly bewildered and the older sister stood next to her mother and they comforted one another. Father sat next to me, with a handkerchief, continually wiping at tears at the corners of his eyes. His eyes were bloodshot and red. He couldn't contain his sadness. Moshtaba's brother spoke in a soft voice, in English, watching his words, even though his mother couldn't understand anything. It was as though he thought she might be able to feel what he was saying, so he left the exact details of how his brother died to later on, when his parents weren't around. He had seen the body himself, but wouldn't permit his parents to do so; he said it was too gruesome and he wanted to spare them even more pain.

Due to the huge numbers of asylum applications at the moment, it is expected that the family will have to wait at least a month before they can have their first interview. They have a lawyer, but will only meet once an interview date is known. For now they must wait at the holiday park, where they get their meals served up to them three times a day, but receive no other pocket money. I took them flowers and a cake, but A. told me that it was perhaps not appropriate to bring a cake; that was something you did in Afghanistan when there was

something to celebrate, he said. I told the family that I didn't want to offend them and that I had left the cake in the car. On leaving, I gave them the cake nevertheless. Mother had said whilst I was visiting how sorry she was that she had nothing to offer me, no biscuits, no cake, as they don't get money for shopping because COA provides their meals to them.

In the meantime, I have contact with Moshtaba's brother. He is relatively isolated now in Amsterdam, where he lives alone. He told me that his only hope is that his family gets granted asylum as soon as possible, so that they can all get on with their lives. He's trying to support them, but lives far away. He visits his family every week, and every few weeks they make a trip to the graveyard in Rotterdam to put flowers on his brother's grave and to mourn him.

Death of humanity

Moshtaba's brother needs to visit his family. I imagine that every feeling person can recognise that having only recently lost his brother and best friend in such a tragic way, he feels a deep need to be with his parents and other siblings as much as possible. Unfortunately for him, his family are a three-hour journey away on public transport.

On Tuesday 28th October, Moshtaba's brother arrived at the asylum centre at around five o'clock in the afternoon. He registered, but was told that he would be required to leave by ten o'clock that evening. There was no possibility for him to stay overnight, he was told by the security guards. Up until then, he had stayed 'illegally' the first few times, so as not to make his presence at the camp too blatant. But this time he decided to register his presence at the reception desk, but was greeted with the news that he couldn't stay. On informing the security guards that he had travelled already for three hours, he requested their understanding, and they agreed to let him stay the night.

The following morning, whilst Moshtaba's brother was elsewhere in the camp with his father, two members of staff of COA turned up at the unit. They spoke with his mother, who speaks no English and no Dutch. Only the sister was at home with the mother. The mannerism of the COA staff, which Moshtaba's brother called "racist, rude and very rough," only served to increase the stress in an already hyper stressed mother. The staff informed the mother that Moshtaba's brother would have to leave the camp and that he wouldn't be allowed in the future to stay overnight. His mother misinterpreted their words, thinking that they announced that she couldn't see her son again, and she became very distressed. The sister dashed to find Moshtaba, his father and small brother, who returned to find a very hysterical mother.

Moshtaba's brother went immediately to see COA and asked them why they had behaved in such a disagreeable fashion. He told them that they should not speak to his mother, but to him or his father, given her weak constitution. He tried to explain that they are all grieving, but were told that all asylum seekers: "have a story, so yours is nothing special". Moshtaba's brother agreed to leave that evening.

About one hour after his departure, his mother took a turn for the worse. She apparently became hysterical and passed out. According to his father, she was left lying in the unit unattended to for more than an hour. Finally an ambulance arrived and she was taken to the emergency department of the local hospital. There she underwent some brief tests, and after several hours was sent back to the camp in the early hours of Wednesday morning, with a doctor's report and note to the camp doctor. It wasn't clear to them what they should do with the note, but they believed that the hospital would arrange for mother to be visited the next day.

On Thursday night I received news from Moshtaba's brother about the situation. He had written the following message to his lawyer and copied it to me:

I HOPE that you Received A file From COA That Shows What Happened This Week In Oranje (name of asylum centre)

Otherwise I will explain you

*Tuesday I went to the asylum centre To see my family
But at the first They stopped me and said to me you don't allow to see your family at this time cuz I arrived 5 o'clock there... I explained them I came from Amsterdam 3 hours ... and I explained Them about my family situation they accept me just for one night I said my mother's sick. she needs me .I wanna come every week one or two nights to see them*

*The day after in morning 2 person from Coa (They were very stupid and Rough)
Going to my Mother and With violent behaviour and inappropriate said to her your son can't stay with you
My mother thought they said you cannot see your son again. while she was crying I arrived to unit and told to Coa worker's that you should talk with me not with my mother she is sick*

It was like a shocking for my mother

I accept that to leave the centre.

After I left there my mother getting heart attack and ambulance came after 2 hours

When my family arrived To the camp they Asked for

Psychologist still they didn't get

No one does not understand our situation (especialy In Coa)

Could we complaint against Coa or just that 2 person ?

Could we find a way that i can go there every week just for one or 2nights ?

Coa Gave to us (me and my brother) 2 years suffering

Now they starting to give suffering to my family

I need your help

Plz help me that everyone can hear The sound Of my pain

I lost my brother I don't wanna lost again my family members

I visited the family again on Friday afternoon. There had still be no contact with a doctor, only a letter that an appointment had been arranged for a week later with the mental health nurse at the asylum centre.

The hand-written note from the hospital emergency doctor was addressed to the doctor at the asylum centre. It informed his “colleague” that Mrs R. had been seen at the emergency department suffering from extreme stress and hysteria. It noted that she should receive specialist mental health care (perhaps even admission to a specialist unit) as soon as possible.

After much time spent phoning around and being passed from one place to another, I eventually spoke with the doctor at the asylum centre. “Oh yes, we know the situation,” he said. When I questioned why mother hadn’t received any care up until now, he said “oh, that’s not what we agreed. We have all the information in the system. She’s got an appointment hasn’t she for next week with the mental health specialist, and I don’t have anything to do with those appointments. If she has anything urgent, or anything with the tablets, she can come to see me before then”.

I asked him whether she could be referred to a specialist mental health clinic for refugees. He answered “yes, of course,” but mother would have to first go to see the mental health nurse at the centre first. After pushing him a little, the doctor agreed that mother could visit him at the medical centre in the asylum centre on Monday, and that he was prepared to do some checks. But he sounded none too happy. He questioned who I was and what my role was, and sounded somewhat

taken aback when I mentioned that I knew the psychiatrist at the specialist clinic and that I thought it would be a good idea for mother to be treated there. I was once more disappointed by the seeming lack of interest by medical personnel and shocked that despite being fully informed about the situation, no one from the staff had even bothered to check how it was with mother since she returned from the hospital.

Mother looked drawn and tired. She sat huddled up, and was cold despite the sweltering temperature in the room. She had difficulty talking at first, and looked as though she had aged ten years in the last week. I brought them lots of food and supplies, so that they would have extra rations, and I gave the youngest son colouring books and crayons, and a set of Play Mobil with a Viking island to play with. He hung around aimlessly, clinging either to Moshtaba's brother or mother, and was barely interested in the toys I brought. He had been hugely shocked, according to mother. He had cried incessantly when Moshtaba's brother had to leave, and when she herself was taken into hospital. He thought that she too was going to die. The fear and grief which the little boy felt were palpable, as I remembered the words of Johannes Schmidt, clinical psychologist, specialised in trauma, at a workshop of his that I attended just the week before, that trauma is not only an experience about which we tell ourselves stories; it affects our whole bodies as it changes the way we relate to the world and gets 'saved' in the body's nervous system.

As I watched the family, and listened to their voices, even though I couldn't understand their words directly, it was as though words were superfluous to the felt experience of compassion and empathy. I could imagine their frustration and even anger at the way they were being treated, but more than that I could see their suffering and feel their anguish. We drank tea and shared some biscuits and I told them again that they should call me if they needed anything. Mother needed her rest, and it was time to leave.

Walking back to the car with Moshtaba's brother and father, and the small brother, I recalled the incident at the reception when I arrived and pondered on how even the tiniest of gesture, or remark had the power to make someone feel (un)wanted, (un)welcome, or even (in)human. At the reception, I was given my visitor's pass rather swiftly this time. Moshtaba's brother was after me, but was told to wait. The security guard was seemingly busy. He was joined by a relatively young female colleague, whose face was full of disdain and scorn. She sat down next to her colleague. When the colleague had finished doing whatever he was doing, he asked Moshtaba's brother what he wanted. He said he was also a visitor visiting his parents. The security guard took his residency permit, then asked his

female colleague where he could find the document number on the identity document. She pointed out to him where the number was and when he put the identity document on the desk before him, she picked it up and started reading it; a totally unnecessary and rather invasive gesture as her colleague was already attending to writing down the details. A somewhat whimsical look appeared on her face, which could also have been mistaken for a comic air of disbelief. A small smile showed on the edges of her mouth. “Which year were you born in?” she questioned Moshtaba. Accommodatingly he replied: “1995”. She smirked, then gave him back the identity card. I could sense arrogance, and disbelief. “Why is it relevant in which year he’s born?”, I asked. “It’s written on the I.D. card already, so why do you need to ask it?”, I continued. “Oh,” she laughed. “It’s because he doesn’t look that young. He looks much older”. We both knew that she was questioning his age and that she didn’t trust what he had told to the immigration authorities on arrival in the Netherlands. To the unwitting observer it may seem like an innocent question. But we both knew that it meant that she thought he was a liar, and she wanted him to know it. It wasn’t even her insensitivity that was the biggest problem; the biggest problem was that her insensitivity was intentional – she knew what she was doing and she didn’t even care to hide it. Insidious violence reared its ugly head.

December 2014

The family have been moved from one Pipo-home to another. They’re now at another former attraction park-turned-asylum centre called Duinrell. This one is close to The Hague and therefore also closer to Moshtaba’s brother in Amsterdam.

When I spoke to Moshtaba’s brother just a week or so earlier, he was on the train with his mother. She had an appointment with a local branch of the mental health services and was due to see a psychologist for the first time in her life. She was under severe duress Moshtaba said, as she now knew the news about how her son died. According to Moshtaba’s brother, his mother had been having a lot of dreams about Moshtaba in which he apparently supplicated his mother to question the family further about his death. In this way she had asked more and more questions, pleading to know the truth and they had had no other option but to tell her of his suicide.

“Those people from COA are inhuman, especially the woman in charge of the young asylum seekers in Oude Pekela. She really doesn’t have a heart. She’s insufferable and doesn’t care about anybody. I think she hates us. I don’t know why she stays in that job, because she doesn’t do anything for the young asylum seekers. She is just awful. She made our lives a misery, me and my brother, when we lived there,” (Moshtaba’s brother)

INTRODUCTION

"Tarrou squared his shoulders against the back of the chair, then moved his head forward into the light.

"Do you believe in God, doctor?"

Again the question was put in an ordinary tone. But this time Rieux took longer to find the answer.

'No – but what does that really mean? I'm fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out. But I've long ceased finding that original....'

'Isn't that it – the gulf between Paneloux and you?'

'I doubt it. Paneloux is a man of learning, a scholar. He hasn't come in contact with death; that's why he can speak with such assurance of the truth – with a capital T. But every country priest who visits his parishioners, and has heard a man gasping for breath on his deathbed, thinks as I do. He'd try to relieve human suffering before trying to point out its excellence.' Rieux stood up: his face was now in shadow.

(Albert Camus, The Plague, 1948, p.122)

I would be lying if I said I didn't hope that this research would have an impact. I don't dare hope that it can change the world, but I do know that it has changed my life and the lives of those who are directly implicated in it. This is an autoethnographically inspired research project with asylum seekers and refugees, and with those who work with them (in a variety of governmental, semi-governmental and non-governmental organisations), which has lasted more than five years. In addition, it incorporates more than a decade's worth of experience working with asylum seekers and refugees in a professional or voluntary capacity. And if we include my own life history, as the daughter of a Chinese refugee who fled to Hong Kong in the 1940's, and later settled in the United Kingdom, then we might say that my interest in what it means to be a refugee has spanned a lifetime.

Whilst I can never be sure who or what it may affect, I can state that I have certainly been indelibly marked by its process and by its results. In fact, I don't believe that one can come close to misery and suffering and not be affected in some way. Is it then not our moral duty not only to write about that despair, and to afford our reader an inkling of our own affects, but also to try to do something to relieve that suffering? Arguably research with vulnerable others compels us to look closely at our affective relationships and to carefully examine and be open about the effect we have on one another. Anger, fear and frustration are just as much part of the research process as are happiness, empathy and ease.

I do not believe that we can compensate for human misery by viewing it as a lofty example of idealised goodness. Nor do I see in suffering some kind of noble beauty. Despair and devastation, exile and pain are ugly endeavours, which engender affects – good and bad. They can just as well push one to great feats of courage and love, as to the worst acts of evil and hatred. Getting close to ordinary suffering and ordinary affects is no easy venture. We may of course attempt, and to some extent succeed, in remaining aloof, or separated from what we see, feel, hear and experience, but how honest are we then to ourselves, our public and our research participants? Can we really write as if we are objective bystanders, or walk away and do nothing? Or do we owe it to ourselves and to others to express our own affects, as they arise, change, dissipate or become encrusted in our behavioural repertoire, and to show how they impinge on our research experiences? Do we want to become the “failed witness”, or do we want to validate the position of the “Moral Third”? (Benjamin, 2014).

This is an ‘experiment’ in leading with affect; in opening to the lives and experiences of the asylum seekers and refugees, as well as to those who work within the organisations whose job it is to provide services to asylum seekers and refugees.

This research is an exploration into human affective relationships.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?

Part one

Introduction to Affective research

The methodological and theoretical underpinnings of this research are premised on affect in the relational encounter. Starting with an inquiry into affect, I look at the avenues which affect unfurls for greater commitment and engagement with our research participants. I acknowledge that my research is based on an affective engagement with my research participants and based on the writings of authors such as Agee, Stewart and Terkel, I lead my reader through their world of affective research.

“Lostness”

This chapter is a conceptualisation of ‘lostness’ as one of the main barriers to escape, for asylum seekers and refugees alike, where ‘escape’ is imagined as the type of subversive acts typified by Papdopoulos et al (2008). After all, how can one escape if one doesn’t know where one is in the first place? Being lost can lead to stagnation or to a retrenchment of one’s habits, patterns and cultural norms, whereby one’s ability to learn or adapt is severely incapacitated. The confusion and insecurity, which being lost engenders, confounds whatever trust there may have been, which in turn has a debilitating effect on relationality and connection.

Part two

Critique of Affect

In part two I turn the affective turn back on itself and develop a critique of affect. I argue that we must bear in mind affect’s potential negative sides, and avoid presenting an overly idealized version of the reality of the (affective) lives of the downtrodden and poverty-stricken and of our relationships with them (as professionals or researchers). The chance that affective research, or affective encounters, will not lead to greater commitment or increased understanding between fellow human beings is very real.

Looking at the writings of Agee and Terkel, I will critique the way in which those who live in wretchedness and poverty are to a certain extent portrayed as more humane and more commendable than others, as though such people have more feeling, more empathy, more backbone than the rest of us. Looking at the work of Stewart, and in particular her writings about the Appalachians, she herself is largely absent from her own writings. Her own affect, if at all present, seems to be a short-term phenomenon; how and why she is affected in the long-term by the people whose stories she tells, and what kind of affective engagement or commitment she has towards them is dubiously unclear in her work.

Escape as illusion

I will examine the book “Escape” (Papadopoulos et al, 2008), whose main argument lauds the inevitability that social transformation and change will ultimately arise out of the miniscule moments of ‘escape’ and subversion of the weakest in society. These tiny affective moments of robust denial to accept one’s situation will, the book argues give way to a more liberated and emancipated future. I disagree and argue that the authors over-simplify the possibilities of people like asylum seekers and refugees to surmount their own problems, even with the help of others.

When one is lost, escape and transformation, such as that presented by Papadopoulos et al, is no more than a pipedream. Subversion of the system of ‘embodied capitalism’ (Papadopoulos et al, 2008), by agents such as asylum seekers and refugees, does not lead to better lives for themselves; indeed subversion of the Papadopoulos masks the true reality of the wretchedness of lives. Once again affects can get in the way, and are no guarantee for a better life.

Institutionalised affect

To round off this part of the book, I undertake a telling of relationships with institutions and professionals whose job it is to either provide shelter and care for asylum seekers and refugees, or else to assist them with the so-called integration process. These writings show how negative affect can become institutionalised, ending up paralysing or rather corrupting a whole system, rendering it not only ineffective, but also cold and inhumane.

Part three

Affectivist Autoethnographic Research

In this final part, I take stock and make a case for a social studies whose aim it is to immerse the reader into the affective lives of vulnerable and marginalised research participants, and in this case, asylum seekers and refugees. I urge a research paradigm which I call “Affectivist Autoethnography”; one which encourages the reader to reflect on the complexity of our relatedness, by turning to commitment, rather than avoiding it. Aware that this is text, I note that writing animates readers to connect with experiences which they would otherwise not know, or which they might otherwise choose to circumvent.

In my reflections I take Jessica Benjamin’s concepts of the ‘failed witness’ and the ‘Moral Third’, as a means to elucidate the way in which I have conducted this research, and to argue that social studies require us to be more than just ‘witness’. Whilst this text does bear witness to what affectivist research might look like, I

suggest that text is also partial. This text is not enough; research must incite ourselves and others to take action for a more just society. I contend that we have a duty as individual professionals to actively eschew the bystanders role. This implies being open to our affects, and recognising our capacity to dissociate to self-preserve. And then making the choice to act to alleviate the suffering of others.

I conclude by reiterating the need to acknowledge that we are affective beings, whose affects possess an incredible scope. To deny the full range of our affective potential is akin to committing a grave injustice, towards ourselves and the other. In questioning whether this research stance is 'supportable', or tolerable, I argue that it is only by being transparent about its pitfalls, that we can we hope to develop affective research strategies which are not fearful and which serve as moral compasses to find ways to allay the suffering with which we come face to face. Affectivist Autoethnographic research is not only an epistemological project to know and understand the suffering of vulnerable others, carried out with rigor; it is an urgent appeal to act on the knowing, as well as an enunciation of a moral imperative to fuel an affective sensibility for bringing a new type of activist research into existence.

Affective Matters

These 'Affective Matters' are events, incidents and happenings, which can be viewed as a series of interlocking interludes, interspersed throughout the book. They are writings on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees and on my relationship with them and with institutions, and on their relationships with one another. They set the affective stage, showing the ways in which lives are played out like tapestries, weaving and unfolding affective experience with affective experience. All of those who participated in this research are struggling to rebuild their lives and to fashion a future for themselves. It is a far from easy task. Their stories show that where escape and loss may eventually lead to growth and new chances, if accompanied by new hopes and resilience-promoting processes, the lives of the participants in my research are largely mired by unrealised potential and stagnation, frustration and loss. Here we are introduced to life as an asylum seeker or refugee, in all its bareness and rawness.

The participants in this study are both victim and agent, simultaneously. They undergo suffering and loss, but it is neither solely the fault of the system or society, nor solely the fault of the refugee that their integration flounders and that their attempts to fit in, fail or are rejected. Indeed, sometimes they may not even want to fit in, or are prevented from doing so, not only by the "other", but also by

their own cultural prejudices and narrow -mindedness. They mistrust and are mistrusted, and whilst chances may be few and far between, they may express a total inability to take advantage of the chances which present themselves.

I have chosen the name “Matters” for a number of reasons. When we ask the question, ‘what’s the matter?’, we are asking ‘what’s the problem?’ or ‘what’s wrong?’. In addition, ‘matter’ refers to ‘something of consequence’ or ‘a topic of concern’. Then there is the invitation to the reader to enter into a relationship with the text, and with these writings as ‘reading matter’. The title of the book “Affect Matters” alludes, therefore, to the importance of affect and to the nature of this inquiry as being something of significance. It elucidates issues that really matter in social studies.

The order in which I write these interludes does not relay any particular measure of importance of the particular occasion, nor are they written chronologically. They are affective expressions of this research process; all leading to this moment.

You can read this book from page one onwards until the end, if you wish. Alternatively you might read the three main parts in one go, and thereafter the Affective Matters. You could consider this reading strategy if you find the switch between the different elements irritating or confusing. Whilst annoying the reader is not my intention, the book’s composition reflects my own desire to articulate the interconnectedness between the parts, whilst reflecting a research and writing trajectory whose course crosses different time frames and folds backward and forward between happenings and reflections. Perhaps it is my way of exploring “*practices of representation via moves of getting lost across textwork, headwork and fieldwork*”, (Lather, 2007, p.34).

CHAPTER ONE

Affective research

The Journey

*One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you kept shouting
their bad advice-
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations, though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
but little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do-
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

(Mary Oliver, Dream Work, 1986)

The Turn to Affect

In this chapter I introduce the reader to the theoretical concept of ‘affect’. You will become increasingly acquainted with the lives of some of the asylum seekers and refugees who have accompanied me over the years on this research journey. In making a case about affect, I interweave their stories with the concepts of indifference, recognition and care. This serves to illustrate why approaching social issues from the position of affect may lead to a more humane, constructive and valuable position from which to examine the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, taking affect to mean the power to affect and to be affected.

As I write about their lives, I see “*affectivity as a substrate of potential bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness*” (Clough, 2007, p.2). I agree with Berlant that “*the visceral response is a trained thing, not just autonomic activity. Intuition is where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention*” (2011, p.52).

This turn towards the affective has been a preoccupation of social sciences and the humanities for the last couple of decades. Drawing on the philosophy of Spinoza, Bergson and James, Deleuze also inspires scholars from a wide range of disciplines in their theorisation of affect (see Ruth Leys: *A Turn to Affect – a Critique*, 2011).

This interest in affect follows a renewed enthusiasm for the emotions and for the body, though according to Hardt, the so-called “turn to affect” “*certainly does draw attention to the body and emotions, but it also introduces an important shift. The challenge of the perspective of the affect resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affects refer **equally to the body and the mind**: and, in the second, because **they involve both reason and the passions**. Affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers*” (Hardt, in Clough, 2007, p.ix, highlighting not inoriginal).

Leys notes that the “general turn to affect” is a “turn to the neurosciences of emotions”; whilst Brinkema (2014) also points to the resurgence of “neuroscientific work on the emotions”. Both these authors, including scholars writing in Clough’s “The Affective Turn” (2007), and in “The Affect Theory Reader” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), point out the broad range of scholarly terrains which have been affected by this turn: from political theory to human geography, psychiatry to feminist and race studies.

So whilst I give a general introduction to affect in this book, I am primarily concerned with the turn to affect within anthropology, and concentrate my critique on the writings of Stewart and Agee, as well as Papadopoulos. I highlight the choices I have made more completely in the methodology section of this book, but nevertheless point out here that what matters to me most about affect directed research concerns human relatedness and the human capacity to affect and to be affected. This point is crucial for understanding, what I call, an affectivist stance, and for getting to grips with the critique I am launching in this book on the turn to affect.

Introduction to Affect

The Affect Theory Reader (2010) proposes a non-exhaustive investigation into the various ways in which affect can be theorized. The editors, Seigworth and Gregg, note *“There is no single unwavering line that might unfurl toward or around affect and its singularities, let alone its theories: only swerves and knottings, perhaps a few marked and remarked intersections as well as those unforeseen crosshatchings of articulations yet to be made, refastened, or un-made. Travelling at varying tempos and durations within specific fields of inquiry, while also slipping past even the most steadfast of disciplinary boundaries (for example, the affective interface of neurology and architecture, anyone?), the concept of “affect” has gradually accrued a sweeping assortment of philosophical/psychological/physiological underpinnings, critical vocabularies, and ontological pathways, and, thus, can be (and has been) turned toward all manner of political/pragmatic/performative ends. Perhaps one of the surest things that can be said of both affect and its theorization is that they will exceed, always exceed, the context of their emergence, as the excess of ongoing process”* (2010, p.5).

How then to define affect? Again, according to Seigworth and Gregg: *“Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon”*. Affect is therefore transitory, something which arises, resonates, passes between bodies, sticks or dissipates. It is a force which engenders the capacity to move and to act. It is a potential. Affect is about the body, but doesn't only concern the body. *“But, as Spinoza recognized, this issue is never the generic figuring of “the body”(any body) but, much more singularly, endeavouring to configure a body and its affects/affectedness, its ongoing affectual composition of a world, the this-ness of a world and a body”* (2010, p.3, italics in original).

Whereas a feature of affect is its *“immanent neutrality”* (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p.10), many writers induce within it a capacity for hope, or *“the promise that the next set of encounters and the ‘manner’ in which we undertake them could always guarantee more”* (p.17). Affect in this sense denotes possible liberation in

that “the moment of the affective turn brings us back to the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way” (Berlant, 2011, p.53). According to Berlant, “the idiom that affect theory can provide encourages more than a focus on orthodoxies of institutions and practices. It can provide a way to assess the disciplines of normativity in relation to the disorganized and disorganizing processes of labor, longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly (consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation” (2011, p.53).

Opening up our analyses to an affective theorization therefore reasserts the visceral nature of everyday life and allows us to recast the way in which encounters are sensed as moments of shared intensity which “question commonsense notions of the privacy or ‘integrity’ of bodies through exposing the breaches in the borders between self and other evidenced by the contagiousness of ‘collective’ affects” (Gatens, 2004, p.115, quoted by Probyn, 2010, p.76). The affective body “becomes a sign in which dense metonymic associations link physical, mental, emotional, and social states.....The self-as-body is constituted relationally in a series of loose metonymic associations of self and world enacted in a poetics of bodily effects” (Stewart, 1996, p.131).

As a researcher, I too am implicated in a relationship with my research participants. It is research with body, mind and heart, as affective charges arise and are transmitted between persons, flaring up without warning, surging forward into new spaces and conjuring up new configurations of meanings and gaps in meanings, or waning and dissipating just as soon as they have arisen, leaving clarity or confusion in their wake.

Stewart too attends to affect as she urges us to consider a new form of cultural poetics; “a cultural “system” that is “located”, if anywhere, in the nervous, shifting, hard-to-follow trajectories of desire and in-filled with all the confusion and aggravation of desire itself”, (1996, p.17). This is a landscape that resides “in the space of the gap” (1996, p.17).

The affective opens up this space and invites one to enter a world which pulsates with radical signs and intense evocation, interpretive positionings and cultural constructions. It is a world in which we are moved by what we see, hear, feel, and experience. So too Agee, writing about poor tenant farmers in Alabama in the 1930’s, “feels as moved by the humble surroundings as he does by their impoverished inhabitants” (Morrison, in an introduction to “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (2006, p.ix).

Agee's intention was that we get to know the farmers as real people, as we share an intimate portrayal of their daily lives, in text and image. As Agee noted, his writing was "an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved that the authors and those of whom they tell" (2006, p.xix). He invited the reader to not only listen, but to feel and to allow the stories to penetrate the body. His work was a performance, designed to affect and to share his own affectations.

"Here I must say, a little anyhow: what I can hardly hope to bear out in the record: that a house of simple people which stands empty and silent in the vast Southern country morning sunlight, and everything which on this morning in eternal space it by chance contains, all thus left open and defenseless to a reverent and cold-labouring spy, shines quietly forth such grandeur, such sorrowful holiness of its exactitudes in existence, as no human consciousness shall ever rightly perceive, far less impart to another: that there can be more beauty and more deep wonder in the standings and spacings of mute furnishings on a bare floor between the squaring bourns of walls than in any music ever made: that this square home, as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven is, not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence: that this beauty is made between hurt but invincible nature and the plainest cruelties and needs of human existence in this uncured time, and is inextricable among these, and as impossible without them as a saint born in paradise" (Agee, 2006, p.117).

Affect's potential unleashed

The exquisite writings of Agee point to an innate beauty inherent in the impoverished surroundings and to a deep humanity which manages to triumph beyond poverty and despair. As Stewart writes "Adopting a poetics of implication and entanglement against a poetics of purity and transcendence, Agee proposed an ethnographic account to be read not for its truth value and congruence with fact but for its tense, halting evocation of difference and desire at the very heart of a doubly constructed "real". It is an account that, far from proposing to "solve" the problems of documentary or ethnographic representation in a perfect text, tries to wrest cultural representation free of the very claim to problem-solving absolute knowledge. His text became an interpretive space in-filled with the failures of representing otherness" (1996, p.23).

Stewart proposes "new ethnography" (1996, p.24/25/26) as a type of ethnography which wrestles itself away from imposing a real from the outside, and which does not attempt to fix objects of analysis, nor essentialise meanings. Instead she champions affect as a means to displace generalized descriptions in favour of contested spaces which are dialogical, nervous, partial and ambiguous. These spaces do not reduce things to the "gist" and like Agee, they do not seek out the true meaning of things; they are destabilizing fragments, cultural narratives and

textured chains of representations which weave meanings back and forth in an effort to mediate between stories and to fashion new meanings about lived lives.

These **spaces** evoke affect; they awaken the senses; they perform.

Space for affect

Making space for affect in research with asylum seekers and refugees means recognizing the contingent nature of life and of relationship building. It means taking account of the body, visceral sensations and emotional sidetracks, and allowing oneself to feel the situation, even when it is uncomfortable or messy. It involves surprise and disorder, displacement and shifting significations. It is a space where *“things loom larger than life as the desire to capture the unknown in the known is displaced by an endless search for signs of alterity itself. Here, finished concept and past event enter the contingencies of speech as a social act in the present, and everything becomes a subject of remembrance and exchange in the constant fits and starts of the effort to unforget”* (Stewart, 1996, p.89). Affective research leaves no space for indifference.

“The sky unites all who breathe under its seamless space, uniting us to all who are born and shall be born under the sky – you and me and....” (Lingis, 97, 2004)

In-difference or rather indifference

A thought crosses my mind whilst exercising one day. Spinning. My body and mind both spinning simultaneously: what does indifference mean? According to an old Collins 3rd edition dictionary – “showing no care or concern” (Collins English Dictionary, 3rd ed, 788). But also “C14 from Latin “indifferens””, it means “making no distinction”. If I am in-difference, does this suggest an openness to the other not captured by modern day meanings of the term? Are my borders permeable; my self-containment a sham? Open to influence? In-difference as the acceptance of the other, or rendering my-self indistinguishable from the other? Perhaps making the unfamiliar familiar in relationality, in affect? To what effect/affect in my work as researcher with the ‘other’, strange, unfamiliar asylum seekers and refugees?

Delilah

She makes me laugh. As she reels out story after story, she affects me with her infectious laughter. She touches me and makes indifference an impossibility; that is if by ‘indifference’ we mean ‘showing no care or concern’. I am touched, if

touch is as “an invitation to re-think relationality and its corporeal character, as well as a desire for concrete, tangible, engagement with worldly transformation” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 298, 2009).

I was teaching a kind of ‘getting to know yourself’ course to foreign migrant women; a course which Delilah was only too keen to be a part of. From Angola, Delilah had already been in the Netherlands a number of years, living like all refugees at first in an official asylum centre, or ‘the camp’ as the inhabitants refer to the place, until she was granted a ‘status’ or permit to reside in the Netherlands; at first for five years, later permanently.

She made an immediate impression on me, and on the other women in the group. A strong-willed, cheerful character. Not afraid to speak her mind, though her wicked accent often meant she would repeat sentences again and again until I, or someone else in the group, got what she was talking about. Delilah had, she said, a good life in Angola, before “the problems started”. When other women complained that their chances of getting work in the Netherlands were slim, and that their diplomas were undervalued and their experience disregarded, Delilah reminded them that they should be glad that they could live in safety and peace. When women mumbled about how they feared being mistreated by Dutch bosses, Delilah would never fail to tell stories which scrambled their, our, perspective once again.

Excerpt second hearing, 4th June 2002 between Delilah and a government official (carried out in Portuguese, with a translator in attendance)

“For which people are you most afraid?”

I have never known them. I am still afraid of everyone, of every new face. I didn’t know them. I was even afraid to go to the market. I don’t know what kind of people they were. I only know that if they found me, they’d kill me.

“Are you afraid of the government?”

I am afraid of everyone. I don’t know if they’re from the government, or elsewhere.

“Have you been able to tell us everything which might be important for your asylum request?”

Yes. I just want to add that how I came here is certainly not the most ideal way. If they hadn’t killed my son, then I wouldn’t be standing here now.

With nothing, no money, nothing. Perhaps in a different way, or elsewhere. Apart from what I've already told you, there's no other reason why I left my country.

Most of the time she did cleaning jobs, as that was all she could get, whilst many of the other migrant women refused to 'lower themselves' to such work. In Angola Delilah had had several jobs, including working and running a small company with her husband, dealing in car parts and operating a small grocery store. She was entrepreneurial, with ambitions, but her language skills held her back to some extent, as did the stress of bringing up a family of four children alone, in a foreign country. Her husband had been murdered two years before her eldest son was also murdered, at which point she fled Angola.

Despite her optimism and despite having just got married to a Dutch man, Delilah confessed that she still doesn't feel at home in the Netherlands. *"There's always a separation between the Dutch and the rest"* she told me, somewhat melancholically. I could sympathise with her, being a foreigner myself, and her words reverberated with some of my own memories of integration and with the countless number of similar stories I have heard since working with migrants in the Netherlands.

Affective charges took hold then, capturing me, touching me, luring me into a collective feeling of disappointment, tinged with a certain bitterness, whilst at the same time we both realized the irony of it all, being married to Dutch men ourselves. Both conscious and unconscious, affects may be *"felt and interpreted"*, conscious *"as states discerned by feelings, but their production is involuntary and unconscious. Affects are thoughtless"*, according to Brennan (2004, p.183). In the same way that we sensed each other's agitation, speaking quickly and tensely whilst exchanging stories of work and of integration in this country, affecting and being affected, we slowed down, bodies less tense, less tight, as we reflected and laughed about Delilah's experiences with the old folk she cares for as carer.

I ponder whether this type of relationship, whether relationality in the sense of being connected to one's informant in dialogue and affectivity is conducive to 'good' research. Whether this amount of openness and sharing is necessary to get to know the other and to make sense of her world. After all, what is 'good'? I know that in striving to get to know the other, in research, I have been confronted with ethical and other dilemmas; dilemmas which bring me face to face with the complexity of doing research with this (vulnerable) other; dilemmas which necessitate turning the lens on oneself (Dutta & Pal, 2010), if one is to avoid (or lessen the chance of) committing acts of violence through totalisation and

instrumentalisation.

As Butler (2005, p.68/69) points out, I have learnt that “*if I achieve (that) self-sufficiency, my relation to the other is lost*” and that the final aim is not to “*achieve an adequate account of a life*” but to stand ethically in relation to the other, acknowledging fully one’s opacity and partiality. Opacity and impartiality; incongruence and incoherence; emergent complexity and unfolding potentialities. Just some words to define how I experience research; how I experience what it means to inhabit new and unpredictable “*spaces on the side of the road*” (Stewart, 1996, p.32), which have been opened up by allowing affectivity in to my research, in the acceptance that mine is anything but the search for the “*perfect text*” (Stewart, 1996, p.6).

Rather, it is an attempt to “*grasp the changes that constitute the social and to explore them as changes in ourselves, circulating in our bodies, our subjectivities, yet irreducible to the individual, the personal or the psychological*” (Ticineto Clough, 2007, p.3). Essential in my work with asylum seekers and refugees is the notion that there is more than cognition, more than rational explanations. At times I am confounded, confused by the tellings, re-tellings, configurations, framings, re-framings and accounts. I am lost, and being lost enables me to look afresh at what I am hearing, seeing, feeling, experiencing, to see if there’s any way to give sense to it all, or if I just have to simply feel, and experience. Just that. Perhaps that is enough, in the moment.

Research is a constant questioning of the self, of one’s own (cultural) norms and values, a possibility to track sensibilities in narrative accounts and encounters and to “*approach the clash of epistemologies – ours and theirs – and to use that clash to repeatedly open a gap in the theory of culture itself so that we can imagine culture as a process constituted in use and therefore likely to be tense, contradictory, dialectical, dialogical, texted, textured, both practical and imaginary, and in-filled with desire*” (Stewart, 1996, p.5).

Listening to women like Delilah, hearing their narratives, sensing their happiness, shame, joy, pain, hurt, curiosity, ambition, fear and disillusion, and riding on our collective affects, I am reminded time and again that, like me, they have more than one story. Their stories are historic, textualised, localized, personal, subjective, individual, shared and collective. Is it my task to make sense of it all, or to provide meaning to their experiences, for them, for myself, for my reader? Or in “*writing research*” and “*writing lives*” am I the poet, (Rasberry, 2001,

p.9), the ethnographer, the researcher, charged with (re)presenting the culturally different other, translating his unfamiliar world into something familiar and less exotic, or am I a producer of yet more stories, this time collaborative, co-operative and dialogic? (Tyler, 1986, p.126).

Ethnography is about evocation: *“evocation is neither presentation nor representation. It presents no objects and represents none, yet it makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented. It is thus beyond truth and immune to the judgement of performance. It overcomes the separation of the sensible and the conceivable, of form and content, of self and other, of language and the world”* (Tyler, 1986, p.123). How then to evoke affect? How to describe the feelings and sensations which arise during encounters with the refugee other, during moments of unconscious togetherness, or conscious renderings of emotional joy or sadness? If words are what we have, can they ever be enough to explain the unexplainable? Or to denote how affects surge between bodies, pulsating and reverberating our very being, at times without us knowing, understanding, what is happening? Affect cannot be written or adequately captured in language. Its nature is such that it *“doesn’t just absorb pulses or discrete stimulations; it infolds contexts...”* (Massumi, 2002, p.30).

In a bid to appear objective, or to enhance the so-called scientific nature of our research, it may not be unusual to want to exclude affect, or the phenomenon of being affected by our informants. The claim of individuals who are self-contained is robust, and it may do us no good to admit our own permeability, or affectability, however self-evident this latter may be. My research however does not leave me unaffected. Those with whom I come into contact on a daily basis, their stories, their histories, their homes, their surroundings, their friends and neighbours, and the organizations who work with them, certainly do affect me, especially in my struggle and desire to make sense of it all.

The inconsistencies and ambiguities which bedevil my research, are made all the more complex across cultures, with vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and refugees. Getting to know women like Delilah has often left me confused about what is knowable to any one of us and about the methodological means open to me as researcher to gather accounts of lives and to write those lives in any meaningful way.

In my (re)search I have discovered there are many ways of accounting for past happenings, of presenting fabulations and imaginations, and of telling, and re-telling experiences. Those who we ask to remember, must sometimes un-forget the past, as though it still resides within them, refusing to surface, or indeed

surfacing at the most inopportune moments, as when one is reminded of a past occurrence by a renewed acquaintance with a smell, or by a bodily sensation of knowing or recognition.

Stewart talks of the gaps opened up by affectivity, as *“narrative spaces [that] interrupt the search for the gist of things and the quick conclusion with a poetics of deferral and displacement, a ruminative reentrenchment in the particularity of local forms and epistemologies, a dwelling in and on a cultural poetics contingent on a place and a time and in-filled with a palpable desire”* (1996, p.3/4). Like Stewart, my aim in research, is to imagine these spaces, to allow for their emergence whilst avoiding the totalisation of *“objects”* and *“gists”* (Stewart, 1996, p.4), and without the violence of extreme *“othering”* to which Butler (2005 p.41) alludes.

“How you feel is closely connected to your environment, and to others. Whether they’re open or not, whether they make room for you or not”, Delilah commented. *“The Dutch try to get at you, to kill your spirit with the small things they say or do. Not with weapons like in Angola; it’s subtle here. An emotional stabbing, if you like”.* I listened as Delilah recalled numerous occasions during her work with the elderly, frail and sick, in care homes, in which she was made to feel worthless, or stupid. Consciously or unconsciously, the actions and words of co-workers hurt. During the coffee break, if she was lucky enough to be invited to sit with the group that is, someone might ask a question which to Delilah seemed degrading, unnecessary or pure ignorant. The question whether an African knows what coffee is, whether they have roads in Angola, or whether she knows what eggs are, she meets with a haughty sound of *“kaw, kaw, kaw”*, rather like the very loud chirping of a very big bird, to express a laughter which not only hides her pain, but which is also intended to make the one asking the question feel rather small, or stupid for asking such a silly question in the first place. Delilah acknowledges that even though she mostly laughs very loudly, (*“kaw, kaw, kaw”* comes closest to replicating the noise she produces), at times she does get angry or retaliate.

“Once somebody asked me if I know what coffee is, whether we drink it whilst sitting together in Africa, and I asked her in return if she knew how to drive a car. The woman didn’t get it, she looked confused and asked me why I wanted to know. Then she said she couldn’t drive a car. I said I thought as much, and that it just went to prove how stupid she is. At least if you can drive a car you don’t only look at what’s ahead of you, you also have to look to the sides to spot what’s around you. To be a bit aware of other things, not only what’s in front. But stupid people only look in one direction, usually downwards, at their feet, at their own bit of the world. They’re not interested in the rest. Then I told her that when I was a child we used to use coffee beans like marbles, playing with them in the

streets, kicking them like stones. I said I come from Angola, one of the many countries in Africa, which by the way is the continent of coffee, just like South America. We're born in the middle of coffee beans. She complained to the boss that I called her stupid. But it shut her up”.

Delilah has so many tales, so many interesting accounts, that it's hard to keep up with her. There's nearly always humour, irony, sarcasm in her tellings. It seems that either a lot of things happen to her which are worth telling, or she just has the knack of spinning a good story. Her metaphors are poetic, her comparisons moving, her memories sensate and excessive, and her texts significant. She's appears honest, authentic, even in her chaos of likes and dislikes, which she concedes make her life interesting if not always easy. She works a lot, in care homes, on temporary contracts, looking after old Dutch people who are unable to live independently. Delilah enjoys her work, the sense of being meaningful to others is important to her, and also the idea of earning her own money. The trials of working with other Dutch care staff are part and parcel of the job, even if:

“...they try to kill you bit by bit, as if you're nothing, with their questions and comments, as if you don't know anything or can't do anything. That's why I don't feel at home here. The most important is to have one's dignity, a feeling of self-worth and that people know how to appreciate your value. But that's what's most difficult here. Nobody knows what I'm worth here. In Angola I came from a family that was well known, well respected. So when I gave my name, people knew me, knew what I'd studied, what my work was. Here nobody knows. I tell them at work that it's only because I came here when I was over thirty and had to learn a whole new language that I'm doing this work. Do you think I'd be cleaning up shit and putting my hands in somebody else's toilet if I was in Angola right now? Of course not. It's just that here nobody knows, nobody cares”.

Space for intersubjective recognition

My inquiry is intersubjective. Affect is intersubjective. It also demands intersubjective recognition. Recognition which is part of an ongoing dialogue between myself and my research partners, between me and my many different internal voices, between myself and others, both inside and outside the academy. “Ethnography is not, and never has been merely subjective. It is an intersubjective practice” (Butcher, Judd, 2013). According to Cunliffe (2004, 2011) the ethnographer's encounters are emotionally charged, and the ethnographer is not only a researcher, but also a research participant. Corporality and affect go hand in hand with reflexivity, as I reflect not only with my mind, but also with my whole being. What affects me, and why and where in my body can I feel it?

“To respect you is to recognize and acknowledge the one you are, the one you affirm yourself to be. In practice to respect a child, a foreigner, a street person, a delinquent is to listen to him or her tell his or her story” (Lingis, 74, 2007)

Re-cognize or re-cognise

To perceive (a person, creature, or thing) to be the same as or belong to the same class as something previously seen or known; know again. To accept or be aware of; to give formal acknowledgement of the status or legality of (a government, an accredited representative); to show approval or appreciation of (something good or pleasing). From Latin ‘recognoscere’ to know again (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2001, p.1196).

Listening, according to Lingis, is one way to show the Other respect. It is a means to provide recognition to the Other, and to affirm his/her existence. Research is also about listening; about acknowledging and attuning to the Other. I take care to avoid instrumentalising the listening for the sake of research, trying not to be a “poverty pimp”, making a living out of the misery of the marginalized (Veissière, 2010, p.29, Diversi & Finley, 2010 p.15), prying into lives, weeding out information here and there, telling their stories to an academic audience with a “privilege differential” (Diversi & Finley, 2010, p.14). It is not easy. It is not easy to know how to best relay the story of the Other whilst acknowledging that “*the subject’s experiences are transformed into textual representations that are only stand-ins for the actual experience being described and analyzed*” (Denzin, p.20, in Ellis, Flaherty, eds, 1992).

Writing a (life) story as a poetic representation is a choice. A choice to present the story/stories of a refugee in a different kind of space. A space which tries to avoid undue appropriation of the voice of the Other (Spivak, 1988, p.74). As with all forms of representation, it remains problematic and is still another form of staging. As Richardson says “*no matter how we stage the text, we –the authors- are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives, we bestow meaning and promulgate values*” (Richardson, 1992, p.131). Of their very nature stories are incomplete tellings that we may use as anchor points to locate our identities and to sift through experiences in order to make sense of them. “*Our story is not a chronicle of our lives; much is left out: the continuity and regularity of ordinary life, events that left us indifferent. Whole stretches of our lives may appear to us as distractions or as times when nothing really happened*” (Lingis, 2007, p.53).

Here is the story which Tatiana told me on one particular occasion in 2010. I recorded our conversation and transcribed it. Then, with her permission, I edited the story, leaving her words intact, but cutting out certain elements to give it a more poetic feel. Tatiana approved this version for publication, telling me that she was 'impressed' by her own words and how they were presented. She was, she said, delighted with the end result hereunder.

My Story

My name is Tatiana

I was born and bred in Kazakhstan..... from a small family

I am an only child.

In Kazakhstan I studied economics

At the university

And accounting

And....i worked by the Ministry of Petroleum

Later as Head of the Financial Department

In 1997 we fled

Kazachtstan

To a strange country....

Strange language,

Strange culture.....

Strange habits

But we had to.....communicate

First we spoke English in the asylum centre

We couldn't go to school

(Waiting list, waiting list)

Work in the asylum centre – I got a job relatively quickly

Crèche, canteen, employment agency for six years I made lists and looked for workers

And did a bit of accounting

Yes, I did it all with pleasure. And my husband got a job in the centre too.
We were glad – in the centre you're not allowed to do too

Much

Not work...not study

Not work...not study

Not work...not study

Not work...not study

A lot of people from different countries, different nationalities, different beliefs

All refugees, all one big family

We celebrated together

Christmas, Russian New Year, Islamic Eid (or the end of the Ramadan)

All refugees, all one big family

We celebrated together

We were glad - in the centre you're not allowed to do too

Much

Difficult times, everything was unsure

Fear, afraid to go outside

No ID

No identity

No ID-card

No identity papers

Living legally

It felt as though we were illegal

Everyone afraid

Civil servants too, afraid of the Minister

No decision

First my husband got a

Residency permit in 2000. Temporary

Until 2003, then he asked for prolongation

And got it

Finally – in 2007

In all those four years he had

No ID

No identity

No ID-card

No identity papers

We phoned the Ministry and asked questions

BUT

Nobody there knew what he needed

Really depressing at that time

Really depressing at that time

Negative comments on TV

The atmosphere changed

Everything was negative, even the personnel were unpleasant

I stopped my work because of it and

(Stayed at home).

We lived in insecurity for

TEN YEARS

We LOST our personhood

We didn't dare do anything, not

even ask questions....

(waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting)

(waiting, waiting, waiting)

(waiting, waiting, waiting)

(waiting, waiting, waiting)

(waiting, waiting, waiting)

waiting)
(waiting, waiting, waiting)
(waiting, waiting, waiting)
(waiting, waiting, waiting)
(we lose count.....)

Fortunately there were other people
They really wanted to help us and support us
Thanks to
Them
We could live and

BE

In 2007
That's 10 years,
That's 10 years,
That's 10 years,
That's 10 years

After our arrival in The Netherlands

We finally got a residency permit

(thanks to the General Amnesty for Asylum Seekers)

We were REALLY HAPPY

FINALLY WE HAD SOME SECURITY

Our children could study and we could work. I always enjoyed my work as an economist,
And so I wanted to work as an economist again.

So long nothing, a lot to learn searching for a new study

But no-one could help me

I couldn't get help any-where

FINALLY I did an MBA study – four modules completed – two exams failed
Should have chosen an easier study

With hindsight

An easier study

My husband was working in a garage repairing damaged cars in Kazakhstan.

With pleasure,

He wanted to do that work here too.

He found a work experience place and after that

Work

His hobby is art and airbrushing.....airbrushing

Our oldest son is now studying.....medicine at the university

Our youngest son is in.....group five of infant school

I began applying for jobs;

For one and half years I sent one or two letters off

Per week

But I was continually rejected.

I looked for help with different organisations BUT THERE WASN'T ANY

Despite, despite, despite ALL OF THIS,

I'm hopeful I'll find work

I try to be

+++++++POSITIVE+++++++

And when the civil servants say I'm too old to get a good job (cos' that's what they say – you know)

I say

It's nonsense

Tip one

Learn the language and try to talk as much as possible

Tip two
NEVER GIVE UP

Tip three
Don't forget who you are and where you come from

Tip four
You can do more than you think (*despite being told the contrary*)

(that's what I'd tell others in the same situation we were in)

I know Tatiana since 2006. She lived then in the far North of the Netherlands, close to the border with Germany. Not so any more. She moved in 2012 with her husband and youngest son to a more central place, where she and her husband both found work. Their son still misses Winschoten, the little town in the North, and especially his school mates.

At one of our last meetings, before she moved, Tatiana was calm, and busying herself in between talking by making a sandwich lunch for her son. It's evident that she's proud of his achievements in school, and that she's proud of her husband's airbrushed paintings. She takes me upstairs to their loft to see his works. The space is small and crowded, and can be reached by a small ladder. Tatiana glows with pride as she tells me that her husband taught himself to airbrush and has already won prizes here and there. I admit to her it's not a technique I'd ever heard about, and am really surprised by the quality of his work. His paintings are varied, ranging from portraits, to jungle scenes and woods, to animals and still life. Realistic, bright and sometimes gaudy. He also does wall paintings she exclaims.

The atmosphere changes as I hear that the local council has been snooping around, asking questions about what Tatiana's husband does with his paintings. "Does he have a business?" "Does he sell them and to whom and for how much?" "Do they know that neither of them are allowed to earn any money as they live off welfare benefits?" and so on.....

Her words provoke a reaction of anger in me alongside a shiver of disbelief. I cannot fathom what those civil servants spend their (miserable) time doing. Have they nothing better to do I surmise, than go bothering honest people who have not only got enough on their plates, but who are also doing their damned hardest

to get out of the poverty trap, to get decent work and to make something of their lives?

A hint of energy surges through our conversations as we find common ground and sympathy with one another. We connect and our voices are raised as we join in a flow of complaints and an explosion of familiar stories extends forth, like plumes of black smoke. As Stewart points out, life “*draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest. Still lifes punctuate its significance*” (Stewart, 2007, p.18/19). As if from nowhere “*things flash up – little worlds, bad impulses, events alive with some kind of charge*” (Stewart, 2007, p.68), and our control over such forces is minimal. We are animated and heated, the calm disappears, and after a bout of powerful interconnectedness, reappears and takes hold once more. Black plumes become white and peace is reinstated. We re-find our reasonableness, and aspire to make sense of the situation and to understand our experiences. We remain connected; our affective states are still bound, only this time we are contemplative and look to each other for reassurance and affirmation.

Time and again I reflect on how research changes all those involved; how its stories have the power to affect us in small, but also significant ways. Doing research, writing and re-writing lives, other people’s but also my own, brings my own prejudices sharply to the forefront; prejudices about organisations and institutions, but also about refugees, asylum seekers, foreigners, and the unemployed, to name but a few of the most common categorisations employed to distinguish one group from another. At times my pre-held conceptions of the lives of my research participants are knocked back, violently tested and vehemently refuted. Sands and Krumer-Nevo argue that shocking the interviewer is one of the strategies of interviewees to “*resist being Othered,*” (2006, p.950). Certainly the times I have been shocked, feeling shivers of disbelief, causing me to recede into silence or contemplation, have also been moments in which “*implicit expectations are disrupted*” (Sands & Krumer-Nevo, 2006, p.952).

Writing stories in the form of poetry is an affective endeavor. It reignites memory and brings the affective potentialities to the forefront. I can reimagine the scene, with special emphasis on the existing pallet of feelings and emotions and affects. The text is not “*cleaned up*” (Richardson, 1992, p.131), as it eschews the researcher’s usual “*desire for decontaminated ‘meaning’, the need to require that visual and verbal constructs yield meaning down to their last detail, the effort to get the gist, to gather objects of analysis into an order of things*” (Stewart, 1996, p.26). The text is as it is. The encounter was as it was. Perhaps there is no ‘gist’, only a network of tellings and re-tellings, and a spiral of intensities, interrupted by stills and

silences. As Richardson states *“I strive for forms in which sociology can be an effective and affecting discourse, a nonalienating practice”* (Richardson, 1992, p.136). This is also what I tried to achieve, in a modest sense, with Tatiana’s story.

Space to care

Care is an essential part of conducting affective ethical research, if ethics means dialogic interaction in relation to the (foreign) other, where power differentials are recognized and reflected upon in order to avoid the violence of totalisation which Butler talks about (2005). Dilemmas and ethical conundrums abound and I am far from immune from their power to destabilize my approach. I meet despair daily, and face the paradoxes of being a researcher for whom trust is essential, doing research in an environment in which mistrust is endemic. I am curious about whether opening up to affect increases, sustains or undermines caring spaces. What effect will affect have on the capacity to care in research (and beyond)?

“Human beings as isolated autonomous entities cannot discover their humanness. Full humanness can only result from relationship, interaction, and experience. Care is a profound form of humanization” (Letiche, 2008).

Making research(ers) CARE

It seems to me that many of the recommendations that Letiche makes in *“Making health care care”* (2008), such as *“do not let systems overwhelm care”* or *“pay attention to your relationships”*, even *“break up old categories and aggregation levels”* and *“translate person to patient and back to person at the bedside”* could, with minor (textual) adjustments, as easily apply to the work of doing research. *“Care [...] is grounded in relationship”* according to Letiche, who levels a critique at the healthcare system for not being as humane as it should be. Indeed do we actually care enough as researchers about those whom we research; enough to let ourselves be affected or touched (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009), or to be *“undone”* by the other (Butler, 2005), or to be *“violated, outraged, wounded by you?”* (Lingis, 2007)

The Iraqi Officer, also known as B.

People in Iraq recognised him, and knew his position. He was privileged. Now, he says himself, *“I am nothing here”*. He goes to bed he says feeling worthless, knowing that he has lost everything, knowing that he is nothing. And he wakes up with the same feeling. It’s not that he’s not grateful to the Netherlands, where he is safe and has a roof over his head; it’s more the realization that he will not achieve the feeling of being anybody any time soon.

“Why isn’t life like this in our country?” B. asked me one day. “All Iraqi’s who are here ask the same question. Peaceful, no problems, just like it should be according to the Islam; yet no Islamic country has managed to organize things like in Europe, with a democracy, with peace”. Did I know why? he asked again. He pondered whether it could be the people, the mentality, the religion. Why were there so many problems when in fact Islam should pave the way for a life like it is here? I nodded, when appropriate, shaking my head when he reiterated the problems; the daily dosage of killing, murder, and atrocities committed in the name of Islam. He was anticipant. I could sense he was waiting for a (certain type of) reply, yet I didn’t quite know what. I wondered if he was out to trick me perhaps. We’d had many many conversations on Islam, and I figured he was expecting me to put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the religion.

The mood was somber. It is 2011. B. was at home, learning his Dutch. His home was no longer the asylum centre where I first met him more than a year before; now that he had been granted residency status he had been housed in a village, not that far from the camp, in a small house with his son of twelve. He’d wanted to remain in the same town as the camp, but once a house had been allocated to him in a village by the authorities, a refusal would mean having to look for accommodation alone, with no right to a shelter at the asylum camp any more. Like many before him, he took what was on offer, but has kept his name on the waiting list for social housing in a bigger town.

Now that he’s on the “outside” of the camp, and must integrate into Dutch society, B. has got a taste of what it means to live in a well-regulated society, where there’s a place for everything, and where everything has its place. His sobriety is partly caused by his unavoidable entanglement into the bureaucratic machinery of the Netherlands; his seeming appropriation by the authorities, meaning a thorough categorization, systematization and rubricating of almost everything. In his first week out B. was so overwhelmed by the paperwork, and by the never ending stream of official letters in his mail box, that he remarked that where he had been losing all faith before in whether he would ever get residency, he was now seriously considering to go back voluntarily to Iraq under the strain and stresses of the formalities and bureaucracy with which he was now faced. *“At least I know how things work there. Here I’m lost,”* is a comment I hear regularly.

I like B. At least most of the time I do. He doesn’t make me laugh like Delilah does, as his demeanor is more serious. Once or twice though we have broken out into laughter, as he or I pick up on something which has been said, or on some irony in the situation about which it’s better to laugh than to cry. We have long

discussions on Islam, the position of women in Iraq and in Islam, and on the role of the West in foreign affairs and in particular in his home country. He usually apportions the blame for what isn't right in Iraq to the West, or more specifically to the USA. Islam would be perfectly fine if left alone, according to B., but Western influence is the main culprit for the lack of democracy, for the fighting and for terrorism. Needless to say we agree on some things, but don't always see eye to eye.

I often wonder what it must be like to be reliant on others for just about everything. I talk with refugees and asylum seekers about dignity, and self-worth, and the loss of it, and whether the system, or rather institutions dealing with issues of immigration and integration care or not about such things. Strange is the sense of guilt which can overcome me as researcher, as I embark on discussions, pry into lives, weeding out information here and there, noting everything down, as I revel in the stories I am told, whilst at the same time being sickened at times by their contents. It almost seems indecent; an instrumentalisation of the relationship for the sake of research, for the sake of description and (re)presentation, for the sake of furthering the cause of knowledge (for knowledge's sake).

I certainly feel like a "*poverty pimp*" at times (Veissière, 2010, Diversi & Finley, 2010), though acknowledgement thereof, combined with open dialogue on the subject with my informants, goes some way to assuage the blows of inequity and power inequality. Self-reflexivity tempers the fantasy that I am the hero researcher, able to empower in any meaningful way those whom I am researching; yet I feel sure that a research methodology which opens itself up to affective interchanges and caring encounters, in short, one that is "humane", can make a difference.

What sort of difference is the next question? I would argue that the sort of difference it can make is ethical first and foremost, in that it avoids rationalizing what cannot be rationalized, and embraces partiality and complexity, and the emergence of emotions and affects, as something normal, something human. In much research the search is on for totality, for the essence, for the truth and great strides are taken to ban that which cannot be neatly packaged into categories and compartments, or explained away by concepts or theories. Texts are trimmed at the edges, tidied up, and made convincing by their neatness and elimination of the messy, uncertain bits. Yet I have found that research is not like that. At least mine is not. People are disordered, life is uncertain and ambivalent, situations are emergent, and affects strike when one is least expecting them to.

Some of the most interesting insights I have made come out of questions informants ask me, and not the other way around; or when they delight in the realization that they have shocked me; or when we engage in real dialogue, debate or discussion whilst sharing everyday chores and activities. These are the moments of “*ordinary affects*” to which Stewart alludes (2007). Veissière speaks of a “*strategic humanism in which writers, ethnographers, and researchers are invited to regain the courage to speak in the name of humanity, the possibility of a human essence, and the necessity of a collective human project*” (2010).

I have professed my guilty feelings to B., to my ignorance on some of the topics we discuss, and have been brought down a peg or two when realizing how deeply ingrained some of my prejudices are, how Eurocentric, and how condescending. “*Do you think we really have time to worry about whether our children watch violent programmes on television*” he asked me once, after I had made some comment or another comparing my concerns as a mother with those of some of the asylum seekers I had met at the camp. I was, of course, insinuating that I was more concerned for the psychological health of my children than they seemed to be, given the abundance of violent programmes I encountered in their living quarters. “*We have far greater concerns*” B. continued, “*like whether you might see a disembodied head when you walk out the door, or whether the car which is driving next to you might explode, or whether you’ll return home alive after being to the market*”. Perhaps my silence thereafter expressed more than any counter argument could have done. Perhaps B. felt my shame, as my affective state was transmitted through bodily motions, lowered eyes, and the unusual lack of conversation. Perhaps that’s why he chose not to embarrass me further.

In reaction to the process of “*Othering*” B. could have chosen to administer further “*shocks*”, although doing so would not always necessarily be a conscious move on the part of informants like B. Rather, there have been occasions of dialogue or even observation, in which asylum seekers or refugees are going about their daily business, with their children, with others, reacting to one another, where I have been moved or touched, affected or bewildered. Such moments do not feel as though they are strategically underpinned by some desire to curtail the power differences, rather as affective interstices or gaps in understanding or meaning, which arise, mark a space of cultural difference and then play themselves out intersubjectively. They are “*moments of encounter, shock, recognition, retreat*” which “*perform the problematics of subject and object, power and powerlessness, distance and closeness, certainty and doubt, stereotype and cultural form, forgetting and re-membling – so that these become constitutive elements of the story itself*” (Stewart, 1996, p.7).

The story is shared, yet the “*relationship demands difference or being-two*” (Letiche, 2008). Care, so argues Letiche, is premised on the acknowledgement of difference in a relationship which demands “*nonappropriative interaction*”. Research needs to be both caring and relational, wherein “*the ability to exchange gazes – that is, to be with another and to interactively acknowledge humaneness – points both to the existential plenitude of relationship, and to the lack of self without the other*” (Letiche, 2008). Affect too is intersubjective, a collective phenomenon, which demands “*being-two*”, and a re-conceptualisation of embodiment (Blackman & Venn, 2010).

The turn to affect shifts our focus to the body, augmenting the body’s potential as transmitter of new forms of knowledge and knowing. How I get to know asylum seekers and refugees in my research relies not only on cognitive understanding, or on rationalizing thoughts, ideas and concepts, but also on the transmission of affect. Bodies matter in research.

BODIES

Bodies matter.

Bodies are matter. They matter. Why do bodies that are matter matter? Does some matter matter more than other matter? It would seem that not all things matter to the same degree. There are degrees of mattering. Can I as researcher decide what or who matters?”

Decide which body matters? Which body counts?

1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13.....107,708
documented civilian deaths from violence since 2003

www.iraqbodycount.org

(Kim Tsai, *Journal excerpt*, 31st October, 2010)

Leyla’s body matters

With Leyla, a single mother of four from Chechnya, I experience magical moments of melancholic meetings; a meandering of minds and bodies locked in meaningful, symbolic embrace. Thoughts which are turned upside down, on their head, lodged sharply or gently out of place, dis-placed, dis-lodged, de-constructed, only to be re-thought with a new vitality, re-dressed in new meanings, clothed in another set of relations, to be pondered, reflected upon....

Bodies, re-acting to each other, interwoven, enmeshed harmoniously, or distorted, dis-placed, dis-lodged, de-constructed, only to be re-charged, or calmed down, in sync or out, depending on the affective mood, and the swing or density of

incitation and imagination.

Who are you...Leyla...? Is there a way to possibly know you? The person, the subject, the person as subject, the person with an identity, a self, a sense of self? Individual yet indelibly entangled in a web of conspiratorial relations, real or imagined, interlocking and influencing, conjuring up wor(l)ds of doubt, envy, betrayal and injustice in your head, and in your body. Affects, effects, which are real and potentially fatal – to you.

How much of anything is the ‘true’ Leyla? All? A fragment? Why this despair? You carry the scars of the past, visible in your eyes; those eyes whose natural colours you hide, enhance, blot out – perhaps to see the world through new – other coloured – lenses. I wonder what those eyes have seen, bore witness to. Which joys and tragedies have passed through them, encapsulating your imagination, and your body?

When you close your eyes, even now, you cannot escape the pain, as the images invade your sleep tirelessly. Nightmares are the order of the ... night. Eyes, a lens on the world, turned outwards, or turned in on oneself, awake or in slumber, you remain haunted by the past. Whichever mask you wear, you say you can’t forget; even tablets don’t help. Is the mask for yourself, for me, for the Netherlands? Did you wear one before, or could you be Leyla back then? More than now, or less?

The complex interweaving of your stories means I lose track every now and then of the line. Your incoherence, or mine, is part of how it was, of what it felt like, feels like. I encounter signs which communicate your disappointment and your fear, yet I may fail to read the signs adequately; the spoken ones at least. I try to wrestle free from representing you culturally, avoid the claim to know you fully, as the spaces we inhabit together are ambiguous and ephemeral.

Imagining *“how an encompassed and contested way of life can grow immanent, how it might be scripted right into the matter of things, how objects and bodies could become images that twist and turn in the strands of desire and rise like moons on the horizon”* (Stewart, 1996, p.20), I have asked you whether you were different back then. Whether you are the same person as you were before.

Adamantly, vehemently, you reply “NO”. Everything has changed. You are a totally different person. Nothing of that old Leyla remains, you say. I’m after the essence of your personhood, the essential essence of Leyla, as if it were to be found in a perfume bottle, carefully distilled and enclosed in the core of your

being. I'm out to glean the real you; to discover the gist of Leyla; to de-code, de-crypt, to make sense, to understand.

"Imagine how people search for an otherness lurking in appearances. How they find excesses that encode not a 'meaning' per se but the very surplus of meaningfulness vibrating in a remembered cultural landscape filled with contingency and accident, dread and depression, trauma and loss, and all these dreams of escape and return. Imagine the desire to amass such a place around you, to dig yourself into it, to occupy it..." (Stewart, 1996, p.20).

Astonishingly, but beautifully simple, you announce that it's only here, in the Netherlands, that you can be Leyla. Only here are you starting to have a sense of who you really are. There, back then, the 'real' Leyla was hidden, repressed, unable to show herself. She was invisible, you say. The mask can now come off. That's what you tell me.

The melancholy dissipates, yet I feel no joy. I hardly know what I feel; what we feel. Though I am affected by a certain element of sadness, if not cold, it is steely. Thoughts which are turned upside down, turned on their head, lodged sharply or gently out of place, dis-placed, dis-lodged, de-constructed, only to be re-thought with a new vitality, re-dressed in new meanings, clothed in another set of relations, to be pondered, reflected upon....

Bodies, re-acting to each other, interwoven, enmeshed harmoniously, or distorted, dis-placed, dis-lodged, de-constructed, only to be re-charged, or calmed down, in sync or out, depending on the affective mood, and the swing or density of incitation and imagination.

The assumption that I held that this life, this place, this system, might oppress, might engender a fear in you to be or become the 'real' Leyla, to be able to enjoy and re-live your own/old culture and ways of life, was unfounded. It lost its potency with your words. I was wrong, once again challenged to re-asses my conditioned ideas of changing identities within a cultural real and to particularize my discourse to take account of the here and now and of you.

Here you are, looking me in the eyes, holding on to my arm, telling me that you could *"never be you"* in your country. That life there held no means to express yourself in any meaningful way, that it held you back, prevented you from flourishing, from becoming you. Only now that you are here, can you see it. You broached the subject of education once, of studying, with your husband, but it

was quickly (and violently) disregarded. So the thought did cross your mind, but was squashed, eliminated with a vengeance, from your mind and your body.

My curiosity reached a peak, as I wondered how I could ever put myself in your shoes, or in the shoes of other refugees? How could I hope to develop an understanding of your situation, try to imagine, or feel what it was like; what it is like, now? I have to undo myself, allow myself to be “undone”, in the words of Butler, or to “unlearn” my privileges, in the words of Spivak. Perhaps then I may start to gain insight, but I can never speak for you. I can never represent you, as such. You – Leyla; let alone all refugee women (from Chechnya), just you. In the same way, you cannot represent all of them, or speak for them. You are you, singular, individual.

We can present though, in narrative, stories, writings and texts, which try to register the complexity and to enfold the sensibilities of how it is you make sense of being Leyla and how I make sense of you being Leyla. I can express our relationship and the sometimes dramatic affect you have on me. For whilst you are delving into who you are, so too I; I am looking through the lens onto Leyla, whilst turning the lens onto myself at the same time. Though our knowing will remain partial, as we are opaque to ourselves and can never fully know one another (Butler, 2005), I want to know more of you than I do at present.

My mind cannot register or collate all the thoughts which race through it. They flit back and forth, flirting with me, making appearances, then disappearing, leaving a trace, a bare notion of what it is I want to know, of what is troubling me, of the pathways I could explore.... But there are so many that I am constantly side tracked, led off to explore new avenues, new possibilities, exciting perspectives, weaving in and out, catching on, then before I’ve-had-a-chance-to-pin-them-down... they have fled, been replaced by new conundrums, or contradicted by new dilemmas. At times it’s too much. The flood of ideas maintains a constant flow, a surge of potentialities, with neither order nor coherence, belying all manner of categorization or sense.

Where the mind races, the senses are flooded. Affect is collective (Manning, 2010), and the potentialities which lie before us manifest in affective form as optimism (Berlant, 2010), shame (Probyn, 2010), desire or anger. Affect accumulates, getting into the body, evading both will and consciousness (Watkins, 2010).

Watkins suggests that the social is embodied, “*an ongoing series of affective transactions [...] conceived not only as a source of subjection but as a site of possibilities*”

(2010, p.284). Perhaps it can be argued that being – becoming – oneself is in part dependent on the accumulation of affect and that being in relation implies the acknowledgement of inter-affectivity. Also in research.

Leyla remains enigmatic, almost sublime. Intensive periods of contact highlight the absurdity of academic essentialism, as Stewart (1996) calls it. Are the psychological traumas and psychiatric treatment part of your essence; or the tendency to attempt suicide; or the evident vulnerability and sensitivity to what others think or say about you; or there again the steely resolve and inherent strength which got you this far with four young children; the childlike gaze and girly laughter; or the sensuousness and sensibility which ooze through your bones and pervade the air around you? If there is a “gist”, I have not yet got to it.

Liking is not the same as Caring

I like Leyla, like I like Delilah, and like I like B.; they all matter to me. I like Leyla, though not because she makes me laugh like Delilah. And not because I admire her humility like I do that of others, rather for her tenacity and strength of character which despite her evident vulnerability and sensibility, is somewhere entrenched in her body, interwoven in the very fibre of her being; dormant, I presume, until called upon to act, until called upon to defend her life and that of her children. I care about them all.

Yet what of those in research that I do not particularly like? Those with whom I feel no specific connection, yet who I still feel I ‘need’ for my research, because of their past, their present and the thrilling nature of their narratives? To what extent do I, or can I care deeply about them, or is theirs the instrumentalised encounter in which I really am like an academic pimp? These questions play on my mind when I meet refugees like Gadar from Syria, or Hermina from Armenia, or other former army officers from Iraq whose past lives are imbued with cruelty and horrors committed not so very long ago.

I am affected by them, by the stories which are told by them and about them; the intertwining of lives, histories, and contexts is unavoidable when one works with asylum seekers and refugees, whose worlds are somehow distinct yet very much connected, the one to the other. The ways in which the spaces which they inhabit fling them together is incredulous, as are their networks of communication and their mechanisms for inclusion and exclusion. Each inhabitant knows something of another, as nationalities either herd together regardless of background, or indeed choose to separate themselves off to avoid identification with the group. Digressions are innumerable, as in the heat of the moment accounts switch,

change directions, fail to materialise, or become embroiled in so many details that each fragment is contested or tracked for signs or meaning. *“Picture how, in story, world is mediated by word, fact moves into the realm of interpretation to be plumbed for significance, how act moves to action and agency, how the landscape becomes a space in-filled with paths of action and imagination, danger and vulnerability”* (Stewart, 1996).

I surmise that it is not necessary to like in any specific manner the refugee informants with whom I work, but I do care about them, or at least about the situations in which they now find themselves, regardless of past acts or actions. I care deeply about how the system, how officials demand accounts which are complete, whole, unflawed, coherent, free of incoherent outtakes and slippages, imposing a rigid discipline on the way in which information and facts, stories and narratives are gathered and drawn up into official texts. I care about what happens in the gaps of affectivity which are opened up as interpretive spaces in my encounters with refugees, asylum seekers, government officials, hardworking volunteers, teachers, neighbours and friends and how I am caught up in between, in the middle, in motion, in silence, tracing the histories and unfolding impacts of those lives on each other and on me.

“What imposes respect is the sense of the other as a being affirming itself in its laughter and tears, its blessings and cursing. This respect is first the consideration that catches sight of the space in which the emotions of another extend” (Lingis, 1998, p.128).

If affect is collective, transmissible and intersubjective, as I believe it is, then surely it calls upon researchers to examine the distance between them and their research objects in the light of their own humanity. We are anything but immune from affect in our research. As Lingis points out *“We have learned our hesitancy, felt our assertiveness and our incredulity, learned our obstinacy, felt our irony and our boredom from the surges and tumults in the fields of emotional forces in others. They vibrated in our bodies as we captured the tones, rhythms, paces, emphases and retreats of the gestures and voices of others”* (1998, p.126).

The desire to collect accounts is tumultuous. Accounts, as *“ethnographic truths are [thus] inherently partial – committed and incomplete”* whereby *“all constructed truths are made possible by powerful ‘lies’ of exclusion and rhetoric”*, (Clifford, Marcus, eds., 1986, p.7). Self-reflexivity is a must. The confrontation with self enlists the researcher to account ethically for his or her own actions during the course of the research project. To take affect seriously in ethnography is, I would argue, to admit our own vulnerabilities and to premise our research on self-reflexivity and care. This

inevitably entails a greater awareness of our relationality, indelibly hinged on the risk of becoming undone by the other.

Becoming undone is a recognition that we feel with our whole self, right down to our capillaries and arteries; that we enter into the dynamics of the moment, however precarious; that we go beyond the impulse to purge the knots which form in our stomach at times of vulnerability and confrontation and we leave open a space in which the other can be heard in an environment of trust and care.

We must not delude ourselves, however. In my experience, exchanges with asylum seekers and refugees sometimes have the opposite effect. They mobilize the desire to create boundaries, or to reassert them, or to reassert oneself as an individual subject, entirely separate from the other. I certainly do not claim that becoming undone is easy.

Once caught in such impulses, emblemized by the nagging surge of disgust, horror, or sheer indignation, it's hard to wrestle oneself free. It's hard to let go. At such times my body is entangled in a web of affects and emotions, each tugging at the other, each enhancing the other to ever greater heights of passion. It may be that I am caught unaware; something is muttered and my ears prick with incredulity. An utterance, an argument, an exclamation, a sentence said in jest, or just a sentence; something which hurts my own sense of being. It may be felt as an attack, deliberate or otherwise. Nonetheless it feels like an attack. The intersubjective space, the potentiality of becoming lost in creativity, is lost and the barricades are hoisted into place. Rage may ensue.

Adverse Affects

I am often taken aback by the sudden surge of affects which I would rather keep boxed up, penned in, and in fact firmly hidden from public view. In my own quest to tackle injustice and to reassert common humanity, I may forget that rage, like hostility and annoyance are also ordinary affects, my affects. In chapter Four I address adverse affects, looking at how affective research is not purely the domain of pro-social affects. I embark on a discussion of the less positive side of an affective research approach, showing how it may debilitate us and our research participants, rather than lead to more enriched and empowering ways of living and researching.

Affective Matter (2)
“Cultural clashes”

The mantu were delicious. A steamed dumpling, filled with beef and topped with a tomato sauce of shredded carrot and onions, is a popular dish in the Caucasus. Leyla’s mother and cousin-in-law had been labouring to produce perfectly formed dough parcels, encapsulating small round balls of minced beef, mixed with a variety of spices, to produce a mouth-watering, flavour-filled experience. They were then steamed in a tall three tier steel steamer, with each tier big enough to take some twenty or thirty small dumplings. They reminded me of the Chinese dim sum which I ate frequently when I was younger, made by my father, but with a sauce of vinegar and soy sauce, with fresh ginger. My father’s filling was pork minced meat, not favoured of course by the Muslims with whom I was now eating mantu.

I had eaten them on previous occasions and Leyla had been inviting me to come for ages, to enjoy them again. The last time she made them was a few months earlier, but I’d just then got a small puppy, belonging to A. and wanted to bring him along. He was ‘haram’ according to Leyla and her mother and was therefore not allowed in the house, in the same room as where we would be eating. At that time the little puppy was too small to be left alone for any considerable time, and I declined her offer of putting him in a box in the corner for the duration of my visit. Leyla said that the Koran forbade Muslims to have a dog in their house, especially close to the room where they might be praying. I surmised that it was on this occasion the influence of her mother, rather than the influence of the Koran, which, incidentally, Leyla has never read. I was annoyed at Leyla’s excuses; I thought they were plain stupid. I avoided telling A., as I knew it would only create additional tension.

Sayed was also eating that evening at Leyla’s. Sayed is an Iraqi Muslim who is awaiting a decision from the immigration authorities on his second asylum request. His first was denied, and after going through all possible appeal routes his case was closed. He’d been living in one of the two houses that the local authority provides for asylum seekers who are officially out of options and whose possibilities are exhausted. Though I found out recently that that policy doesn’t make sense, as the houses are actually for those who are either working toward their voluntary return to their country of origin, or for those who actually have a chance of re-opening their cases. Such asylum seekers might be investigating ways of getting access to ‘new’ evidence from their home countries, or they may be in a process of conversion (to Christianity), or they may be bluffing, and biding

their time until the situation is more favourable to a new asylum application. This might be the case if the security situation in their own country is degenerating rapidly or if a new 'policy notice' is issued easing up the asylum conditions for certain nationalities.

Whatever, Sayed had been living in such a property with other asylum seekers and recently lodged a new asylum request. Due to the situation in Iraq, his case has not yet been decided upon and he has been given official accommodation in an asylum centre in Utrecht in the centre of the country. A judge recently ruled that the situation was too unsafe in Iraq to send asylum seekers back and that whilst awaiting a decision, such asylum seekers should be housed.

I'd first met Sayed a few months ago when Leyla moved into her new council house. Her house is one of the newest in the town, on the water in a mixed neighbourhood (mixed council and bought properties). The houses are spacious, with a small back garden which opens on to a waterway. The council is constructing canals in Drachten to re-open the waterways and to provide access to the centre by (small) boat. Leyla is lucky enough to have been allocated a brand new house in that new neighbourhood. It's a three bedroomed property with a huge loft area which is totally insulated, a modern kitchen and living room space, with glass patio doors which open on to the garden. The shower area is also sleek and the fittings include all the comforts of a good home. Leyla knew Sayed via B. and she had asked him to lay down her laminated floor a few months after moving in.

Originally Leyla had bought cheap carpets to cover the floor, but she had her eyes set on something more practical such as laminate, and despite not having the resources to actually buy it, once she saw a 'cheap offer' she couldn't resist buying the stuff and having it fitted. I'd advised her to wait, as she already had a new and decent, though cheap, perfectly good carpet. But her desire to have a lovely interior swayed her more than her aching wallet. It had been the same with the flat screen which she had bought previously and which lasted just a few months before one of the children smashed the screen by accident. The same with the glass chandeliers, of which most of the 'crystal' droplets were already broken and one of the two lamps now only consisted of the silver under plate; the decorative part having been long broken and removed. The same with the tablet and lap top; two more casualties of carelessness and bad spending options. Though she still proudly parades her I-pad around; a giveaway by an energy company when she swapped from one provider to another. She didn't have a clue about the possible benefits or disadvantages, but the lure of a 'free' I-pad was just too great. Leyla

even lent it to me one weekend to convince me of its benefits and of the rightness of her decision to change energy companies, but I personally wasn't able to discover any ground-breaking reason for me to purchase such a tool. She delights in taking it wherever she goes, though when she's at home the children are invariably playing one war game or another on the thing.

Back to Sayed. On the day I first met him I'd gone round to Leyla for a coffee and Sayed had arrived early to start sorting out the floor. But what a fiasco that turned out to be. It was already around ten in the morning and they had just returned from a local discount store where they'd bought a few of the necessary tools for the job. Then they'd made a stop at the shop to rent out a tile cutter, as Sayed was also going to lay the tiles in the kitchen area, where the laminate ended. In the big DIY store though Leyla discovered that she had to put down a deposit before she could rent the tile cutter. A deposit which she didn't have. She was already skint by having bought both the laminate and the tiles, plus other stuff such as dining chairs and a table. The furniture she'd had at her old house wasn't good enough for the new one, except the sofa and the beds, and so the rest was bought new. Leyla is not a fan of second-hand goods. Rather cheap, cheery, glitzy and new, than good quality and second-hand.

I returned with Leyla and Sayed to the store, and gave her the deposit for the machine. We got it into her car, and drove back home. A ten minute drive or so. At home Sayed read flippantly through the user manual and safety guidelines and announced that they didn't count for much as in Iraq they never took any notice of such stuff, but just got on and used the equipment. He was an expert anyway, he noted. He said he knew what he was doing. I mentioned that it might be good to use gloves or glasses but he disregarded the advice and proceeded to set up the machine for use. I couldn't help wondering how many accidents there probably were with such machines, but couldn't be bothered entering into a discussion with him. I already felt aversion arising.

After a short while it became evident that Sayed needed more tools, which Leyla didn't have. It warranted yet another trip to the local bargain store, to pick up tile glue, a kind of measuring stick, and a few other bits and pieces. "*How is it that these people never prepare anything beforehand,*" I probed. So much for a peaceful coffee morning. Leyla left again with Sayed to the shop, and I accompanied them. I made some comment about how much petrol she might have saved if she'd made a list in advance, and said I hoped we wouldn't have to go out again.

Once back home, Sayed got to work pulling out the fridge freezer and the gas

cooker, and started measuring up. There was another glitch with finding out how exactly to disconnect the gas in a safe way, but I left before he really started working. It was already lunchtime.

Now I met him again at Leyla's. The work he'd done was fine, though not without fault. The tiles were fitted, as was the laminate. They'd used her carpet as underlayment. The edges to the walls weren't entirely fitting, and there were sections of laminate where the trim wasn't completely stuck down to the floor. At first glance it was ok, but on closer inspection a bit shabby or hotch potch. Nevertheless it was clean, and good enough. Sayed sat next to me, as Leyla presented us both with an enormous plate heaped full with mantu. The two sauces were on the table to be put on individually – the tomato with carrots and onions, and another which looked more like tomato paste but which Leyla said was 'spicy'. If it was spicy, I couldn't taste the spice, but its thickness made a nice contrast to the other more runny topping.

I immediately protested and said it was too much, but Leyla laughed and said: *"just eat what you want, no problem. This is all there is, so eat"*. At the square glass table she had set four places, as there were only four chairs. I sat next to the wall with Sayed on my right-hand side. Facing Sayed was Leyla, and facing me Ilias, the cousin of Leyla, who was also living temporarily with her (with his wife and daughter of just over one year). Sayed commented on Leyla's hair, which was now ash blond, after a few episodes of dyeing which turned out to be disastrous. Why in heaven's name she wanted blond hair is beyond anybody's guess, but at least her hair was now a decent colour compared to last week and a few weeks before then.

Her first home-attempt at dyeing her hair blond had turned it to a screeching orange colour which looked ridiculous. I'd seen her on the street with Ilias running to the hairdressers to have it dyed professionally, as her own attempt had been such a failure. I'd hardly recognised her as the day before her hair was its normal mousy brown colour. It had taken quite some while for the ebony black to grow out, but now seemingly she wanted to become blond. The black made her look hard and unfriendly, her own colour suited her, and this orange was just a spectacle of dyeing gone wrong. A couple of days later, after her visit to the hairdressers, her hair was better. Most of the orange was gone, leaving behind a golden yellow hair, which resembled straw, but then softer. She donned that colour for about six weeks, and before a company outing last week to the race course, had gone back to get it ash blond. A definite improvement, but still not natural.

Sayed noted that Leyla was also 'slimmer' than before, 'but that could be the hair too', he laughed. Leyla blushed, and said it was probably the hair, but that she has been going a lot to the gym recently. "Yes, sport is important," he said, "it's important to stay fit".

We tucked in to our food, savouring the lightness and tastiness of the mantu before us. Mother and cousin's wife sat in the living room behind us, with the smaller children, except Medina, who I'd not yet seen. I asked why they weren't eating with us. "I've only got four chairs, well five," Leyla said pointing to a plastic garden chair in the corner. "My mother doesn't want to eat with us, as Savine is also here, and she'll eat with her later. And she's embarrassed because she doesn't understand anything we talk about". I laughed and retorted that if they sat with us then we (Sayed and I) would be in the minority and they could all talk together and we would be the ones not to understand anything. "That's true, but she'll eat later with Savine," Leyla said. "Yes, leave the two women there, it's fine like this," Sayed commented, continuing to heap the mantu into his mouth. His plate was almost half empty, whilst I'd only just begun.

I told Leyla that they were delicious and asked who had made them. She pointed to mother and the wife of her cousin. I looked at Ilias, and whilst I knew he wouldn't directly understand me, I asked if he too could cook. Leyla translated quickly, and I saw the edges of his mouth turn up in laughter. "In our culture the men don't cook," laughed Leyla, "the women do all the cooking in the house. He can't cook," she repeated looking at Ilias with a big grin on her face. Sayed intercepted,

This is it, I thought. Why was I not surprised. The archetypal Muslim man. Stuck in his cultural inheritance, unmoved by cultural transitions in his move from East to West and evidently in no way disentangled or disenchanted by his own background. The new 'spaces and places' which Sayed now inhabited seemed to have had little sway over his way of thinking about traditional roles of men and women. Or was the challenge in fact too great for him to bear, leading to a grounding down on his cultural and religious values; a re-rooting of his beliefs after the upheaval of migration and loss? I realised that I was affected to answer back and to counteract his comments.

There was a palpable surge in intensity, and a wave of heat flowed through my body as I reacted. I felt an irritation rising in my throat, causing a certain tenseness. Agitated I asked: "What do you mean by that?".

"I've got a Dutch girlfriend, and she does everything for me. The men should be out earning the money, and the women should be at home cooking and cleaning. If you think I'd stoop so low as to cook or clean, or Hoover the floor, then I'd really be stupid wouldn't I?", Sayed answered smugly, with a smirk on his face, remaining composed. He was deadly serious. *"That's how we've been brought up and that's how it's meant to be"*.

The heat rose within, and my breath got shorter. Leyla was looking intently at the two of us, and her cousin looked on, not understanding anything of the conversation. Ilias continued eating, eyes on the two of us.

"That's not how it's supposed to be. That's just how it is in some cultures," I retorted. *"Especially in cultures where men are afraid to have smart women next to them. Then they figure out all kinds of ways to justify why they should have certain positions and women others, but it's all so that men can dominate women"*.

"Look at Europe," Sayed said. *"And look at the Muslim world. We are much bigger. And our culture is a hundred times superior to the culture here. It's just the best. That's how it is. We've got a far better culture. The culture here is just stupid. What kind of man does stuff in the house. When the food's eaten, we just sit down and the women can do the rest. It's just stupid here. Look how big the Muslim world is compared to here.....we're just bigger and better.....,"* he rattled on.

I laughed, "bigger doesn't mean better. Size is no means to judge quality".

Leyla looked on as the argument got more heated.

"Our women want it this way, they like it like it is. They want to do the cooking and cleaning and looking after the children".

"Your' women don't know any better. They've never had the chance to know a better life. That's all they know, so obviously they accept it. Why is it that a lot of refugee couples divorce when they've settled here for a while? It's because the women grow and develop and leave the men behind. They realise they have chances here that they didn't have at home and they want something better for themselves.....".

Sayed interrupted, feeling challenged. "How would you know that? That's not true. It's because they take on the culture here. They're not good Muslims any more, they just become like you Westerners.....," his voice was raised, and he shuffled about on his seat. The remaining mantu waited to be eaten.

"I know because I read, books, research and I talk to a lot of refugees. That's how I know. It's because in Europe I've had a chance to get educated, to learn to read and write, which if I may say a lot of women don't get in Muslim countries...."

"That's not because of the Islam. The Islam is the best religion. You can believe what you want. You can worship stones for all I care, but our religion is the best".

"If that's so, what are you doing here? If everything is so fine in the Muslim world, why are you asking for asylum here?" I bit my tongue as I said it... but couldn't help the urge to confront, to argue with this man. My mind raced back and forth spewing up images of other Muslim men I've met just like him and I could hear their words, similar to his, in my mind; about how superior 'they' are; about how 'they' know best; about how 'their' women don't have ambitions to work or study; about how it was all 'our' fault that their countries are ruined; about how 'we' are to blame for all the ills in their lands; about how we should leave 'their' religion alone; about how 'we' poison 'their' children and lead them astray; about how everything is better in 'their' own countries; about how Christians are conspiring to ruin 'them'; about how the Islam is perfect and the culture is to blame for the wrongdoings against women; about how nobody is to be trusted and everybody is lying to 'them'; And on and on, like a whirlpool disturbing the muddy depths and throwing up the mud higher and higher to the surface, where it was just about to erupt.

"I've got problems in my country, problems. It's all the fault of Europe and the West anyway. Those who aren't good Muslims, that's their own problem but our religion is just better. Look at those hypocrites who become Christian to stay here, that's really hypocritical....."

I could barely hold myself in: *"hypocritical, hypocritical....the real hypocrites are the Muslims who drink, smoke, have sex, and then close their eyes and pretend they haven't done anything. The majority of the so-called Muslims I know drink, party, have girlfriends and are then all pious and pretend that they're Muslims. And then they get all upset when a Muslim converts to Christianity. Do me a favour, that's hypocritical if ever I saw it....the whole religion based on fear of this, fear of that, rules for this, rules for that, lends itself to hypocrites and oppression if you ask me. That's backward....,"* (oops, uncontrolled, there I went again).

He edged closer to me and started shaking his fists. *"Keep your mouth shut. Your culture is nothing, we have the best culture and religion. Don't talk to me like that. It's only because you're a woman.....if you were a man.....,"* he writhed in his seat, hands raised.

Poor old Leyla was also writhing in her seat, looking helplessly and pleading to me with her gaze to stop. Ilias meanwhile looked stupefied, but tried to hide his stupefaction with a small smile. He kept looking at Leyla, and Leyla kept looking at me, and then to Sayed. I felt slightly sorry for her but my natural fighting instinct had been wrenched to the fore, and against my own better judgement, I didn't stop. In fact, I was more heated, and more fired up than ever.

"What? What?" I almost shouted. "Ha, that's it. If I were a man you'd hit me? Yeah yeah, and don't tell me to keep my mouth shut. If your culture knows the language of violence to solve problems, then that's not how I've learnt to solve discussions. We do it by talking, not by fighting or killing one another. So I won't shut up, and don't tell me to either".

"It's only because I'm a guest here. In my culture we learn that if we're a guest we shouldn't offend anyone or have an argument at the dinner table. We don't do it like that..."

"No, indeed. You wait until you get outside and then start stabbing people in the back. I prefer an argument up front. Not behind my back. Better get stuff out in the open, say what you mean. I don't want to be a hypocrite..."

He was fuming by now and his hands were moving and his face was red. Leyla looked on and her cousin seemed even more perturbed. His smile had dissipated, and now Ilias also looked uncomfortable. *"Please, please, I invited you to have dinner, let's not talk about religion or culture. It's all politics, it doesn't matter, better to ignore it".* Leyla implored us to end the conversation and to resume our food. Her cousin nudged her, and looked questioningly into her face. She muttered something to him, probably half explaining what it was about. Knowing Leyla she didn't want to have him embroiled in such an argument. As an avid Muslim himself, it would probably make things worse.

Leyla's attempt to smooth things out was interrupted by Adam, her oldest son. He approached the table with a white piece of A4 paper and murmured something to the men, whilst looking at Sayed. I imagined that he had a bus schedule in his hand, or a timetable of some sorts, as he also looked at the clock when talking. I thought it meant Sayed would be taking his leave shortly. I was almost sorry at the thought he would depart. I felt I was just warming up and had a huge arsenal of arguments at the ready to bombard him with. Then the two men stood up and went upstairs. It was prayer time.

Leyla looked at me as they left. She repeated feebly that she hoped for a friendly dinner, and said we should stop with the discussion now. *"What is so important*

about it? *Just differences. That's all*". I replied that it's a question of principles, and that I didn't take kindly to being asked or rather commanded by a man to shut up. He was a living example of the kind of Arab Muslim who really got under my skin, despite having helped several of them in the past with their asylum procedures. At times I really questioned myself about what I was doing. Blimey, did I really want this kind of person living here next to me. If I was honest, sometimes I didn't. I found it easy at such moments to understand those who vote for Wilders' far right party and to sympathise with his followers wanting "less, less, less...." in the Netherlands. Most of the time though I could be reasonable and could see beyond my own prejudices. My critical capacity for reflection was, I admit, at this point in time, severely disabled, and I followed my urge to defend what was mine, and to differentiate it from what was 'other'.

The men returned from prayer, and went to sit at the other side of the room. Sayed chatted to Leyla's children and then after a short time remarked that he had to leave to go to the mosque. Leyla stood up and said she would be back shortly, as she had to give him a lift. He left, nodding goodbye in the doorway of the kitchen. Leyla's mother prepared three more platefuls of food for the smaller children, just as big as what we had eaten, and called them to the table. They sat their around me, and I chatted with them.

The children reported enthusiastically how they were now being taught how to pray properly. They now pray five times a day they told me, because they have to as Muslims. "*According to our religion.....*",. It brought me abruptly back to Natheer and our holiday with B's son a few years ago, when he wasn't able to eat or drink anything, including swallowing the water he was brushing his teeth with during Ramadan, despite the temperature being around 30 degrees Celsius, because "*according to our religion, it's not allowed*". He was only twelve at the time; and I got a sickly sensation, a kind of sinking, in my stomach on hearing the same words, but this time from Leyla's children.

Leyla's children said they know exactly how the men and women should pray, where the arms and hands have to be, that you need to wash your feet before praying and that men and women are separated. They even go to the mosque to read the Koran and to have lessons and listen to stories. Adam delighted in telling me about a story of how Mohammed fought against unbelievers and killed them, saying: "*he probably had a very good reason for doing so*", and he went on to tell a story of four men in a cave.....of the Koran.....of being a Muslim and of belief.

"There was this guy who went to the hairdressers and the hairdresser asked him if he

believed in Allah, but the guy said No, because he'd never seen Allah, and he didn't need Allah, so why should he believe in him. Then the hairdresser told him that if he went up to a man with a beard and asked why he had a long beard, and the man said because he wanted to, and the hairdresser asked him why he didn't go to the hairdresser, the man would also reply because he didn't need the hairdresser, but does that mean that hairdressers don't exist? No of course not, it only means that the man doesn't believe he needs a hairdresser, but hairdressers do exist for people who want to have their hair cut. So you see that's what the man in the mosque explained, that people who don't believe in Allah don't believe because they think they don't need him, but it doesn't mean that Allah doesn't exist, does it? And he told us about the story of the four men in the cave, and I can't remember all of it, but anyway he also told us that if I pray five times a day, and I don't drink and don't smoke and if I follow everything that Allah wants then when I die I'll go to heaven and there I'll get everything I want, and everything I dreamed of because it's perfect there. But if I don't do what it says in the Koran, then when I die I'll go to hell and there it's fire, death, fire, death, fire, death and nothing else. It's definitely not good to go there. That's why I want to do everything I should do. I've been reading lots of stories on internet, and my uncle tells me stuff and now I know how to pray. Mum doesn't ever pray because she doesn't have time, but I'm glad I'm learning it now....I'm glad.....," Adam informed me proudly.

"Yeah, but I'm a bit scared, with all that stuff about hell and so....," Amina, the youngest sister butted in...

"No, no, you just have to do what they say, and you'll be alright," Adam continued. His eyes were wide with enthusiasm and energy. He was shuffling on his chair, almost jumping with delight.

I tried to ask what they thought about learning to pray and asked how late they had to get up in the mornings...."Now about seven o'clock I think, no no it's more like six, or five, but I do it later because I always have my tights on and it takes longer to get ready because I need to take them off before I wash my feet, and the girls don't pray anyway in the same room as the boys, because girls are girls and boys are boys, and that two different things," Amina told me.

"Yeah, and in the mosque there's a man who sits at the top of the stairway and he's in charge, he tells us the stories. In a real mosque in our country, or somewhere else, the stairs are really really long and he sits there right at the top talking to everyone, teaching them about our religion. We even get to leave school fifteen minutes earlier on a Friday now so that we can go to the mosque with our uncle....," Adam continued without taking a breath to pause, in his usual pent up and excited manner. I'd grown used to

listening to this boy over the years, and to deciphering his words, which he sometimes swallowed because he talked too fast and with too much agitation in his voice. This boy who wanted to be a war hero like his father, who he thinks is still fighting as a rebel in Chechnya, who he still talks about with great pride as a hero of the Muslim cause, but who in reality is long dead, stone cold, shot by a Russian bullet.

The boys continue talking about 'our religion' and 'our beliefs,' keen that they have learned the right way to pray and that it was 'easy' and didn't take half as long as they thought it would. At my suggestion that they should think deeply about whether everything they were being told is true, they looked at me indignantly, as though I had said something really stupid, and said, "*yes but it's all written down, it's proven that it's all true, it's in books, so I believe it*". Amina sat picking at her food, meanwhile the boys had finished, and retreated to the living room. She picked up the baby girl, rocking her back and forth, leaving the rest of the mantu on her plate. She was stuffed she said. I couldn't help noticing the differences between Leyla's children and my own at a similar age; difference in attitudes, differences in knowledge, differences in likes and dislikes and interests. I was flooded by differences.

Leyla returned. Mother came to the table with the cousin's wife to eat, and more tea was served. Leyla was sorry that the evening had been 'ruined', ending in a discussion on cultural and religious differences and she repeated that such discussions are futile. Some things are better left unsaid, she said. I know that the next time I speak to B., also a friend of Sayed, B. will ask me what happened, and will say: "*oh no, kim, oh no,*" and he will do his best to defend his friend.

Leyla repeated that whatever anybody else thinks or does, she is open to all religions, and open to criticism and doubt. Her children go to a Christian school, she pointed out again. They listen to the Bible and they know about Jesus. She has no objections to them learning what's written in the Bible, just as long as they remember they are Muslim and that they pray five times a day.

Leyla said she got Koran lessons from her grandfather, and she thinks it's important that her children learn their religious roots. They are being brought up in the Netherlands, but they shouldn't forget that they are Muslim, and they should learn to do what it says they should do in the Koran. That's the right and proper thing to do as a good Muslim, she noted, saying unwaveringly that you shouldn't 'play' with religion. Here she was referring to those people who she thought had converted to Christianity purely to get a refugee permit to stay in the

country. That was 'wrong' according to Leyla and no matter what, you shouldn't mess about with belief.

I drank my tea, whilst mother and Savine ate. They served the baby who was standing next to the table, with a dumpling, and they looked at Leyla and myself. They didn't have a clue about the content of the discussion which had just played out before their eyes. It was almost bedtime for the children. Leyla, who had taken a seat next to me, turned back and saw both boys on the computer. She could see that Adam was playing some war game on the laptop and she started shouting. He closed up the laptop and got up and approached the door. "Hey, and how is it going in school?" I asked him. "Good," he replied. I questioned him further: "And with the student's panel?"

"Oh I'm very busy. Far too busy. I don't have time to do everything because we're also doing a play at the moment, about Jesus. That also takes a lot of time," he said.

"Nice," I said, *"and where are you doing the play?"*

"Well actually I'm not doing it anymore, because it's in the church, but my mother said I'm Muslim and I'm not allowed to go inside a church, so I can't do it anymore. Goodnight". He went out and closed the door.

Leyla looked uncomfortable again. She already knew which question was on the tip of my tongue. Talking of openness : *"What does he mean he can't go in a church?"*

She stuttered.....*"well, eeeerrrrmmmm, we are Muslim, and it's not good for them to go in a church. We go in the mosque, not in the church...."*

Once more I couldn't hold back and blurted out...*"Don't be so ridiculous. What do you mean they can't go in the church? I got out a book this morning on Mohammed for our boys to read. It's on my kitchen table at this very moment. If they were invited to a mosque, of course they could go. It's all good experience for young children. They need to stay open to all possibilities. That's essential for an open and critical mind...."*

I recalled taking the large book from the book shelf this morning and putting it on the table. It was entitled *"Mohammed, the Prophet"*. I couldn't remember exactly why I'd got it out, but I remember reading a piece out of the book on women and the Islam at breakfast. I stared at Leyla searchingly, waiting to see what arguments she would give this time. I actually felt that my own window of openness was closing, as I waited.

Leyla looked at me, almost in panic. *“They need to first get the basics of our own religion,” she argued, “before they learn about other things. First they need to learn about the Islam, and only then will they be ready to learn about other things”.*

“No, they first need to learn to ask questions, to ask why, to know it’s ok to doubt and to question, and at the same time they can learn about the Islam. They don’t need to have something stamped into their brains so that they are no longer capable of asking questions. Look at what they just told me about being afraid of the hell, what’s all that about? What’s all this sudden interest in learning about praying and going to the mosque,” I questioned Leyla. “Since when have your children been praying five times a day?”.

“Yes, that’s why I’ve been having nightmares and bad dreams. I’m afraid of hell, I don’t want to go there”. Amina walked over to us, and stood next to her mother as she talked.

Leyla looked slightly overwhelmed: *“What are you talking about, bad dreams, when, why?”.*

“You know, that’s why I’ve been coming into your bed at night, because I’m afraid....”, Amina went on.

Leyla shouted something in her own language, as she customarily did when she didn’t want me to know what was going on, and the little girl bowed her head and scurried away.

“Look, we’re not even allowed to have the Bible in our home. My grandfather told me that a Muslim can’t have any book with the cross on it in his home. That’s not allowed. You’ve grown up differently, but this is our religion, our culture. If a woman does something wrong, she knows the consequences. That she might be killed for honour, so it makes it partly her fault doesn’t it, as well as the man of course, but she knows how it works, so she should be extra careful....”. Leyla was doing her best to find defensive arguments.

“Leyla please, do me a favour. How can you justify cultural barbarities by saying the woman knows what the punishment is and for that reason she should follow the rules which she didn’t even make? Especially after your own experiences with the male members of your family. And answer me this question, why can’t you have something with a cross on at home, what’s behind that?”, I inquired.

“I don’t know, it’s just like that. My grandfather told me, we can’t, that’s all and so that’s

why I'm not going to do it. The children go to a Christian school, they don't need to go to the church as well.....," she replied.

"Well that just proves my point. How can you do something because someone tells you to do it, but you can't even give a decent explanation as to why it's not allowed. Does it say in the Koran that you can't have a cross in the house, and if it does, why? Or does it say it somewhere else? That's just pure stupidity. Accepting something without questioning what the reasoning is behind it..."

"You've studied all your life, and I was brought up just to accept it. With religion we just don't ask any questions. I am Muslim and I'll die a Muslim, so I don't need to ask questions"

I tried to explain that having studied or not shouldn't prevent her from using the freedom she now has to question certain practices or rules or traditions. But I felt it was like talking to a brick wall. It was time to quit and to move on to chit chat. We were getting nowhere. And why should I try to convince her, or any other person for that matter, or Sayed, of how I did things. It's her own business after all. Her cheeks were already flushed and she was perspiring, and looking none too comfortable. I said goodnight as the children all left the room and went to bed. And we reverted to another subject.

At times I felt sorry for Leyla. She'd had so many trials recently, and was in debt due to silly mistakes that she'd made, or even worse, mistakes that the tax office had made or the housing corporation, on payments she was due but received far too late. Plus all the extra mouths she had to feed: her mother was with her, and now her cousin, his wife and daughter. Her cousin and his family would soon be moving back to Chechnya Leyla told me, as their problems had been 'sorted out' by the uncle. The cousin's life was apparently no longer 'at risk', though Leyla told me that she didn't trust it at all. The Russians couldn't be trusted at all to keep their word, she said. I wondered to the contrary whether I could trust his story of innocence. That he was definitely not involved in any way shape or form in (Muslim) terrorist activities. He was supposedly an innocent bystander who had a friend who was wanted by the authorities, and because of information he might have, now he was sought after too.

Who was I to question his story? I've heard so many narratives of innocent people wrongly accused and punished, more incredulous than this one, but nevertheless fitting with local traditions or culture. Stories that 'we' and more importantly the authorities, find unbelievable, stories that have been told

countless of times but which in the end have a numbing effect, which raise nobody's eyebrows anymore, except for the wrong reasons, and which engender indifference at best, (out) rage at worst.

All these extra people that Leyla is taking care of are a financial burden on her limited income and also an extra psychological stressor, as she tries to keep her head above water, and to keep their presence as inconspicuous as possible to the neighbours and the authorities.

We moved on to talk of filling in forms for her eldest daughter; yet another bellyache, due to her lack of educational ability and physical health problems. That is going to be the next big challenge for Leyla. What to do with an eighteen year old who is deaf, or rather who became deaf overnight, intellectually challenged to say the least, and whose physical composition is feeble and whose self-esteem is compounded by grave problems with her facial features, especially the teeth and jaws? To top it all off, mother, Leyla, sees her as incapable, and treats her as such; afraid to let the girl travel alone on public transport, constantly measuring her blood pressure in an effort to 'prove' her worst fears, that Medina's health is seriously defective and protecting her from every gust of wind that happens to be blowing.

I've been to so many school meetings with Leyla, about and with Medina; to the audiologist, to the cardiologist, to the emergency department at the local hospital, to the social worker, to the welfare agency, to the doctor, to the dentist. You name it and I've accompanied them. And each time there's a curious paradox at work: an almost total lack of independence when it comes to doing things for herself, mixed with inappropriate responsibilities when it comes to caring for her siblings. Leaving the three youngest children with Medina from a young age has never bothered Leyla, but changing schools so that Medina goes to a school more equipped to deal with deaf children, is out of the question as Medina would have to use public transport to travel about 40 kilometres to and from the school. Despite my advice that it would do Medina good to stand on her own two feet outside the house, Leyla protects her with vigour and determination. It appears that Leyla will stick to her guns and prefers to have Medina pulled out of the current school, than let her travel alone to the specialist school.

Medina's current school is unable to give her the education that she needs, mostly due to her deafness. The school she now attends is a school for the least intellectually able, though Leyla also denies this fact. She still harbours higher hopes for her daughter, though is slowly beginning to see that Medina's capacity

is more limited than she originally thought and her chances of a career in academia are non-existent.

The deafness was almost a God send as it seemed to re-awaken Leyla's hopes that her daughter's problems do not stem from her low intellect; rather Leyla prefers to believe that it's her daughter's hearing capacity which also causes the learning difficulties. The same is true of Adam who is also deaf and intellectually challenged.

I reminded Leyla of the meeting at the school next week, and she reiterated her choice of letting Medina stop school rather than having her travel alone. The 'busyness' and 'noisiness' of the children at the other school were also given as an argument: *"Mdina won't be able to make friends with any of those children there. They're far too agitated and busy,"* Leyla tried to convince me. Though I know it's more the shock she got when she saw that some of the children were visibly intellectually impaired, when we visited the school together a couple of months ago. I can envisage the exact moment when her jaw dropped and her face turned whiter than white. Leyla's far too ashamed to make such a comment openly, though her thoughts are evident as she pussyfoots around the reasons why Medina can't go to such a school. Leyla talks only about the children there being *"different, busy, noisy, agitated, not like in the other school, different, busy, noisy, different, too busy, too noisy...."*. And: *"the journey is far too dangerous. I dread to think how Medina is going to make it there alone. She's dizzy every morning, faint and weak, so how is she going to be out of the house by 7.30 am to get the bus alone? And what if anything happens to her? It's not round the corner,"* Leyla insists.

It wasn't the time to start badgering her on this decision. She was already visibly affected by my run in with Sayed. So I just said I'd inform the school that the meeting could go ahead as planned. I went through the form with her, and advised that she should get it sent off as soon as possible, as it meant extra cash. She desperately needed the money, and had already delayed far too long in getting the right forms sent off for the additional compensation for Medina's schooling costs.

The time had just fled by. The children had all but one already made their way up to bed. Except the curious Adam, who hung around, listening in, and making a comment or two every now and then. Leyla was irritated at his interjections about religion, the church, school, the Islam, his school play, and at his not being allowed to go to the church with the school. He didn't get it either, but took it on

good faith that this was how it was. Leyla screamed at him that it was enough now and he said goodnight and left us alone.

Mother and cousin's wife were still at the table. They sat mainly in silence, apart from when they were feeding mantu to the small daughter. Then they would laugh at her antics, as she tried to stand on a small plastic step stool that was placed at the edge of the table so she could reach the table top with her hands and just about look over it. Every now and then she stepped down and came around to me, pouting her lips for a kiss. Then she'd run away delighted and laugh. Ilias, her father, sat behind me on the sofa, looking at something on the computer. He looked up occasionally and smiled at his daughter.

I announced it was time to leave, and gave Leyla's mother her pink and black plastic flip flops back which she had taken off her own feet and given to me when I first arrived. She gave me a hearty hug, whilst the cousin's wife said goodbye with three pecks on the cheek, and her husband shook my hand. Leyla put a load of mantu into a glass bowl for me, and filled a jar with the spicy sauce. They were for the rest of the family to try she said. Her cheeks were no longer red, and she looked less upset.

I drove off still thinking about the exchange with Sayed and Leyla and wondering about cultural and religious differences. I had perhaps been too harsh, especially on Leyla. I still was in no mood to feel sympathy with Sayed. It was at such times that I felt that it is no easy task to bridge differences, even when you desperately want to do so. It was at such times, if I'm really honest, that I may not even want to bridge differences with a man such as Sayed. It was at such times that I questioned the possibility of entering into a meaningful relationship with a man such as Sayed. I didn't trust him, and it was evident that he didn't trust me.

B.'s anticipated reaction

A couple of days later I called in to see B. and his wife, on the off chance, to have a coffee with them. Just as I sat down B. asked me what had happened at Leyla's house with Sayed. I couldn't help but laugh at my words to Sayed a few nights' ago about the likelihood that he'd be talking bad about me to other Muslims, and this just seemed to prove my point. I laughed and asked B. what he meant. He told me that Sayed had said I'd been saying rude and unpleasant things about the Islam and B. repeated: *"you shouldn't talk about our religion. We don't mind criticism, or discussion, but don't talk about religion"*.

Once again I laughed, and said that Sayed had been quick to point out that “our culture” was backward and that he’d told me to “shut your mouth”. B. just asked whether I started first on religion, as that would have been the reason that Sayed got riled. I said it didn’t really matter who started, but that in any case he had no right to start waving his fists and telling me to shut up. It was evident we wouldn’t get anywhere by repeating the whole discussion, as B. was quick to defend his friend no matter what. He denied that this was the case, of course.

Safia was listening, and tried to defend Sayed by saying that the reason he talks like that was because of his low education and lack of knowledge. I said I could agree to a certain extent, but that the extremeness of his views on the Islam were also to be seen in others who were more educated than him. It wasn’t the preserve of the uneducated, I said.

We got onto the role of women again, in Islamic culture. B. repeated, as he does every time, that the woman is to be respected according to the Koran. It’s the problem of those who don’t know how to interpret the Koran properly. As the cases of Saudi women who weren’t allowed to drive had recently been in the news, I brought it up as an example that women don’t have equal rights in Saudi Arabia. Incredulously B. argued and argued that women in Saudi are allowed to drive cars, alone. Even Safia butted in to correct him, saying “Come on B. , you know they’re not allowed to drive there,” but he insisted. We dropped the subject as it was no use arguing once again.

Their house had been modernised. Safia’s influence had forced B. to buy new furniture for this house, and to make sure the walls were properly decorated. The wallpaper had a purplish swirly pattern, from embossed velvet, and was the same kind of stuff that H.’s wife also looked at for their new home. They had a black, modern, leather-look sofa, uncomfortably hard, which was more for the looks than for its comfort, and a rectangular glass dining table with silver chrome chairs to top off the look. The lights were typically chandelier like, with mock crystal baubles dangling from the ceiling. All in all, a dramatic change from the first house that he and Natheer had lived in alone, before the arrival of Safia.

I asked how it was going with the girls at school. Things didn’t seem too bad, only Zahra was still not learning enough they said. I suggested that the tactic of forcing her to sit for hours to do school work was probably not the best, and suggested they ease up on her a bit. Zahra was glad to have gone back to Iraq with Safia recently, they said. There, despite the insecurity, she could sit at home and see friends and family. She missed Iraq a lot they said. Hanifa, on the other hand,

also went back to Iraq for three weeks with Safia, but more than anything else, because she didn't want to stay home alone with B. and her big brother.

It was two months later that I was driving with Leyla to an appointment when she got a telephone call. Gleaming, she repeatedly shouted: *"whalla, whalla, whalla, I'm so pleased for you, whalla, whalla, you see I told you it would all be alright, I told you to be patient and that everything would turn out for you. Whalla, whalla, yes I was out yesterday, that's why you couldn't get hold of me, but I'm so glad you called, I'm really glad for you, whalla, whalla, now it will all be alright. No that doesn't matter, it doesn't matter what kind of 'status' you get. They can't send you back. Whalla whalla. Yes, we'll have to meet soon. I'm so pleased. Thanks for phoning me"*.

Leyla was grinning from cheek to cheek. In a moment of inadvertency, she forgot the argument I'd had a couple of months ago at her house with Sayed, and blurted out: *"oh whalla, I'm so pleased, that was Sayed, he's been given a residency permit (refugee status)"*. She looked at my face, and then quickly tried to resume the conversation we had just been having, before the telephone call. Of course, unable to see my own face in a mirror as I was driving, I can only imagine that it looked like thunder. Somehow, despite myself, I felt a rising anger at the news. A kind of spite and regret that such a person could be granted the right to stay in the Netherlands, whilst others, in my eyes more deserved, are left to rot, with precious little chance of being able to stay.

Yes, even as I write the words 'more deserved', something rocks in my stomach, something which warns me not to speak out or to write it down. But each time I hear the name Sayed I cannot stop my intestines churning and my head getting warm at the thought of his smug face on telling the news of his refugee permit. Why doesn't Hafid get refugee status? He's now been admitted to a psychiatric clinic in the hope that it will help with his post-traumatic stress syndrome, which may in turn temper his use of alcohol and make life a bit more bearable for him. Why do those who suffer from bogus lawyers, or incompetent support workers, or from traumas which make it impossible for them to tell their whole stories, why don't they get refugee status? The fact is that when I think of Sayed my blood boils and whilst I tell myself that I should really give him a chance, I replay the discussion I had with him in my mind and with others like him, and all hope of my adopting a more critically reflexive position jumps out of the window, drowned in a sea of frustration and disbelief.

The need to reflect

On the partiality of “ethnographic truths”, Clifford argues: “This point is now widely asserted – and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact”, (Clifford, Marcus, eds., 1986, p.7, italics in original).

Sayed has a residence permit, and like those who have gone before him, he now embarks on a new stage of his struggle to fit in and make a decent living. I have no doubt that he will continue to perfect his language skills, which on all accounts are not bad. And he has practical competences which will help him to find employment (albeit I imagine on the black market). His self-confessed attitude towards his new country is worrying to say the least, though in part (I surmise) down to his long wait for recognition and a residency permit, combined with the quality of the reception he enjoyed by the official organisations responsible for his asylum procedure.

My reaction to Sayed’s outbursts at Leyla’s were an automatic reaction to the types of arguments which he put forward about his religion which I have heard so many times before, and which never cease to stupefy me. Not to mention his arrogant and pig-headed mindset on the roles of men and women in society, which I personally find offensive. Somewhere in the interaction, he sparked something off in me, or I in him, which lead to a round of to-ing and fro-ing, blame and recrimination. Of the sort which occurs daily in settings where difference is at the forefront of the inter-relational contact.

Perhaps this reflection on our meeting is my way of expressing “*representational tact*”, as mentioned above. I am trying to present a clear dilemma which faces not only researchers, but also professionals and volunteers who work with refugees and asylum seekers.

Whilst hardly admirable on my part, I don’t want to shy away from the realities of such confrontations.

“I’m retiring soon, early retirement. To be honest I’ve had enough. My patience is just about exhausted and I’m getting more and more frustrated,” (Dutch language teacher).

The teacher quoted above went on to tell me about the umpteenth experience of frustration that she had recently been through with one of her foreign students, a refugee from Iraq. The young person in question was expected at a meeting for a work experience place, which would not only provide him with additional

language practice, but which was also essential to pass his citizenship exam. Like many before him, despite constant reminders, even on the day of the appointment, he failed to materialise on time. He “*couldn’t be bothered*” to catch a bus on time, which meant that he turned up very late. Consequently the teacher decided she would have to cancel the appointment which had been scheduled many weeks before and once again had to apologise to the company that was expecting them.

“There’s such a big difference in culture. They just don’t know what to do and time again we have the same experience with them (the refugees). It doesn’t matter how many times we explain that things work here according to a plan and a schedule, they just keep on letting you down. This one student had me running around for weeks, as he did a colleague of mine, which I found out later. Then on the day of the appointment, he just didn’t show. I really let my frustration show that time. I was just completely fed up. I exploded and told him exactly what I thought of him,” (Dutch language teacher).

It doesn’t do to hide these frustrations behind a wall of good will, nor to gloss over them as exceptional occurrences. The dilemmas are real. The consequences dire. So when do we need to accept cultural clashes as more than just an unfortunate by-product of international migration and an ill-aligned attunement to difference and diversity? And how do we offer a dialogic space which is self-reflexive and transformational to the professionals like the teachers described above, who are plagued by frustration and haunted by scepticism?

Describing our dilemma’s is a way to bring out into the open the parts of us which we may normally wish to keep hidden. The attitudes which we harbour towards strangers, the slips of the tongue which betray our biases, and our internal thoughts which churn up our minds into an avalanche of accusations and recriminations against the other which, once rolling, are impossible to curb. The crucial question is what we do at the end of the day with the snow ball. Do we allow it to get bigger and bigger, or do we acknowledge that we ourselves apply layer upon layer to it, until it’s so big, it’s unrecognisable?

There have been times, it can be said, that during this research I have felt like giving up on one or another asylum seeker, where I’ve been rocked by an uncomfortable feeling in the presence of one of them, or where I’ve been outraged by comments or actions or both. Sayed is not the only one. Sadek, an Iraqi Officer who never got his asylum request approved and after a stint in the Middle East, went to France where on all accounts he’s still waiting. His steely

blue eyes made me squirm in his presence, and I was hardly surprised when B. told me that he'd been active in the Iraqi Secret Service, working in the jails, responsible for all manner of crimes against humanity. This one didn't get through the net, fortunately.

Or Abu Z., another cagey Iraqi, who told me he was just a civil servant, but according to B. he had also worked for the Secret Service, at the Ministry of Information and if not directly responsible for acts of torture and the like, was certainly well informed and indirectly party to such acts. He got a permit and brought his wife over a couple of years ago, with their handicapped daughter. They now live close by. He's finished his integration course, is still unemployed and I doubt whether he will ever find gainful employment. His attitudes were unpleasant and annoying to say the least, especially on the role of women in society, and like with B., it was impossible to have a normal discussion with him, as he was always right.

Then there was Iman, a young Arabic woman, also from Iraq, who despite good language skills and a desire to learn, refused to undertake a work placement in a shop because they sold pork and alcohol there. That was forbidden, she said, in her religion. Or Lala as he's known, from Afghanistan, who insists that the state should do more to help him find a house which fits his exact requirements and which should be situated next to a hospital. His daughter is ill, which is why he and his wife applied for a medical visa when their asylum request was denied. His daughter of nearly two years old, has a very rare sickness which affects her metabolism and which means that she can barely eat normal food, and exists on a strict diet which is closely monitored by specialists at the hospital. His wife is hardly allowed outside the door, and despite appearing a reasonable type of person on the outside, he has told me that his wife will not be able to work in the future as one of them will have to look after their daughter. That being his wife of course.

Despite having signalled COA at the centre where he lives, that I have my worries about his wife, I never received any reply whatsoever to my calls for them to check why his wife spends most of the time in the house, except for when they have to take their daughter to the hospital. On the myriad of occasions I've met him shopping in the past one and half years, or that I've been at the camp in the billiard room, I've never once seen his wife with him outside. Others confirm that they too have never glimpsed her and surmise that she is probably very beautiful which is why he won't allow her in the company of others.

Visiting Lala

I decided that I would force his hand and invited myself to his unit. He blushed and said I was welcome any time. Of course cultural norms of politeness and hospitality would not have allowed him to do otherwise. So one day, when I was visiting the centre with A. we were at Hafid's place and I mentioned I wanted to go around to Lala. It was relatively early in the morning, and raining hard.

First we had a job finding out where he lived. Nobody knew exactly which house was his, until another friend said he was sure which unit it was. Nobody, it appeared, had ever been inside the family unit, despite the fact that Lala is a frequent visitor to the units of the others. So, in the rain, A. accompanied me with Hafid. They pointed hesitantly at the door, looking at me as if I was about to commit a crime. They weren't sure what to do, and looked anxiously at me and at each other. I could feel their embarrassment, but continued anyway.

I knocked at the door a couple of times. It was opened. Lala stood there in what looked to be a traditional pyjama. He had a long tunic on and baggy cotton trousers, which were a sort of white colour. Hafid had long since disappeared and A. stood at least three metres behind me. Lala looked rather bewildered and waited for me to say something. I told him I'd come to take him up on his offer of a cup of tea, at which point he muttered "*yes, yes, of course,*" and picked up his small daughter who had squirmed her way between him and the front door, which was still very much half-closed. A. made some feeble excuse that he had to go to look for someone else, at which point he ran off shouting that I should go back to Hafid's unit when I was ready. He didn't get an invite, and neither would he have accepted it had Lala offered him to come in.

I went in behind the door, which was fully curtained, so that you could see neither out nor in. It was a standard unit, with the usual basic furniture. Two brown sofas stood in the main area, with the plastic table and red chairs. Lala ushered me onto one of the sofas and quickly hurried in to the bedroom to put on his jeans and t-shirt. A few minutes later he reappeared, with his wife following. A young, dark-haired woman, slim, and on the pretty side. She wore loose-fitting clothing and had a scarf draped around her neck. She was probably in her early twenties. Lala I believe is just under thirty. His wife scurried into the kitchen to make tea and soon reappeared with a flask of tea, some cups and a bowl of sweets and a plate of biscuits.

We drank tea together and made small talk. I learned that they have been in the Netherlands for almost five years, and moved to this particular camp more than a

year ago. She was apparently pregnant when they made their initial asylum claim, but didn't know it at the time. A. and others don't believe that they didn't know she was pregnant before the couple fled Afghanistan. Their asylum request went through the normal procedures of being denied, going to court, being denied once again, then to the Upper Chamber, denied once again, procedure closed. During this time their daughter was born and diagnosed with a severe metabolic disorder; a rare sickness with no chance of getting adequate treatment in Afghanistan. The couple then applied for a medical visa, and were granted it several months ago.

They are now awaiting housing, and due to their constraints with their daughter, they want a house in the same city as the university medical hospital at which she is treated. As waiting lists are long, the couple have been accorded priority for housing, but it seems that their demands are too high and therefore difficult to meet. So they wait. In the meantime, they remain within the relative security of the asylum campus, and have yet to face the complexities on the outside. Lala does the shopping, and plays billiards with friends in the evening and his wife looks after their daughter.

COA organises a pre-citizenship language course two mornings a week which both of them should attend. They both say she goes there, but others who also attend tell me they've never seen his wife there. It could just be that nobody knows who she is, therefore they can't recognise her, or that she doesn't go, which is what I expect. Her language skills are poor, for somebody who has been here already five years. He speaks slightly better. They say they know that they will have to go to school, but don't have an idea what they want to do after the compulsory citizenship course is complete. She will be too busy anyway, according to him, looking after their daughter.

His wife remained still mostly, answering the occasional question, but never asking any questions herself. She busied herself with their daughter who found the biscuits appealing, though seemed to know that she wasn't allowed to eat them. She wanted tea, then tried to tug at my necklace, then tried to delve into my bag. Lala took her on a few occasions on his lap and they laughed and played together. I'd seen him a lot walking about the campus with his daughter on his arm, and mentioned that she looked much better now than just a couple of months ago. They both agreed and noted that she was eating and drinking much better than before.

After just under an hour I took my leave of them and thanked them for their hospitality. We shook hands and he showed me out. I've seen him many times since then in the centre of town, walking with his friends, cycling, shopping, at the camp, and just a week ago in the billiards room where he called in the services of COA and the security guards to remove a few under twelves who were playing there. I've never seen her again.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction to the author

Love After Love

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was yourself.
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you
all your life, whom you have ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,
the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.

(Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems 1948-1984*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986)

Personal motivation

Why write about refugees and asylum seekers?

Firstly, why should I tell the reader anything about my background? Does my telling you about myself and my potential biases add anything to the arguments I am making about affect in this book? I think it does. Although this book is not an autobiography – it is not my life story – who I am and what matters to me have defined how I carried out this research, and why I undertook it in the first place. That's why I chose to include this chapter before the methodology chapter, which follows.

In some ways this book reflects the journey of my own father, who after leaving his homeland settled thousands of miles away in the British Isles. I imagine that part of my interest in asylum seekers and refugees, and in their attempts to find new homes, new lives, relates to his own search to settle, and to fit in. Though I

probably never quite realised that this was the case until now. Quite simply, people desperate to pass in their new surroundings.

In the summer of 2012 I took my family on a trip to China. It was a trip I had planned to make since 1995, the year my father died. It was a trip to take his ashes back to the country of his birth and to the city in which he grew up – Shanghai.

He left China in the 1940's, as a refugee, first to Hong Kong, and later travelling on the ships as a seaman for the Blue Funnel Line he arrived in Liverpool in the north of England. There he met my mother, a runaway, who'd left home in the East End of London, and ended up in Liverpool.

My parents married in 1953, the same year as the Queen's coronation, and they stayed together up to my father's death. Ho Lim, my father, stayed in England all that time, never leaving its borders, as he didn't have the right papers to leave. He had no Chinese passport, only a seaman's pass which was stamped when he came in and out of the country. He could have got British citizenship, but never did so. He always said: "my face is Chinese, so what difference will a passport make. I'll never be English". He didn't exactly pronounce his words like that though, sticking as he did to pidgin English, as was probably expected of a China man in those days.

"Lee," he said at last, "I mean no disrespect but I've never been able to figure why you people still talk pidgin when an illiterate baboon from the black bogs of Ireland, with a head full of Gaelic and a tongue like a potato, learns to talk a poor grade of English in ten years".

Lee said, "I know it's hard to believe, but it has happened so often to me and to my friends that we take it for granted. If I should go up to a lady or a gentleman, for instance, and speak as I am doing now, I wouldn't be understood."

"Why not?"

"Pidgin they expect, and pidgin they'll listen to. But English from me they don't listen to, and so they don't understand it".

(East of Eden, John Steinbeck, 1979, p.187).

Perhaps it's because of my father's background and experiences that I remain fascinated by cultural differences; by what it is that makes us 'other', different and by what it means to try to understand or be in relation to the 'other'. My father never 'fitted in'. He never passed as an English man, couldn't have passed even if

he had wanted, because as he remarked often enough, he couldn't change his looks or alter his appearance. He'd always be the 'other', the foreigner, the China man, as my mother's family, rather impolitely, called him when he first met them.

It was the 1950's in Liverpool, and there weren't that many mixed marriages in those days. My father remained a seaman for the first years of their marriage, and then in the early 1960's came ashore for good. He set up a chip shop, had a penchant for majong, and busied himself with his work, or with gambling with his Chinese cronies in Chinatown in Liverpool. In the early 1970's we moved to a new town, Skelmersdale, some twenty kilometres from Liverpool. It was an overspill city, with lots of new council estates built to house people from Liverpool.

We lived on one of those estates, 115 Brierfield, in what I thought at the time to be a rather grand house. But I was a child, and everything seemed bigger than it actually was. Nobody around us was foreign. No other children had foreign parents. There were no 'half-casts', as you were called in those days, just scousers or woolly backs; the scousers being the real Liverpudlians, and the woolly backs the original inhabitants of Old Skelmersdale. Of course, I never imagined myself as anything less than a pure scouser, and the desire to be the same as everybody else was vivid. I remember, rather ashamedly now, not wanting to walk next to my father in the street, but asking him, no telling him, to walk behind me and my mother; and on the bus, as we didn't have a car of our own, I always made sure we sat a couple of seats away from him. He never complained.

My father was not seeking asylum as such. At least that wasn't his official status in England. I'm imagining that the migration laws were somewhat different in those days, and that marrying an English woman led almost automatically to the right to be able to reside in the UK. And so he stayed, all those years, right up to his death, in England. First Liverpool, then Skelmersdale and then in the early eighties we moved to a small flat in Barkingside in Essex, on a council exchange programme. My mother wanted to move 'back' to the South, to be closer to her own mother. My father stayed in Skelmersdale at first, and then followed once everything was settled.

Ho Lim didn't talk too often about his family in China. Looking back I think that one of the reasons may also be because we, or I, didn't question him too often about it. We heard snippets of information here and there, about him growing up in extreme poverty, gathering grains of rice from the floor to eat, working for the French in the French Concession in Shanghai, being shipped off to Bordeaux

to work as a house servant, his three brothers and a nephew in Hong Kong, and a sister with whom nobody in the family spoke after some affair with money and a restaurant, being caught up in the war, having to work for the Japs, as he called them, becoming a seaman and travelling the world over, only to end up in Liverpool. We have photos in an old leather briefcase, showing my father with various types of friends, in what seem to be different countries; but as he's no longer around, we have no means of identifying the people in the pictures now. He did have written contact with a nephew, which allowed me to trace the family in Hong Kong and others on my first visit to Shanghai, but I never got the impression that my father yearned for really intensive contact.

He was Chinese, and Chinese he remained to his death. Chinese food was eaten almost exclusively, he listened to Chinese music and Chinese opera songs on an old-fashioned reel-to-reel tape, which would be classed as antique nowadays; he read Chinese stories in small thin paperback books, from right to left and top to bottom, spoke crooked English and had no English friends, preferring to go to Chinatown to gamble and play majong with other Chinese, friend or foe, it didn't matter. Old habits die hard.

Neither as a child, nor as a young woman, did I stop to imagine the reality for my father of being so far away from his own country, his own folk. The possible social or emotional consequences, loneliness, anxieties or fears never even crossed my mind. Life was at it was; they were hard times, or just different times. No time, it seemed, to dwell on the past. In those days you just got on with it, and made the best of life. Hard work, honest work, was at the core and having had little formal schooling, that also meant unqualified work. Mind you, diplomas and qualifications didn't have the same hold on society then as they do now. Opportunities were limited, making choices less complex: shop work, factory work, cooking, cleaning or working in a restaurant. Between the two of them, my parents did all of these jobs. Their chances were limited.

Looking at the experiences of my father and mother, I wonder how life may have been different had he arrived now in the West. Ho Lim would have to take a citizenship course, learn the language at college, and getting the nationality would not be as easy as back then. How would he react to the complexity of life in the new millennium and to the maelstrom of public opinion on questions of integration and asylum, not to mention the proclaimed death of multiculturalism? Who knows?

In many ways my father is like many of the refugees and asylum seekers I encounter on a daily basis: male, poorly educated, wanting a better life. And despite expectations in the host country, he never felt English, probably didn't know the National Anthem, and could not have passed as English even had he wanted to. Just as the refugees here tell me they don't feel Dutch, and probably never will, they will never pass as Dutch men or women. Indeed what can we expect from them? What is realistic or desirable? An Iraqi Muslim from Baghdad, is never going to be a Dutchman, no matter how hard he may try. He looks different, he talks differently, he acts in ways which aren't always fathomable, and more than that, as a Muslim, he's a member of a religious minority.

I never questioned my father's loss. Nor did I really examine his life as a foreigner in a strange country. I knew about cultural differences from an early age, but as a child I didn't wonder about his chances, nor about what could have been. We had a simple life. It wasn't grand. We always had food on the table, though I remember squabbles when times were less fortunate and money was short. Holidays were restricted to a coach trip to London once a year to visit my nan, or a trip to one of the then popular Butlins Holiday Camps; though we did go abroad once, when I was seventeen, to Malta. Like our other holidays, that trip was also just with mum. Dad never came. He was always working.

When I reflect on my childhood, I have happy memories. Though my parents seemed to live in separate worlds, I didn't think we were worse off than any of the others on our council estate. Nearly everyone at my junior school had free school dinners (lunches), and I only had one friend whose parents had a car. The rest, like us, made do with the bus. Nobody went abroad in those days on fancy holidays, at least not if you came from the side of Skelmersdale that I came from, so our yearly trip to the capital city was a big event on all accounts. Looking up an Ofsted report recently, it would seem that the school, Bishop Martin Church of England Junior School, is still populated by children of some of the poorest families in the country, and apart from a couple of friends who 'escaped', few managed to go to university. Some of the girls got pregnant very young and have grandchildren now who are older than my own children, and even more still live there or thereabouts, on the council estates or if lucky, in their own houses. Hardly anyone I grew up with had their own house.

My youth was relatively fortunate, without major event or incident. The fact that only one of my parents was foreign and that my father didn't busy himself with our upbringing, meant that we grew up considering ourselves as English, more

than anything else. In fact, when I was young, I saw the Chinese half of my being as an inconvenience and a constant reminder of difference.

My mother, blond hair and blue eyes, was brought up in the second world war. She was, and still is, an avid saver who, despite having very limited financial capital, never had a debt in her life. She lives by old-fashioned values of honesty and hard work, and never overspends beyond her means. She kept my father on the straight and narrow, and largely brought us up single-handedly. She knew what was expected of a mother in those days, and despite initially being an outcast from her family for marrying a Chinaman, she was never really a part of my father's community either.

My father may have lived in the margins, but he participated and worked and got on with his life as best he could, even though he never really belonged. For the rest of our family; we belonged. And in so far as nearly everyone on our estate lived either on welfare benefits or with a minimum income, we were all living in one realm of marginality or another. We were all poor, surviving on what we had, aware that it could be otherwise, had we been born elsewhere, or into different families, and in the knowledge that this was it, for now. We were all in the same boat on our estate, at least when it came to our working class backgrounds.

From a young age I was fascinated by the mechanisms at play when it comes to which people or groups of people manage to make something of their lives, and which ones don't. And this with the recognition that 'making something of one's life' does not mean that we are sole authors of our destinies, rather that we operate in connection to one another, forging a path with the help of, or despite the relations which we make on the way. I never wanted to make a point of my background, or become bitter in the sense of 'why me?'. Despite my own ambivalence on the nature/nurture story, I knew that complaining probably wouldn't get me far anyway. Deeply embedded social and cultural patterns played themselves out, reinforcing expectations that university wasn't for kids like us; it was better to get a job, rather than spend years in school. So at the age of seventeen I did just that and started working.

Religion

I was brought up Christian, attending a Christian primary school and belonging to the Christian youth club. In my teenage years, and after I left home, I hardly ever went to church, and religion played no part in my life until I married and had children. When we had our first child, my husband and I decided to have him baptized at the local, Anglican Church in the Hague. We both believed it was good

to have a grounding in the Christian faith and we attended the children's service there on a weekly basis. Our other children were also baptized as babies in the same church. We also made a conscious choice for Christian (primary) schools, believing that the teachings there would help guide our children morally in the right direction.

When we moved from the Hague to Friesland, in 2004, despite 'shopping around' and visiting a number of different, internationally-oriented churches in the North of the Netherlands, we never managed to find one in which we felt comfortable. And so our church activities came to an abrupt end. We still visit the Anglican church in the Hague on special occasions like Christmas – mainly for the Nativity Play - but that is about it. On a trip with work colleagues to a small village in France, which was right next to Taizé, I did make a daily visit to the Taizé services and was, I remember, deeply moved by their simplicity, yet simultaneous grandeur. However, my convictions were seemingly not strong enough to encourage me to become a regular church visitor again.

I took up a position in the board of the Christian School Association, which was in charge of the primary school(s) which our boys attended, first as board member and later as Chairwoman. This gave me a chance to contribute to the maintenance of Christian schools in the region, whilst at the same time helping to shape a policy that was open and amenable to the external context and developments. None of the other board members, or parents for that matter, ever asked me which church I attended locally. Perhaps they presumed that because they didn't see me in their church, I attended the local village church. In any case it was never a point of discussion.

In 2010, I was at a point in my life where I felt a need to make a renewed re-connection with some kind of spiritual path. I didn't feel a strong enough tie with Christianity. I wanted a moral grounding, but felt that the Christian way wasn't practical enough. Years of working with asylum seekers, refugees, school drop-outs, and the unemployed were taking their toll. I was starting to feel more and more angry at the injustices I witnessed, and whilst the anger provided fuel to want to change things for the better, I was also feeling bitter and morose. I had always been the type of person who didn't shy away from conflict, but I felt as though I was on a collision course, which was inciting arguments and looking for battle grounds. I wanted to be more responsible for some of the damage I might be causing. I was out of balance, and struggling to comprehend why and how those working in the asylum system could behave like they did. At the same time, there were asylum seekers who annoyed me, who I felt I'd rather not help. I was

becoming increasingly judgemental, but it didn't stop at judging others; I started to feel guilty about judging others, which then incited self-judgment. It was a downwards spiral which, if I wasn't careful, would cause me, and those around me, harm.

After listening to a professor who has been a Buddhist practitioner for over twenty five years, I was inspired to investigate Buddhism. It was not only his words, but more the outer demeanour and inner peace that he embodied. I fished out a book on Buddhism which I'd bought many years ago, and started to read. It was as though the book had been waiting on the shelf all those years for the right moment to appear. The words spoke to me in a way that felt like I was 'coming home'. I had tried meditation several years back, but without success. Nevertheless I tried again.

Spurred on by a feeling that this was what I was looking for, I contacted the professor and sought his advice. He advised me to contact the monastery which he had been visiting for meditation and teaching for many years, which I did. An appointment was made for soon after and, after my visit to Aukana Trust, in England, I attended a retreat in Scotland, and one at Aukana Trust itself. Since then the Buddhist path has been an integral part of my life.

I maintained my voluntary position as Chairwoman of the Christian School Association for two more years, but decided to step down once my four-year term came to an end. Despite having become a regular visitor to a local Baptist Church, to accompany A., the young Afghan who lives with us, and who converted to Christianity in 2012, I felt that being the representative of the local Christian School community was no longer compatible with my own Buddhist practice.

Buddhism and Affect

As researcher I am engaged with my whole self in the research. Both my research practice and my Buddhist lay practice are embodied and engaged and connected. When outlook, faith or belief changes in one area, it has an effect on the other. I see Buddhism as a practical philosophy, based on empirical engagement with the world. There is no belief in a higher God, and no blind faith. Meditation practice serves to unmask the 'reality' of our experiences, through direct observation and through the bodily senses, including the mind.

In my case, Buddhism has had a direct effect on how I view the world, and on how I view my place within the social. It has helped me to understand a great deal about suffering; my own and that of others, and to relate to that suffering in a variety of different ways. In the same way it has afforded me new understandings

of affect, and of the damage which can be caused if we idealise ourselves or the other, or if we look away or divert our gaze (refusing to see) from the (suffering) other. As Hugo Letiche pointed out, “*the Kim who is writing this book, is a radically different Kim to the one who did the previous research on asylum seekers and refugees*”.

What does this all mean?

Research is a path. It is a path which has not remained static, but which has also been deeply affected by the choices I have made over the years, the people I have encountered, and the relationships I have entered into, or steered away from. The researched, asylum seekers and refugees, knew me, for the most part, before I started down the Buddhist path. And my work, and interest in asylum seekers and refugees began many years before I turned to Buddhism.

My previous research with asylum seekers, entitled: “*Getting to Know Asylum Seekers. Turning to Affectivity for a Self-Other Account*”, was a first attempt to open to affectivity and to enter into a space of un-knowing. I was present, engaged and committed to the research project and to its participants. In the opening lines, I wrote:

“The overwhelming desire to engage in something meaningful was just that, overwhelming. To make it mean something, to make it worthwhile. Not only for me, but especially for those from whom I, in all my naivety, intended to “do it”; the weak, the vulnerable, those without voice living in centres for asylum seekers in the Netherlands. The subaltern if you like (Veissière, 2010, Spivak, 1999)” (Tsai, 2011, p.11).

Throughout that research, I upheld the conviction that the turn to affect presented me (and others) with a marvellous opportunity to undertake more ‘meaningful’ research and whilst contemplating on the ‘epistemological conundrums’ or the ‘dilemmas of knowing’, and admitting that I was not ‘ready for the spaces which would open up on “*the side of the road*”, the interstices of power and surges in emotions, (Stewart, 1996), and certainly unawares of the complications of “*giving an account of oneself*” (Butler, 2005, p.11), I nevertheless now feel that I presented an over-idealised picture of the potentials of affect.

I wrote that, “*I discovered the joy of “writing lives” and the magic of the “tangle”, which opened me further to the complexities of knowledge and partiality and of “not knowing that you know,” (Rasberry, 2001, p.11).* I was ecstatic that I had been given access to the intimacy of the lives of my research participants, and I viewed them and their struggles through the hue of rose-coloured glasses. I was deeply affected by their stories, and with each new account, my resolve to help them ease their suffering

grew. I acknowledged the complexity of their lives, and the gaps in understanding that are inevitable; and I tried to show the diversity of their experiences and the way in which our identities are constantly changing, dependent on the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the roles we take on, and the relationships in which our lives are embedded. But looking back critically on my research, I see that I too was guilty of romanticizing asylum seekers and of presenting a too one-sided account of affect. It was a world neatly divided into 'goodies and baddies' and the asylum seekers were on the side of the good. And I too, as researcher, helper, friend, committed activist, in fact, all-round 'angel', was also on the side of the good, fighting the 'axis of evil', with them at my side.

Now, I am in no way saying that this was not the reality, as I then experienced it. I did not set out to embellish their tales, or to make them sound more heroic or more victim than they were. What has changed is that I have learned to be more discerning to negative affects, allowing myself to recognise and to acknowledge when my feelings for my research participants (asylum seekers, refugees, institutional workers) are unpleasant, or when a certain person leaves me cold, or devoid of any particular kind of emotion. I have learned to acknowledge the pitfalls bound up with doing this type of research.

A daily meditation practice has taught me, these past years, how to hone in on affects, sensations and feelings, in the mind and body. This affords me extra time to recognise what it is I am feeling, or what it is that is affecting me, and to make a more mindful decision about which course of action to take, if any. Of course, such skilful action is only possible when my own mind is not entirely overrun with reactive patterns of thought, or when I'm not completely caught up in my own affects, as well as those of others, therefore making it difficult, if not impossible, to temper affects' worse effects.

Whilst this may sound as though the goal of mindfulness is to dim the affects, I would argue that being mindful, in fact, enhances our capacity to remain present, no matter what; to '*bear witness*' (Glassman, 1998) and to develop our skills of compassion and understanding. It decreases our compulsion to know, and to plan for every possible contingency, because it reduces our fear for the unknown. We may come to develop an unshakeable capacity to be with what it is that presents itself to us (the emergence of our affects and those of others), whilst remaining entirely available to the (suffering of the) other, in equanimity.

All this is not to say that I am so far on the spiritual path that I never get carried away any more by my affects, pro-social or not. Nor am I so advanced that I have

been able to step out of reactivity and conditioned behaviour. Affects can still overwhelm me, encouraging a compulsion to respond in known, if unskilful, ways, and to hold on to and perpetuate old ways of behaving. B., still angers me with his views on Islam and homosexuality; and when Ammar phones my first reaction is nearly always 'what does he need now'? At times I feel that I can't be bothered anymore, and at others, I'm fired up and ready to do anything for anyone who needs assistance, regardless. The difference now is my own awareness of these reactions and the development of a certain means to channel them in ways which do less harm. The Buddhist path is long, arduous and confrontational. But it is a path in which progress can be made and transformation can be experienced.

Since my first research project with asylum seekers, I have certainly developed new ways of seeing, and of knowing, my research participants. I have come to value the true potential of affect in relationship to the Other, as well as to acknowledge the challenging complexity of affective research. Who I am, and which other paths I may be following, are not separate from my research. They proceed in parallel and affect each other deeply.

The critique I launch in this book on writers such as Stewart, Agee, Papadopoulos and Terkel, does not suggest that they did not engage affectively with their research participants. They did. However, I question their long-term commitment to the researched and I especially criticize their affective idealisation of misery, and the fact that their own affective lives, and how they are affected or how they affected others, is (largely) missing from their writings.

With this research I wanted to find out where affect-directed research would lead me and whether it was a position which could be supported as a means of doing social research which would do justice to those I was researching. Whilst opening to affect affords us a chance to develop rich relationships and to tend to deep layers of meaning, and profound levels of understanding, (something to which we may otherwise not have had access); I found out that we must be wary of affective over-arousal or affective numbness. When we get overwhelmed by affect, we risk the black hole of despair. I've been there many times. And when we become numb to affective charges and impulses, we run the risk of becoming affectively dead, and devoid of any capacity for sympathy or compassion.

I found it helpful to develop a position of 'lostness' and 'not-knowing'; and whilst in the beginning I suffered more regularly from periods of despondency and feelings of hopelessness, I now depend more and more on my practice of

mindfulness, and relational awareness to retain a sense of balance and ease. I also allowed the lived experiences to find a place to settle, in order to mull them over in my mind, whilst I called upon the full gamut of my affective resources and my analytical capacities, to help me to figure out what it was I wanted to say, and what it was that it might be worth telling. The path of Buddhism has enriched my capacity to be aware of my affects and the ways in which they are affecting me. Buddhism pushes me into those uncomfortable affective interstices, at the edge (or in the borders), where I feel the most learning takes place. Though not easy; for me, this is the right path.

Affective Matter (3)
“I wonder how she knows.....”

It's 26th March 2014, I travel almost in silence to the court with Hafid. His previous lawyer failed to mention to the new lawyer that a court date had been set in February in order to handle the appeal regarding the negative decision made by the Dutch immigration authorities. The previous lawyer had received notification of the appeal date in good time, but didn't pass the letter on to the new lawyer, nor did he include the defence letter from the immigration services in the dossier that he forwarded in March.

Hafid and myself heard of the court date less than one week ago, on the Friday; the court session being set for the Wednesday thereafter. It came as a shock to me, but also to Hafid. Already stressed enough, he believed that the date had been postponed, awaiting his admission for treatment at a psychiatric clinic for traumatised refugees.

I surmise that the old lawyer, more or less out of spite, 'forgot' to forward the relevant documents; as he was, and still is, angry at my "interference" in Hafid's legal case. The first lawyer had failed to provide me with the necessary documents in the past, at which I had complained to his office. And when I did receive documents by fax they were more often than not not the documents I had requested, or the same documents were sent twice, or pages were missing from the scanned material. I had accused him of being sloppy and inefficient, which did not of course go down very well.

When Hafid (acting on my advice) decided to opt for a new lawyer, the old one was not amused.

I am left wondering why I, and more especially, asylum seekers or refugees, have to fight to get decent services from those who are paid to either represent their interests or to provide them with adequate treatment or services (be they medical, juridical, or social)? Why are there so many mistakes made, and why are the so-called 'professionals' unable to step outside of their own areas of interest, for the good of their clients? Why oh why do they defend their actions even when they are wrong, fail to admit mistakes, turn their backs on feedback, or criticism, and more importantly, scorn help when it is offered?

They certainly feel threatened by an outsider such as myself. And a researcher at that. It all makes for excellent research material, but may not always serve to

assist the asylum seeker or refugee in question.

I have got a more or less complete copy of Hafid's file now, though the medical specialist has refused to provide information, despite an authorisation letter from Hafid explicitly asking that she send his medical dossier to me. And the last lawyer left out some crucial information when he forwarded the file to the new lawyer. The contact person of the addiction clinic eventually sent me what I needed, included diagnostic information and Hafid's treatment plan. And I did get a copy of Hafid's complete file from the organisation which is mandated to provide legal guardians to underage unaccompanied minors (asylum seekers). This last organisation, NIDOS, sent me, to my astonishment, the complete file relatively swiftly (within a few weeks of it having been requested). However on opening the file I noticed a few inconsistencies which raised my suspicions.

Firstly the file mentioned Hafid's brother and the home address was in another municipality. It would seem that I had been sent the complete file of *another* boy with the same name and same date of birth. Given the fact that the majority of Afghan refugees do not know the exact date of their birth, the government assigns them a birth date. This is often 1st July, as in the case of both these young men. So, a full file. Complete. Just *not* for the right person. Complete with copies of correspondence between guardian and asylum seeker, photocopies of the identity papers of this second Hafid, copies of school-relevant information and what's more his whole asylum procedure with all formal interviews with the authorities, medical reports, police reports and even a copy of the bank statements. Exactly what I had asked for. Just for the wrong person.

I informed the organisation at once, and received a rather swift apology and a request to disregard the information I had been sent. They promised to send me the right file as soon as possible.

Back to the court case. We arrived at the court on time, with fifteen minutes to spare. We could hardly get through the doors to register our arrival because of a large group of what I took to be students also waiting to get in. They were before us, about ten of them, young girls mostly, who looked in their very early twenties. There was a man with them, who I imagined was the teacher. They were excited, chatting loudly whilst putting their stuff through the scanner. "*Do I need to put my bag through too, how about my coat*", "*do you want my keys*"? "*should I put this in the tray*". There was a visible clamour of expectations as they waited and then proceeded to pass through the electronic doorway. Each passed without problem.

I registered our arrival and we passed through the court security system without a problem. I had forgotten that I had my voice recorder in my bag, and hoped it wouldn't be spotted. It too passed through without a problem. On the other side, through the glass doors I noticed the lawyer behind us, so we stopped to wait for him. He hurried through, gave a hand, a very firm hand and ushered us to the right hand side to the reception room for the courtroom. Hafid was announced, as was the lawyer, and I was noted as advocate. We sat and waited, Hafid and I, whilst the lawyer went to put on his formal clothing.

The interpreter arrived at the desk, behind the large group of 'students' who had also appeared before us. He shook Hafid's hand and took a seat next to the seat of the representative of the Secretary of State for the immigration services. She had temporarily left her seat to check something in or around the court room, having seen how big the group of 'students' was. Before departing she was talking to the group who had gathered around her and were listening eagerly. She pointed out that indeed there were a few interesting cases that day and that she would be putting forward the views of the Secretary of State. I surmised that it was a group of law students who were perhaps specialising in asylum law and who were on a day out to get some experience of how it works in a court room. The representative muttered something about expecting four or five people, and that she hoped the courtroom would be big enough, and then leaving her brown leather bag on the plastic seat in the waiting room, she left hurriedly.

I had already experienced the same woman during the court proceedings of A., the friend of Hafid who has been living with my family for almost two years. She was dressed in the same dark grey pinstripe trouser suit, with a tight-fitting pair of trousers and jacket to match, with a dark grey t-shirt underneath. Her grey boots peered out from under the trousers, and were rather bulky in comparison to the tightness of the rest. Her long mousy hair was tied back in a ponytail with a grey elastic band and her face was drawn and makeup-less. I would guess that she's in her late thirties, and with a bit of makeup she would look rather more feminine than she did now.

Her buttocks were taut, and whilst standing talking to the 'students,' I could make out their muscles being squeezed in and out in her tight trousers. I wondered whether she was doing her pelvic floor exercises, similar to those all pregnant women are advised to do during and after pregnancy and childbirth. Her pinstripes were extremely narrow, and in my mind I imagined a parallel between them and the governmental policies she was defending – both narrow-minded, little room for manoeuvre in between, no space for reflection, tight and

impenetrable. She was the perfect picture of a representative of such policies: tense and fixed, yet an island of composure who would not let her guard down. I asked myself how she sleeps at night.

At the allotted time we were shown into the court room. The judge sat at the front, next to him on the left the clerk, also a man. The judge was a middle-aged man, probably in his fifties, with greyish hair and a long face with subtle features, neither too stern nor too kind. Hafid's lawyer sat to the far left, next to Hafid, who had the interpreter at his right hand side. Far right was the representative of the government. There were some five to six chairs in between them. I sat on the first row behind the lawyer, alone, and behind me were three rows of 'students', scattered among the available seats.

The judge opened with a welcome, checking the identity of those sitting before him.

The proceedings

You received the defence papers?

It is your own risk as you know, changing lawyers. The old lawyer accepted the court date and received all the papers. It's your own risk.

Yes Sir. But I would still like to request a postponement of the sitting..... I only heard of the sitting quite coincidentally when I bumped in to Mr L. last Friday in Ter Apel. He announced the sitting would be today, Wednesday, whilst I knew nothing of it before. I hadn't received any of the documents, like the invitation or the defence papers in the paper file that he handed over to me beginning March.

It's not that I am not fully prepared, but for my client it is a shock. Not to mention the fact that the situation for him is unchanged, as he's still awaiting treatment for his post-traumatic stress syndrome and for his addiction. Nothing's changed for him. He's waiting admission to a clinic.

Own risk.....

The judge is nodding. The governmental representative stares ahead, glancing occasionally sideways.

Mmmmmmm, yes I understand. But....own risk.....according to the law.....But what does Mrs de G. have to say about it?

Mrs de G....your turn.....mmmmm yes, you have worded it perfectly your Honour. Perfectly, Beautifully...Wonderfully....I couldn't have said it better myself.

Now then, I am certainly not going to postpone this sitting, but I am willing I am willing to postpone my decision, pending pending receipt of your response to the defence papers of the State and pending receipt of any additional arguments you would like to bring forward

I do need your permission to make a decision outside of the courtroom if if I deem that a second sitting is not necessary do I have your permission

Mrs de G looking uncomfortable.....yes your Honour
Hafid's lawyer.....yes your Honour

(Good news, very good news, I muse)

Hafid's lawyer takes the floor, not half as well-spoken as I had imagined, nor hoped
Talking too fast, stuttering, repetitive, lost in arguments, almost not to be followed in a
coherent fashion, jumping from here.....to there.....
and back again

regarding the new facts which are not seen as new
facts.....trauma.....treatment.....inadequate questions at the time of the interview,
not probing enough to elicit the right information.....see the remarks made by
the guardian.....facts not reported earlier.....shame.....guilt.....taboo
subjects.....sexual abuse - rape.....Pakistan.....Afghanistan.....human rights
abuses.....3 ECHR.....return impossible.....no social network.....no family.....

(and we expect coherence from asylum seekers, I ponder? At any other time it would be amusing, but not now..)

Hafid's lawyer then quotes something from my report (and not even the most convincing bit at that) informing the judge that Mrs Kim Tsai (sitting behind) is

accompanying the client Mr. Hafid and has written a detailed observation report on his behalf, in my capacity as social scientific researcher. He quotes:

“Given that he suffers from severe post-traumatic stress syndrome, it was impossible for H. to give a complete picture of what happened to him during his first interview. This, coupled with the enormous shame and guilt that he felt (and still feels) makes it almost an impossible feat for him to speak openly about the sexual, physical and psychological abuse which occurred when he was kidnapped in Pakistan. These subjects are taboo; subjects about which one does not talk”.

Mrs de G looks on, stiff and immovable, tight and upright. She looked back at me and I see a hint of remembrance in her glance. Then it's her turn.

I will recapitulate the asylum dossier of Hafid, for the benefit of my colleagues in the courtroom

(uuughhhhh, colleagues?)

Oh, says the Judge, sitting upright. Colleagues? I thought we were visited by a large school party.

Mrs de G squirms. Eeerrmmmm no your Honour. I had expected four or five colleagues. But then a larger group turned up. No your Honour, these are all colleagues of mine from Ter Apel. They are decision workers working for the immigration services at the asylum reception centre in Ter Apel.

(pppfffff, with an average age of twenty two....I am flabbergasted. They look like students. Only one woman must be over thirty, and the other women are young, very young. The sort who are still interested in fashion and make-up, not even ready to set up house and home. The two men who are with them are perhaps a little bit older, but not much. There are eleven of them in total. Eleven “decision workers”. The ones who make life and death decisions in the new 8-day asylum procedure. Eleven youths with, I surmise, little to no life experience. What do they know.....about people such as Hafid and others? Pppfffff – truly flabbergasted)

She sums up Hafid's procedure to date, rather more fluently than Hafid's own lawyer.

First interview, second interview, negative decision, appeal, appeal rejected, higher appeal, higher appeal rejected, new application, new interview, second

negative decision, second appeal.
We are up to date.

According to the government the new facts brought in during the new application are not *'new'*. In addition the events took place in Pakistan and not Afghanistan (Hafid's country of birth) and are therefore not *relevant* for an asylum application. *Shame* is *not* a sufficient reason for not reporting the sexual *abuse*. Look Hafid talked of other forms of violence in his first interview, so what's so different that he couldn't mention sexual abuse?

(is she joking?)

She continues dryly and without emotion.

In any case during the first application we considered his story to be 'unlikely', and that is *set* in the previous court decisions. The additional information is not *'new'*. And if they occurred, the events occurred in Pakistan, making them irrelevant to an asylum application in the Netherlands. We do not consider shame an adequate reason for not talking about the events in the first asylum application. In the first application he declared similar events to have taken place, so why not also the rape? In the new application no new facts are therefore admitted. No matter which way we look, the events took place in Pakistan, and cannot lead to the granting of refugee status and a permit to remain here. Hafid's lawyer also mention that the applicant has no social network in Afghanistan. This is nowhere further supported in the claim; there is no proof or evidence that this is the case.

She continues dryly and without emotion.

There is no reason why the applicant cannot be returned to Afghanistan.

Hafid looks on, wipes his eyes on his sleeve, and the judge requests the clerk to give him a glass of water. Which he does.

She continues dryly and without emotion, staring ahead.

It is absolutely important that also in cases of shame that asylum seekers nonetheless confront the barriers of shame and talk openly about their experiences. They have to proceed beyond that threshold of shame. And I repeat, the events did not occur in the country of origin. And regarding the lack of social network or family relations, there is no evidence to support this claim in the dossier.

There is therefore no reason why the applicant cannot be returned to Afghanistan.

(no evidence, no evidence...how do you support such a claim with evidence from a lawless country where it's impossible anyway to get documents, certificates and the like. What's more, the death of his mother took place in Pakistan and the death of his father and other family members occurred years ago and were the reason why Hafid and his mother fled to Pakistan in the first place. Either Mrs de. G's knowledge of cultural differences is minimal, or it's part of her job to deny them, or to discount their influence . Perhaps the immigration services could hire me to give them an intercultural awareness training. On second thoughts, probably not. Too confrontational. Flabbergasted.....)

And on what grounds Mrs Tsai speaks, I am unsure, and I wonder **'how she knows'** that the applicant would have been unable to declare the rape in his first interview. She glances quickly around, avoiding my direct gaze and ends there.

The judge speaks. *We are here to handle the appeal. The appeal is based on whether or not the facts are 'new', and whether or not returning the applicant to Afghanistan would be in contradiction with human rights law, Article 3ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights).*

Mmmmmm by the way have you considered that an asylum route might not be the best route for your client? Have you thought about a regular permit for medical reasons? the judge asks.

Yes your Honour, I have, Hafid's lawyer replies. But we are here to first handle the appeal.

And I want to repeat that no matter where the events took place, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that my client H. is certainly a victim of serious abuses.....

The judge looks at Hafid and asks if he would like to add something. Hafid listens intently to the translation by the interpreter and says that he would like to speak.

Hafid begins: "You don't seem to understand. Shame is a big deal, we cannot just talk about everything. Rape is very different. If something like that happens to you, you can't even tell your own mother, let alone a load of strangers. I am all alone. I have no mother, no father, my whole family is dead. I've never known the love of a family. I know no-one anymore in Afghanistan. I am alone. I feel alone". Hafid is almost choking on his words, as he wipes his eyes on an embroidered handkerchief which is wrapped around his wrist. His body is trembling and he is shaking his head in disbelief. His emotions palpitate through

the courtroom, even though his voice is still low. The judge looks at him, making a motion with his arm that this is enough. He squirms rather uncomfortably at the open display of hurt and pain, but does not try to stop Hafid from having his say. Mrs de G. looks glacially to the front, avoiding Hafid. She remains composed and seemingly unmoved.

(what story will she spin afterwards to colleagues I ask myself)

The judge acknowledges Hafid's words and closes the proceedings. And we all rise and leave the courtroom. I walk past the 'colleagues', and they smile uncomfortably to me.

Outside Mrs de G. gives her business card to Hafid's lawyer and shakes his hand. She avoids my look and turns quickly back into the courtroom. The lawyer explains that this is the best which can be expected in the circumstances. At least we have time to present my report to the Judge before he makes his decision. The translator takes his leave of us, as does the lawyer. We agree to confer on the next steps in the coming days. Hafid and I leave the court in silence and just notice the interpreter jumping onto his bicycle outside. As he cycles away, we walk solemnly to the car park next door. Hafid is visibly moved and upset, and I decide it is better not to go into the details straight away. There's time for that later. I'm in any case relatively pleased with the flexibility of the Judge and with his delay in decision making until he receives additional information from the lawyer.

We make the return journey home practically in silence. I do ask Hafid how he feels. He replies in the customary manner, "yes, ok," and looks despondent. Hafid receives a What's App message and replies. It's about whether he's going to the swimming lesson that afternoon. I ask if he likes swimming. "Yes" he replies, "*but I'm not going today. My head is too full now*". I make a comment about not staying at the asylum centre alone, which has no immediate effect. He does, he says, want to go to school. "*That's good. What have you got on now? Have they had a break already?*" I question. Hafid looks at his telephone, then replies, "*yes, at 10.30, no 11.30, oh I don't know anymore. I can't think. I've forgotten. I don't know*". He studies the time on his telephone intently and murmurs, "*I don't know. I can't get the words out now. My head is full*". We leave it at that and continue in silence.

Symptoms of trauma include "mental blankness" and "spaciness" and an extremely low resistance to stress and stress factors. Like other asylum seekers and refugees I know, Hafid is often overwhelmed by physiological arousal, caused by trauma, leaving him virtually paralysed and helpless, forgetful, and fearful. It

is a vicious cycle of hypervigilance and hyperarousal, often leading to physical and mental shutdown, or to a need to numb the symptoms through auto mutilation or substance abuse. Both of which Hafid engages in when the situation gets too much to take.

“As I have mentioned repeatedly, the perception of threat in the presence of undischarged arousal creates a self-perpetuating cycle. One of the most insidious characteristics of trauma symptoms is that they are hooked into the original cycle in such a way that they are also self-perpetuating. This characteristic is why trauma is resistant to most forms of treatment” (Levine, 1997, p.150).

What does Mrs de G. know of trauma? What does she know of cultural differences and how they are played out in real life? What does she care? In any case the governmental representatives I’ve thus far seen in action seem to pay little heed to what is known about the effects of trauma on the daily lives of the traumatised, in particular when combined with cultural taboos which only serve to enhance traumatic symptoms.

Perhaps it’s not relevant to ask what she knows. Despite the fact that her performance evidences a lack of knowledge, perhaps that is just a smart move to camouflage her knowledge or to disregard it’s relevance for the State’s case. In the same way she questioned my knowledge. **“I wonder how she knows.....”** she asked, referring to me.

The question has been on my mind since the court session. “How do I know?” In fact how do any of us know anything? And certainly how do the ‘decision workers’ come to decide on who is telling the truth and on who is lying: on whose story is credible and whose isn’t?

We can never know everything, but I would wager that the years of experience with asylum seekers, day in and day out, hour after hour, including the experience of A. who has lived in our home for more almost two years now, set me on a better footing than a ‘decision worker’ who undertakes interviews in a formalised asylum setting, and whose contact with asylum seekers and refugees is severely restricted. I think the same can be said of research with asylum seekers and refugees, where the research is limited to one or two interviews, or a questionnaire. But more on that in Matter.....

In the case of Hafid, I have known him or been getting to know him for more than a year now. He is a shy boy, young man, of eighteen years old, of the Hazara

tribe. He has Chinese features, and a round face, sporting a beard and moustache of short stubble. He wears large, square black-rimmed glasses which cover his eyes, and a large part of his face in some kind of strange fashion statement. His clothing are usually cared for, and at times he wears colourful outfits, such as olive green or mustardy yellow trousers and stripy shirts or sweaters. Hafid's pants are usually baggy; his shirts or pullovers less so. His shoe choice is usually a soft type of sneaker, made of canvas. Not very practical in the winter, but Hafid is always warm anyway. I've seen him in the middle of winter with bare feet, no socks and flip flops on. *"If you smoke joints, you get warm,"* he's told me.

Rejection

Hafid's asylum claim, or rather the appeal, was rejected. In effect he should be sent back to Afghanistan; a country which he cannot remember, and where he knows no-one. Those facts seem not to matter to the Dutch government.

His lawyer launched a claim to stop Hafid being returned to Afghanistan, on the basis of medical needs. This procedure is known as Article 64, in the Netherlands. Others I know have been refused the right to stay, as the authorities argue that adequate medical treatment is available in their country of origin. The decision is generally based on whether or not there is an acute medical need, or danger. If not, then the authorities deem it safe to remove the alien from Dutch ground.

In the case of Hafid, the permission to delay his removal was accepted. He's been in a psychiatric clinic since spring 2014; at first for diagnosis, and thereafter he's been on a full dose of different types of therapy – social, musical, art, movement – in a group and individual. The clinic is a specialist treatment centre for people suffering from trauma – from war veterans to asylum seekers and refugees. Hafid can stay because he's interned in a clinic. He now gets to come home to the asylum centre at weekends, but the rest of the week, he has to stay there.

In the fifteen page report I wrote about Hafid, including the background to his asylum application, the cultural context and the effects of trauma on making coherent statements, I stated:

"According to trauma expert Levine, it is very difficult for traumatised people to integrate their trauma experiences into their knowledge base. The normal basis for orientation is seriously damaged by traumatised persons. The result is hopelessness.

“An inherent quality of hypervigilance is the absence of the normal orienting responses. This has serious ramifications for traumatized people. Primarily, it will impair our overall ability to function effectively in any situation, not just those that require active defense.....Instead of being assimilated and available for future use, new information tends to stack up. It becomes disorganised and unusable. Important pieces of data are misplaced or forgotten. The mind then becomes unable to organise details in a way that makes sense. Rather than retain information that does not make sense, the mind “forgets” it. In the midst of this confusion, any other problem compounds the situation and ordinary circumstances can mushroom into the not-so-comic nightmare of frustration, anger and anxiety”.

(Levine, 1997, p.160)

In the case of a severely traumatised person such as Hafid, it is to be expected that the consistency and coherent nature of their account does not comply with the expectations of formal institutions. The effects of trauma, combined with an extremely large cultural difference in worldview, frame of reference and norms can therefore be seen as one explanation why the accounts of many asylum seekers are found to be ‘unbelievable’ by many institutions in the Dutch asylum system”.

The immigration authorities claimed to the court dealing with the appeal:

“As in our initial decision, we see no reason to acknowledge why claimant (Hafid) did not talk about the traumatic events in his initial asylum application. The defendant (IND) can find no evidence in the dossier as to why it was not possible for the claimant to talk about these events in the first place, or to at least make a reference to them. With this in mind, there is no reason according to the defendant to view this information as new,”
(letter from the IND to the court of the Hague, dated 17th February 2014).

The court, in their decision dated 22nd May 2014, approximately two months after the court case, concluded that the IND had acted correctly. They dismissed the case stating:

“6.1. The court concludes that the claimant has not been successful in bringing forward new information for his asylum application, which would justify the court making a new decision in this case. In relation to the sexual abuse of which claimant talks, that claimant should have mentioned this in his first application procedure. The court is not convinced that the claimant was unable to mention this at the time”.

“6.2. In an additional report the claimant states that he could not talk about the traumatic events which occurred. This is mentioned in the observation report written by Ms. Kim Tsai, dated 24th March 2014. Ms Tsai is social scientist and researcher, also independent advisor [.....] The court concludes that the evidence presented in this report cannot be

considered proof that claimant could not make a declaration about the said traumatic events. In this case, the court considers that the said report was not written by a medical specialist,” (Decision of the court of the Hague, sitting Groningen, 22nd May 2014).

When I read such arguments, I feel the anger and disbelief welling up inside me. It's easy at such moments to get carried away with disgust and extreme irritation. I wonder whether those civil servants working at the immigration authorities can actually take themselves seriously. How many even believe what they're writing? Both the court and the immigration authorities agree that Hafid can be returned to Afghanistan, arguing that there is sufficient psychiatric help and support available in his own country? Despite my report on his psychiatric state and the effects of a severe PTSS, including excerpts from medical reports which were written by 'medical specialists', the authorities did not believe the claims about Hafid's mental state. The absurdity of the situation is enough to bring me to tears at times.

It was telling Hafid about the decision which was hard at first. I decided not to tell him about the negative decision whilst he was alone in the clinic, and waited for the first weekend that he came back. He was at our place on a Friday evening. It was more or less his first weekend back from the clinic. The clinic had supposedly arranged with the asylum centre that he should receive a 'food packet' to cover his needs for the weekend. His weekly monetary allowance had been cut since he was in the clinic, because the clinic provided him with food. This meant that Hafid now only got about twenty euro's per week to cover all his personal needs. However, this meant that if he came back to the asylum centre in the weekend, he would still have to buy his own food, without having the allowance to cover it.

We went that Friday to the asylum centre together to ask for his 'food packet'. We were greeted by a group of workers sitting outside smoking. The reception door was open, and the security guard was also outside. The sight of the one woman, with long blond hair, already set me on alert. Without anything having been said, I felt a deep aversion to her. I was wearing my past experiences with her on the surface of my skin and at the forefront of my mind. She glanced at me and I could feel a mutual sense of unease.

Hafid explained the situation, which was greeted with incredulity. When he asked for his 'food', his request was met with laughter. "Haaah," one of the workers shouted. It was a middle-aged man, whom I'd never seen there before. Hafid told me later he was one of the 'new' workers. "Haaah," he repeated, "of

course, this is a five-star hotel. Accommodation and food included,” and he burst out laughing. I hid my rising disgust and anger at his snide remark, and remained poker-faced, waiting. The blond woman edged a look towards me, and sensed that I was not amused. She started to look nervous and said that this wasn't 'usual'. I explained that it didn't really matter whether it was 'usual' or not; the arrangements had been made between one of her colleagues and the psychiatric clinic. *“Oh, of course, she's arranged it, without thinking,”* the blond woman pronounced, placing the blame firmly on the shoulders of her absent colleague. *“This isn't typical. I'll have to have a look inside to see what we have”*. And with that, she scurried off into the reception area, and back into the offices. We waited.

We moved away from where the workers were sitting, to just around the corner. A. joined us. Hafid explained to him what the male colleague had said. The words were still reverberating in my head, and obviously were still niggling away at Hafid. A. was furious. He wanted to storm over and start a fight. He started to say things like, *“I'll show him what it means that this isn't a hotel. What the f....., how dare he talk to you like that. Wait til' I show him”*. I didn't want to cause a scene. Not because I was overly concerned about the personnel; rather I didn't want A. to get into any unnecessary trouble. I knew who would get the blame, and it certainly wouldn't be the workers. I calmed him down. And he eventually stopped.

After a wait of around ten minutes, the blond woman returned with a plastic bag. She looked more at ease, as she started waving the bag towards us. We walked over to her. *“I found some stuff in the freezer. It's all we have. We're not prepared to give out food rations, and stuff, it'll have to be sorted out better next time. This is all I could find. I got some bread and meats and cheese for the morning. Some drinks, some butter, and a frozen dinner for this evening; meat and rice”*. She handed over the bag, which Hafid took. I felt like asking if it was all halal, but didn't. We left. When we got back to Hafid's unit, we laughed. Hafid had already eaten at our house, and didn't really need the stuff. It felt somehow good to have seen someone from COA running around for a change.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

“May we always
have the courage
to bear witness,
to see ourselves as other
and to see other as ourself”.
(Bernie Glassman)

Preface to the methodology

It seemed to me to be somewhat of a paradoxical exercise to have to define, in traditional academic terms, what exactly the methodology of affective or affectivist research is. The essence of a ‘normal methodology’ is to separate the ‘rules’ from the ‘content’ as if the ‘objects of study’ are unimportant, and as if the context does not play a crucial role in how the research is carried out. In fact, I realised that the methodology had to be discovered in situ, whilst carrying out the research. I could not work out in advance how I would feel in each particular situation, nor which affects would carry me forward or lead me to become despondent, and least of all which effect the research participants might have on me. It was impossible for me to know the exact type of situations to which I would be privy, nor the degree of trust or intimacy that would be afforded to me.

And so immersion into a research project which was about relationship, affect, feeling, and experiencing the other, meant that I had to navigate, at times unknown, waters and to trust myself and others to know what to do for the best. Of course, my professional landscape was already littered with invaluable lessons, and my previous research with many of the same participants stood me in good stead for this new journey. I relied on not-knowing, and ‘lostness’, and at times I faltered and became desperately overwhelmed. I spent much time questioning what it meant to be doing affective research, as there were no clear cut methodological guidelines which I could follow. As researcher I had to be present and engaged; and my research participants were no less present or affective. We touched each other, by our mutual presence and in our daily interactions. I affected them, and they affected me; but there was no book of rules which I could call forth to check if I was doing it right.

This 'methodology' section mirrors a desire to summarise what it was I did exactly, or to 'get a grip' on the methodology. This desire stems partly from the external (academic) world, and partly from a personal wish to remember what I was doing and to reflect openly on the ups and downs of this project. It seems evident to me that I can certainly deliberate on the process, and I can provide methodological pointers to others who might also wish to undertake this type of research (in fact I think it is our moral duty to do so); but I can never fully encompass or describe how others will be affected by their particular research or their research participants, nor can I predict or advise upon which course(s) of action they should take in order to really serve or to (re)claim recognition and justice for those whom they are researching. This, for me, is what Affectivist Autoethnographic research is all about.

The Summer Day
Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-- the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

(Mary Oliver, *The House of Light*, 1990)

Autoethnography-inspired research

This book is the result of years of working with, living with, observing and researching asylum seekers and refugees, in all their rawness, frailty and vulnerability, but also resilience, strength and immense plenitude. I opted for an approach which could best be described as 'autoethnographic', as this was the

methodology which made the most sense given my focus on relatedness and relations, affect and affectivity, including my own.

It is “research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political....[Thus], autoethnography [that] claims the convention of literary writing”, (Ellis, C., 2004, p.xix).

However, whilst Ellis may at times combine fiction with ethnographic tellings, this book contains no fictional writings. None of the people are made up; the accounts I make are of actual incidents; nothing has been dramatised. I do not write whole chapters in the form of direct speech, though I do quote myself or others, and in one instance I take the literal words of one research participant to make a ‘poetic story’. The participant in question was a part of this process, and approved the final piece. I do not feel particularly comfortable with ‘making up’ long stretches of speech (either my own or that of others). I think such strategies make texts seem superficial.

I eschew the means which Ellis employs to maintain control of her texts. She directs her own theatre, by writing the script and being producer and director rolled into one. I argue that we cannot, as researchers, be constantly in control. We never know how we will affect the other, nor how we will be affected. The researched can, and do, do things to the researcher. They have the power to affect, just as we do. Controlling the script in this way is a falsification of the researched-researcher relationship, as it fails to own up to the affective dynamics of ‘real’ relationships. If we want to take the other seriously, in relation, we have to admit that we can’t always be in control.

I do relay stories though, in the recognition of the responsibility which comes with the choices I make. The so-called crisis of representation in anthropology raised many important questions about authorship, power, and objectivity, and brought increased recognition of the partiality of truths and the need to make one’s own position and biases clear, (Clifford, J., and Marcus, G., 1986, Marcus, G., and Fischer, R., 1986, Lather, P., 2007, Whiffen, M., 2003). I recognise that I can only disclose part-truths, if in fact they are ‘truths’ at all, as no matter how honest and authentic I claim to be, I am ultimately the one who decided what could (and what couldn’t) be told. It is evident that there are multiple truths, and multiple ways to represent the world around us, (Geertz, C., 1990, p.274).

As Crapanzo argues: “Like translation, ethnography is also a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages, of cultures and societies. The

ethnographer does not, however, translate texts the way the translator does. He must first produce them. Text metaphors for culture and society notwithstanding, the ethnographer has no primary and independent text that can be read and translated by others. No text survives him other than his own. Despite its frequent ahistorical – its synchronic – pretense, ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer's encounter with whomever he is studying", (1986, in Clifford, J., and Marcus, G., (eds), p.52).

And so it is, that based on the encounters I have had with research participants, I have formulated texts; albeit in a process of sharing, discussing and debating the things I wanted to write about with those same research participants. I have translated our common experiences into a diversity of narratives, and have described my own affective transitions at the same time. According to Jackson (2013), writing is also a means of forging relationships, whilst recognising that representation remains a flawed practice. He says "*The blank page confronts the writer like the face of a stranger. Though we cling to the belief that we can read one another's minds or mimic reality in art, the gaps between us, like the gaps between words and the world, can never be closed*" (p.1). I have tried to conduct this research in the spirit of dialogue, with recognition nevertheless of the danger of overshadowing the other, (Benjamin, 1998).

There is another debate in autoethnography which I want to touch on here. I refer my reader to a series of articles published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Volume 35, Number 4, 2006), for a more complete overview. In many ways, it concerns the fundamental legitimacy of autoethnographic research, which is still contested.

The discussion concerns the distinction between autoethnographic research which is described alternately as "*evocative*", "*subjective*", "*creative*" and "*emotional*", versus what Anderson calls "*analytical autoethnography*", whose goal is not only to describe, but also to "*analyse and theorize*".

Anderson embarks on a discussion about what autoethnography is, and what it can be said to encompass. He enlarges the field, as it were, by arguing for an alternative autoethnographic paradigm that includes more traditional realist ethnography and analytical possibilities. These are now, he argues, overshadowed by the dominance of a narrow emotional or evocative type of autoethnography, as exemplified in the work of Ellis and Bochner.

According to Anderson, evocative autoethnography is rooted in a postmodern framework, which mistrusts traditional forms of realist representation, and its

claims to the generalisability of theoretical discourse (for Anderson's outline of the history of autoethnography, see the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Volume 35, Number 4, August 2006). Analytical autoethnography, as put forward by Anderson, incorporates five key features. They are: "(1) *complete member researcher (CMR) status*, (2) *analytic reflexivity*, (3) *narrative visibility of the researcher's self*, (4) *dialogue with informants beyond the self*, and (5) *commitment to theoretical analysis*" (2006, p.378). Indeed, Anderson argues that: "*The definitive feature of analytic autoethnography is this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization*" (2006, p.388).

It is this point that Ellis and Bochner dispute, when they take a position regarding Anderson's analytical autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner claim that Anderson is in fact just describing "*another genre of realist ethnography*" (2006, p.432), which would be better served by being called "*aloof ethnography*", and not "*analytical ethnography*", (2006, p.436). At the same time, they note that their own autoethnography is both analytical and evocative, but "*the difference is that we use stories to do the work of analysis and theorising*", (2006, p436).

I agree with Ellis and Bochner that Anderson "*ignores or overlooks how stories work*", and that "*Leon seems to treat 'theory', 'analysis', and 'generalization' as if they were natural categories rather than invented ones....He sees theory as somehow superior to story*", (2006, p.438/439). In this sense, I would argue that my research is both evocative and analytical, albeit not in precisely the way that Ellis and Bochner contend. The stories I produce are not fictionalised tellings, designed to expose a particular theme. I do not do drama like Ellis and Bochner. However, I do write affective texts about actual experience, in order to connect the reader with the affective dimension of relationship and interconnectedness. My stories are less scripted, and messier, because as inquiries into the complexity of social relations, they are always moving, and changing.

I continually make sense of my encounters with my research participants by analysing and reflecting upon my experiences, alone and with them. Their stories initiate discussions in which we examine meanings together, and ponder how we got here and what to do next. I try to be with my affects in a mindful way, though this is not always achievable, and I allow what I take to be knowledge to be disrupted again and again, put up for further questioning and analysis. Pathak (2010) talks about using "*our own experience as the location of analysis*", in an essay in which she argues that there is an "*inherent synergy of the intellectual and experiential*", whereby lived experience (and bodily knowledge) is not separate

from intellectual knowledge. I would include within this lived experience, my own affects and experience of affectivity and its embodiment.

For Pathak, it is a question of destabilising what she calls “*scientific imperialism*”. The colonialist tradition has, she argues, demeaned embodied knowledge by relegating it “*to the realm of the exotic...[and] implicit in that derailment is the reinforcement of the western, white, male knowledge as scientific, universal and true*”, (2010, p.3). Pathak endeavours to legitimize other forms of (embodied) knowledge, through autoethnographic inquiry. “*Knowledge*”, she argues “*..is a vaster, more multi-dimensional realm than we often recognize. And this then allows us to consider how it is possible for a person to have intellectual and experiential knowledge*”, (2010, p.3, italics in original).

The value in Pathak’s approach to autoethnography is the focus on a critical engagement with the questions one is researching, which goes beyond mere evocation and storytelling. Pathak argues for political engagement in autoethnography, in order to disrupt traditional (epistemological) frameworks. Pathak employs the “*four ethics for postcolonial ethnography*” which are offered by Gonzalez (2003). These ethics are, I feel, more attuned to what I am doing, than the five features of analytical autoethnography, as proposed by Anderson.

The four ethics are accountability, context, truthfulness and community. Accountability is about revealing how we came upon the stories we are telling. It can act as a counter to narcissism, in that it obliges the researcher to question her own position, and to engage actively in the spaces between herself and the researched. I am not only accountable to an academic community, but to research participants who have placed their trust in me regarding the texts I write about them.

Context is about “*laying the stage*” (Pathak, 2010, p.6). It includes environmental and political factors, the social setting, the physical landscape. By taking into account systemic constraints and realities, the researcher extends beyond her immediate self to account for external influences. The context in this research refers in particular to the institutional, as well as the physical surroundings (living in asylum camps, detention centres).

Truthfulness relates to a way of seeing that which is invisible, or difficult to see on the surface. It is about openness, and acknowledging implicit power differentials which shape the ways in which we tell our stories. Trust and mistrust are recurring topics in this book and I have also written a chapter on ‘lostness’; I

would relate truthfulness to the capacity to be open to lostness and to the opportunities with which this mindset provides us.

Lastly, the ethic of community, which is all about relationship and intimacy with those with whom we have conducted our research. This requires a sense of interrelatedness and connectedness in our research, and a knowing that we are part of a larger whole.

These four ethics provided me with an initial framework within which to carry out autoethnographic research according to a set of values which were supportive to my endeavour to fully and affectively engage with my research participants. For a more complete description of these four ethics, see Gonzalez, 2000 and 2003).

I do not think that autoethnography is the easy way out. If anything, writing autoethnography demands just as much, if not more, rigor, than any other kind of research.

I have touched on the debate regarding the legitimacy of autoethnographic research, and it is not my intention to try to solve that problem here. I recognise the dangers which critics point to, like falling into pretentiousness, arrogance and narcissism. These are indeed some of the pitfalls of writing about oneself, which I have tried to avoid. I believe that keeping in mind the four ethics I mentioned above (Gonzalez, 2003), helped a great deal in this aspect, in that they forced me to constantly engage myself in reflexive action, both alone and with my participants. This research has been an effort of co-creation, as has the analytical endeavour encompassed within.

Then there is the question of non-generalisability and subjectivity. Autoethnographic research is deeply subjective, and I make no claims to being able to speak for all asylum seekers and all refugees in this country. However, I would dispute the idea that I have nothing to say of value about the Dutch asylum system or about the experiences of those asylum seekers and refugees whom I know intimately and whose lives I have followed for years. The very possibility of being a participant in the lives of so many asylum seekers and refugees for so long, meant that I not only witnessed what it was like to be an asylum seeker or refugee in the Netherlands (at all phases of procedures), as a non-asylum seeker or non-refugee through interviews, meetings and observations; but I also experienced directly what it was like to be an asylum seeker or refugee, even though I wasn't one. How do I explain what I mean here more clearly? Because I was so often seen with, and associated with asylum seekers and refugees, in many

instances those working in authoritative positions took me to be ‘one of them’ (i.e. asylum seeker), even though they knew (most of the time) that I was formally not one of them. I got a sense of what it was like to be powerless when I participated in interviews with professionals and wanted to say something but couldn’t, because I was afraid it might negatively influence the decision of the person with power. I felt a kind of humiliation at having to check in and out of the asylum centre every time I visited and at having to account for why I was there. I sometimes wanted to sneak past the security gates, but didn’t dare to, in case I might get thrown out, or banned. It was the same standing in line with an asylum seeker, being kept waiting for a morsel of information, or being told that they weren’t entitled to a train ticket, or waiting to take finger prints on a weekly basis, afraid if a red cross appeared on the screen, meaning you had to go to the desk, or being relieved when a green tick revealed itself, meaning everything was ok, at least for this week.

So whilst I’m not really ‘one of them’, as I have a British passport which guarantees me certain privileges and security; I experienced first-hand the way the system treats asylum seekers and refugees, as “*second-class citizens*”, or the ways in which “*they think they’re better than us*”, or “*they know they can just keep us hanging around, because we can’t do anything about it*”. I speak therefore, not only through the mouths and experiences of others, but of the things I experienced directly, of the lack of recognition, and of the violence and oppression of the current asylum system in the Netherlands.

And so, with an original orientation that was probably more ethnographic than autoethnographic, I started on an affective course of research to see if I could understand what it was like to be an asylum seeker or refugee in the Netherlands. The asylum seekers (B., Leyla, Tatiana, Ali, Lianne), asked me to tell their stories and to show (the world) their suffering. I felt I owed it to them, for their trust in me, to do so.

Why affective research?

I have explained above why I call my research autoethnographic. At the same time, my research leads with affect.

I developed a position of doing *affect-directed* research out of an involvement with the refugees and asylum seekers that I had known for years. Having read the literature on affect, I thought this was really a way to, as the famous Evans Agee phrase goes, “*Let us now praise famous men*”. However, I realised that whilst much of the literature lauds affect, the authors’ own affects are much less evident. There

is much talk of affectivity, but when it comes to action and engagement, both are strikingly absent from much of the literature.

I do not write from the position of an asylum seeker or refugee, though I might call my father one. I am writing from the position of an affected researcher, who has undertaken research which leads with affect. Some of the questions I began with were: what happens when we open ourselves to affect, and all its incumbent emotions, and feelings? Does it lead to a better, or rather, more substantial knowing of the other? Does it necessarily lead to greater solidarity and connectedness? In fact, can we do this kind of research without being affective or affected? And what of trust and mistrust; how do these factors enhance or undermine our research endeavours? I wanted to find out whether doing affected research meant I would have to bare my own affects, or could I just describe the affects of others without laying out my own affects for inspection and introspection?

Traditions of affect

Before addressing how I went about doing affective research, I want to reiterate once more that the ‘affect perspective’ which I take seeks its primary inspiration from anthropology. My choice of literature reflects this position.

I have, throughout this research project, struggled with affect studies as a vast and changing field, and I have offered one perspective in this book, which draws particularly on the work of anthropologists with marginalised populations. There are other traditions and disciplines which look at affect from different perspectives. I introduced affect in Chapter one, and I point out a few traditions briefly hereunder, but do not engage extensively with any of them.

Von Scheve (2013) presents an interesting study of the social structuration of affect and emotion. He posits that “*cognitive orders of meaning-making cannot exist or function in the ways proposed by existing accounts without corresponding affective orders*”(p.6). Returning to Weber’s theories of rationality, von Scheve argues that affect and emotion have been marginalised and viewed as threats to rational thought and to analytical reasoning. He re-examines this position, and offers an alternative view which seeks to counter the idea that affect and emotion necessarily have a negative and disruptive impact on cognition and rational decision making.

“The experience of complex (social) emotions required establishing connections between thoughts, ideas, and memories (or conceptual and learned representations, more

generally), with basic affective reactions that have become associated with these representations. These kinds of emotions “occur once we begin experiencing feelings and forming systematic connections between categories of objects and situations, on the one hand, and primary emotions on the other” (Damasio, 1994, p.134, in von Scheve, 2013, p. 28).

So drawing more on the neurological components of affect, von Scheve picks up on Damasio’s account of ‘somatic markers’ (see Damasio, 1994), to refer to “associations of certain courses of action and their emotional consequences that have occurred in the past” (2013, p.59/60). Memories trigger certain emotions in a process whereby stored situational models are combined with affective reactions; based on past experiences particular emotions are elicited in certain circumstances⁵. I believe that von Scheve’s interdisciplinary perspective offers new insights into the role affect plays in the ways in which we relate to others and to our experiences. He avoids, rightly so, the simple opposition of rationality to affect, or the passions and widens the space for alternative ways to conceptualise human relationship and action.

Brinkema, examining affect from within the literary and cultural studies tradition, argues that affect should be subject to a close reading which deals with “textual particularities and formal matters” (2014, p.xiv). Whilst not rejecting her arguments entirely, I would resist the tendency to try to straightjacket affect by insisting that the turn to affect only has validity if affect can be analysed in ways which are theoretically generalizable. For an interesting discussion on theorizing affect as form, which requires a textual reading, I refer the reader to Brinkema (2014).

I would also like to point the reader to a recent book by Giovanna Colombetti, called “*The Feeling Body, Affective Sciences Meets the Enactive Mind*”. Drawing on cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, Colombetti applies an ‘enactive’ approach to the understanding of affect. I am drawn to this ‘enactive’ inquiry into affective science. Colombetti’s attempt to do justice to the complexity of affect is clear and well written. In particular, he argues, like I do, that “*Affectivity...is a broader phenomenon that permeates the mind, necessarily and not merely contingently. The mind, as embodied, is intrinsically or constitutively affective; you cannot take affectivity away from it and still have a mind*”, (2014, p.1).

⁵ For a comprehensive study on the effects of affect and emotions in (rational) decision-making and human action, from a perspective that integrates aspects of neuroscience, with psychology, cognitive science and sociology, see von Scheve, 2013.

Mind, or what we might call ‘rationality’, cannot be seen as separate from affect. Indeed, decision-making, requires both. I see the affective as being present as an integral component of our sense-making trajectories; patterned like grooves which subtly (and not so subtly) condition our reactive mechanisms to different situations, peoples and places. What is clear to me is that there are many competing, sometimes complementary conceptualisations of what affect is, and we should remain as open as possible to the different appraisals which are being offered.

My own affective journey with asylum seekers and refugees is integrated into a path of mindful living and practice. My own transformation has been great. I have been continually confronted with what it means to ‘write lives’, and to embody affects in my writing. Whatever I do, I am taking experiences and representing them to my readers through writing; I cannot avoid this representation process and I cannot avoid the process of discernment about what to write and what to exclude that comes with it. I suggest that my affects, and my emotions have been a guiding factor in those discernments and in the decisions I have made.

How to do affective research?

Taking an affective stance is not only epistemological; a way to deal with questions of knowing about the world, or knowing the other. It is far more than that. An openness to feelings and emotions is more than just being affected in the moment, or on the spot. It takes its toll on one’s whole being over the long-term. Authors such as Agee, Terkel, Stewart, Lingis, and Papadopoulos all assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that the turn to affect is a turn to community and belonging. They assume that we might glean the common humanity behind stark poverty and that despite the miseries they portray, we will be able to rise above the hopelessness and detect a grandeur in the tragedies about which they write. Affect has to do with an openness to feelings about and with the other, but there’s no guarantee that those feelings will lead to anything constructive or valuable (Letiche, Lightfoot, 2014, p.151-174).

Having completed a previous project: *“Getting to know asylum seekers – Turning to affectivity for a self-other account”* (2010), I started on this one with an initial objective to further explore the lives of the many participants I had come to know during that research. For those who were newly qualified ‘refugees’, I expected that the resilience and hopefulness that I had witnessed in the past would grow and carry over into new lives, and that they would somehow cast off the shadows of their asylum seeking pasts, with the help of the many Dutch organisations and professional welfare workers who make a living supporting them.

Premised on the assumption that ‘affect’ encompasses this turn to commitment and solidarity, I set out convinced that pursuing a methodological engagement based on affect would lead me to strong(er) relatedness with my research participants and that affect-led research would somehow be liberatory. I started out believing that opening up to affect would lead to better care, less violence, and less repression.

However, the more I became involved in my research and with my research participants, the more I experienced the effects of hyper or hypo-arousal of the affective system, which in turn engender reactions such as numbness, moral outrage, hopelessness and disillusionment, or abandonment⁶. These affects can lead to a form of entrapment, from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape. Not only did I personally experience all of these things, at some point during my research, but they were clearly visible in the professionals and volunteers alike, working within the asylum system. So much so, that suffering is greatly increased, and the potential to develop relationships which foster growth and development is severely cubed. The turn to affect turned out not to be all that the literature makes it out to be.

I tried to be present in the daily lives of my participants, engaging in their lives and participating in their experiences. I allowed myself to be drawn into the complex webs of relations to which asylum seekers and refugees belong. It was a question of letting things present themselves for further inquiry and investigation, seeing where my relationships took me, rather than trying to force myself into arenas which I might have previously determined (see Hoey, 2014, p.2).

Research participants asked me to accompany them into various settings, as researcher, support worker, acquaintance or observer. Some areas were already known to me due to paid work or work which was ongoing during the research period; others were new to me, such as attending formal interviews with the immigration services, or visits to the doctor’s office. In such instances, I did not always make it explicit to the professionals that I was a researcher, though at times, when I thought it would be beneficial to the asylum seeker or refugee in question, I did. At other times, I was the ‘dumb onlooker’, who sat passively listening and observing; at other times I may have even initiated the meeting on behalf of an asylum seeker/refugee, and I would then actively engage with the

⁶ For a discussion on the modulation of affect, see Bloom, S., 2013. For a description of emotional regulation and the cultivation of compassion, see Halifax, J., 2011, 2012 and 2014.

professional during the meetings, asking questions, seeking clarification, or urging for some type of action or another to be taken. The leading question was 'what will serve the asylum seeker or refugee best', rather than 'what will give me the best data for my research'?

Affectivist Autoethnography

One aspect of affective research turned out to be research that also serves the other. For me this meant research which involves admitting that I am affected by what I see, hear and experience; research which faces up to questions of responsibility for the other and which does not shy away from direct action. Questions then arose about who or what serves the other? And about which 'other' are we talking? Were these arbitrary factors which only served to increase the power differential between researcher and researched? After all, if I am the one who is deciding what serves, and how to go about serving, what is the role of the vulnerable other, in this case the asylum seeker or the refugee? Dealing with these kinds of dilemmas was a constant source of inquiry during the research.

In order to answer these question, I need to point to the principally dialogical nature of my research endeavour and to my commitment to including my research participants in all stages of the research process. It was, after all, a group of asylum seekers who got me interested in this research, based on their own request to me to research their lives and to tell their stories (Tsai, 2010).

The question of power is nevertheless an important one. I needed my research participants and they needed me. But there were times when I had more power, and times when they were pulling the strings. There were moments of great frustration and hopelessness, and situations of celebration and joy. There were certainly instances when I felt manipulative, or inversely, when I felt I was being used or manipulated. I could not make research participants trust me, and indeed, a number did not and still do not. However, those with whom I had the most contact, have certainly not only affected me greatly, as I have them, but they have also jointly determined the course of this research and its final conclusions.

I have wondered whether it was necessary for me to reveal my own affects; what is the added value of such openness to this research project? Rather than looking at the question in terms of effectivity or use, I think the answer lies in the sphere of moral and social responsibility. So whilst I am convinced that this type of research does generate knowledge which might remain hidden in 'traditional' social science research; more importantly, affect-led research engenders a space of mutuality whereby the research participant is also privy to the multiplicity of the

researcher's affective identity. According to Benjamin, this space is a "*shared third*", or a space of potentiality which re-affirms each person's capacity for recognition of the other and re-establishes a reciprocal obligation of care (2014).

Veissière questions the possibilities for social transformation, when researchers enter a field with a vision of doing emancipatory research, based on "*culturally displaced visions of social change*". Calling himself a "*gringo ethnographer*", Veissière points out the dangers involved in "*imagining, articulating, and facilitating conscientizacao on other people's behalf*", (2009, in Kapoor and Jordan, eds, p. 211/212). I agree with his stance that undertaking activist ethnography, with the hope of empowering the marginalised other, can be extremely violent and repressive. The ethnocentric condescension that Veissière points out has also plagued me at times during my research with asylum seekers and refugees. He notes that "*engaged theory*", grounded in, and indeed only possible through prolonged and in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, is a conscious move away from "*disengaged practice*". Researchers who are also social activists must re-examine their own roles in the field and should avoid becoming paralysed by, what Veissière calls "*postmodernist obsessions with power and co-optation*". He goes on to argue that "intellectuals who become implicated in postcolonial contexts are not so much entitled to, but *morally obliged* to contribute to the social struggle of the marginalized people they study", (2009, in Kapoor and Jordan, eds, p.212, italics not in original). I see this type of "engaged theory" as being compatible with my own journey in affective engagement, or, as Pathak (2010) calls it, "*political engagement*" as a form of participatory activism.

I have come to realise that an affectivist research methodology is, for me, one which admits the researcher's vulnerability and one which opens to that vulnerability. It is a strategy which acknowledges our fundamental interrelatedness and our fundamental connectivity. We are not immune to the other, even though I sometimes wished I could be. For me, leading with affect means that being affected encompasses a desire to serve, to engage and to take action, amidst my own fears, anxieties and aversions. It can involve being a participant observer, writing notes, jotting down thoughts and keeping a research diary, or conducting interviews, transcribing them and looking for sensitising concepts. But it is always about examining how I am affected, and why, and considering what I need to do in a particular situation, as a researcher, as a professional, but more importantly, as an affective human being. This means realising that doing nothing might just as well be the right thing to do.

Affect-led research is also about the vulnerability of the other, and about not

closing down in the face of suffering. It is about being alive to suffering and being willing to meet it with care and compassion, even when I'd rather just forget what I'm doing and run away. It is important not to underestimate the complexity of doing research with vulnerable groups or individuals. Research premised on the turn to affect certainly can lead to new possibilities for understanding the lives and choices of refugees and asylum seekers and those who work with them, professionally or otherwise. But we should take care to remember that opening to affect does not always lead to pro-social re-actions or inter-actions. I too learnt that hatred and disgust, shame and ill-will, and a host of other less desirable attributes, are very much a part of our affective systems.

Many times I didn't know what to say to my research participants. I felt an immense sense of shame, even disgrace, for the way asylum seekers and refugees were being treated. It was difficult to decide whether it was useful to point out the flaws in the system, or to tell people that they were being lied to, as I didn't want to give them a false sense of hope that things could change. I read Paolo Freire's *"Pedagogy of the Oppressed"*, and felt a renewed vigour to increase the awareness of those I was working with about oppression and violence. Then I compared those writings with that of Samuel Veissière, in the *"Ghosts of Empire"*, and I felt like an imperialist, trying to impose my view of the world onto those who I saw as 'subaltern' and without voice. It was all very confusing. On the one hand I could see how people were being badly treated and violated; my participants could, after all, express their feelings to me in these ways. And on the other hand, I felt that my wider engagement with the broader asylum system meant I could analyse and explain their feelings, in ways in which they themselves couldn't yet see. I didn't want to appear arrogant; yet it was painful to see them lost and swimming without direction and without purpose.

"The prisoners, above all those who did not understand German, might not even know where in Europe their Lager was situated, having arrived after a slaughterous and tortuous journey in sealed boxcars. They did not know about the existence of other Lagers, even those only a few kilometres away. They did not know for whom they worked. They did not understand the significance of certain sudden changes in conditions, or of the mass transfers. Surrounded by death, the deportee was often in no position to evaluate the extent of the slaughter unfolding before his eyes. The companion who worked beside him today was gone by the morrow: he might be in the hut next door, or erased from the world; there was no way to know. In short, the prisoner felt overwhelmed by a massive edifice of violence and menace but could not form for himself a representation of it because his eyes were fixed to the ground by every single minute's needs" (Primo Levi, 1989, p.17).

Much of the works of authors which I decided to study implies affects' possibilities for emancipation and transformation. I will argue that this is too simplistic. I believe that affect is not only a short-term phenomenon, or something which we encounter momentarily; it marks, even defines, our long-term registers and influences our very ways of being in the world with others. It is indeed, not something to be seen in opposition to thinking or rationality. Letiche calls *affectivity* "the direct presence of life". He notes that: "*affectivity as attunement, sensitivity and as openness to existence, is a pre-structure or pre-supposition to 'life'*", (2009, p.298/299). When we open to its full capacity, affect can lead to engagement and solidarity; but it can also engender an inhumanity which we scarcely wish to recognise, let alone willingly acknowledge. It can move us to act both for good and evil; to commit to alleviating pain and suffering, or to causing it or prolonging it.

What I call "Affectivist Autoethnography" recognises this ambivalence and works with it. It refers to a research position which is grounded in the complexity of relatedness and connection, whose backdrop is an affective activism as a force for social change. It is not activism conjured out of the idealisation of affect. Rather, it is an activism charged with a sensitivity to not knowing as a source of transformation, which acknowledges that both researcher and researched are caught up in mutual exchanges of affect. From this perspective both are agents during the research process. Each party affects the other.

This type of research demands that researchers accept the social responsibilities that their own research calls forth; that they emerge from the shadows of methodologies which aim purely to abstract and objectify, and glare into the face of the real other, and take action. Affectivist Autoethnography challenges the researcher to become visible and to make visible new pathways of co-existence and relationship.

"To record an image or sound requires both movement and action – going somewhere, seeing something, doing something – "doing something about it" demands more – it entails movement across multiple registers; from the personal to the public sphere, from individual to collective speech, from aesthetics to politics." (Sharon Daniel)

The research participants: refugees and asylum seekers

I expected that the research should encompass only refugees; that is those who have achieved official refugee status with the relevant permit to reside in the Netherlands. However, the relationships between asylum seekers and recognized refugees remain strong, and the separation of the two into singular entities

would not do justice to how they continue to play an important role in each other's lives and how they continue to influence one another on a daily basis. I therefore could not leave the asylum seekers behind. This research encompasses therefore both refugees and asylum seekers.

I have been engaged in the lives of some twelve to fifteen asylum seekers and refugees intensively over the past five to eight years. I have had sporadic contact with at least one hundred other asylum seekers and refugees over the same period; either formally in schools, for example, as a teacher or project manager; or informally, at the sports club, or at people's homes, as I've been introduced to networks of friends and relations of those I already knew or worked with. I will write about a number of these asylum seekers and refugees in detail, but I carry the experiences of all of them in my words and writings. The asylum seekers and refugees involved in this research have lived in many different asylum centres or accommodations for asylum seekers, all over the Netherlands. A full list of the places can be found at the end of the book, with a list of the main participants.

I have included the research participants with whom I have had the most intensive contact, in all stages of the research process, and have maintained an open dialogue with them. Consequently, I have tried to avoid seeing them as mere examples to illustrate a point about affect, being reminded constantly along the way that writing lives is a precarious endeavour. After years of research, including many thousands of hours spent with asylum seekers and refugees, I have become wary of oversimplifying their experiences or of reducing arguments to purely psychological or purely sociological causes. It is neither the individual nor society, but a complex interweaving of the two; of the multiple connections that make up daily life and the relationships that people have to themselves and with one another, and with the culture at large.

Selection of research participants

The decision about which refugees participated in my research has been one driven partly by chance, partly by practical considerations. Knowing one particular individual or group has oft times led to introductions to others, and their friends and families alike. Not all refugees have responded in the same way to requests for meetings or research involvement, which is understandable given their experiences with official institutions and authorities; the level of trust given varies accordingly (Daniel, Knudsen, (eds),1995). Those with whom the research relationship has grown over a considerable number of years, have afforded me the greatest trust and insight into their daily lives and happenings.

Others I know less, either because they haven't been in the country that long, or because the time spent with them has been more divided and less intense. Some of the participants in this research are refugees whom I met many years ago during integration projects, long before the idea to undertake this research had even entered my head. I got in touch with them again, and they readily agreed to become a part of this new project.

The participants in this research project don't all know one another, though some do. Many live now in the North of the Netherlands and they originated in a variety of different countries. The research participants who entered the country less than a year ago, and who participated in this project, were mainly Syrians, escaping the war in their homeland. They live spread out now in various parts of the Netherlands, though when I met most of them they were living in an asylum centre in the North (Oude Pekela). The stories told are of the day to day lives of refugees and asylum seekers, of ordinary occurrences which are grounded in the relational webs in which these people operate; webs of suffering and adversity, and occasional hope.

Many asylum seekers have spent years accounting for themselves, accounting for their actions, accounting for why in heaven's name they upped and left everything behind and came here. These years have left some bitter, and wary of strangers. Trust has to be earned and whilst years of almost daily contact has afforded me the trust of some, others still refuse to believe that I am other than a spy for the authorities. Though they may not say it to my face (see Bohmer and Shuman, 2008, and Daniel and Knudsen, 1995 on issues of trust and mistrust).

I have also shared my home for two and half years with a young unaccompanied asylum seeker from Afghanistan. He wants to be known as A. in this book. In this time with him, I have come to appreciate the daily struggles and intense suffering caused by loss and exile, and the hurt of not actually belonging anywhere at all. The pain of trauma and grieving is a daily reality for him, and for many others; all too often hidden in the recesses of a room at the asylum camp, forgotten in a bottle of whiskey and a joint, or laid bare for all to see (but not easily recognisable as such) in all too frequent incidents of aggression and frustration. Life is hard for him, but much harder for the majority of other young unaccompanied minors, because of their loneliness, and the simple fact that they literally have no-one. Trying to fit in takes its toll, especially when the support systems in place fail miserably to provide decent care, or even to acknowledge your suffering. A roof over your head at fifteen is, as you can imagine, not the only thing you're looking for.

When it comes to the representatives of institutions or organisations in the asylum chain, I also call these people ‘research participants’, though many would rightly claim that they did not know that I was formally ‘carrying out’ research at the time of our encounters. As I explain below, meetings with such representatives were usually held because the asylum seeker or refugee had an appointment with them, and not because I, as researcher, requested a formal research interview. Other meetings and dealings with organisational personnel were in the framework of my own professional activities. The fact that I was also a researcher was hidden from no-one, and indeed I often brought it up in conversation. Only a few people were interested in my research as such, and asked questions about it. For example, a few professionals working in mental health care, and in education. The director of Nidos, whom I also contacted about my experiences with Jade⁷, became particularly interested in my research once he heard that I have been taking care of one of their ex-pupils for a couple of years. His immediate point of interest was not my concerns about the level of care provided to unaccompanied minors by Jade, as he said we could discuss that point at another moment, but how many of ‘his’ guardians had I spoken to during my research, and how many ‘knew’ I was a researcher at the time.

Choices and limits

When A. first came into my life, into our lives, my mindfulness practice was not as well established as it is these days. In his gravest moments, when I felt that his life was most in danger of spiralling into a deep abyss, I too rocketed into places of unbelievable desperation and sorrow. I didn’t know what to do at first, when he was psychotic or dissociating. I relied purely on instinct to stay by him, and I told him that I would never leave him, no matter what. He had been moved from place to place by the Dutch authorities (COA and Nidos), was self-harming and drinking alcohol in excessive quantities, was highly depressive, severely traumatised, and he had no-one. He was alone.

Now I decided when I started writing this book that I would leave much of A.’s story out of it. And I have not reneged on that decision. Unlike the other asylum seekers and refugees in my research, I have never been given permission to tell the intimate details of his story. Whilst it would make for an astounding addition to this book on affect and in particular on my affective relationships with asylum seekers and refugees, all along this research path I have had to make pertinent choices about what to include and what not to include. They are choices which extend far beyond the question of what will make for a good book, or for a good

⁷ See Affective Matter (4)

piece of research. My considerations and deliberations concern the protection of all my participants, so as neither to disclose anything which could potentially harm them or their families (here or in their home countries), nor to do or say anything which they might now, or later on, regret, or be ashamed of.

Evidently, there is no guarantee that somebody may not be happy at some future point in time, but by discussing openly with my research participants about what I would or would not include, and by asking them their advice, I have done my utmost to avoid harm or discomfort to them. The point is that even when they might say that they don't mind what I write about them, I feel it is my duty to consider the possible consequences to them of publishing everything they tell me. I can never know how things will turn out at some future date, but I have to assess what the knowledge means, and how it could be read, or used by others. I don't want to sound pretentious, but need to employ my knowledge of juridical procedures, rules and regulations, in ways that will limit damage to others.

These purposeful deliberations mean that I do not tell everything that I know; in fact I tell only a fraction of what has been divulged to me in most cases. It has nothing, or nearly nothing to do with the fact that people have lied to the authorities in order to get a refugee permit. I know of some cases like this, but not many. There are instances where people do not tell the whole truth, but that is usually because of issues like shame and honour making certain subjects taboo. Those who choose to relay the whole truth of their horror story at a later stage of the asylum proceedings are often punished, in my view wrongly, for not having told the complete truth in the beginning. They can be denied a refugee permit because 'they should have told everything during their first interview'. Trauma and distress are not good (enough) excuses⁸, according to the IND⁹.

Sometimes the plain horrors of what happened to asylum seekers cannot be fathomed in our minds. Though asylum seekers tell me "*They (the authorities) know exactly what we've been through, but they just pretend they don't*". A lot of the accounts I have heard seem unbelievable; of torture and abuse, witchcraft and black magic, mistreatment in prisons or people escaping from prisons, escaping from smugglers or traffickers, suffering from extreme hunger and illness, and hiding

⁸ For more accounts of how asylum seekers are mistrusted see Daniel & Knudsen, (eds), 1995, Bohmer & Shuman, 2007, Hynes, 2003, Salis Gross, 2004.

⁹ IND: Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst / Immigration and Naturalisation Service. This is a part of the Ministry of Security and Justice. According to the website www.ind.nl: "The IND is the organisation that handles the admission of foreigners in the Netherlands. That means that we process all applications for asylum, family reunification, visa and other residence permits."

in forests for days, even weeks on end. I've had times when I didn't want to see or hear another story; I was full to the limit, and it felt as if I was being dragged under to a dark place, where there was only tragedy. At those moments it's hard to separate out the problems; there seem to be so many people with so many difficulties. It's hard not to become sceptical. I sometimes get the feeling that we're on a big merry-go-round. We're spinning around most of the time, and only occasionally do we get off for respite. When I hear it's going well for Leyla, I'm really glad. But the happiness can just as well be over within a day or so. The debts pile up, she gets paid work, and it seems like there's a temporary relapse in the troubles; then the tax office makes mistakes and the debts start piling up again; then she gets a rebate, and seems on track again; then she buys a scooter, has an accident, sells the scooter, but the man she sold it to never paid insurance, and it seems it's still on her name, then she gets the scooter back, resells it, gets more work, and buys a car; then she has an accident with a cyclist, and gets back pain and severe panic attacks; her contract doesn't get extended, so she's back to just a few hours work and welfare benefits; she gets married, but they don't live together because it's not a 'legal' marriage; the nightmares start again and the panic episodes get worse; and now she's back to seeing a psychologist, again. It's as if she's back at the beginning. And this is just the half of it. I am with her on all these journeys, and sometimes I feel the weight of her troubles pushing me further and further down. But I can always go home at the end of the day, which is when the guilt might set in, making me question what I should be doing to help her, and others more. It's heavy, and feels uncomfortable; kind of suffocating at times.

So what do I do? I fall back on my mindfulness and try to re-establish a balance within myself. I might get angry at the world, or at somebody close to me, or I might cry and feel pity, for asylum seekers, or for myself. But I try not to withdraw, and not to shut down. I try to stay engaged and to be a witness to my own suffering and to that of others. I accept that pain is natural, and that bearing witness to so much suffering brings me to the heart of pain. It's about being able to stay with the suffering, and in its midst, being able to discern the wisest course of action, without attachment.

This discernment is most difficult in the relationships in which I am affectively most invested, like that with A. Retaining a sense of not sinking into complete despair at times when he is triggered by something to dissociate, is one of the most difficult things to do. Even though I know about impermanence, and that all things change, at those times it's hard to imagine the next 'good' moment, or to visualise a space in which to hold the pain without collapsing.

An evolving process

(Recording) methods

My method incorporates thousands of hours spent in conversation (sometimes also silence), with asylum seekers and refugees, and with civil servants and others working with asylum seekers and refugees. I have met with my main participants (those I know most intimately) in the asylum centres where they have lived, or are still living, and have accompanied some of them on their journeys to becoming fully-recognised refugees. Others are still asylum seekers, others are illegal, or have no legal procedures any more. Our meeting places have also included their homes, the doctor's surgery, the emergency room at the local hospital or the operation room, the supermarket, the welfare benefit's office, the mental health clinic, school (their own or their children's), a visit to the psychiatrist or psychologist, the interview room of the immigration authorities or of the deportation authorities, the sports club, restaurants and cafes, the church or mosque, my home, and the street.

The majority of my meetings with asylum seekers and refugees, when stationary, have been recorded. Others, ad hoc or on the move, have not been taped. Many conversations took the form of informal discussions, rather than formal interviews. It was not me posing questions, and them answering. Very often I learned more from the questions they posed to me, than the other way around.

With regard to professionals or civil servants, or volunteers, working with asylum seekers and refugees, many of the meetings were held either on their request, or that of the asylum seeker or refugee, and took place with the asylum seeker or refugee present. I was presented either as a 'friend', or 'supporter', sometimes as a researcher. During formal interviews with either asylum seekers or refugees, or professionals, (i.e. at times when I wasn't just accompanying an asylum seeker or refugee on an appointment), I presented myself as a researcher. These interviews were also recorded.

The absolute bulk of all these recordings meant that it was impossible to transcribe all the meetings or interviews. However, I have re-listened to many of the tapes, in order to regain a feel for certain meetings which I felt to be crucial to my understanding of the affective nature of my inquiry and of the (unfolding) relationships in my research. All of the recordings are archived according to participant and date.

Dealing with (language) differences

I do not share the mother tongue of any of my research participants. My mother

tongue is English, so even the Dutch professionals and volunteers with whom I have worked, or who have been a part of this research, do not speak the same mother tongue as I do. Having studied Dutch to the highest formal educational standard, I do not consider my knowledge of the Dutch language to form any kind of language barrier with native Dutch participants. I also speak French and Spanish, where French has been a common tongue for me and many African research participants, but I have had no reason to use my Spanish.

With many research participants Dutch has been the common foreign language for all of us, and whereas some formal meetings have taken place in the presence of translators, the majority of our meetings and encounters have been informal, and without the aid of translators. Indeed, whilst language can form a barrier to understanding one another, the intensity of the contact with the majority of my research participants, not to mention the trust and openness which has developed over time, has meant that asking for clarification one or more times, if I did not understand something, has never been problematic. Even more importantly, however, spending so much time together means developing a common understanding of the ways in which we use language, and employ certain words or phrases. This in-depth understanding has meant that, at times, I have understood research participants even better than translators who are speaking to them in their own language, and I have been called upon by authorities or by the asylum seeker/refugee him/herself to 'explain' what he/she means.

I have witnessed many a time how misunderstandings take place because the asylum seeker or refugee uses a Dutch term in a certain way, to mean something quite distinct from what the other (Dutch) person means. Openly asking the asylum seeker or refugee to repeat what he/she has just said helps sometimes, otherwise intervening by clarifying what I believe the Dutch person has just understood and asking the asylum seeker or refugee if this is what he/she meant, nearly always helps to avoid confusion or to avoid the asylum seeker or refugee making promises which he/she cannot keep. It is amazing how often this kind of situation has arisen in the office of the asylum seeker's lawyer! The danger being, of course, that the asylum seeker might ordinarily leave the appointment having understood little to nothing of what was going on, even though there was a translator. Many asylum seekers have explained that the problem is that the translators, who are just doing their work, simply use the same type of inexplicable jargon in their own language as the lawyer does, and which the asylum seeker also fails to understand, or to question, for want of not appearing to be stupid or illiterate.

During a meeting with Ammar and his lawyer in January 2012, Ammar told her about the family's conversion to Christianity. At that time the asylum procedure was still ongoing and the family was waiting for a decision from the highest court regarding the appeal which had been filed by the lawyer. The meeting was merely to go over their case once more, as Ammar had difficulty in really understanding what was going on.

The lawyer, a middle-aged, rounded woman, with short curlyish hair and spectacles, took us into her office and reiterated to the interpreter (on the telephone) that the people accompanying Ammar (myself and their regular welfare worker) would be listening in on the conversation. It wasn't however, our task to participate in the discussion as such. Explaining the current situation and procedure, the lawyer settled into juridical language with all its complexities and I could see that he was having difficulty comprehending what the translator was telling him, despite the explanations in Arabic, and even though each time he was asked if he understood, Ammar replied "yes, yes". His eyes and expressions defied the fact that he was having great difficulty grasping the gist of the explanation. On several occasions, therefore, I ignored the lawyers instructions, and asked questions for clarity, or requested that she explain certain elements in a little more detail, a little more simply. She did so, without argument.

Cultural differences

Another issue is the cultural one. Evidently there are great gaps in cultural knowledge due to the difference in how I have been brought up and how my research participants have been raised. This gap (like the difference in educational background), has been partly bridged by feelings of mutual trust, which allow either party to ask questions and to be critical of the other; and partly by undertaking 'research', or reading up on different cultures. I knew nothing of Chechnya before I met Leyla, and even less about Guinea, before I met Moussa. Afghanistan seems strangely familiar now, since A. has been living with our family, and I have learnt about the difference between Sunni's and Shia's from talking to, debating and discussing with Sunni's and Shia's.

Learning about the other demands an interest in his/her cultural background and a strong curiosity in trying to figure out how the other thinks and sees the world. I have no pretension that I could ever truly understand what is going on inside the mind and body of one of my research participants, but a willingness and desire to do so certainly goes a long way. Evidently there are pitfalls, and with those I 'like' more, there might be a more pronounced wish to know more; though having said that, one of my strongest motivations to learn can also come

from those I 'dislike', or from those who affect me most in a negative way. When an open conversation with somebody has not been possible, due to animosity or aversion, I may question a friend of theirs, or somebody who knows them better or who can tell me more about their culture or religion. That has happened in the case of Iraqi's with whom I felt particularly uncomfortable, or whom I found unpleasant; I then reflect on my own feelings and actions with people like B., and his wife, as they are able to challenge my position and they afford me a new perspective on the situation. This rhymes more or less with the ethic of 'truthfulness'.

Nevertheless, there is no easy answer. Trying to understand my own affects has been part and parcel of the process of trying to connect with, relate to and understand difference and alterity. This type of research needs time and patience, but above all a commitment to long-term relationship and affective engagement. It is a "*project of learning about the self*", (Hoey, 2008).

(Noting) methods

In addition to taped recordings of meetings and encounters, interviews and interactions, I have also made extensive notes in diaries (also digitally), which record my own take on the meetings, as they took place, or just after. I recorded my own feelings and how I was affected by the different people and situations. I often use poetry, or even drawings and etchings, to process and analyse what I have been experiencing, and as a way to reflect on the affective 'fall-out' of various encounters.

(Analysing) methods

Much analysis took place during the writing up of meetings and encounters, whilst trying to figure out what I had seen or heard, and to make sense of the experiences I had been a part of. I discussed my 'findings', thoughts and 'analyses' with asylum seekers and refugees, but also with those working in the system. Terms which I 'discovered', and which seemed to make sense to me, like 'lostness', were shared in depth with research participants and with professionals. I wanted to see if they recognised the same things I did, and if it had meaning for them too. I made a document of more than forty pages which was in table form, and which I used as an analytical tool to decipher themes which emerged from the research process. The table referred primarily to my own diary recordings over a period of a few years. I did this with thirteen different 'work diaries', cataloguing my own admissions per person, by date and setting. Then I re-read each piece, (some were descriptions of encounters, others were more jottings and notes, and yet others were personal reflections or poetic tellings), and I started to draw out the main

thematic categories which were recurring. Some examples are: loss, grief, hope, religion, fear, culture, exclusion, knowledge, mistrust, lack. Thereafter I thought about which categories were related to each other, and which categories seemed to be important ways in which asylum seekers and refugees made sense of their lives. It was then that I came up with “lostness”, as a theme running through many of the lives I was participating in. Thereafter, I stopped doing this categorisation work for a number of reasons. Firstly, I decided that I did not want to write thematically. I did not think it did justice to my research participants to write about them in a categorical way. The only exception hereto is the chapter on lostness, as I have explained above, as lostness seems to encompass a wider variety of experiences than other, more narrow, categories. Secondly, the absolute amount of data was too overwhelming to be able to categorise it in any meaningful way. I had sorted out a portion of my own diaries, but listening to hundreds of hours of recorded conversations and transcribing them would be impossible. In addition, I also rejected the systematisation of ‘knowledge’ in this way. It may have proved helpful in the beginning, but as I was systematising and analysing whilst still in the process of researching, I wanted to avoid colouring my position by having a narrow set of categories through which I would eventually experience the world.

I still continued to write up detailed accounts and descriptions of what was happening, but I allowed myself to focus more on my own reflections and my own affects, and I decided to abandon this process of categorisation. I began to notice more and more how the affective influences our behavioural registers and how it determines the paradigms within which we operate. I listened more and more for feeling tones and emotions, and observed more intently the physical and non-verbal reactions, of myself and others, whilst registering when their words were imbued with emotionality and affect. I reflected often with my research participants about what I was experiencing and about my analyses, and we used one another as sparring partners to work out our understandings of things as they were happening. This seemed more important to me for making sense of relations and of how asylum seekers and refugees are treated within the system, and how they react to that treatment, than making an analysis of categories of speech.

(Writing) methods

It has been a gruelling yet compelling process trying to figure out how best to write about this affective journey and about the refugees and asylum seekers who participated in my research. They are all individuals yet they are bound to each

other in more ways than one. Whilst they each have their unique histories and experiences, they have all committed to leaving behind everything they knew for a new life here in the Netherlands. They have all faced losses of one kind or another, indeed of the gravest kind and are scarred by their past lives; they commonly occupy one or other borderland, existing on the edge for shorter or longer periods, and they all seek refuge in relation to others. They cannot make it alone.

How then to relay my own story to the reader, whilst accounting for them in a way that does them justice? It was imperative that I should write about relationship, without denying their subjectivity, yet when we face the Other, we must be alert to the dangers of Othering, to the violent tendencies of asking for yet one more account (Butler, 2005). If I write about them as individuals, I risk losing sight of the importance of relationship. If I write about them thematically, won't their uniqueness and individuality seem banal? These are important questions that I've asked myself throughout, and in many ways there are no satisfactory answers. Yet I believe that whilst it is immensely challenging, it is possible to stand in relationships of trust whilst acknowledging difference, and simultaneously recognising our common bonds.

The reader will meet numerous refugees and asylum seekers in this book. I don't write about them in any particular order, but as the period which I've known my research participants spans many years, what I knew about them in the beginning is not the same as I know now. Information changes, as new elements have come to light, and old stuff has had to be disregarded. Stories have been added to, as I've come to know them better and better, and the more time spent together, the more rounded the picture I have of them. Though never complete, I feel I 'know' them better.

For this reason there may be some discrepancies in the information told in one story, compared to another, or a story may be repeated, but in slightly different words, with more or less details, according to the moment of relating and re-call. I've learned to accept these inconsistencies as a normal part of an affective life. Rather disturbing for the authorities, who expect each and every asylum seeker to be able to relate every detail of his/her story with great precision, the same every time, and absolutely complete. Absolutely absurd as I have come to discover, as life does not at all have a perfect storyline. It just doesn't.

As Butler (2005, p.68) says:

“There are clearly times when I cannot tell the story in a straight line, and I lose my thread, and I start again, and I forgot something crucial, and it is too hard to think about how to weave it in. I start thinking, thinking, there must be some conceptual thread that will provide a narrative here, some lost link, some possibility for chronology, and the “I” becomes increasingly conceptual, increasingly awake, focused, determined. At this point, when I near the prospect of intellectual self-sufficiency in the presence of the other, nearly excluding him or her from my horizon, the thread of my story unravels. If I achieve that self-sufficiency, my relation to the other is lost”.

The relationships before you are lived experiences. They are affective relationships, layered with rich meanings. They show themselves in and through the research participants, including myself and through the organisations with whom they have contact. Besides the ‘*thick descriptions*’ (Geertz, 1973) of people, events and places, my own reflections furnish the reader with deeper insight into relational conundrums, bothersome questions and affective qualms.

Relationships such as these reveal the complexities of, in many ways, tragic lives. They reveal the degree to which each and every asylum seeker and refugee is affected by loss and broken resilience, and the difficulties associated with rebuilding and nurturing new relationships as a sign of renewal and growth. The stories reveal the ordinary troubles associated with life building in a new country, and the everyday struggles which make the escape of which Papadopoulos et al (2008) write, no more than a lofty ideal for the vast majority. Many asylum seekers have, it seems, exchanged one prison, for another. Whilst life in the West invariably offers a form of physical safety which was lacking in the homeland of the asylum seeker or refugee, the psychological, social and economic wellbeing of many of my research participants leaves much to be desired.

The Rationalist critique

“It’s a lie here, everything is a lie. It’s not like I thought it would be. Nobody wants us here, but they don’t say it openly. It’s all a lie” (Sem, asylum seeker from Syria).

The original manuscript did not have a 'methodology chapter' as such. I did not explicitly state what I did, as I imagined that that would make a book on the 'turn to affect' paradoxical to say the least. Professor Blommaert¹⁰ was asked to read and 'judge' my work, and he delivered a scathing critique of my manuscript and stated that I should not be allowed to defend it.

Professor Blommaert, to summarize his findings, referred to my writing as "anecdotal". He used the words "straw man arguments" a lot. And claimed that what I did could scarcely be called "research", let alone "scientific research", let alone "auto-ethnographic research". I read his critique carefully, allowing the parts I could follow to sink in, and I decided to respond to it publically by publishing most of it hereunder.

Blommaert began his critique stating that he "always gives students the benefit of the doubt, and uses very flexible criteria". It sounded hopeful. He went on to legitimize himself by stating that he based his judgement on his own "attitude" and on the guidelines and "benchmarks" of his own university. This meant: "From this I retain one essential criteria. A scientific study must hold within it the possibility of generalisability – it must be relevant beyond itself – and this generalisability must be attributable to a method which makes it possible for others to carry out a similar study, in order to control its generalisability". Thirdly came a personal justification, namely the fact that "I am no stranger to the demotivating and sometimes emotionally shocking work with asylum seekers and people on the margins of society; I have learnt from this that one can only do justice to the terrible conditions of these people when one applies enormous severity and self-criticism in research about them. Such research is driven, without exception, by rage and concern – thus by "affect"- but it must methodologically translate those emotions into a controllable scientific narrative, in the sense of generalisability as I have said above".

His initial arguments are based on a supposed opposition on which, Blommaert argues, this whole book is based. He stated:

"Affect" is reified. Tsai draws upon a theory with debatable merits, where "affect" is just the OPPOSITE of "rationality". The whole manuscript is built around this opposition, whilst the opposition is never discussed critically. However, we know that since Adorno, the issue

¹⁰ According to Blommaert's profile page on the website of Tilburg University: "I am active in a number of fields - linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and literacy research - and concerned with issues of language, culture and globalization, especially (a) the emergence of 'superdiverse' environments and (b) issues of social and cultural inequality that accompany these globalization processes. I investigate superdiversity in both online and offline contexts. As for the latter, my work has addressed issues and phenomena in Europe, Africa, and Asia."

is not so simple and there is an enormous amount of literature which overcomes this opposition and which even describes “rationality” as a particular type of “affect”.

Blommaert went on to critique me “intellectually and methodologically”, arguing that the whole thing was based on “straw man argumentation”, arguing that I was claiming that mainstream ethnography “eliminates affect”.

I don’t believe, however, that I have ever made that statement. Blommaert then refers to the discussion in ethnography about subjectivity and objectivity, bringing in Clifford & Marcus, but also Johannes Fabian and Bourdieu. On ‘ethno-poetics’ he mentions Dell Hymes and Ochs and Capps, who are authors whom he quotes considerably in his own writings.

In the following piece, Blommaert launches into a discussion on epistemology: “the question is which kind of knowledge can we draw from ethnography, and how we are to do this. The debate is ethical AND methodological at the same time: given that the starting point is that people of flesh and blood are not blank slates, how can we gather ordered (thus: generalizable, non-anecdotal) knowledge about other people who are also made of flesh and blood, in a context where one has likes and dislikes, where prejudice is unavoidable, and the result cannot be ‘clinical’, but is nevertheless always “soiled” by such things”.

He repeated once more that even “reflexivity” has to “search for ordered knowledge”. And that “Tsai does not do this”. Blommaert goes on to criticise the reduction of “real people” to “letters” and uses the example of “B”.

Admittedly, I had not explained that each of the research participants chose how they wanted to be known in the book. “B” chose to be known as “B”.

According to Blommaert, I “instrumentalise” the respondents and “smuggle away” my interpretation techniques. Even “lostness” is more about me, than about the asylum seekers. On the narratives, Blommaert writes: “with permission: it is often as if I am reading Facebook updates”. In addition, it would seem, that “the effect of all of this is that the empirical material that Tsai presents in this manuscript is not usable as raw material for other researchers. Everything is mediated by her own “bias”, to such an extent, that a re-analysis is impossible. The status of “controllable realism” that is expected of ethnographic material is absent”.

In the following part on “social patterns and structures”, Blommaert revisits the “straw man character of the opposition between affect and rationality”. He accuses me

of “quick judgements” when it comes to the administrators working in the asylum system, noting my description of the court sitting and the visit to the doctor as examples of how I demonise the professionals. Blommaert says: “I find these descriptions shocking.....the affect of the doctor is eliminated – he incorporates the “straw man” dichotomy between an affective author and a rational, thus, affect-less world”. Blommaert accuses me of taking a “moral high ground”, “a position of undeniable moral superiority which is based on the simple opposition “affective-rational”(whereby “affective” is BETTER than “rational”).

Coming to the last part of Blommaert’s critique, which is about “the writing itself”. In this section he accuses me of “stylistic” writing, which he calls “automatic writing”. It is a “non-linear, incoherent, knowledge discourse”, wherein the “autobiographical story is “formatted” – told in a standard discourse about culture, cultural differences and identity which – as I have repeated over and over – is also a “rationalised” way of writing”.

My descriptions somehow lead Blommaert to accuse me of the assumption that a humanistic approach involving “the whole person” is not possible by “Christians, Muslims, or atheist researchers”. Once again Blommaert alleges that I exhibit an “unfaltering position of moral (and epistemological) superiority, which does not seem to possess any “affection” for the moral-epistemological positions of others”.

Lastly, Blommaert charges that the literature which I have used is “predictable” and a “victim of the “iconicity” between an unordered “affect” and the resulting descriptions”. His conclusion is thus:

“DECISION: one can barely call this piece an ethnography, let alone an autoethnography, as there is not one serious or well-considered argument to this effect in the whole manuscript. It is undoubtedly an honest and integer story about the author’s own emotional connection with asylum seekers (and conversely, with institutions). But it misses just about everything which separates “diary daydreaming” from (auto) ethnography”.

Blommaert charges that I shall probably dismiss his criticism as coming from an “icy and emotionless” person, who adheres to the “rational tradition”.

In fact, far from dismissing his critique, I have used the words of Blommaert to re-assess the manuscript and to acknowledge that it would be wise to re-arrange things in order to make a clearer and more defined methodology chapter. In addition, I have elucidated my choices, and explicated the reasons why I believe that this book can be viewed as an autoethnography. I had not made this point

evident enough in the draft that Blommaert read. I am relatively sure, however, that none of these efforts on my part will satisfy Blommaert.

I argue that if this work is subjected to the criteria proposed by Blommaert, in particular the demand to produce ordered knowledge which can also be systematically generalised, it will inevitably fail. I am not a socio-linguist, nor do I subject my research to the same type of analysing techniques which a socio-linguist would use. I do not do “*Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis*” like Blommaert. On reading and hearing that Blommaert is an expert in the affairs of asylum seekers, I took to read his research in this field. Though hopefully not exhaustive, I found a couple of papers written in 1999 and 2001 which explicitly referred to research on the narratives of African refugees, and in addition several, more recent papers on complexity, linguistics, ethnographic monitoring, urban language and literacies. I also read a manuscript by a Masters student, for whom Blommaert acted as supervisor.

I will restrict my comments to Blommaert’s work with asylum seekers. I could not find anything more recent than 1999/2001. From the research I have found on “*narrative inequality*” and “*home narratives of African asylum seekers*”, I gather that Blommaert undertook a linguistic analysis of the stories told by approximately forty asylum seekers from different parts of Africa. According to one article about this research:

“The interviews were open interviews in which asylum seekers were invited to tell the story of their escape, their reasons for escape, their experiences with the Belgian asylum procedure and with life as an asylum seeker in Belgium. The interviews were conducted in French, English and (in a small number of cases) Dutch. Dutch was the mother tongue of the interviewers; thus in most cases the interviewers and the interviewees had to rely on a language other than their native language to do the interview, and as a rule nonnative varieties of those languages were being used”, (1999, p.3).

Also:

“The interviews we organized with asylum seekers were conducted between October/November 1998 and March/April 1999, i.e. during the brief period in which asylum seekers came out of hiding and were eager to tell their stories to all those interested, and during which there was some positive media and political attention for these stories. This explains, first, that and how we could collect our data at all. During these few months, asylum seekers became visible and their stories became publicly accessible. Second, it explains the nature of their stories: they are apologetic and

argumentative, using a discursive space shaped by the Sémira Adamu crisis, in which new and anti-dogmatic formulations of asylum seeking, motives and experiences could be articulated”, (1999, p.5).

Blommaert did not conduct the field work himself. The data was collected from interviews carried out by second and fourth year students of the Africa Studies Programme of the University of Gent. The interviews varied in length from a half hour to four hours. The interviews were transcribed, and analysed according to sociolinguistic techniques; they were codified and systematised, ordered and temporalized, categorised and sequentialised, indexed and contextualised, whereby patterns and structures could be discerned. This methodology emanates clearly from a totally different research paradigm, or scientific paradigm to that to which I claim adherence.

Whilst I do not wish to launch into a critique of Blommaert’s work with asylum seekers, which I consider to be relatively limited, I want to mention a couple of issues which I believe to be problematic. Blommaert bases his findings on analyses of interviews conducted by students. With permission: I would suggest caution in making scientific claims about the narratives of asylum seekers, considering the fact that the interviews were one-off occurrences, ranging from half hour to four hours in length, and conducted at a time when asylum seekers themselves were seeking publicity.

Blommaert himself states: *“This explains, first, that and how we could collect our data at all”.*

I presume he recognised that, in principle, gaining access to asylum seekers is a huge problem for all researchers, as issues of trust and mistrust loom large. There is a great deal of literature on this issue (see Daniel & Knudsen, (eds), 1995, Bohmer & Shuman, 2007, Hynes, 2003, Salis Gross, 2004).

In addition, I would argue that what asylum seekers were willing to tell at a time when they themselves *“were eager to tell their stories to all those interested”*, may not be what they would tell to an ‘insider’, or more especially to a researcher at those times when they might not be so willing to reveal all. Indeed, experience has taught me that the story which an asylum seeker tells today to one person might be totally different to the story told tomorrow to a different person. It all depends on the perceived value of telling one’s story, and the personal motivations and goals attached to the telling. I personally do not consider forty interviews to be of the nature of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, even if there were more than one interview per informant, which we cannot assume.

Blommaert raises himself the problematics of language, which I have also talked about. He fails to disclose anything about the students undertaking the interviews, other than that they were “*highly literate*” native Flemish/Dutch speakers. Blommaert discusses the language difficulties in terms of problems with proficiency and comprehension (on both sides), but fails to account for cultural differences in what can and what cannot be told, or for hesitancy in terms of an asylum seeker weighing his or her words, to alleviate shame, or to make sure a particular point is well-made. He makes his own assumptions about why asylum seekers talk slowly or with difficulty, without the means to check whether his conjectures are correct.

Additionally, Blommaert examines excerpts from two official letters of rejection received by one of the interviewees and his wife (a man and woman from Angola), from the Belgian immigration authorities, in order to reiterate his point about narrative inequalities. However, to my knowledge, Blommaert was not present during the formal interview with the authorities in question, (during the application procedure), nor did he have access to the full asylum file of the said interviewees. Once again, I would argue that his sources were too limited, encompassing only one personal interview (carried out by a student) and a copy of two official letters. Blommaert has no notion as to what the asylum seekers actually told during their asylum interviews with the authorities, how they told their stories, what the reactions of the civil servant conducting the interview(s) were, nor how the interviews were ‘translated’ into formal decisions and then written into official letters. And if he did, then he does not inform his reader of the fact. He actually spent no time whatsoever with the interviewees but relied on transcribed interviews made by students.

Now perhaps this is the standard, accepted ‘scientific’ way of working of sociolinguists; I can only assume that it is. I am in this regard therefore slightly disconcerted by the accusations of Blommaert that my research, which is based on more than a decade of intensive experience with asylum seekers and refugees (through work, study/research, informal activities) is “*anecdotal*”, “*diary daydreaming*”, similar to “*Facebook updates*”. As I have previously argued, I make no claim to complying with the objective criteria laid down by Blommaert, as proof that my research is ‘scientific’ (according to his criteria); however, I do claim that I make a valid contribution to social studies and to what we know about the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands, as well as about the systemic inequalities and injustices propagated by the Dutch asylum system. I argue that my research methodology and methods of interpretation and analysis are both rigorous and grounded in solid and intensive empirical fieldwork. Whilst not

perfect by any means, and certainly with (much) room for improvement, I believe that this work is important and that it provides valuable material for the asylum and refugee debate in the Netherlands.

The main point which I am trying to make is that it was impossible, from the start, to meet the criteria laid down by professor Blommaert for valid scientific research. He is arguing from a paradigm that dismisses the research perspective within which I am working. He rebukes the literature which I have used out of hand, and suggests I read the same authors from whom he writes. The research tradition within which I am working (Stewart, Ellis & Bochner, Agee, Terkel) rejects the proposition that the purpose of research is to find a generalizable truth. Controlled and controllable scientific texts are not the object of their research, nor of mine. The opposition with professor Blommaert is too fundamental and too great to make any kind of consensus possible.

Affect-directed research is, I argue, undertaken from a position of engagement and social relatedness, with the research participants but also with the reader. It demands uniqueness, situatedness and relationality; all of which are dismissed by professor Blommaert as being un-scientific. Writing, or text, is the only means through which I can immerse the reader in the lives of my research participants, and ignite their own affects for that which lies beyond their immediate experience. The turn to affect is the big issue in this book, and not the epistemology of anthropology, as professor Blommaert sees it.

I welcome a discussion with professor Blommaert on the validity of my texts on refugees as opposed to his own, as I argue that this research is more than one person's flight of fancy, or self-absorbed, pretentious moral crusade. I contend resolutely that this research MATTERS.

Affective Matter (4)
A precious gem? Jade.....

“And amidst great danger and huge uncertainty, hope is what makes the human condition livable”,

Arthur Kleinman, 2006, p.45

At the hands of administrators, civil servants, mentors, support workers, and the like, asylum seekers tell me they feel they are herded around, looked down upon, subjected to trial-like interviews, and generally treated as numbers (though many asylum seekers would say: ‘like animals’).

I have not hesitated to make my position clear, when I felt it was necessary and when I believed an asylum seeker was being harmed. With COA alone, this has meant a number of tricky situations with COA workers, including unpleasant exchanges, differences of opinion, diverse wranglings over the right of asylum seekers to have access to their files, or access to decent medical care and treatment, arguments about governmental policy and the way in which it is implemented by COA, disagreements about the responsibilities of COA workers towards asylum seekers, and the like. I have protested in person, by mail, by telephone, at the local asylum centres, during meetings, during visits to asylum seekers, in writing, in complaints letters, to COA’s lawyers, to the detention system, to the local managers, and even to the top. Mostly without avail; sometimes with (relative) success.

And so when I took up a position at the end of 2014 as a teacher – coordinator, at a (protected) school for underage, (potential) victims of human trafficking (asylum seekers), I persuaded myself that I could fit into the system and that I could best serve by working within the educational care system, rather than without. Despite numerous warnings of naivety, and even stupidity, I chose to ignore them, and accepted the job at Jade Zorggroep¹¹. The salary was low; but didn’t seem to matter. Some friends recognised my intentions and told me to ‘go for it’;

¹¹ Jade Zorggroep (Jade Caregroup) is an organisation with different functions and different target groups; from providing housing for the mentally handicapped, to providing housing and support to young unaccompanied asylum seekers, including the victims of trafficking. Jade’s main partner is COA. COA also contracts Jade for the provision of education to underage asylum seekers, and to the children of asylum seekers: Jade organises, in partnership with other schools, primary and elementary education, for this vulnerable group in different parts of the Netherlands. In the North of the Netherlands, Jade is the national partner of COA for the provision of protected housing and schooling to trafficking victims. The value of the contract between COA and Jade (estimated to be millions of euro’s) is unknown. COA will not divulge these figures.

others saw the dangers and told me to 'stay clear of the Dutch welfare system'. I'd been let down several times, but somehow refused to accept that it was all bad. So off I launched into a new adventure.

I should have learned by now that it's impossible to change a whole system alone. Though at that point I was still convinced that this part of the system could be an exception; it could be one of the few good bits. So with renewed hope, and a whole lot of enthusiasm, I started work at the school.

Looking back, my first day was ominous for the whole school organisation. I had been given instructions to start as a teacher at a particular school, which was not yet opened (not the school I ended up working in). The co-ordinator in charge didn't have the keys when I phoned her to start. She hoped to be picking them up within a couple of days. Neither did she know exactly when the school would open; the order had been given to open as soon as possible. We arranged for me to meet her at the school she was currently working in, in order for me to get to know her a little better and to meet a few other colleagues. I turned up there and first found myself in the wrong building. There were two buildings; one main one, and a second one at the back where the co-ordinator herself was situated (though she also gave lessons in the other, main building).

She sat in a small 'office', with a computer and printer, and no privacy. Other teachers came in and out to collect stuff from the copying machine. There was no coffee; it was dreary. We sat at a small table, and she began to tell me about the organisation. The picture presented was pretty much the same as that put forward by the Team Manager during the interview and during a number of conversations with him thereafter. The school itself seemed lacking in a lot of stuff; the co-ordinator had been having a hard time being accepted as co-ordinator, she told me; I gathered from what she said that there were 'authority' problems. The teachers did their best, the kids were separated into groups as best possible. The lack of funding and material made it difficult, but they did what they could. There seemed to be quite a bit of strife, unhappiness and bickering going on. The teachers I met on that day were pleasant enough, as were the security 'guards'. This school was the school for (potential) victims of human trafficking, and as such, had to be 'guarded', to protect the children from unwanted visits by traffickers.

I introduced myself as the new colleague who would be working as a teacher in the new-to-open school. Most colleagues were busy in their classes; they seemed pleasant enough. I gathered that a couple of them were also brand new, like me. I

arranged to meet the co-ordinator, who I will call M., at the new school the next morning, as she would be there with a bunch of students and other teachers to clean and arrange the place. She would be co-ordinating both schools she said (the protected school and the new one), though she would be mainly stationed at the new school.

I arrived early the next morning on time, and was greeted by a couple of new colleagues. At least two had been on extensive sick-leave, and were now glad to have jobs in the educational part of the same organisation. They had been working in the 'care sector' of Jade. The Team Manager announced proudly that he was glad to give them a chance under his wing to get back to work, as the rate of sickness was unbelievably high in the other part of the organisation, and by allowing people to return to work in the schools which the organisation ran, they were doing one another a favour, as the school operations were expanding and they needed a bigger workforce.

Some ten minutes into my arrival, and before being able to help with the cleaning, the Manager called me to a room upstairs. It had been decided, he informed me, that due to my 'natural authority', I would be a good team co-ordinator for the school I had visited the day before (the protected school). M., who was supposed to be taking on the two schools, would now only be responsible for this new school and I'd be the new co-ordinator at the protected school. I said I didn't mind at all. In fact I got a buzz, as it seemed to be more of a challenge.

The comments of one of the teachers the day before slot into place. One of the male teachers told me he'd been told, in private, that I'd be the new co-ordinator; I said I wasn't aware of it. He'd also mentioned something about 'tensions', but I didn't put two and two together until being told myself the next day.

The Manager invited me to join him at a meeting with more new colleagues, who were busying organising the opening of a new primary school, for the children of asylum seekers, at an asylum centre nearby. After that, he'd take me back to the protected school in Assen, where I'd been introduced the day before (as a new teacher-colleague).

The asylum centre school was on the first floor of a very steep flight of stairs in the same building as that which housed the Refugee Council, right next to the asylum centre where Moshtaba's parents were living. The teachers complained of the steep stairs, and started thinking of ways to avoid accidents with the very

small children who'd soon be climbing them. Upstairs there were boxes of stuff everywhere; toys and play things. The teachers gathered around a table and started to discuss the division of work and groups. Who would be getting which group of children was made clear, and they started to make a plan. The school had to be ready; the organisation had promised COA and the local authorities that they could open a school in the fastest of times.

The workmen arrived, and chairs and tables started to be carried around, shunted in and out of rooms, and set up. The school would open, I was told later that morning, by one of the partners in the venture. The important thing was getting the children into school.

I meanwhile set off with the Manager to Assen. It was lunchtime, so the whole team, more or less, was in the teachers' room. They sat around, and barely lifted their heads to greet the Manager as we walked through the door. They looked at me, somewhat in surprise, having met me the day before. The Manager called them weakly to attention, and announced that I was their new co-ordinator.

It was like a bomb dropping. The silence was palpable. Then the first rant started. "Typical, just typical of this organisation. This is just how it always goes. We are always the last ones to hear of any changes. And what about M. then? ", a worker asked? "She left here yesterday and didn't even say anything. I presume she knew that she wouldn't be back?"

So that was my introduction and initial welcome. "*We have nothing against you*", the team members repeated in chorus, "*it's just that it always happens like this. We're not informed of anything, get faced with decisions already made higher up. We're the dustbin of the organisation, except when they need us for publicity stunts. Then we're the prime example, with the original target group of Jade, doing good work, to be shown off to the world*".

Long faces; some team members walked in and out of the room, others stayed looking glum. They barely looked into the eyes of the Manager who had accompanied me and who had already repeated his own sob story to me tens of times. He barely looked at them either; he was like a scolded puppy with its tail between its legs.

According to him, he was hired on a '*different mandate*' than the previous team manager. He was not there to co-ordinate the stuff at the schools, but to do '*policy-making*' and '*improve the quality of the educational organisation*'. However, since

starting, he'd had no 'institutional support' and was 'thrown into the deep end'. He was a 'pioneer', with 'no financial responsibility, no clear mandate, no clear view of his tasks, and no back-up'. He'd just had to get on as best he could. There was some evident 'backlash' from the teachers, as he was just an 'intermediary' for the big bosses, the 'message boy'. He carried orders from above, and then executed them. He was a 'nice guy', according to staff members, but he just had 'no clout, no responsibility, and no say'. He was a 'mouthpiece' for the big guys who dished out orders, held the finances tightly in their own control, as well as the decision-making. To be fair, he had warned me, even in my initial interview, that you had to be prepared to 'make it up as you went along', as there were too few structures and too few guidelines to be able to go on. I wouldn't call him exactly unpopular; he was just a 'talking piece', or a handy middle-man who could get shot for bringing the wrong messages, whilst he had absolutely no say in the decision-making processes. I felt rather sorry for him.

Clearly uncomfortable, the Manager made an excuse about having to be elsewhere and left rather quickly. I remained with the team. Whilst the teachers went back to teaching, I agreed with them that we might chat once the school day was officially over and the children had left. I was mildly perturbed by my introduction, though bemused might be a better description for how I felt. I was more upbeat than nervous; my body was excited, in a tingly way. I got one of the workers to log me in to a computer, and I started looking for policy documents, a school plan, task descriptions, educational files on the children and the like. There was nothing of the sort to be found. I asked the pedagogical worker, come-security man, who'd been working for years at the school. He confirmed that such documents didn't exist. I asked where I could find information about the methods used, and he laughed.

There were books, though some had been removed by one of the other coordinators when they set up a new school, and apart from that each teacher used different materials, a lot of which were downloaded from the internet, I was told later. There were no clear methodological choices regarding the teaching materials and books which were being used. It more or less depended on the personal preferences of the teachers involved.

"What about the teachers", I asked. It seemed that they weren't all 'qualified' to teach the subjects they were teaching. One or two did hold the correct diploma's, for example, a Teaching Dutch as a Second Language diploma, but others didn't. Again, there was a sort of rotation, according to what a teacher wanted to teach, or what he/she thought he could best teach. They didn't have a clue on which

credentials I was brought in, and asked what I could teach. I remarked that I could best teach citizenship and empowerment, but would be no good teaching Dutch or Maths. Perhaps I could have a go at English, they questioned; me being English and all. In the end, I was committed to giving 'Handicrafts', as the co-ordinator who had just left gave this subject, and it would be a scandal if the teaching schedule had to be totally changed, yet again. This was the umpteenth change in a very short while, I was told.

I commented that I was surprised by the lack of communication, and the fact that nobody knew that the previous co-ordinator/teacher would not be returning to this school. The teachers shrugged; they were used to it, they said. They appeared fed up, though not despondent. One man was still stomping around, muttering his displeasure; another was more bewildered than anything else (she was new); and a third colleague, though not indifferent, nevertheless had an air of indifference about her. The second new colleague talked of her surprise at the lack of organisation and about her disappointment; the others nodded in agreement.

The school was a place for around sixty to seventy (potential) victims of human trafficking. The children were brought to and from school in a bus; collected from the protected housing units where they were living. Boys in one house, girls in another. Some of the students were from a local asylum centre, or lived in smaller (unprotected) housing units, but this school was primarily for trafficking victims. They came from different countries, including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Congo, Nigeria, and Guinea.

The school's building was old and dilapidated. *"The windows haven't been cleaned for five years",* I was told, *"and we have scurvy",* the Manager said. *"I don't dare go to the toilets here, it's disgusting",* he warned me. *"The caretaker should do the cleaning, but he's just not a real cleaner. Poor guy. We need a professional cleaning company, but there's no finances for that, and I don't have my own budget",* the Manager reiterated, *"so I have no authority to make such decisions. I just keep on passing the complaints forward to the bosses, but they keep repeating that the teachers should stop complaining".* I wasn't sure I should use the toilets either, after hearing what he had to say, though the teachers did apparently have their own 'w.c.', which was locked with a key.

That afternoon, as the children had left, I sat down with a few of the remaining teachers. They got out a glass of wine and some juice, and we had a talk to one another about the school, my position and their situation. They were not happy. I listened. I tried to keep an open mind, and to concentrate on how we could work

together. I gathered that they were capable of organising a lot of their own work; they had to. But that they missed a common direction and goal. They missed a joint plan, and good teaching methods; and they were fed up of the ad hoc nature of working. One teacher told me that she searched for teaching materials on the internet in the evenings before the lessons. Another that they lacked a co-ordinated teaching plan, or means and ways in which to really differentiate in the lessons between learning styles and levels. The groups were split into some kind of an order based on cognitive ability, but they were far from optimal as the groups all had to be about the same size. This meant potential high achievers were sometimes stuck in a class with children of limited cognitive capacity, and the teachers had to 'make do'.

"It's making do with what we have", a teacher told me. "There have been small improvements since I've been working here, but it's very very slow".

There seemed to be little support from the management, hardly any training or teacher resources, and the teachers didn't even know the official governmental teaching 'regime' which they came under. Such a 'regime' fixes the goals of the educational establishment, the goals of teaching and sets the standards one must try to attain. Somewhat flabbergasted at the lack of, well more or less everything, I admired the teachers for their steadfastness and perseverance in such circumstances.

The teachers told me that they had refused to work a few weeks earlier, something which I (and one or two of them) called a 'strike'. Later, pressurized by management (they said), they could no longer call it a 'strike'; rather it was (re)-named "a team day". The homes where the children lived had been called to say it was no use sending the children to school that day and the teachers resolved to 're-orient' and discuss some of their grievances together. The big boss had, I was told, turned up, "*absolutely fuming, steaming, ranting and raving*", that they had no right to stop working. "*It would be a disaster for his public image if it got out*", one teacher told me, "*that's why he was so mad at us*". "*Not that he listened, or did anything. He just turned up, which is also something that he never does. He never shows his face around here. And then he started shouting that we weren't allowed to stop working. He said we should just get on with giving lessons and stop moaning. He said that these kids aren't used to much anyway and that the lessons should be 'good enough'*", one teacher said. She went on: "*I told him that I don't want to give a 'good enough' lesson, that's not what I'm here for*".

The said teacher later resigned, and wrote about the 'good enough' lesson in her resignation letter. She was cordially thanked for her service by the manager. I doubt the big boss ever responded to her personally.

My first day ended with a kind of incredulous feeling. I was excited by the prospect of working with these people, and especially with the group of children that this school, and the organisation Jade, was supposed to be serving. I was overflowing with good plans and ideas which I wanted to discuss with the teachers, and with the Manager. I was convinced that we could become a team, working together to improve the educational and life chances of the young students at the school. I got down immediately to working at home; searching out examples of school plans at similar institutions, making an inventory of teaching methods and of teacher skills, for internal trainings and workshops. I was delighted at the chance to be working again within the system. It felt like a 'second chance', a personal triumph to be allowed in.

CHAPTER FOUR

Not all affects are pro-social

“He was a great lover of animals, as were many leaders of the Nazi Party and as, indeed, I am. He was so incensed against meat-eaters, he said, and about the cruel conditions in which meat is produced, that he often felt like shooting people at the meat counter of his local supermarket. To this end he had joined a gun club, for it takes practice to kill carnivores selectively in a crowded supermarket”
(Theodore Dalrymple, *Farewell Fear*, p.170)

So what happens when we experience negative affects during our research (or work)? Like disgust, anger, shame, or fear? Don't we tend to gloss over the negative, or deny that our research participants, or their situations, also induce nasty affects in us? Perhaps we observe those affects in others, and notice how they circulate during conversations and encounters, endeavouring to maintain our own 'participant observer' status, or to suppress that which arises in ourselves. I started out believing that my own affects would primarily engender feelings of sympathy and compassion with refugees and asylum seekers, and that rage and anger would be exclusively experienced in contact with bureaucratic organisations or civil servants. But this wasn't always the case.

In this chapter I will look at the not so social affects which are part and parcel of the research experience. The first part of this chapter highlights a number of encounters between refugees and those working in positions of authority who are expected to be caring for, or assisting refugees in different ways. I describe situations in which all parties are adversely affected, estranged or enraged by the other. And I discuss the dangers inherent in extreme othering, such as mistrust and separation.

This chapter ends by questioning the assumption that affect is liberatory and with the recognition that whilst affective research may champion the possibility for a more ethical relationship with the other, this is by no means an easy feat. I open the way here for a more engaged critique of affect in Part Two of this book.

Enraged?

“Emotions then do not only discharge their forces on the outside environment; the outside is also the source of their forces. Rage does not come from the overwhelming of the organism itself; love does not derive from inner needs and wants only. Outside forces surge into us and drive our rage and our love” (Lingis, 1998, p.122)

What are those “*outside forces*” which drive our affective systems and why is it that a lot of civil servants working with immigrants and asylum seekers or refugees seem closed, unaffected; or at least unaffected in any way which might involve care and compassion, let alone love? According to one woman working for COA, the government has an intentional policy of ‘demotivation’, or in other words consciously making the lives of asylum seekers a misery, so that as many as possible will choose voluntary return; and I’ve heard the same said many a time of workers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who deal with asylum requests, also by ex-workers themselves. One worker at the organization responsible for the deportation of migrants to their homelands told me that he’s long past being affected by the stories of asylum seekers: “*if they threaten suicide these days, I just say – go ahead and do it – but don’t try to blackmail me with your threats*”. He admitted his total skepticism for their plight, retorting that their lives are better here than there anyway, regardless of the treatment they get in the Netherlands. “*They’re safe, they get pocket money and a roof over their heads*”. He reported that he’s just “*implementing the policy of the politicians and policy makers*” anyway, therefore it’s not his fault if the majority of asylum requests are denied. He’s just “*doing his job*”. Nothing more, nothing less.

The process of sense-making is multilayered, as I have discovered, and it is likely that civil servants make sense of their relations with refugees and asylum seekers in other ways than I do. Many of the ones I know rationalize their work and find meaning in the policies they have to implement. Affect engages them in ways which bind them to policy choices and decisions, and which push them to collectively not care. That is not to say that all civil servants are so, but that in my experience many (learn to) shut themselves down, simplify the choices they face and eschew (moral and other) dilemmas. Perhaps not to do so would lead, does lead, to a kind of professional schizophrenia.

“I left the organization because I couldn’t stand the new policies. Asylum seekers became numbers and we were not expected to care about what happened to them. Our job was to just implement the policy and to follow protocols and procedures. It was like being a robot. I couldn’t live with those expectations. Lots of us who were more ‘social’ left. We couldn’t stand it” (ex-COA worker).

Like many asylum seekers and refugees whom I’ve known for years, Joseph, a refugee from Iraq, has exclaimed often enough “they’re just doing a job. It’s work for them. Who we really are is irrelevant to them, they don’t want to know us. They just do their jobs and at five o’clock they can go home to their own lives and forget about us”. Like Delilah, Joseph and others recognize an implicit lack of caring in many of those who work in institutions specifically working with people like themselves.

A young asylum seeker from Afghanistan once told me:

“Some of them (the workers) are good, some are OK, and some are real bad. When there’s something wrong they give you a band aid or tell you to take a paracetamol. They wouldn’t treat their own children like that, so why do they treat us as if we’re nothing? When I was living in a KWG run by Jade¹², for young asylum seekers, we got many a time stale and outdated bread. I had real arguments with the staff. I asked them if they would eat that themselves or give it to their own families. It’s not as if they pay for it with their own money. They think it doesn’t matter because we come from poor countries. They think that we’re used to eating rubbish, so they can give us anything. There’s two types of worker. The real good one who listens to you and who comes over for a chat. He goes home at night and thinks how he can help us, but after a few years he’s too stressed out and can’t work anymore. Then there’s the one who just comes to his work, does his job, follows the rules, and then goes home. He doesn’t see us as humans. But he usually stays long. That sort never leaves. It’s hard too because they’re always changing and you never know where you’re at. One day this one is your mentor and tomorrow it’s another. I’ve had at least five different guardians in three years. How can you get to know anyone like that?”

Mandates change, positions change, responsibilities change, often enough. Many a civil servant is today in charge of integration issues, and tomorrow in charge of youth and education, or some other policy area which they themselves may or may not have chosen. They barely have enough time to get to look into their

¹² KWG – Kinder WoonGroep – a form of housing for young unaccompanied asylum seekers under the age of eighteen. Jade is the name of the organisation in charge of this type of housing in the area where Hadi lived. It is the same organisation that I have written about in *Affective Matter* (4).

'caseload', before they get a new one pressed upon them. Re-organisations are so abundant that several civil servants in one local council told me *"this is our fifth reorganization in two years. We just say yeah, yeah, we listen to the managers and then we get on and do what we've always been doing. Positions change but nothing really changes in how we work"*. Workers are tired of reorganisations and refugees lose track of how many contacts they have or have had at the local council, or at the benefit office, or at the governmental employment agency. Policies change like the wind in some cases and what used to be a priority or a target group to be prioritized, becomes like a stone hanging around the civil servant's neck, or in other words, a group that won't go away, but that no longer qualifies for anybody's attention. This is the case more often than not for the most marginalized, like refugees, where effective help requires time and therefore also money. Councils and the like concentrate on groups who they can reach more easily and where the chances of success are bigger. Others get left behind. And even where there are so-called specialized services, my own experiences show that control mechanisms are inadequate so that those in charge can deny care to those who need it, and still get away with it.

In yet other cases the problem is not the speed of change, rather the opposite. Sometimes people stay for years in the same position, managing the same files. Too long. Unable to adapt to changing times, or to alter perspective, some civil servants get stuck in a certain mode of working, and just can't get out. Old patterns become fixed, old experiences become the norm for acting in the now and in the future, and adaptation or attunement to new situations and people is nigh on impossible. In one local council where I worked it was easy to distinguish two types of case manager, just like Hadi said. The one that literally *"cried with the client"* and could be found at the end of the day *"doing the dishes at the home of the client"* (according to the manager of a social services department in Groningen), or the one who 'never listens, who knows best, and who whilst treating all clients as cheats, applies the rules and procedures with rigor, convinced that it's not why you do something but how you do it that counts'.

A local governmental policy maker told me, when reflecting on how his colleagues actually implement policy that *"They don't really care. They figure what's a week or two of waiting matter for a refugee who's used to waiting anyway and doesn't expect any better. A day or week here or there doesn't matter"*. He noted how colleagues stress the formal nature of what they do and don't want to get involved. It's all about procedures and protocols and getting those things right. It's easier not to try and see the whole picture, as that only complicates things and keeping a distance is seen as an absolute necessity so as not to get drawn into the personal

lives and problems of refugee clients. There's always another party or organization that one can rely on to help 'those people'; it's an instrumental case of too many cooks spoil the broth, without actually knowing (or caring) how many, if any, cooks have actually started cooking.

Massumi, equating affect with "intensity", notes that "*Matter-of-factness dampens intensity*" (Massumi, 2002, p.25). Where intensity is seen as autonomic, preceding conscious perception, the level of intensity depends partly upon "*expectation, which depends on consciously positioning oneself in a line of narrative continuity*". Factuality and in the same vein, objectivity, is dampening. Effects are interfered with when narratives are continuous, in the sense of appearing linear and logical and when stories are objectified, or devoid of emotional content. According to Massumi, "*Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static – temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption*" (Massumi, 2002, p.26).

Perhaps then what is happening with many of the civil servants (and mentors, guardians, benefits officers) I meet is that they develop and use functional narratives, fearing any excess or disruption or disconnection with convention. Massumi argues that affect escapes, and releases potential. It's potential is to interact and to affect and be affected. It is then captured. Emotions are an expression of that capture in the most intense, also contracted form, but affect itself remains autonomous in its resonance and in its power to infold emergent contexts and volitions. Affect induces the senses to collide with one another, in a transformational way; in a way which localizes a feeling of aliveness and a sense of becoming. Perhaps because affect is indeterminate, because it moves the sensations and is unassimilable, it changes rules and forces the inexplicable on us; it disorients. Perhaps "*matter of factness*" is the habit of choice of some civil servants, where habit is "*an acquired automatic self-regulation*" (Massumi, 2002, p.11). However, the danger hereby is a universe "*without potential, pure entropy, death*" (Massumi, 2002, p.35).

I have witnessed how lawyers, civil servants and case managers, but also teachers, psychologists and health workers, deal with refugees and asylum seekers. Acting in the name of 'professionalism' most of the time, though sometimes blatantly honest about the lack of desire to 'become too involved' or to get 'sucked into' the intimate lives of the Other. "*Before you know it they'll be asking you to lend them money or to babysit*" one worker told me, "*that's why it's important to keep your distance*".

I recall an event with Ali, and a visit to the doctor on site at the asylum seekers' centre where he once lived. Ali has been several times to see the doctor already. They've given him many different creams and potions and antibiotics. Now he's got a referral, but the appointment with the dermatologist is in 5 weeks' time. Ali can't wait this long. "If I get put on the streets, what should I do then? Then I can't see a doctor, maybe they can't make me better then, maybe then it's too late". *"Here they don't care, they just say wait, wait. In Iraq it's better. You don't need a general practitioner, there you just go direct to the specialist and they take care of you. Here somebody told me that I should ask for a second opinion. They don't tell you here that it's possible. They don't tell us anything. They don't want us to know these things. Here you just have to speak up for yourself, but nobody knows their rights here"*. Ali shows me his papers, the two different doctors' reports, from May and August. The diagnosis is scabies or eczema. According to the report the doctor is not sure what he's got exactly. Apparently more people in the asylum centre had similar problems, maybe cause by mites. Ali got cream and new bedding, but nothing seemed to help. The rash got worst, cleared up a bit, but the spots keep coming. Now he's driving himself crazy at the thought that he may be sick when and if he's turned onto the streets, should his asylum procedure be closed for good. He doesn't know for sure if he then has a right to health care, or if it's only in emergency situations. His lawyer told him that in any case he won't die as they "don't leave you to die in the Netherlands". For emergencies there's always treatment. *"I first have to be really bad, then they will see me. Why can't they just see me a little sooner" he pleads? There's not many things better in Iraq, but there we can see the doctor quick, and we have some good doctors"*.

Ali's roommate explains that if he goes to see the doctor in Iraq and he picks a number and it turns out he's 15th in line, a five dollar bill and a chat with the receptionist will ensure he gets seen first. *"It doesn't work like that here"* they say in chorus, with a look of nostalgia in their eyes. The roommate also has an appointment that day, but forgot it. We were busy chatting at the time. We go to the receptionist – *"Yes a new appointment can be made – next week, same day, same time" she says. "Is it urgent? Can it wait that long? Do you have any pain?"*, these are questions that the receptionist doesn't ask when she gives him his new appointment card and slides back the glass window and retreats in to her room next door, withdrawing herself from any possible contamination from the other.

I go in with Ali to see the doctor. It's 13.39, the appointment was for 13.10. We are led into a somber room. In fact I didn't really notice anything except the somber face of the doctor. He asks who I am. *"A friend"*. Are you a guardian he asks. *"No just a friend, I repeat"*. *"Oh"*. He sits behind his desk, tall, skinny, bony face. He

looks down at Ali and asks what the problem is. Ali explains he would like to get his appointment changed if possible, to an earlier date. Could the doctor maybe phone the hospital for him to ask? “No”. That’s his reply. Cold and unaffected, but clear. “That won’t work. The hospitals have their own agenda. They are very busy, they decide who gets treated and when”. I retort that the doctor can always decide to phone to ask for an earlier appointment if he wants. “*Is it a question of not being able to or not wanting to,*” I ask? “It won’t work” he repeats. “*You can’t phone or won’t,*” I ask again? “Absolutely not,” he replies. It’s clear we are getting nowhere. He mumbles that the doctor can’t do anything, only the insurance company. They can phone, or they can check which other hospitals might take Ali sooner. I explain that his psychological state is not good, and that the worry of being turfed out and of not having been to the specialist is maybe making his skin complaint worst. The doctor looks on. Staring ahead – blank-faced. “Absolutely not possible”. Ali has been given the name of a cream from a nephew of his in Bagdad, who happens to be a doctor. He doesn’t know what Ali has, but Ali has explained it to him on the phone. The doctor looks at the name. Yes, he knows that cream. OK, he’ll prescribe it. Mmmmm - I wonder if that’s responsible practice. Does he just want to get rid of us? Would my doctor prescribe me a medicine because my cousin told me that it might help? Or is he just being kind? I don’t sense any kindness in his demeanor, so I don’t think that can be the reason. “You can pick up the prescription at the pharmacy today”. Those are his last words. He stands. I remind him that he kept us waiting more than half an hour. He mumbles some excuse about having other priority cases that afternoon. I suggest that an apology would not go amiss. But he has already turned his back and is walking into his office. He leaves us in the corridor and closes his door. It is silent. We walk out. I am rather taken aback by his aloofness and by his lack of manners, or indeed of respect. Ali says this is normal. “*We are only asylum seekers. They do not care. Nothing will happen to them. We can do nothing. They can do anything with us*” he says, dejected.

Ali is now hoping to move to Canada under the Canadian refugee sponsorship scheme. He had to leave the asylum centre, because his file is closed. He’s illegal, and he considers his period in the Netherlands with bitterness and as a waste of time. At the end of December 2011, Ali writes on his Facebook page: “*I need help, I can’t cope with it any more. I am fucking tired of Holland*”. His tone is often derisory, and full of anger. He’s fed up and is looking forward to a new life. But the procedure with the Canadian Embassy, which he also started up some two years ago, is also time consuming and bureaucratic. He can’t work in the Netherlands, and seems to get more frustrated with every day that passes.

Ali goes every day to the mosque to pray and to borrow books. He feels that he's treated as a 'second class' citizen in the Netherlands and wants to forget his time here. He calls those who opt for Christianity to get a refugee status (for example Iraqi Muslims) "religious traitors". He doesn't want anything to do with most people he once knew at the asylum centre because they are mainly 'liars' and play around. The authorities treat people badly, he argues, and he can't understand why, in his eyes, they accept so many liars and uneducated people, whilst Ali with his a good, technical education and university degree, doesn't get the chances he thinks he deserves.

It seems to Ali to be a world on its head¹³. Upside down. Absurd. Sanctuary is given to those who are better at talking, inventing, 'proving' their stories. Those with the gift of the gab, who have understood the art of spinning a good yarn. The refuge which is promised to the most needy, doesn't always reach those who tell the 'truth' or whose stories are too incredulous for our ears to actually believe or make sense of. When we put two and two together and get five, we turn our heads and look in disbelief. Narratives have to add up, be coherent and those seeking asylum have to remember even the smallest, and what may have seemed at the time, most irrelevant details. Like what colour clothes the bus driver was wearing, or how many stops did the van make, or in which row did you sit in class in the junior school? What's more, in my experience the most traumatised and psychologically inflicted asylum seeker or refugee may not even get the chance to be heard. Weighted down with trauma and shame or guilt, such people either cannot tell their story, or the story which they tell doesn't 'fit' with our (rational and cognitive) ways of sense making. Sometimes we actually don't want to hear the horrors that they have faced, we don't want to be affected by the Other's tales of disaster, woe and misfortune, or we can't or don't want to admit that life is not simply a neat series of causes and effects, or of linear developments which we can single-mindedly analyse in retrospect. Life is messy, incoherent and inconsistent, bedevilled by lottery and chance. Things do just happen. And sometimes unfortunately so. That's what makes fathoming actions, experiences and choices on the one hand so complex, on the other so interesting.

¹³ Ali obtained refugee status at the beginning of 2015 after a six and half year wait. A couple of weeks later he also got accepted to migrate to Canada. He was confused and didn't know what to do. In the end, he decided to remain in the Netherlands, partly because of his fear of the unknown and the upheaval and insecurity that a move to Canada would entail. He applied for housing, as do all refugees; but was not only refused help to find a house, but was also told that he didn't qualify for welfare benefits. Ali was taken in by a Dutch person when he became illegal, more than two years earlier, to save him from a life on the streets. It seemed that once Ali got refugee status, the same Dutch person was held 'responsible' for Ali's upkeep. As this helper had a job, and welfare claimants are judged on their 'partner's' ability to keep them; Ali's helper was judged to be earning above the limit for claiming benefits. Ali was told that if the partner 'threw him out', he could claim 'homeless benefits'.

As Gagnon states “*Maybe the ordinary man or woman.....doesn’t behave like a single-minded individual because he or she isn’t one*” (Gagnon, in Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.237).

The writings of Lingis are endowed with the idea of a shared humanity even if we have nothing in common with the Other. “*Is there not a growing conviction, clearer today among innumerable people, that the dying of people with whom we have nothing in common – no racial kinship, no language, no religion, no economic interests – concerns us?*” (Lingis, 1994, p.X).

An essential element in this relation with the Other is trust. Lingis addresses trust as an acknowledgement of the Other, which goes beyond a space of knowing in order to connect with the “*real individual agent there – with you*” (Lingis, 2004, p.ix, italics in original). Trust according to Lingis does not depend on knowledge. It is a connecting force, one that binds people to each other. Something deeper than knowing is at work when trust comes into play. It is an affective state; a force and intensity that is pre-conscious. It arises and then sticks, dissipating fears and anxiety. Trust moves. Trust affects as it builds and accentuates our capacity to care.

The researcher’s affect

What is our task as researchers? Evidently we need to take the other seriously, to listen to their stories, to delve into their incompleteness and to accept their incoherence and inchoateness. To a large extent we remain opaque to ourselves and to others, but gaps in understanding in no way compel us to indifference with respect to the Other. Affective interstices mark spaces of cultural difference which play themselves out in ways which can bewilder us, touch us and move us. How can we not be touched by our research; how can we not be affected by our research participants? Indifference does not appear to be an option. But do we also have to become “*undone*” or to be “*violated, outraged, wounded*”?

I have discovered that whilst attempting to undertake research that is both caring and affective, whereby “*the ability to exchange gazes – that is – to be with another and to interactively acknowledge humaneness – points both to the existential plenitude of relationship, and to the lack of self without other*” (Letiche, 2008, p.69), I was insufficiently prepared for the affective overload which would incur.

To do research and to write lives is ultimately to acknowledge the ways in which we are affected and in which we affect our research participants. It is to reflect seriously on how our bodies encapsulate moods, become entwined in surges of

affective and emotional forces, acting as mediating antennae that communicate pleasure and pain through vital and intense, precarious and ephemeral, signs and sensualities. Research affects not only our minds, but also our bodies and hearts. Research indelibly alters our gaze and fashions our thinking in new and unexpected ways. When worlds collide in epistemological clashes and cultural collisions, the mirror gets turned back on ourselves in a revelatory fashion, and if we are very lucky and try our hardest, we may even experience that we can “unlearn our privileges”, thereby marking “*the beginning of an ethical relation to the Other*”. (Landry & McClean, 1996, p.5). However, we may not always be so lucky.

Affect's potential?

Affective research is a precarious endeavor. And if one is prepared to open to its gains, one needs to be fully equipped for the tumultuous ride which it entails. The vagaries of existence and the vicissitudes of life facing asylum seekers and refugees are exposed when we take affect seriously in our research. This can result in more caring relationships and a greater understanding between researcher and research participants, and it can set a path in which creativity and compassion can flourish.

Affect configures new zones of potentiality, fashions spaces of exchange and allows one to “*dwell in the space of alterity itself in which the names and meanings of things are never fully present but always still ahead and behind. It is to rob the hierarchy of paired oppositions – culture versus nature, order versus chaos, system versus accident, reality versus fiction, and original versus imitation/reproduction/repetition; to rob it of its metaphysical privilege to have the last word*” (Stewart, 1996, p.89).

It appeared to me when embarking on this research that affect held a promise of something better, an optimistic promise of better research, and of a new way of being in the world, with the other, in relation. I expected that there would be a softening of the self-other relationship, blurring the barriers between subject-object (see Hosking, 2007), and I looked forward to the “*possibilities of thinking and feeling oneself into other people's bodies, and into the heart of their suffering*” (2011, Veissière, p.37). Affective research offered at its very core the chance of greater interconnection through the shared nature of its visceral effects, right down to the very fibres of our nervous systems. I longed for an engagement with theory as affect, and affect as methodology or as Veissière puts it “*an Engaged Ethnography of Resistance*” (2011, p.61).

So I continued in the field with asylum seekers and refugees, denoting it an affective field; a field filled with desires, moods, feelings and emotions; a messy

field, full of inconsistencies, incoherence and ineffability; a field full of potential, “*perhaps even beauty*” (Veissière, 2011, p.69). But emergent affects were not only positive and encrusted in a golden case of opportunity and joy. Many were black, and caustic, inciting despair and fueling prejudice.

I spent hundreds and hundreds of hours with my research participants, years of encounters, skirmishes, meetings, moments, dialogues, and reflections, sharing sentiments, laughter and likes, but also frustrations, irritation and disappointments. It was an effort to reside in border spaces of uncertainty and unknowing, drawing on the creative force that lives in the margins and in the engagement with difference. It was a “*getting lost*” and “*working in the ruins*” (Lather, 2007). Weaving through the affective turmoil could be scary, unleashing contraction in fear, rather than openness and trust. In other words, what emerged in the spaces of affect, was not always significant for social emancipation and greater mutual recognition. Sometimes the other became the object of vilification or automatic aversion.

Affective Matter (5)
“Automatic aversion”

Everytime I saw her, I felt a pang of unease, aversion, even contempt. The first time I saw her, sitting at the table in the lunch room of the asylum centre with colleagues, she was eating her sandwiches. Her face had one of those mouths which turned down, making her look miserable all the time. She had long hair, which was thin and mousy, and she wore it tied back off her face, making her look all the more harsh. She wore plain glasses. I don't know why, but I immediately disliked her. In the beginning, I didn't even know the woman. I just saw her every now and then, when I was working in the same corridor. She never smiled, said hello or addressed me. She oozed small-mindedness. I think I even despised her from the beginning.

That first time in the canteen, I was chatting to one of her colleagues, actually one of her members of staff (I didn't know at the time that she was the manager). We were talking about my experiences with young asylum seekers, who were unaccompanied by family members (known as ama's or amv'ers in Dutch), and more explicitly, I was talking about trauma and the need for good psychological care. She butted in, saying “they're not all traumatized. They don't all need treatment”. I could feel the skepticism in her words. Her face looked like thunder. I got a knot in my throat, smiled feebly, and acknowledged within myself that I thought she was pitiful.

I didn't know at that time the stories which Moshtaba's brother would tell me about living in this same asylum centre in Oude Pekela, and of his hatred for this same woman (and her team). I'd had little to do with her up to now, and was glad that I probably wouldn't have to deal with her whilst I was working there.

I'd started an educational project at this asylum centre in the summer of 2014. It was a self-initiated project, agreed upon by another manager at the centre, and subsidized by the Provincial government. I would be teaching a course to adults in the camp who had already been given a refugee status, primarily Syrians and Eritreans. The aim of the course was to increase self-sufficiency, through learning to understand cultural and social expectations, and by developing skills to better negotiate one's new life in the Netherlands.

Whilst I had an entire method, with well-designed lessons and lesson plans, what I did on any particular day largely depended on what arose in group discussions. I was pragmatic, and spoke in English, as nobody in the group had enough Dutch to

be able to manage a conversation. The classes were full; refugees invited others, who hadn't been on my initial list, and they asked their friends who were still asylum seekers (without permits) to also join the class. I didn't mind. As long as they got something out of our meetings which was useful, and they said they did, I didn't mind.

The course went extremely well. It was popular and the group was full every week. I had a lively group of people, mainly men, who attended regularly, plus a group of men who attended incidentally. I used the standard lessons every now and then, but most of the time I addressed their topics and answered their questions relating to life in the Netherlands. We talked about learning the language, studying, finding a job, which types of careers and jobs there are, how to get one's diplomas legally recognized, and how to behave in all manner of situations. The group asked for a lesson on trauma, when one of the men asked me if it was normal that he forgot everything, even the most recent of appointments, and if I knew why he couldn't concentrate any more, or why he slept badly at night. The majority of other group participants recognized what he was talking about, and so we spent a lesson talking about the effects of trauma.

Most lessons were spent dealing with topics that related to their immediate future. They were worried about bringing their families here, and about getting an appropriate size house in the right neighbourhood; they asked about the school for their children, and were concerned about who would help them to fill in forms, and to find work. They told me that they were at a loss with all the rules and regulations in the Netherlands and that they hardly received any help from the people from COA.

It was a dicey situation. I was attending to the group, spending a lot of time on stuff which I thought COA professionals should be dealing with, but they weren't, and at the same time I was trying to involve COA, but they weren't interested. At some stage I got pretty naffed off with the worker who was teaching Dutch. She was my main intermediary. She was supposed to be channeling people from her lessons to me. I had asked for her assistance several times to help me get more women on board, but she kept making feeble excuses about how difficult it was. I suggested I could hold an information meeting in the communal meeting place, where the youngsters played pool in the evenings, or that I could just go around the camp and knock on doors.

"Oh no, that's not allowed. We can't go visiting people in their units. I don't know what goes on out there, in the camp", she exclaimed, pointing vaguely towards the camp grounds. "I don't have much to do with people outside the lessons".

“*What a small-minded idiot*”, I thought. I couldn’t help myself. I knew it wouldn’t be any use relying on her for anything. I’d be pleasant to her when I had to, but apart from that I’d just get on with my group in my own way. I made a point to walk around to see other colleagues every now and then, but each one of them showed just as little interest as she did in what I was doing. In the end I gave up. I had functional contact with workers when I needed to ask them something about a refugee who was in my lesson, or when I needed to pass on information or get information; but apart from that I stopped pushing to arrange a joint meeting, and I didn’t invite them any more to the lessons. Not that any of them had been.

I was disappointed, but not surprised, that nobody took an interest in the group and in my lessons. I’d heard the same stories from other organisations working within the asylum centre. They too had been left to get on with their own thing, without too much interference, and certainly without active assistance. “They’re not bothered”, I was told. “As long as you do your thing, they’ll let you get on with it, but don’t ask them to take an interest”.

I got more and more requests for help from asylum seekers and refugees at the centre, to phone lawyers, to check with the immigration services about the decision making procedures, to ask the local refugee council about family reunification times and procedures, and to phone housing corporations to fix appointments, or re-schedule them, or to find out about governmental rules regarding allowances and special payments for buying furniture. People were really desperate. They had no-one else they could turn to. Or actually, they did have others, and they did turn to them, but mainly to no avail.

Classes were most times weighed down with worries and fears about family members left behind, and about whether people would be able to reunite with their families before it was too late.

“Why are we kept waiting so long? Why so much time spent waiting? My brother and his wife and their seven children got blown up last week. We don’t even know where the bodies are to be able to bury them. And my family are freezing cold, living in a church close to the Syrian border, in Turkey. I have no more money to take care of them, and the authorities say I have to wait a few more months before they can take a decision. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to support my family there? I got them out of Syria because I thought they could come here quickly, and now I have to wait another three months. Maybe they’ll be dead in that time”,

(Ahmed, Syrian refugee, 2014).

His pain was visible, as he spoke with teary eyes. I felt him quivering and didn't know what I could say, other than to nod in agreement. He wasn't the only one waiting. He was no exception, unfortunately.

We broached the question of why an employee of the refugee council said that if one more Syrian showed him photographs of his wretched family in Syria, or of *"wounded and hurt children"* on his mobile, he would grab the phone from him and throw it out the window. "They want me to feel sorry for them, so they show me their kids back home. It really gets me riled". He told me that he told the Syrians: *"You're the ones murdering each other. We didn't ask you to do that. Can't you see we're doing our best? What more can we do?"*. The employee discussed the systemic crisis because of the huge influx of refugees. *"We can't handle all the requests for family reunification, and then they get mad at us. The system's going to break down. The immigration authorities don't care. They don't give even one extra day. If you go over the legal deadline of three months, your application will get denied,"* he said. He showed me all the names of applicants in a list on his screen. Some were highlighted green; they had been invited for a meeting to discuss the application. Many were red; they had to be dealt with urgently, or they would miss the deadline. The non-highlighted names were already being processed. "We're even working in the weekends to get things done", he assured me. "But it's not working. Our system's going to crash one of these days", he repeated.

The employee spoke quickly, pointing out how long the list was. He smiled briefly, baring his crooked, blackened teeth. He was a seasoned and experienced worker of the refugee council, he told me, but this was just too much. He showed me, quite paradoxically a photo on his mobile, of the waiting room, full of Eritreans. *"If we start to prioritise or try to make a distinction between the most urgent cases, and the less urgent, look what could happen. See how many people are waiting here?"*, he said pushing the picture in front of my nose. *"We could get scenes, and riots. Look how many people are in the waiting room already"*. I looked at the picture of an overfull waiting room. I only saw black faces. *"Just look how many Eritreans come every day, and they want to bring their families too"*, the employee complained.

I could understand his predicament, but only partially. There were admittedly too many calls on his sparse resources. But the refugee council had centralised the procedures in the bigger city so why, I questioned, couldn't his team also deal with the requests locally, as he'd already said he knew how the applications worked. *"Yes, we're working on that"*, he said. But then there's the question of his anger at being confronted with the suffering of those left behind in Syria. That was, it seems, just too much for him to take. It indicated an overload of affective

prickles, which eventually led to this employee, like many others, to put up his own defensive armour. I felt that he wanted to help, but he couldn't see another way out, other than following the procedures. I felt sorry for him; and at the same time, irritation at his lack of sympathy for the Syrians desperate to get their families out of the war zone. A sense of powerlessness also reverberated through me, as I recognised in him others who were also affectively shut down, dead, or on their way to becoming nullified in this system.

During the same period as I was working at the asylum centre, I took a job at Jade. Three of the colleagues on the Ama team congratulated me. They'd requested me to provide a group of young asylum seekers with information on schooling and the importance of education, because they didn't feel that Jade, their own partner, was equipped to do so. One of them said that their boss had been worried that I might present them with an invoice, because why otherwise would I want to do the information meetings for free? I assured her at the time, that I was just happy to be of service.

When I gave in my notice to Jade, they were some of the first people I informed. I didn't think it necessary to inform their boss personally, as I'd had little to no personal contact with her anyway. In fact, it didn't even cross my mind to copy her in on my emails. I was open about my reasons for leaving Jade's employment. I didn't think I needed to hide my concerns about the organization. I figured, rather naively, just the opposite; that COA would be glad to learn about my signals, and that they would take action to remedy the situation and to improve the quality of education at the Jade schools.

CHAPTER FIVE

Why lostness matters

Conceptualising the ambivalence of lostness

Lost
Stand still.
The trees ahead and the bushes beside you Are not lost.
Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you,
If you leave it you may come back again, saying Here.

No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still.
The forest knows Where you are.
You must let it find you.

(An old Native American elder story rendered into modern English by David Wagoner, in The Heart Aroused - Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America by David Whyte, Currency Doubleday, New York, 1996)

In this chapter I will discuss the concept of lostness and illustrate its centrality in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. “Lostness” can enhance our understanding of the ways in which those lives are played out in an intensely affective and affected way. The writings on asylum seekers and refugees in this book illustrate the ways in which lostness influences their lives in fundamental ways.

Firstly I discuss the dangers that being lost present and I argue that we cannot understand the challenges which face asylum seekers and refugees if we do not address the issue of lostness in and on the borders which they occupy, and its impact on their everyday lives. It is an existential affective experience which

serves to increase feelings of insecurity and mistrust in what are already vulnerable bonds of connection. I will show how lostness is pivotal in explaining why “*escape*,” (Papadopoulos et al, 2008) is just not possible.

In the second part of this chapter, I will highlight the fact that although lostness contributes to the wretchedness of asylum seeker and refugee lives and heightens their precarity, it paradoxically also serves to traverse the gap between researcher and research participant, creating new spaces of creativity and transformation. I will reflect on the possibility, as researcher, to open to the productive capacity of lostness, by dwelling in the spaces of unknowing and uncertainty that it throws into the research process. And I will link its workings to those of affect, where both opportunity and risk are ever present, in its ambivalence.

“Lost” refugees

“Come and sit with us. We are your children now. We need your help now to find the way”.

(B., Iraqi refugee)

“I am tired of all these papers and forms. I don’t understand anything. I don’t understand anything at all. I just don’t understand it. I am completely lost”.

(Leyla, Chechen refugee)

“Those refugees are traumatised enough as it is, without having to deal with all these procedures. I personally believe we shouldn’t let them handle their own money. Half of them don’t know how. They come from societies without banks, or where you can’t trust banks, and they don’t know the first thing about how to spend their money properly. They just go buying ridiculous things, as they haven’t got a clue about managing their finances”.

(Dutch civil servant)

“Lost” is how B. (and others) describe their lives. He calls himself, and others, “my children” and, according to his language teachers, he is passive and lacks motivation. The anxiety of not knowing how to behave, fear of making blunders, shame at the perceived inadequacy of their Dutch language skills, hurt at their own incapacity, terrified to fill in a form wrongly or to omit a detail here or there, passive in their encounters with authority, fearful of the projections of others, and the diagnoses of doctors (borderline, traumatised, potential child abuser).....lost.

Being a refugee automatically implies varying degrees of loss. Be it loss of one's homeland and lost family members, lost possessions and artefacts, not to mention the loss of one's language and culture. Losing one's bearings is part and parcel of the experience; which is more often than not accompanied by a loss of self-esteem, of trust (in oneself and others), and a lost sense of self.

"I knew who I was back then," "I knew how things worked, and what to expect," "I don't know what's expected of me anymore," "I was somebody in my home country," "I have to rely on others to help me all the time," "I've lost everything"; these are just some of the many ways refugees have expressed their losses to me.

The life of refugees is turned upside down. First of all, in the would-be-refugee phase. Becoming a 'refugee' is a privilege not afforded to every hopeful who arrives in Europe seeking asylum. The journey here is arduous, in all senses of the word: leaving everything behind, facing numerous dangers to get to the Netherlands and, once arriving to the relative safety of an asylum camp, enduring procedural obstacles, interviews, questioning (*"as if you're a criminal,"* as many asylum seekers experience it), deciphering 'how things work', and negotiating life in the camps.

Once refugee status is accorded, a new can of worms opens up. Sometimes more confusing, and just as stressful, as during the asylum phase. For some, it is even more terrifying, precisely because of the expectations that troubled times are over, and that the refugee simply needs to 'get on' with integrating. B. told me once: *"I get so many letters, I haven't got a clue what it's all about. If it goes on like this, I think it will be better if I just go back to Iraq. Now I really have to become somebody again, but what are the chances of that? Now I have to prepare everything for when my family comes. When I was an asylum seeker, nobody expected anything of me, but now everybody's looking and waiting for me to be somebody"*.

In the past he has referred repeatedly to a loss of self-esteem and self-respect, to the fact that he had a good position in Iraq, a respected job, which brought with it a good salary, a big house and plentiful opportunities for a good life. He didn't come here *"for the social security,"* but because his life, (and moreover that of his son), was in danger. He would never have chosen a future in the Netherlands voluntarily, indeed, it would not be his wish to live in a non-Muslim country. He feels demoted, devalued, and has lost his dignity and his self-worth.

Honneth (1995, p.134), remarks that *"...a person's 'honour', 'dignity,' or to use the modern term, 'status' refers to the degree of social esteem accorded to his or her*

manner of self-realization within a society's inherited cultural horizon. If this hierarchy of values is so constituted as to downgrade individual forms of life and manners of belief as inferior or deficient, then it robs the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social values to their own abilities”.

Without exception, all of the refugees with whom I have worked closely these past ten years, have described this loss of self-respect, and the accompanying shame of being isolated, or not entirely accepted as an equal member of society. Of course they benefit from the welfare benefits system, some more fully than others, but they would like nothing better than to “have a profession,” or to “get a job,” or to “be able to support my family,” or “to have a job equal to the one I was doing at home”.

A Syrian man wrote to me:

“Dear Kim, hello dear,
I just got out of war alive and I am trying to save the rest of my family (wife and four children). Coming here, I would like to live again and to work in the same job as a teacher, which is what I like most in my life. I wish you could help me to restore my life. I'm going to go on to study to get another Master degree, or a Phd in the future” (November 2014).

One might argue, that being a refugee affords one with more chances than were available in one's own country. At least, this is often how I have felt when talking to refugee women, escaping lives of abuse and humiliation, with little or no political, economic and social rights in their own countries. However, being able to take advantage of chances here, is not as easy as it may seem, especially when one has had little formal education, and when one comes from a society whose level of complexity is far less than what it is in the Netherlands.

Leyla is almost a model case in this respect, and finds the number of demands on her from one governmental agency or another, or from the school, or from employers, overwhelming. There's always some letter to be read, some appointment to be kept, some official to meet, and some form to be filled in. She says “...even though I didn't have much of a life in Chechnya, at least I knew what I was doing at home, and in my own way, I could still be some kind of a role model for my children. Despite the war, and everything that happened, I was more certain about how to handle things, and I knew how the system worked. At least I could speak the language better than my children could. Now I can't even do that” (Leyla, Chechen refugee).

“I ask him how things are going; he says ok, no change. *“still no news from IND (governmental agency dealing with immigration). I am waiting now three months, they didn’t ask for DNA, no news”*. B. mentions that the embassy in Syria is now closed, *“I heard this”*, which means that if his wife and children have to travel to an embassy, there are few choices left open to them. Turkey may be the only option, but this is a long distance; travelling in Turkey once inside the border will be more than 20 hours he says. *“Jordan is not possible. We cannot go there. We went there before with Italian passports, false, and they catch us. They question us, and now they have our names at the border police. They say the ban lasts 5 years, it was 2006, but I think forever. We can’t go there. Only Turkey maybe”*. (diary notes, meeting 20th January 2012)

B. contemplates how his wife and daughters, who have been granted the right to family reunification, will ever make it to collect their entry visa. The latest news, on 20th January 2012, was that the Syrian Embassy was closed. Previously, they had had to travel to Syria, to hand in the forms at the Dutch Embassy, as it was not possible to do that in Iraq. This had already meant one long journey, and an uncertain border crossing, and they were willing to take the risk again to pick up their visas for the Netherlands. But now that possibility seemed cut off, the family must find some other way. Options were limited. Officially they might have to go to Jordan, but getting across the border would be impossible, due to the family’s earlier failed attempt at trying to enter the country. Yet more obstructions, more borders, entrenched with confusions, hampering attempts to unify a family that had been apart for more than three years.

Refugees always seem to be teetering on some border or another. The borders which block entry or allow it. The border of knowing and unknowing; of living on the periphery or being at the centre of society; the language border with its incessant doubt – *“when will my language skills be good enough, if ever?”*; the border of (in)sanity, balancing precariously between the various stresses of integration and refugee-ship; the border of ‘otherness’, between belonging or being an-Other. Oft times regarded as foreigners with some sort of deficit – language, understanding, work, health - life invariably seems to be spent in one of many possible borders, between inclusion and exclusion, acceptance or denial.

The extraordinary stress of living a decade without official refugee status, then finally becoming a refugee in a national amnesty in 2007, still didn’t lead to work for the economist Tatiana, who arrived in the Netherlands in 1997. With a gap of more than a decade in her CV, leaving a huge hole in her work experience since fleeing Kazakhstan, she has participated in a couple of work schemes for the

unemployed, getting minimum wages for six month periods to do work far below her level: (“it’s *secretarial work – again*,” she wrote to me recently, exasperated). The reality of such schemes is that they provide neither job satisfaction nor job security. At the end of the six months the contract is not prolonged, which means a new round of bureaucratic procedures to sign-on again, and then a period of unemployment, followed by participation on yet another revolving-door work project. However, “*precarious labour*” (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, 2008), is preferable to no labour at all. Tatiana says “*it’s better than sitting at home*”. She just wants to have a “*normal life*”.

Extraordinary situations, for ordinary lives in some borderland, where admittedly not everything borders on the unimaginable, or inconceivable, but a lot does. Tatiana and her husband and youngest son, who was born in the Netherlands, finally decided to leave their ‘home’ in the north of the Netherlands for somewhere closer to the big cities, this summer, in order to improve their chances of work. Tatiana’s husband, a car mechanic, has had low-paid, part-time work for a couple of years, but his contract ended recently due to the crisis, and so a move seemed like the only option.

Integration infers reinvention, not once, but often many times. Being lost, and found, or losing and (re)finding one’s self, one’s identity and one’s life, is all part of the process. And for some, the periods of lostness are longer, interminable and more bewildering than for others. The longer one is lost, the deeper the trench, and the further one appears to wander from the ‘right’ side of the border.

Border(line) hopes

In the ‘spaces in between’ (Stewart, 1996), hope for patching up the brokenness and for replacing what has been lost is scarce. Leyla still refuses to acknowledge that Medina will never have the university education of which she (Leyla) is dreaming, and neither will she have the looks of Kate Moss, despite numerous operations to fix her teeth and jawline. Together we’ve discussed Medina’s education, her chances, her motivation and her possibilities and, protective like all mothers, Leyla insists on believing that perhaps the school has made a mistake, or that once Medina’s “*rabbit teeth*” are fixed, a host of other problems will dissolve.

Perhaps these hopes are the ‘thread’ to which Leyla grips, in order to maintain her sanity. When Leyla was still seeing the psychologist, we discussed whether she should continue with the therapy, because Leyla found it increasingly difficult to shoulder the long journeys and stressful days, when she had to trek all the way to

his practice. The practice was a six to seven hour return journey from her home, and that was on a good day when there were no bus or train delays. Whether she could go there on a school day, depended on whether Medina would be home on time to pick up the younger children from school, and going on a Saturday meant once again leaving Medina to look after her siblings whilst mum was away.

This period coincided with the warnings about potential child abuse to the local social services, by the same psychologist. This was not the first time. The botched suicide attempt after accusations that Leyla was trying to 'steal' Hermina's boyfriend. And when Medina took Leyla's sleeping tablets after an argument with her mother about some boy which she had been secretly sending messages to. Both were reason enough for the social services to raise their eyebrows, and start an investigation into Leyla's mental and physical capacities to raise her children. Hermina, previously a 'friend', was cast off as a vicious viper, whose jealousy knew no bounds. A critical border had been crossed, and their amicable relationship came to an abrupt halt after this incident.

Leyla asked me to look at the files from the psychologist, as she couldn't understand why he would make such an official report to the social services. When I phoned him, though surprised, he did not hesitate to go into particulars, referring to Leyla's borderline syndrome, her past suicide attempts, her instable personality, her inability to sustain long-term relationships or friendships of an intimate or other kind, her difficulty in bringing up the children alone, her traumatic history, and her unreliability when it came to keeping the appointments at his office. He did not hesitate to talk to me about her, crossing the border between the public and private at ease.

"The safety of her children is paramount to me," he explained.

On reading 'borderline' in the documents, and upon hearing it from the lips of the psychiatrist, I was rather shaken; lost in fact. My only previous encounter with 'borderline' was with a cousin-in-law whose psychological instability was evident, and whose daughter clearly suffered the consequences of a shaky, irresponsible upbringing, with fragmentary care swinging from over-protection and pampering, to inconsideration and a lack of attention. This was coupled with the mother's overly concern for her own wellbeing, more often than not to the detriment of the child. I'd also heard (horror) stories from an acquaintance whose son was married, then divorced, from a 'borderliner' with a two year old son. These were stories of a mother who was incapable of providing the loving care the child needed, who stayed in bed in the mornings whilst the child was alone

downstairs, and who couldn't be bothered to cook, but fed the child take-away meals instead. All hearsay, but nonetheless it got me thinking.

It got me thinking and comparing. I started to wonder how I could have missed this in Leyla. I started to wonder whether the psychiatrist had, in fact, got it wrong, or had imposed some Western diagnosis on a patient whose lifestyle choices might be perfectly normal in her own country. I pondered how strange it was that the application of a 'label' made me wonder about what I knew about Leyla and her family, and question some of the assumptions which I had once held as 'true,' or as close to 'true' as possible.

Did I miss

something?

Why was I thrown off track?

Lost...in a sea of

psychological concepts and psychiatric diagnoses

the DSM, borderline, PTSS, ASS,

personality disorder

prescriptions for tegretol, alprazolam, anxiety, panic attacks

and nightmares

which invade the night hours.

I knew of all that stuff but

nevermadetheconnection.....

What difference the expert diagnostics, the categorisation of
(your) illness to my capacity to see, observe, feel, affect and be
affected?

Did I need to know the doctor's account or is it (still) your
ac-count that counts?

I discussed these medical categories with Leyla, but she failed to recognise the term and symptoms of borderline. Post-traumatic stress syndrome was a more recognisable condition, but apart from its relationship to 'trauma', Leyla couldn't pin point what it exactly meant. The nightmares, which were an integral part of her life when she decided enough was enough, and stopped taking "*all those medicines which I don't know anything about*", had gradually subsided and didn't haunt her nights any more.

I felt it was necessary for me to critically examine my own reactions to the disclosures. It was impossible to disregard what I'd been told, or what I'd read, yet it seemed as though I may be disrespecting our relationship in some way, if I went along with it the diagnosis unquestioningly. It would be a "*denial of recognition*," (Honneth, 1995, p.131), which denied the confidence and trust we shared. Yet despite not wanting to make connections too quickly, my mind consistently jolted one experience after another to the fore, which seemed consistent with the behaviour of a woman with borderline.

Perhaps I did not want to recognise Leyla's borderline up to now; perhaps I still don't want to; or perhaps it doesn't really exist. At times we have heated discussions about her future and about the future of her children, about her needs and their needs, and about the duties and responsibilities of parenthood. I see that her children are often left to their own devices, watching far too much television, playing too many violent computer games, drinking far too many sugary drinks, and eating too much fatty and unhealthy foods, (what is too much?); she shouts and yells a lot, and goes to the gym in the evenings, at the time when my own youngest children are being tucked up in bed; there are no books in the house and the children do hardly any daily exercise.

I wonder if this is the reaction of an overly protective, moralising west European mother, to a young mother from another culture and with another history. Or are these the symptoms of a mother with borderline, who finds it difficult to achieve a balance between her own desires and those of her children? Where is the border between 'good' and 'bad' parenting? Am I denying the existence of a syndrome which Leyla has; or confirming that there's something amiss, spotting the bogeyman at every corner, and glorifying my own parenting in a bid to reassure myself that, at least I'm doing it right?

However you choose to look at it, we are bodies whose "*..existence entangles us in a process of co-constitutive action, a process in which we and other things do not simply inter-act with each other as external and autonomous entities, but each exists through the process of action*," (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, 2008, p.65). This mutuality engenders affect and engagement, as we not only respond to one another, but co-construct meanings and practices, as "*things and objects are constantly incorporating and producing other things (and therefore the world we live in)*," (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, 2008, p.65).

Honneth speaks of "*the vulnerability of humans resulting from the internal independence of individualization and recognition*" and "*the experience of being*

disrespected [that] carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse,” (1995, p.131-132). Challenges to fragile self-esteem, balanced precariously “*between fusion and demarcation,*” (Honneth, 1995, p.133), accompany this research process, hand in hand with loss and lostness. But neither pertain exclusively to the experience of the refugees.

In this next section I will specifically examine the way in which researching leads us into the domain of lostness and will discuss both its pitfalls and its possibilities

A researcher lost(?)

I do a lot of pondering. Alongside observing and talking, and reading. Not to mention feeling and being affected by everything I see, hear, read about or experience. This can lead to confusion, though I ponder that researchers are probably not meant to be confused too often. Perhaps it's too much reflection which is the problem. Coupled with the desire to understand, and to understand as much as possible, so that I can do justice to the refugees with whom I'm working. Or, at least so that I do no harm.

One of the things I ask myself, is whether doing research can be about not doing harm, or is it about finding the truth and making it public? But since what truth is, and what knowledge is, is contestable, I invariably end up thinking of this research as an opportunity to tread in border spaces filled with uncertainty, exploring the edges of knowledge, and triggering reflections on common aspects of our human condition.

This ethnographically inspired journey, trying to understand what it means to be an asylum seeker or refugee, is revelatory, as I learn about their relations to themselves, and to those whom they encounter in their daily lives, including teachers, social security officials, welfare officers, social workers, medical personnel and others. But, it is also revealing a lot about the possibilities for research in general with refugees, throwing up methodological and ethical conundrums along the way.

The process of researching refugees and asylum seekers is enriching, yet confrontational, challenging yet inspirational. I endeavour to follow a ‘thread,’ without being obsessed about not letting it go. Being lost has opened opportunities to stray into new waters, to reconnect with resilience and to re-center the research voyage back to its humble beginnings.

Lostness is relational, attending to a shared experience between myself and the

refugees who participate in this project. Lost at different angles, and in different magnitudes, never in-different, we nevertheless construct a part of our daily realities together. As Gergen and Hosking (2006, p.299), point out, “*we do not begin [here] with answers already in place, but with questions and curiosity. For this exploration we also choose the medium of dialogue.....Within the constructionist domain dialogue plays a pivotal role as the progenitor of all meaning*”.

Whilst being lost can engender confusion, or lead to the tendency to grip tighter on to that which is known, if we soften the boundaries between knowing and unknown, and allow ourselves to open to lostness, we widen the resources for our research and, in the words of Gergen and Hosking “*...we have an enormous canvas available for painting new futures,*” (2006).

It is not about giving in to confusion and turmoil, or accepting that ‘all is lost’. I prefer to look at lostness as an existential condition, in some ways a human necessity, something temporary, encapsulating periods of losing the past to join the present (Solnit, 2006). I see it as collisions with difference, or encounters with transience, discovering the resilience which rises out of abandonment, “*something that can be explored but perhaps not mapped,*” (Solnit, 2006, p.89).

Research is like that; it affords us the opportunity to oscillate between the familiar and the strange. At some stage we stop being lost (at least temporarily), having gone through a transition, “*whereby you cease to be who you were*” (Solnit, 2006, p.80).

“Si vous êtes prêts à abandonner père et mère, frère et soeur, femmes, enfants et amis et à ne jamais les revoir; si vous avez payé toutes vos dettes, rédigé votre testatment, réglé toutes vos affaires et êtes un homme libre; alors vous êtes prêts pour aller marcher”.

“If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk”.
(Thoreau, *Walking*, 1862)

Perhaps we might exchange the words of Thoreau “*...then you are ready for a walk,*” with “*....then you are ready to research*”. Ready for the transformation process to begin; opening oneself up to new resonances, and mutual affectations, which may dismantle old maps and trace new pathways of knowledge and knowing, changing landscapes forever.

It sounds attractive, exciting, doesn't it, this idea of lostness, losing oneself,

getting lost, being lost? And it is, or it can be. Yet, I argue that, in both senses of the word, “*losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing,*” (Solnit, 2006, p.22), it can not only be disorienting, but also frightening, even terrifying.

At home with lostness

Perhaps there are few who feel at home with being lost. Few who don't associate lostness with suffering, doubt or fear. The known, be it culture, language, surroundings, friends and acquaintances, gives us coordinates from where we get our bearings and construct meanings, in order to understand our world. Olsson, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, notes:

“As my takens-for-granted are unhinged, my fix-points begin to float and my compass to spin. In the resulting confusion I no longer know my way about. Whatever I do, I do something wrong,” (Olsson, 2007, p.189).

Researching refugees for the past few years has brought me repeatedly into contact with professionals, volunteers and others, who play a role in the integration process of refugees. This includes school and higher education teachers, social workers, welfare workers, benefits officials, civil servants, hospital staff, doctors, psychiatrists, neighbours, helpers, friends, colleagues, co-students and family members. All are, or have been, invariably lost, at some stage or another. To varying degrees, and with varying degrees of accompanying confusion, sometimes masked by power (antics) and firm talk, or avoided for risk of having to admit one doesn't know what to say, or which course of action to take, at others expressed through pure despondency, indifference, or panic. Lostness would appear to be a condition common to us all.

Take the welfare benefits officer who is at a loss to know what to do with the claimant, in this case B: the citizenship course is completed, the examination is taken, and B. is still awaiting the result, but what now? Constant rounds of cost cutting have left the local municipality with fewer and fewer options for claimants, meaning that there's little chance of them funding an additional study, or a new language course to improve his Dutch, and the days of hopping from one municipal work scheme to another are also (thankfully) over. In practice, this means that unless refugees, and others like them, badger their welfare officers, they may well be 'forgotten about', as municipalities have more than enough on their hands dealing with Dutch unemployed people, never mind the 'hard-to-help' foreigners.

In a similar case of being 'lost' to the system, Ammar, an Iraqi national who I have known for more than four years, and who arrived in 2007, finished his citizenship course about a year ago. Since then he has had regular contact with social workers to help him read his post, to deal with financial matters, and to apply for various types of social assistance; but, he has had no more than one official meeting with the welfare benefits officer who is in charge of helping him find work. Despite requests by Ammar for a meeting, he has been consistently left waiting.

I recently got in touch with one of the team managers in the benefits department in his municipality and received a relatively prompt reply from the benefits officer. She confirmed that she had had a meeting with Ammar, but that she was still unconvinced that he would be able to undertake the study he wanted to enrol in, due to his poor language skills. Even if he was accepted by the vocational college, and despite wanting to pay for the study himself, Ammar would not be allowed to start the course without her permission. However, given that he needed to be 'available to work,' which the benefits officer also admitted would be almost impossible because his Dutch was too poor, she would not be able to give him permission to do a study. It sounded like a farce and it was.

The benefits officer informed me, nevertheless, that, *"As far as I can see, I can put Ammar's name down for a scheme by "Synergon" (a local sort of 'Work First' bureau) where they will also do a test for him to check his knowledge and his skills and to see where the problems lie. After that they should look for a work experience place for him,"* (email, dated 12th July, 2012).

The real question is why Ammar, a middle-aged man, who has been claiming benefits for almost five years, has had so little contact with the local municipality and with his benefits officer in that time? Perhaps we could talk of 'five lost years'? Even if the knowledge about a client exists, (in the heads of people or in the files of one organisation), it somehow seems to get lost in the systems and procedures, and does not make its way to the next link in the (integration) chain. Time, energy, money, but especially trust and hope, are also lost in the process.

Tatiana, before moving to what she hoped would be a more active municipality, had about one meeting a year with her benefits officer; Olga, a Russian refugee, has had refugee status for approximately one , (and has also been receiving benefits for that time), has never seen her benefits officer; Leyla, who has had refugee status for one and half years, has had one meeting in that time; B. has had two meetings in the last one and half years with his contact person at the local municipality.

Contact with the local refugee council is more frequent, although not all refugees make use of their services. The amount of help received varies, depending on the willingness and experience of the volunteer in question. B. has his hands full with his refugee council volunteer, who more often than not asks B., or me, “*what should I do now?*”. The man appears more lost with each question that B. poses, so much so that B. told me that he only sees the volunteer out of a certain sympathy (or pity), and because he doesn’t want to cut ties completely, just in case. We both suspect that the man is an alcoholic.

The school teachers in the vocational colleges, who deliver the citizenship and language courses, often have many years of experience in working with foreigners and refugees alike, (they are part of an ageing population of teachers of Dutch as a second language). Whilst one may be more astute and a better teacher than the other, the teachers I know have a map and a plan, and know in which direction they need to go to get the students ready for the citizenship exam. There may be many ups and downs on the way, including drop-outs and ‘hopeless cases,’ and every now and then some students fall by the wayside, and get lost, or the teachers face a student unlike any other, and are lost for words, and don’t know what to do.

The ‘lost’ teachers, (but also volunteers, professionals, civil servants etc.,) with whom I’ve worked, who are more in chaos than out of it, tend to have trouble keeping students interested and involved. These are the professionals, (and others), who bend more than they are humanely able, trying as hard as they can to comply with the wishes of those around them. They are unable to plot a course, or to make a decision to which they will stick, if faced with dissent. Lacking authority, they are unable to convince students, (or anybody else for that matter), that they know what they’re doing, or where they’re (collectively) heading.

Overall, the teachers in my research are a sturdy, resourceful bunch, whose intercultural communication skills are rather better than those of the average civil servant, or social worker. The teachers who receive the best results are the ones who are open to letting go of their plan and map, if need be, and who exhibit their curiosity by a willingness to navigate in unknown territories, and to explore new possibilities. They allow themselves to be lost, which enlivens their creativity and sharpens their attention, and eventually enables them to alter their plans, readjust the compass, regain balance and reassume their journey with their students. For them lostness is treated as a chance rather than a hindrance.

*If lost were a map, what would it look like?
What would be its coordinates and who would live there?
Would it be over-crowded? A nodal network chaos, with no borders and no signs?
Only people searching, looking, not knowing what for...
Just looking...lost*

*Or a creative, imaginative place? A space for novelty and discovery, where limits are put
to the test, or dissolved, and
borders
are crossed or redefined ...and hope is found
in the unknown*

*Or both? Duality banished. No separateness.
No border-lines. Just border spaces. Full....of potential....
(Diary excerpt)*

Lostness in the borders as potential

Borders can be spatial or temporal. They may refer to physical space and how we imagine that space is or should be, or to boundaries in time and the conceptualisation of time. Equally, they can be epistemological or ideological, separating distinct types of knowledges, all of which are vying to establish themselves as legitimate or truthful; stirring up affective passions which disturb previously held certainties, and upset usual binary divisions. Borders “*vacillate*” (Balibar, 2004), they are “sneaky” zones of indeterminacy (Cameron, 2011), and their functions are innumerable.

There is potentiality in the in-betweenness of borders, where new social spaces can be (re)imagined, and in which the boundaries of representational truth, knowledge and certainty are explored and perhaps even perturbed.

Thinking from the borders, or border thinking, also termed “*double consciousness*”, “*double critique*” and “*an other thinking*” by Mignolo (2000), are “*theoretical articulations*” which turn around the epistemological hegemony of the Eurocentric perspective, which claims Europe as the locus of knowledge production.

For Mignolo: “*Postcoloniality (and its equivalents) is both a critical discourse that brings to the foreground the colonial side of the ‘modern world system’ and the coloniality of power embedded in modernity itself, as well as a discourse that relocates the ratio between*

geohistorical locations (or local histories) and knowledge production". This is referred to as the "reordering of the geopolitics of knowledge", (2000, p.93).

This so-called "reordering" is twofold, and besides the "critique of the subalternization from the perspective of subaltern knowledges", it also entails the "emergence of border thinking". Border thinking broadly encompasses the articulation of a "new epistemological modality at the intersection of Western and the diversity of categories that were suppressed under Occidentalism....Orientalism....and area studies," (Mignolo, 2000, p.93).

Certainly, researching refugees, who more often than not fall into one of those suppressed categories, and whose "Otherness" oozes reification and objectification, demands thinking "from and about the borders". Yet, the question arises as to the possibility for the researcher to effectively do so if the researcher has no direct experience of being a refugee herself. I am not, nor have I ever been, a refugee. I cannot understand the experience of the refugee from the point of view of the historical experience of being a refugee. I am not that "new epistemological subject" that Mignolo talks about; the kind that thinks from subaltern experiences and that induces "new forms of rationality," (Mignolo, 2000).

Nevertheless, I would suggest that an alliance of thinking in the border is possible. An alliance which displaces traditional subject-object thinking, and which rearticulates lost sensibilities and accentuates inter-relatedness. My research is not, therefore, an attempt at postcolonial theorizing according to Mignolo's terms; rather, it is an emergent process of creation and re-creation, in which the "distinction between the knower and the known" (Mignolo, 2000, p.18) can never be erased, where 'contamination' is not necessarily undesirable and where borderland spaces provide possibilities for new logics and for new forms of intersubjective empowerment, even amidst loss and despair.

Presence in borders

Borders are permeable, changing, porous spaces which resist control, (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, 2008). The in-between spaces of borderlands, at the confluence of the known and the unfamiliar, form dynamic potentialities in which lostness can lead to new discoveries, and to intensified relationality and affectivity, pushing "towards a new consciousness," (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Lostness is a condition familiar to us all, researcher and refugee alike. We can be taken by surprise by it, try to fight it, or eschew its presence, but we cannot avoid

it completely. New spaces may be crafted in lostness, forging a resilience and hope, and in alliance with border thinking, it can encourage the imaginary of the modern world system to “crack” (Mignolo, 2000), “*compelling the reorganisation and refocusing of knowledge*” (Brydon, 2007), leading to a “*reconsideration of what counts as knowledge and who has the ‘right to research,’*” (Appadurai, 2006).

Research in the borders can challenge conventional notions of knowing, but only if we are prepared to submit to the openness and reflexivity that is required to unleash lostness as a transformational potential. The cradling arms of familiarity may be comforting, but, if we are willing as researchers to loosen our grip on Stafford’s “*thread*” (1999), or to visit Collins’ “*Blue*” (1988), we may delight in the affective responsiveness of relationality, which also dwells in borderlands, as experience “*acting in a not knowing way*” (Ray, 2000), and organise from the perspective of presence - “*being in the present and ‘being in the now rather than the know,’*” (Hosking, 2012). We will then be, more than ever, able to harness the potential of border spaces, for releasing the creative and empowering dynamics which lostness holds for each and every one of us.

Because we are not separated and bounded individuals, our reflexivity must also strive to be dialogical and relational, (Hosking, Pluut, 2010). Indeed as Gergen (1994, p.48, quoted in Hosking, Pluut, 2010, p.62) states: “*with each reflexive enterprise, one moves into an alternative discursive space, which is to say, into yet another domain of relatedness. Reflexive doubt is not then a slide into infinite regress but a means of recognizing anterior realities and thus giving voice to still further relationships*”.

“*Reflexive doubt*”, “*reflexive enterprises*”, “*voice*” and “*relationships*”: it all sounds too easy. Doubt might forge a critical sense of self-awareness that can help discharge the transformative potential of being lost, or it might not. Indeed, doubt which surges in an affective encounter can degenerate into (mutual) feelings of mistrust or frustration, or any possible negative emotion.

Lostness and the turn to affect

The turn to affect demands that we pay attention to our bodies and to the complex interaction between mind, body and heart. It demands that we address things as they are, in the now (Jackson, ed, 1996), and that we “*attend to the “pulsational intensities” of life rather than any give cultural codes or symbolic orders*” (Desjarlais, in Jackson, ed, 1996, p.70).

As I have previously argued, affects are neutral and non-linear; they can either way-lay us in mid-action, and lead us to new unexpected spaces, even launching

us into confusion or disarray, or they may find a warm welcome in our deepest patterns and pre-conditions, stubbornly rendering us incapable of seeing the world any other way than what we're already used to. In fact, we may not even realise that there is another way to see the world.

Lostness is, in many senses, a companion to affect. For researchers, it means a genuine and intentional decision to delve into our affects. To wait and see what happens, and to reflect in-situ about our next course of action. By unmasking our own prejudices and by being honest about the limitations in our knowing, perhaps we can go some way to saying farewell to fear, and to crafting new configurations of creative and respectful intersubjectivity.

Like affect, however, lostness has its downside. It can overwhelm us, leading to severe disorientation, and retrenchment into the known. Our undertakings in self-reflexivity can, to some degree, temper these risks, but cannot do away with them altogether.

Conclusions

I have looked at lostness as a theoretical concept through which we can examine the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. Their deep connection with all aspects of lostness and loss is critical to our understanding of their experiences of flight and exile, but also of rebuilding and integration.

Lostness is bound to affect, both as a theoretical concept and as a methodological ally. Both open up a terrain of potentiality, which can enhance learning and creativity, in the best possible ways. But both, in their neutrality, can also lead us into a minefield of despondency, anger or depression. Therefore, when undertaking affectively-engaged and critically-reflexive research with vulnerable groups, we must be prepared to contend not only with the fears they might incite, but also the rich possibilities which reside within lostness and affect.

Affective Matter (6)

“Stolen”

A fairy tale

“Once upon a time a princess lived in a small city. She had no brothers or sisters. But she found peace in being alone and dreamt that she would grow up and that she would spend her days learning. Her whole life would be different.

She was a young girl of fourteen years old, going daily to school; she didn't know what lay in store for her. She didn't know that her life would change with the wink of an eye.

It was a typical summer's morning, and the day passed by as it usually would. The princess went for a walk in the city. She looked at the passers-by; everybody seemed so happy. It was as if everybody had their heart's desire.

She made her way home, but close to her house a wolf lay in wait. When she came closer to the wolf, it jumped out of its hiding place and grabbed the princess and took her away. In the blink of an eye everything stopped breathing, and it was as if the world had ceased to exist. But the world did still exist; only the princess stopped 'being'. She was stolen by a wolf, and from that moment on she disappeared for everybody, even herself”.

(Leyla, refugee from Chechnya, January 2012)

Where to begin?

My first recollections of Leyla are in the asylum centre where she lived at the time I first met her. She didn't yet have formal refugee status and had been in the country for a couple of years already. A single mother of four children, varying in age from five to fifteen, from Chechnya. Leyla's husband was a Chechen rebel fighting against the Russians for an independent Islamic country, before he was assassinated by Russian forces, shot dead at the wheel. Since his death, she was pestered and even kidnapped by state forces, who were trying to weed information out of her about her husband's past connections and activities. And as if that wasn't enough, her husband's brothers were also after her with the intention of forcing her to hand over her husband's children who, according to tradition, now 'belongs' to them. It was their honour that was at stake, she said.

She fled her homeland in 2007, travelling via Poland, where she made an initial asylum claim, which was refused, and thereafter travelled on to the Netherlands. In Poland she first received assistance from a nephew, the son of her mother's brother, but they couldn't support five extra mouths for long, themselves having six small children to feed and look after. Leyla lived in a garage for a while, and earned money for the rent and food in inconspicuous ways. When she could, she moved on to the Netherlands, paying somebody to drive her and her children through the night across the borders. When she looks back now on what she went through to get here, she can hardly believe she found the strength, but especially the courage, to do what she had to do.

But then her life up to that point could hardly be classed as a fairy tale.

Leyla was literally 'stolen' in a centuries' old tradition in the Caucasus where girls are snatched off the streets by men, taken home, forced to have sex and then to marry the perpetrator. In Leyla's case she was stolen by friends of her husband-to-be, who took her into the mountains. Once the act had been committed, she was taken home to her father's house by her husband-to-be who then asked for her hand in marriage. Ridden by shame, her father disowned her, and left her to the whim of her husband and his family. She was fourteen at the time, and never spoke to her father again. She managed to maintain in contact with her mother and they continued to meet secretly without her father's consent or knowledge. For him she no longer existed. She had brought shame on the family and in doing so, was disconnected for good. At the time of his death she hadn't set eyes on him for years.

Leyla had her first child, a daughter, at the age of fifteen. A sickly child, whose physical demeanour hasn't really changed since, Medina was and continues to be a constant source of worry to her mother. Leyla went on to have four more children. Her first son was born some seven years after Medina, closely followed by her second son, and then a daughter. Leyla was still pregnant with her youngest daughter when her husband was killed, and so she never knew her father. According to Leyla, only Medina and her first son Adam, remember their father. Third son, Ramadan, can't remember his dad. In between there was also another boy, born prematurely, too small to save with the primitive medical attention in Chechnya at the time. Apparently Leyla's husband, when on leave, would let their first son play with his guns; something which Adam seems to remember. At least he can recount such memories to me when he wants to.

Strange and somewhat disturbing is that, apart from the eldest daughter, now going on eighteen, the other children believe their father is still fighting in a war against the Russians back in Chechnya. He is their hero, a freedom fighter, who will be coming home at some stage in the future. Leyla has never plucked up the courage to tell them the truth of his death, and as with all such things, the longer she leaves it, the harder it becomes.

It sometimes proves difficult to maintain this farce, given that teachers, and others, know the truth. Yet everybody pussyfoots around the three youngest children, afraid of letting the cat out of the bag. The children but especially the oldest boy, often recount hero stories of the war, of a father in a distant land, using his military prowess to outwit the enemy, for the honour of a free Muslim state. The boy even lets his choice of favourite sports and hobbies hinge on his image of his fighting father. It's kickboxing or some other fighting sport that's top of his list, not football or hockey; he wants to be like dad; a super fit fighting hero.

His father wasn't that heroic a husband though, by Leyla's accounts. More than twelve years her senior, and an uneducated man of the mountains, he could be violent and extremely jealous. Chechen women belong in the home, in the kitchen, taking care of their menfolk and children. Leyla never got to continue with her education and effectively left any dreams of studying behind on that fated day that she was snatched off the street. She was a peasant housewife, with a headscarf and an apron; a woman who knew how to sow and tend a vegetable garden, to clean up wounds, and even fire a rifle. She looked tough on the photos I saw of her taken back in those days, and old. Much older than she looks now. Her face looked worn and weathered and her clothes were simple. She was an uneducated Chechen wife, with lots of common sense and practical skills to take care of herself, her children and her husband. And it turns out, more than enough to get her out of Chechnya when life became unbearable. Staying put was no option. Fleeing meant leaving the known behind, in exchange for an unknown future, in a new country, with a new language, new culture, and new ways of being. In 2007 she chose to cross borders in search of safety for herself and her children.

Crossing the border into the Netherlands turned out not to be a bad choice, though I should explain the use of the word 'choice'. The choices asylum seekers make are relative. How much money does an asylum seeker have to spare? What is the going rate for transportation from one place to another? What are the risks involved in the travel and in getting caught, especially for a young mother of four? Does the asylum seeker know anyone at the place of reception? These and more

questions may be considered in advance of embarking on the journey. And the answers to them determine the final destination and which borders will be crossed. Leyla's move was not that of a hopeless woman, but of a woman driven by hope for a better future for her and for her children.

Leyla waited for a shorter period than most to have her asylum request approved. Her initial request was in 2007, and her second in 2009. It took more than three years to get a refugee status, in February 2011. With a few botches on the way, like getting wrongly sent back to Poland in a plane whilst handcuffed to a woman officer, not to mention two failed suicide attempts, she was eventually granted permission to stay in the country with her children. The stresses and trials of life as an asylum seeker could, one imagines, be left behind. The borders had been successfully negotiated, and once recognition of her status as a 'real' refugee followed, security and peace of mind could ensue.

Residency and a new beginning. For Leyla. For this story. A new life, and a chance to make new relationships and new lives. Or not?

Leyla, hopeless in relation

A meeting with a psychologist on 01.10.2012

Despondent and disillusioned, she looks on, eyes facing downwards, blank, just sad. She notes each one of the psychologist's words, as it is translated into her own language, and she writhes her hands together. I notice the look, the blinking to hold back the tears, as she hears the drone of the psychologist and feels the statistical reality of IQ scores plunge into her conscience. She's downhearted, and shows it. She raises her voice to protest, arguing that it's obvious that the scores are so low; they don't do such tests, or have any experience of this type of exercise in her country. How can her boy therefore be expected to understand any of it? It must be dependent on where you come from, from the schooling you've already had; she makes it a point that her son didn't even go to school in their own country, so how is he supposed to recognise patterns, analogies, mosaic, categories and the like, and why would it matter if he's a bit clumsy and didn't draw the lines in exactly the right spots, she retorts? That kind of stuff doesn't exist in Chechnya, so its validity definitely hasn't been tested out there.

To no avail. The psychologist, apart from a perfunctory offering of a tissue at some stage, has a bemused smile on her face, leaning towards condescension, or maybe discomfort? Perhaps she can't imagine why a mother might become so distressed at such news. After all, this does need to be known; the school does

need this information if they are to ‘help’ her son. She continues, informing us of result after result, noting Adam’s score in relation to the standard score. Each time recalling what it means in terms of cognitive ability, saying “*so with sixteen good answers, it’s the same number of answers that a child of seven years and ten months would achieve*”.

Leyla wears a furry jacket, brownish, a long black skirt made of polyester, a short-sleeved black t-shirt with a lowish round neck, and a black head band. The psychologist is probably late twenties or early thirties, with dark blond hair. She wears a black shirt over cream coloured pants, and has a lacy scarf around her neck. Her lips are thin and pursed. She has short grey boots on with a slight heel, and a large round watch. Her eyes are black, and unemotional. She leans over the desk towards Leyla. The translator has a blue top with diamante-type beads around the neckline, a dark blue skirt, below the knee, and a blue woollen cardigan, sky blue. She has beads around her neck, and was wearing black, low, laced shoes. The type someone of the older generation would wear for comfort. She is, I imagine, in her fifties.

We sit in an office; it’s plain. The psychologist sits on one of the long sides of the rectangular table, I am at her far left, Leyla is at her mid-right, and the translator sits at the corner of the table, on the short edge. The psychologist’s elbows are on the table, arms straight up in front of her, except for when she points to the paper with the test results on it with her pen, and then leans over towards us. She has a worn face for someone relatively young. Hardened, I think. Not warm and empathetic; rather distant, though not cold, superior but not exactly arrogant. Seems more like a protective shield or a guardedness, un-emotive, neutral; neither friendly nor unfriendly. I imagine she wishes to maintain a distance fitting for a professional relationship.

The more she talks, the more Leyla stutters out her words, raising her voice in indignation every now and then, taken aback with emotion and clearly suffering. The translator translates steadily, emphasising those bits of the conversation which need emphasising, as if it’s a match against the psychologist. Between bouts of stuttering, there’s anger, fire and fury, then despair and disappointment, then tears and sniffing, as I take her hand. The psychologist continues her story, technically, mechanically, but slightly taken aback. She becomes a bit redder in the face every time Leyla pours forth an argument or a question. Leyla is getting whiter meanwhile. That strange laugh, smirk, grin, is still perusing the lips of the psychologist as Leyla talks of a school conspiracy. The psychologist feels uncomfortable but steadfastly continues with her story, reporting on the report,

spewing out the scores, and regurgitating the means and the averages and the standards, before coming to the conclusion. She repeats that Adam's hearing problems have no influence whatsoever on the test results. IQ 79, tests indicate the cognitive ability of a seven years, ten months' old child. But we're talking here of a boy of eleven and half years¹⁴.

"Adam doesn't always make contact with other people, but he often looks downwards. That's not what you expect with children who are hard of hearing," the psychologist states, without going further into why she makes this remark.

The interpreter translates. Leyla's face whitens further, she looks bewildered at first, then enraged. She asks what is the meaning of this statement. *"Why are you saying this?"* The psychologist says that it's just an observation. That's all. Nothing meant by it really.

"Any more questions, or should we leave it at that?" *"No more questions,"* she notes. *"Then one final thing. Do you give permission for me to send the report directly to the school or will you give them a copy yourself?"* No need to guess the answer. *"No, I will do it myself"*. The psychologist can send a report to the GP, though Leyla doesn't really get why he needs one, but not to the school. She wants to take care of that on her own. Leyla stands, I shake hands, and we leave. Leyla is emotional and visibly shaken. She envisages a conspiracy devised by school; a cunning plan to get Adam into special education. She's known it all along, and she's having none of it. But what now? How to face the results? She's lost. She feels hopeless she says.

The interpreter, who Leyla has seen elsewhere, states indignantly that this is a common occurrence. Leyla shouldn't allow such authorities to push her around or to get her son pushed out of a normal school, she advises. Leyla remains silent. Later she tells me that she recognises this interpreter, as there aren't many Chechen interpreters in the Netherlands. Leyla prefers to have a Russian interpreter, when needed. She can't trust the Chechen ones she notes. We say goodbye to the interpreter and we walk together in silence to the car where she cries once more. How often have I seen those tears, shared tearful spaces? Sometimes the weight of responsibility on her shoulders crushes her with a downward force, too heavy to bear. We drive home, lost for a while for words. In a relationship embedded in a trust which can nestle in the silence of confusion and not knowing.

¹⁴ After years of wrangling with schools, (Adam went to three different primary schools), he finally got the support and help he needed. Despite being told that he was 'mentally impaired', and that he should go to 'special school', in 2015 Adam will finish his last year at primary school and will go on to secondary education at an average level for Dutch secondary school children.

PART TWO

Critique of Affect

“And this was the attitude I would meet on the street. The poor would say, “Don’t kill the man”. I discovered, which is often the case, that the poor found it in their hearts to forgive. Whereas, the pure, the middle class, you know, haven’t got it any more. Somewhere along the line, they’ve lost it. Like, you know, as if Paul Crump sitting there is a threat to them, and they had to keep the status quo. Don’t rock the boat in any way”.

Terkel, 1993, p.35

CHAPTER SIX

A critique of Affect

“Heroism, in the classic mode, only perpetuated tragedy”
(Kleinman, 2006, p.193)

Reading “Division Street America,” from Studs Terkel, I get the feeling that good inevitably must triumph against evil. The stories presented highlight how, despite poverty and destitution, poor people can surpass the dreariness of their circumstances, as the bright light of moral goodness shines far beyond that which is dark and devilish. Terkel’s accounts reveal the heroic side of human nature lurking behind the murkiness of life in the big city. It is *“a remarkable work of art – a collection of poetry, really. Poetry of the everyday. Poetry of the streets. And, like all good poetry, it’s about our yearnings,”* (Kotlowitz, foreword to Division Street America, 2005).

Terkel interviewed some seventy people; a diverse bunch of citizens living in Chicago. He says he *“was on the prowl for a cross-section of urban thought, using no one method or technique,”* (Terkel, 2006, p.xxiii). Whilst endeavouring to include people of all races, and incomes in his selection, Terkel says that he deliberately left out certain groups of people whose high level of literacy afforded them other media to get their message across, (for example, professors, journalists and clergymen). He used tips, chance encounters, and hunches to get in touch with his interviewees, meeting people in a variety of settings, including their homes, restaurants, street corners, and on public transport.

Despite his assurances that we get a relatively diverse cross-section of accounts, I can’t help wondering why so many of his interviewees like art or literature, despite their lowly backgrounds, and lack of education. The white people he talks to are rarely ever overtly racist, and where racism or discrimination is discussed, it’s addressed in terms of *‘fear of the unknown’* and the like. In one account, about a man named Hal Malden (2006, p.324), Hal got convicted on charges of defamation of character. Hal was apparently mixed up with American Fascists, and took part in a demonstration outside a cinema, which was showing a film about a famous black performer. The demonstrators were carrying defamatory signs, and Hal got arrested and sentenced to jail. It seems that in jail he had a change of mind. Hal recounts what happened when *“Big Tom”* approached him in jail:

"All the guy did was just come over and ask me if I still felt the way I did. I told him very honestly I didn't. My whole system of values and everything else was shaken up. I didn't know what the hell I did believe in, but I didn't feel that way about anybody anymore," (Terkel, 2006, p. 327).

Hal goes on to recall how he lost his racist opinions once and for all when he "met a Negro girl and really fell in love with her. She taught me a lot that I had never really thought of. She showed me a world, another society that I didn't know anything about. And I showed her. She had never met a Southern white. I think we taught each other about different kinds of people," (Terkel, 2006, p. 328).

In Terkel's book, diversity shows its positive sides; there's tolerance and acceptance, and people read books and are self-educated, they know right from wrong and they help their neighbours, or play piano. People make an "honest dollar," (p.159) or work hard and make it out of "grinding poverty"(p. 200). Mrs Winslow, talking of white bigots says: *"They need changing because they have not had our opportunities to meet and know the magnificent people of other races,"* (p.145) and Mr Carter, on black people, notes, *"And they're decent people, they're good people in my book"* (p.147).

Big government, big industry and the rich are, like the system and the bureaucrats, not to be trusted. Poor, honest, hardworking men and women, have to fight for their rights. According to Kid Pharaoh (p37), lawyers and doctors, *"are the two biggest thieves in our society. One steals legitimate, the other kills legitimate. Charge you what they want. They never pay the Uncle what he's entitled to. Guys like me they want to put into jail"*.

In Terkel's Chicago there are goodies and baddies. *"The powers that be are the powers that are,"* (p.170). We can't help feeling sorry for the rogues, or liking the poor labourers who are up against a tough capitalistic system, fighting unprincipled leaders, working *"their heads off, you know, to improve the city in one way or another and they really love it"* (p.180), or growing their own vegetables whilst trying to make something from nothing.

Kotlowitz, in the foreword to the 2006 edition of *Division Street America*, writes, *"It's transformative – both for the teller of the tale as well as for us, the reader. People begin to see things they'd never seen before, understand things they never understood before. What Terkel has long realized is that people want to count – or, as cab driver Dennis Hart says in these pages, "I want my death to be worth something,""* (p.xviii).

It's as though by chronicling the lives of these Americans, the reader is affected by a certain element of purity in their experiences. The bleakness of their accounts is somehow tempered by the hopes and dreams of the interviewees for a better future. And, even where there is a sense of despondency, we are drawn to feel sorry for the common criminal and to admire his audacity, because we are encouraged to view it as a necessary part in the struggle against the big bad system.

My experience is **not** so clear cut. Not wishing to demoralise my reader, I think I must point out that there's an element of heroics in Terkel's book, which doesn't quite fit with the reality of my own research, and I fear, with real life. Of course, there are heroes who are poor, who work hard, and who rise above their own tragic lives; but more often than not, they don't. My research showed me that escape is not so easy and that the chance of getting caught in a downwards spiral is all too obvious. Traumatized refugees may have once been heroes, helpless and abused, but they may also have been abusers or perpetrators; even simultaneously. Take the former army officers from Iraq whom I know, Sunnis for the most part, who welcomed the arrival of IS (formerly known as ISIS) in their country, and who, fail to condemn their actions, even after hearing about the atrocities committed by them.

At the same time, the losses refugees feel are not always something that they can come to terms with, or easily get over; the traumatization of loss leaves an enduring melancholic mark on their sense of self. The loss cannot be mourned easily; let alone accepted with ease.

"They haven't got a clue at the IND (immigration department) what it's like to leave everything behind; as if we do it for fun. You lose yourself completely when you have to flee, you don't know who you are anymore, you have nothing left. It doesn't matter where I am, I'll always be looking behind me. Even here I can't be sure they won't find me. My past will always follow me. All that trouble because of my husband, because of his family and because of my father's family. It's all tradition, honour. My father's brothers are after me because I dishonoured them, and my husbands' nephews want the children back because, according to our tradition, they belong to his side of the family now. So many problems, because of tradition and culture. None of them come from the big city; they're all from 'behind the mountains', with no education, and they still carry out all those traditions. And now my mother's got problems, because she helped me and she knows where I am. They settle stuff in Chechnya according to old traditions; they have to speak to the elders. Now the uncles came looking for my mother, and her brothers told them they didn't want any trouble, and that they didn't know where she was. They gave the brothers permission to

look for us, if they want to. They just don't want any more trouble. We're all tired. And the IND thinks this sort of thing will just blow over. They have no idea. These grudges get passed on from one generation to the next, they never get forgotten. And the Polish authorities work with Kaderov (Chechen President). One family, a whole family, got deported from Belgium and just disappeared. Nobody knows where, but everyone knows they were probably murdered by Kaderov's men. There was a family just after the war whose son betrayed lots of resistance fighters, like my husband, and all of a sudden they lived in this huge three storeyed house. Like that, they had money, out of nowhere. Everyone kept their distance to them after that, you couldn't trust them. It's like the translators here. That's why I never got a Chechen translator, nor my mother. They send information back to Kaderov. That translator who was at the audiological centre, she goes back to Chechnya on holiday, even though she's a refugee. She's now got a Dutch passport, but she travels freely there. How? Because she passes information on about the Chechens who are here. That's what someone told me about her. She is not to be trusted." (Leyla, August 2014).

The optimism expressed in many of Terkel's stories is starkly missing from the accounts that I have from refugees in the Netherlands. As is the welcoming face of diversity and difference. Instead, there is deep mistrust, hatred and wariness of the other who is different, and who has a different culture and religion to one's own.

"I asked COA where I could get a house the quickest. Though I'd rather stay here in the North because my children are already at school here, I've now been told I'll be going to The Hague, as I can move there more quickly. I can't stand it here anymore in the asylum centre. Anything is better than here. You don't know what it's like when you're forced to share accommodation with people you don't know. They are from different countries, their culture is totally different to mine, they do things differently, and even their religion is different. I can't stand it anymore. I can't stand living like this anymore." (Ahmed, a Muslim from Syria, September 2014).

A group of Afghan boys also told me, "it's the blacks, the ones from Somalia. They are really dirty. They don't clean anything at all. The dishes, the toilets, it stinks in the unit. And they just sit down the whole day, doing nothing. They're really lazy. Of course COA does nothing about it. They don't care. They don't listen to our complaints. It's useless trying to get a transfer to another unit. Anywhere's better than here. There are just too many fights and arguments".

Rwandese and Burundian women, whom I've taught in the past, refuse to talk about which ethnic group they come from. They won't mention the genocide and they're afraid to let people know where they come from or what happened to

them, for fear of reprisals or retribution. Muslims who have converted to Christianity, and have been granted refugee status because they have become Christians, don't tell their fellow asylum seekers why they got refugee status. They say: *"my lawyer worked something out for me,"* or *"the IND looked at my case again, and took a new decision"*. They keep their church-going activities to themselves, because they don't want to be taunted or harassed by others. They are petrified of being cast out of their communities, and don't want others talking about them behind their backs. In schools and on citizenship courses, the Arabs stick with the Arabs, the Afghans with the Afghans, the Somali's with the Somali's, and so on. Of course there are exceptions; black people go around with other black people, especially if there are not many people around from your own country (Moussa from Guinea has friends from Cameroun and other African countries), but visit any asylum centre and more often than not you'll notice a separation in the groups chatting, playing pool, darts, or ping pong with one another. Not everyone is as open and non-discriminating as in Terkel's *Division Street America*.

While I may have hoped for tolerance and peace amongst the different nationalities and religions in an asylum centre, my naivety has long since been crushed by the realities of the situation. On a regular evening in the 'leisure room,' you can feel the affective charges whizzing around: the chatter of the voices, the burst of music blaring out of the speakers, or the loudness of the television, which no one is watching anyway, but which provides more than enough background noise. Groups of youngsters from Afghanistan hang around waiting for a pool table to become vacant, whilst others, Somalians, stand near the bar, negotiating with one or another asylum seeker who sells cheap telephone cards, or cigarettes; an older Afghan man is trying to get children out of the room, whilst a group of Eritreans is cheering and tipping up the Subbuteo table to get the ball to roll their way. It only takes one wrong word, an overly eager glance, or misplaced comment, to set the whole thing alight, and to ignite affects on a course towards disaster. Then, things can really get out of hand.

Alongside a whole gamut of prejudices and pre-conceived ideas, deeply ingrained affects can flare up, patterning themselves deeper into our flesh, confirming our worst fears about the other, whomever he or she may be. Mistrust and fear: no pens allowed in the interview room at the reception centre for new asylum seekers. No telephones with cameras, in fact no bags whatsoever. Not even for those accompanying the asylum seekers like myself. I had a job recently persuading the security guards that I needed a pen to write with. *"Sorry madam, but you'll have to put the pens in your baggage, and your baggage in the store room. No pens are allowed in here I'm afraid, for security reasons"*. I hate to think what she

would have said, had she searched my bag and found my tape recorder sitting there with a brand new pack of triple A batteries, just in case.

Fear and suspicion is not only bred by the system, and reinforced by it: that would be too easy. No, it lies in the bodies and minds of asylum seekers and refugees, long before they get to the Netherlands. They already bear deep affective scars, from their own experiences in their home countries. Mistrust of bureaucrats, of the police, of those in places of authority. Fear of neighbours of a different ethnic group, or reverence for black magic and witch doctors. Shame for handicapped children or adults, and hatred of those of other religions. And the same is true of ourselves. We would be stupid to say otherwise.

Liverpudlians against Mancunians. Blacks against whites. Upper class against working class. Yes, the class system is far from dead. And Christians against Muslims. Whilst I may be exaggerating the differences, they play a marked role in shaping who we are, and how we live out our affective lives. Not only influenced by our upbringing, culture and experiences, we shouldn't forget the unpredictability of our own prejudices. Sometimes they lie in wait, relatively at peace when our lives and the world seems to be going the way we want it to. Then, a shocking event in the news, something in our private lives happens to upset the balance, and ingrained conditioning surfaces, to affect us and those around us once more. Severing the ease, and digging a new affective grave from where old patterns will surface again.

"I couldn't believe how I was treated the other day whilst waiting for my mother. She'd just gone into her interview. The man at reception had checked her name and nationality – of course it says Russian, and not Chechen. Then, I had to move into the waiting room, but couldn't because a new group of people had just arrived with the translators and lawyers and they were blocking the door. I had just got a cup of hot chocolate from the machine, and so I sat down for a second to wait for the rush to pass. The man shouted out at me, 'You can't sit there. That chair isn't for the likes of you. You can't use it. You have to move'. I tried to tell him I was just waiting for the people to move, but he told me again that I couldn't sit there. You should have seen the look on his face, he was really mean. He was fuming. I thought later that it's probably because of what's happening now in Ukraine. He saw that we were Russians. And, what with the plane which was shot down. But honestly, it was really embarrassing and not normal, the way he talked to me. I had to do everything in my power not to get angry, for my mother's sake" (Leyla talking to me on a car journey back from the asylum centre where her mother was staying, August 2014).

I told her that it might have been the case that he saw that they were from Chechnya and that he realised they were Muslims. And given everything that is happening in Iraq and Syria, perhaps that's what riled him. Who knows?

“For Massumi, affect is precisely a matter of how intensities come together, move each other, and transform and translate *under or beyond* meaning, semantics, fixed systems, cognitions. Part of the assumption here is that – even in the most reactionary of circumstances – *nothing happens if affective intensity has not already paid us a visit*” (Bertelsen, Murphie, 2010, p. 147, italics in original).

That is, affective forces, or intensities, are already resident within us. They escape, re-organize, create or transform our frameworks, and upset our everyday discourses. Sometimes they emerge as “emotion or feeling, the folding of broader affective intensities into the nervous system, eventually to become recognizable as the *register*, eventually the representation, of the ongoing folding of self and world, *as the person*,” (Bertelsen, Murphie, 2010, p.140, italics in original).

Leyla felt a tone of displeasure emanating from the receptionist, when she tried to sit in a waiting room on a chair that wasn't meant for her. She later asked the same receptionist if she could take a chair outside into the fresh air for her mother to sit on, as it's hard for her to stand for long periods, having just had a hip replacement operation a few weeks ago. The answer was 'No', again.

Affect cannot be captured. We can sense when affects subside or turn into new affects, or just die away, in their ongoing passage. Like the disdain when I first met the social worker, Jan, from the addictions clinic where Hafid was receiving treatment. He addressed me, at first, with a look and feel of annoyance, as if we were working for two different causes. He remained wary during the meeting, at times edging closer with a smile, or (uneasy) laughter, trying to fill the gaps with talk of all the work he'd done to help Hafid, at great expense, and with little gratitude from Hafid.

His attempts to involve Hafid in the discussion were feeble, though he took advantage of the occasion to point out how much was expected of Hafid, and to note that Hafid had not kept to all the agreements, and that Hafid needed to sharpen up his ideas and to get more pro-active. Hafid looked on, writhing his hands together, getting more and more annoyed, yet shying away, each time criticism was levelled at him.

Jan ranted on about all his efforts, though he had no idea what was really

happening in Hafid's life at the time. Throughout the meeting, the hostile affects were like sparks bouncing off his nervous body. "Why do those people always look like scruff bags?" I asked myself. At some stage during the meeting, he cottoned on to the fact that I was there to help, and not as his competitor. I learned a long time ago that it's not always worth it to make a fuss. So I listen, get what information I can, and assess what I need to proceed, and then get out without creating a scene. I can just as well leave the glory to the other, so that he thinks that he's the one who is doing a great job. This was one such case. Jan's tenseness eased, and he relaxed. I knew that, whilst I couldn't expect much from him, he'd be less angry at me in the future, if I was easy going now. And that alone would make my job much easier.

"Let us now Praise Famous Men"

Like Terkel, Agee arouses sympathy for his characters. His descriptions of their desolate lives and ruined surroundings ooze a beauty and grace which sets them apart from the grind of their daily reality.

"Behind the house the dirt is blond and bare, except a little fledging of grass-leaves at the roots of structures, and walked-out rages of grass thickening along the sides. It lifts up gently, perhaps five feet in twenty yards: across the top line of this twenty yards is the barn, set a few feet to the right of center of the rear of the house. Half between the barn and house, symmetrical to the axis of the house, the henroost and the smokehouse face each other across a bare space of perhaps twelve feet of dirt," (Agee, Evans, 2006, p.115).

"It is my belief that such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary 'beauty'. In part because this is ordinarily neglected or even misrepresented in favour of their shortcomings as shelters; and in part because their esthetic success seems to me even more important than their functional failure; and finally out of the uncontrollable effort to be faithful to my personal predilections, I have neglected function in favour of esthetics," (Agee, Evans, 2006, p. 177).

Agee is moved by what he sees and what he experiences. He chooses to lay bare the family's inherent dignity and to defend their limitations. On illiteracy he writes: *"That they are, by virtue of these limitations, among the only 'honest' and 'beautiful' users of language, is true..."* and he notes that, *"I believe that every human being is potentially capable, within his 'limits', of fully 'realizing' his potentialities..."* (Agee, Evans, 2006, p. 270/271).

And, like Terkel, Agee conjures up a performance seeped in affective yearnings and longings, in which the poor and downtrodden are "cheated and choked" by the literate and privileged, deceived and robbed of hope. Yet, they forge on regardless;

hard workers in their home-made overalls and worn-out shoes, old and haggard, or young and burdened with a responsibility to reap a more decent future. And we even like (and would defend) Terkel's rogues and (ex) criminals, whose resourcefulness makes them deserving once more.

Our affective sensibilities are on alert; highly attuned to the lofty ideals of Agee and Terkel. We want to like these people; we can't help but sympathise with them. We look beyond their tragedies, and identify with their authentic human spirit, which we are relieved to discover lurking in the dark recesses of their pain and suffering. And we feel good by what we read.

But hold on. Affect's promise, can also be nightmarish. The reality of a dirt floor and cooped up living spaces isn't usually so poetic, let alone beautiful. A room of three metres by two meters, one single bed for Mostafa's mother, and a carpet on the floor which Mostafa sleeps on at night; a metal cabinet to keep all their belongings in, and a small sitting space on the floor with a few cushions, so that they can at least welcome people with a shred of decency to drink tea with them. A young man of twenty four, sharing a room with his mother. Both suffering from trauma; both desperate for something better, but without hope. There's no grace in Mostafa's mother's face – it is ash grey, aged beyond its years, with sunken eyes bereft of any joy or signs of living. At the bare mention of the word father she breaks down. At the bare mention of the Taliban, she shudders and holds her head in her hands. Her son, Mostafa, rocks incessantly and rubs his hands in his hair. His gaze is towards the floor, as his eyes start to well up. Mother is crying again. As I reach out my hand and place it on her shoulder, she weeps into her handkerchief, trying not to draw attention to herself or to her sorrows. We are all affected by her grief and anxiety. We sit in silence. That's not beautiful; it's pitiful.

They share the unit at the asylum centre with six more people. They barely know one another. Men and women of different nationalities and religions, all sharing one kitchen, one cooker, and one toilet and shower. Some of the units I've been in stink. I don't even dare to go to the toilet in them, let alone cook or eat there. Fat and grease line the gas rings of the cooker, and the floor is so full of smears and stains and leftovers, that it hardly seems worth it to clean it any more. Bare and broken, squalid and sleazy, chipped cups and plates, wallpaper peeling off the walls, exposed light sockets, brown toilet basins, and filthy sinks, taped up hoovers, and manky clothes with brightly coloured flip-flops, which would never match anything, but they are cheap and cheerful. The cracks in the windows, and the stains on the carpet, or the holes in the walls, are just that; cracked windows,

dirty carpets and badly maintained walls. A sign that nobody cares. Not 'beautiful' or 'dignified'. In fact, for many, dignity is something which is long lost, just like the rest of their lives.

"I don't know what's happened to him. He's not the same anymore. He's gone. He's in there somewhere, only I don't know where," (Afghan refugee, speaking about his traumatised brother).

Their misery is miserable and their lives are tragic. The sense of despondency is high; apathy is their best companion. I feel their bodies resonating with dejection and fear. They live on the fringes, suspended awaiting a final judgement from the authorities, perhaps deportation or imprisonment. They are restless and disengaged. Affected, yet numb to the core. And sometimes they wander from place to place, because they have nowhere else to go, or they get high on their anti-depression drugs, or they party all night long and drink a bottle of whiskey or vodka to forget. But theirs is no real party. It's not a real celebration. It's a momentary interlude of forgetting to remember the bad stuff.

Leyla wants to forget her debts, and the fact that her mother could be deported any day now; Mostafa wants to forget how his Afghan lawyer betrayed him, and tried to get money out of him; B. wants to forget that he's still unemployed, with no hope of work in the near future; Olga wants to forget that she didn't get a chance to say goodbye to her mother before she died; Lianne, who used to hide in the shower when someone knocked on her door, wants to forget that she's been here for more than six years with her two small children, and she's still getting negative decisions from the IND, despite being eligible for the Children's Amnesty; Tatiana wants to forget she's a refugee, and to stop getting questioned about why she came here, so she can get on with a normal life; and A. would just rather blot out his past altogether.

I've said before that, notwithstanding the drudgery and burden of a tragic life, life still goes on. Abdel got married recently, despite the fact that the refugee council messed up his chances to legally bring his bride here within the allotted time span. So now they're married, but she's illegal; Leyla is doing volunteer work at the sports club, so she can sport free of charge, and despite her recent accident with her scooter and the accompanying pain and injury, she thinks she'll be up and running soon; Mostafa has made a rap about street life and the Taliban, and it's already proving popular on internet; Hafid has a secret girlfriend, which is why he so desperately wants to leave the psychiatric clinic and come back to live in the North. Lives continue to try to make something out of nothing, even when

the chances of success are minute.

Perhaps, unlike Agee, my 'predilection' is towards the functional and not the esthetic, though I don't think so. I too wanted to document lives in a manner fitting of their human dignity. I wished I could have only witnessed great resilience, hope and beauty in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. The affective, I surmised, would lead me towards greater understanding and greater commitment; and to an increased sense of common humanity. And, to a certain extent, it did so. But it also did much more. I also got a vivid sense of the hopelessness of many situations; of the scarred and brokenness of experience; I became intimately acquainted with my own affective preconditioning, which has also led me to the depths of despair, rage, frustration and impatience. Most of all, I saw how affect's promises are bountiful, but not always good. And, how affect can become trapped in habitual responses.

As Massumi says: "*Science is not the only nature-culture mix that begins at this same point. Habit does also: habits contracted by the body (as basic as looking or reaching). "Normal", everyday knowing begins at exactly the same point science does. Every ingress meets a habitual reception,*" (2002, p.236).

Agee's predilection towards the esthetic is perhaps why he veers away from "*the murky connections between fabrics and feelings, between the glutinous and the guffaw (for example),*" (Highmore, 2010, p.119). According to Highmore, our own engagement with the world is driven by a web of "*sticky entanglements of substances and feelings, of matter and affect*", and what we need is a "*critically entangled contact with affective experience,*" (2010, p. 119). In other words a "*cross-modal investigation*" or a "*social aesthetics*". Criticizing aesthetic inquiry, Highmore comments: "*How did an ambitious curiosity about the affects, the body, and the senses end up fixated on only one tiny area of sensual life – beauty and the sublime? What happens to fear, anger, disappointment, contentment, smell, touch, boredom, frustration, weariness, hope, itchiness, backache, trepidation, and the mass of hardly articulated feelings and moods that saturate our social, sexual, political, and private lives? And aren't these the elements (rather than beauty and the sublime) that fill most of our lives most of the time?*"

He goes on to say: "*The answer is right there in the aesthetic discourse from the start and it takes two forms. First is the a priori assumption that certain experiences are simply better than others (thus beauty will win out over boredom each and every time because beauty is seen as edifying and morally uplifting whereas boredom would simply register as the failure of self-discipline and moral vigilance ["the devil makes work for idle hands"])*. Second is the difficulty of speaking and writing about creaturely, experiential life, except

through exemplification (an exemplification that is most often provided by art),” (2010, p.122).

Both Agee and Terkel succeed with “morally uplifting” tales because, as “Terkel once said: “My goal is to survive the day. To survive it with a semblance of grace, curiosity, and a sense that I’ve done something pretty good. I can’t survive the day unless everyone else survives it too. I live in a community and if the community isn’t in good shape, neither am I” (Kotlowitz, foreword to *Division Street America*, 2005, p.xviii).

And Agee: “In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and of no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again: and in him, too, once more, and of each of us, our terrific responsibility towards human life; towards the utmost idea of goodness, of the horror of error, and of God,” (2006, p.255).

But what of the rest?

I would argue that, by excluding the whole gamut of negative affects, we present an overly optimistic view of humanity. One that glosses over the damaging and shameful; or denies existential loneliness and loss. Putting a lid on the dark side doesn’t, I fear, mean that more light can shine. It is rather like grasping for hope, in what I have come to experience, as a gaping abyss of forlornness and devastation. Close to misery and tragedy, we recognise how very real the risk is of being subsumed by the black hole, weighted down, paralysed, disoriented and abandoned. It gnaws at your bones, and burrows pockets of guilt and melancholy into the mind, leaving deep indelible fissures in your being. As Watkins says “..affect also operates independently, accumulating as bodily memory that, while both aiding cognition and inducing behaviour, may evade consciousness altogether,” (2010, p.279).

I have learnt that “affects, as such, are the corporeal instantiation of recognition, the sensations one may feel in being recognized, which accumulate over time, fostering a sense of self-worth. Moments of recognition, therefore, function as affective force, or in Spinozan terms, *affectus*,” (Watkins, 2010, p. 273, italics in original).

They are also “worlding refrains”; “critique attuned to the worlding of the refrain is a burrowing into the generativity of what takes form, hits the senses, shimmers. Concepts built in this way score the trajectories of a worlding’s looping refrains, its potentialities, and attach themselves to the living out of what is singular and proliferative in a scene or moment, to what is accrued, sloughed off, realized, imagined, enjoyed, hated, brought to bear or just born in a compositional present,” (Stewart, 2010, p.339).

Affect is an embodied, contagious, force of “perpetual becoming”, “born in in-betweenness and resides as accumulative beside-ness”, (Gregg, Seigworth, eds, 2010, p. 2/3). And for Latour: “If the opposite of being a body is dead [and] there is no life apart from the body...[then] to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning ‘effectuated’, moved, put into motion by other entities, humans or nonhumans. If you are not engaged in this learning, you become insensitive, dumb, you drop dead,” (Latour, 2004, p. 205, quoted in Gregg, Seigworth, eds, 2010, p. 11).

So, affect is something for the living; it’s about being alive, and about learning. The essays in the “Affect Theory Reader” discuss affect, explore affect, write about affect, ponder what affect is, write with affect, even write affectively (Gregg, Seigworth, eds, 2010), but they miss a sense of life. Humans are effectively (and affectively) missing from the writings. Real people, being affected or affecting one another, are nowhere to be found. The authors themselves, are even less in evidence than those whom they, in generalised terms, choose to write about. I read nothing about how the authors may or may not be affected by whomever or whatever. Their own affects are left unspoken.

Affective engagement

I argue, that if we pursue research where affect is a methodological or theoretical abstraction, we foreclose our own affective engagement with our research participants; at least one which extends beyond the immediacy of our research, and which may serve to make a difference in their (miserable) lives. As Probyn writes “an abstract way of approaching affect and emotion places the writing itself in an uninterested relation to affect. This is a contradiction in terms – affects are inherently interested,” (2010, p.75). However, I’m not just talking about precise descriptions, or performances, like that of Stewart, which “performs the problematics of the American imaginary – the problematics of subject and object, power and powerlessness, distance and closeness, certainty and doubt, stereotype and cultural form, forgetting and re-remembering – so that these become constitutive elements of the story itself,” (1996, p.7).

I’m talking about a theoretical and methodological encounter with affect, which leaves no-one unaffected, least of all the author. Stewart’s writings are emblematic of writings with affect; she accounts for culture as “a space of imagination, critique, and desire produced in and through mediating forms. It is not something that can be set “straight” but it has to be tracked through its moves and versions, its site of encounter and engagement, its pride and regrets, its permeabilities and vulnerabilities, its nervous shifts from one thing to another, its moments of self-possession and dispersal,” (1996, p.9).

Stewart re-calls, re-tells, re-imagines, re-traces and re-stories her encounters. She *“condenses and performs a set of particular associations of place, home, memory, history, exile, excess, spectacle, social performance, encounter, contingency, agency, social hierarchy, the body, the mythic, talk, ideals and imagination,”* (1996, p.10/11). It is a wonderful journey into writing with affect, evoking affective turns and ruminations, shimmers of affective meanings and explosions of desires and graphic imagery.

Through Stewart, we get a feel for how affect grabs the ordinary, making *“things happen”*, dispersing the regular, infiltrating and opening up narrative spaces. *“One day half a dozen strangers waiting for a new batch of chili dogs at the Rhodell volunteer fire department bake sale started in with talk about the weather – talk that quickly spiralled into idioms of roads and bodies, dangers and sicknesses. Then Miss Lavender slowed the talk with a story that focused on the lyrical image of her trying to paint her porch, which had been “ruin” by rain”* (1996, p.38, italics in original).

We meet many storytellers in Stewart’s ‘social imaginary’, their accounts interrupted and ruptured by their own affects, and affect’s longing for contagion and dispersion. Warned not to go into the camps by a social worker because, *“for her it was an imagined landscape beyond the pale – a place given over to dirt and violence, lack and excess. In the landscape of lack there was not enough money, not enough schooling, no lawns, no police, no fire stations, no paint on the houses, no city water, no cable TV, bad plumbing. It was unsanitary,”* (1996, p.65), Stewart nevertheless took to the hills and stayed for more than a year with its inhabitants.

Of the social worker, Stewart writes, *“her words addressed the space of alterity itself....[But] in the very process of addressing the space of alterity, her words encased it in the prefabricated code of a class defending itself against the contamination of a surrounding “Other” through the class-conscious phantasm of a life that would somehow contain itself in coded norms of order, cleanliness, propriety, safety and self-control. In the mode of a shocked rhetorical query (“How can people live like that? I just can’t imagine”) the diacritical construction of self and other grew incarnate in the visceral look (and smell) of an absolute “Other” as an object that contained lack and excess within itself like a personal flaw. The hills were for her the monstrous unimaginable locale of an “Other” that was not just overstepping its bounds but had itself become unbounded and contaminated – a place beyond the pale,”* (1996, p67-69).

Stewart wants to open up a *“space on the side of the road”*, in which a local cultural real can emerge, to *“open a gap in the order of myth itself”*; that is the myth of

“America” whose cultural productions are “frozen into essentialized “objects” with fixed identities; a prefab landscape of abstract “values” puts an end to the story of “America” before it begins,” (1996, p.3). Like Agee, and Terkel, she expresses a desire to listen to the marginalised and to tell “an other” story of America: “For me, the first-glimpsed space of alterity was more haunting and sublime than monstrous, more thickly imagined than unimaginable [.....] Where the social worker’s code expressed defensive disengagement from the hills, mine was expansive, engaged, appropriative. Where hers rested in visceral reaction, mine, armed with the spirit of adventure and a relativist chant, forcefully subverted visceral reaction in an act of transcendent self-reflection and the poetics of encounter,” (Stewart, 1996, p. 69).

Do I dare question Stewart’s affective engagement with the folk in the hills? Her tellings are engaged; she talks about real people, as she flits from one happening to the next, just as it is in real life. And she tells us about how she visits neighbours, and about her near accident, and about how gets caught up in a church row, because she talks to the wrong people. But in these rich narrative exchanges, we rarely get to glimmer Stewart’s own affectivity, nor do we get to hear about how she affects those around her. She does get news from West Virginia, which she calls “*cryptic and intense*” (1996, p.207); letters and postcards, which Stewart once more documents in a fragmentary and lyrical manner. But beside these stories, we know precious little of her long-term affective engagement with the field, if any. We hear nothing about a critical commitment towards the people of the camps.

I presume that Stewart’s commitment to escape totalization, which would address those in the camps as ‘marginalized’, ‘exploited’, ‘simple’ or ‘oppressed’, and which would ‘essentialise’ their experiences into a static repertoire of “*grand summarizing traits that claim to capture the “gist” of “things,”*” (1996, p.3), may also prevent her from entering into any form of activism on their behalf. She can hardly rant about their backwardness, or their oppression, lest she herself be found guilty of essentialising that which she has struggled to open up into a space of cultural poetics.

Surely Stewart’s accounts of the sublime and creative nature of her encounters in the field, which she also describes as “*a fragmented series of anecdotes and luminous allegorical images,*” (1996, p.71), would be met with some suspicion if she divulged the full range of negative affects which, she arguably, also experienced whilst living in the hills? Or was Stewart actually able to uphold an ‘unaffected separation’ from the field, in which case her engagement must be questioned? Or did she manage throughout her time in the field to maintain a sense of the place’s surreal “*sociality and desire,*” (1996, p.5), in-filled with a sublime notion of its own

particular and textured humanity?

Left as we are to wonder precisely about how Stewart, Agee or Terkel may have been affected in the field, I only have my own intense affective experiences to go on. Experiences which were not always rose-coloured. Whilst certainly not wanting to refute the significance of researching with affect, I would argue that affectively turning the poor into the heroes of humanity (Agee), into the good guys (Terkel) or into a 'betrayed community' (Stewart), does nobody, least of all the poor themselves, any favours.

I am missing an account of the vagaries of affective research; of its relationality and intersubjective contagion; of its threat and disappointment; of its disgust and dangers; of its workings on and within the researcher him or herself. These authors were surely not immune to its propensities and its neutrality. What Probyn notes on writing, "*simply put, writing affects bodies. Writing takes its toll on the body that writes and the bodies that read or listen,*" (2010, p. 76), is also true of researching with affect. Which toll did the field take on Stewart, Agee and Terkel? Or on Lingis, Kleinman, Clough and Berlant? In their "*deployment of affective capacity,*" which Clough argues marks "*an intensification of self-reflexivity (processes turning back on themselves to act on themselves),*" (Clough, 2007, p.3), I am left searching for the affective body of the researcher and for his/her affectively construed, self-reflexive account.

When we open up to affect, we in effect open up to the fiasco that is life. That is, to its most basic contingencies and ambivalences, and to the way in which whatever we do, can at any time, be confounded by the slightest interruption, or a most banal exchange, or re-membling. It is an opening to a confounding instability, and to the creative forces of unknowing. It's an opening to the pro-social affects, as well as to the anti-social affects; to the positive, as well as to the negative. We cannot choose which affects will surface, but we can filter out the stuff we'd rather keep hidden in our writing, and in our accounts. We can also choose generalisation or abstraction, to avoid the painful becoming too personal. And when we get close, really close to the misery or tragedy of lived lives, we may even wish that we had never entered the field in the first place.

Affect offers potential, but no guarantee that life or research will be any better. It is a "*neutral bloom-space,*" (Gregg, Seigworth, 2010, p.12) that may "*commit your sensorium to new sensual worlds that sit uncomfortably within your ethos. There is hope here....*" (Highmore, 2010, p. 133). Particularly if affect works "*as a generative, pedagogic nudge aimed toward a body's becoming an ever more worldly sensitive interface,*

toward a style of being present to the struggles of our time,” (Gregg, Seigworth, 2010, p.12). But all that, without a guarantee that our increased receptivity will lead to a life better lived, or to more engaged, more committed, more emancipatory research.

Affects may liberate; they may also imprison.

The condition of affect’s possibility is tenuous and unpredictable. It may be cruelly optimistic of us to invest our hopes in affect’s capacity to compose empathy, and to generate sympathy for the other, thereby bridging the gap between “us” and “them”. “As much as we sometimes might want to believe that affect is highly *invested* in us and with somehow magically providing for a better tomorrow, as if affect were always already sutured into a progressive or liberatory politics or at least the marrow of our best angels, as if affect were somehow producing always better states of being and belonging – affect instead bears an intense and thoroughly immanent neutrality,” (Gregg, Seigworth, 2010, p.10, italics in original).

The many sides of affect

And so, to round off this chapter, I want to reiterate that my goal has been neither to beat affectivity into the ground, nor to diminish the importance of the affective turn for a type of research that potentially promotes greater understanding of the tribulations of the most vulnerable in society. It can be both captivating and engaging, leading to greater solidarity, and the type of determined and daring activism that Veissière exhorts for “*anthropologists working in the street and other dangerous, subaltern, and transnational places,*” (2011, p.18).

However, one of my aims has been to render a (partial) critique of some ethnographic writings, (in particular Agee, Terkel and Stewart), whose works both lead us into a new realm of cultural poetics, whilst at the same time presenting, in my view, an overly pro-social affective picture of those worlds. The same authors also fail to expose their own affectations, through a glaring lack of self-reflexivity, leaving the reader with no clue whatsoever as to how he/she was affected by, or indeed affected those in the field with whom he/she was working.

Secondly, I have argued that affect is by no means a panacea; our research is not saved by affect, as it were. The dangers of affect not generating strong and positive relationships with our research participants are all too real. As is the danger of an affective overload. This latter engenders a flood of affective states, to which we may or may not be accustomed, and which may incite a whole array of negative feelings within us, and within those around us.

At times the rage can be energizing, and it might even be necessary in the light of one's responsibilities; but, in my experience, it can also lead to a sense of total impotence and vulnerability, coupled with paralysis and complete inertia. Stuck, with no place to go; staring into a big black hole, feeling powerless and dejected. Or enraged (read also: cheated, angry, disappointed, dismayed, disgusted, flabbergasted, anguished, confused.....the list goes on), (at yourself or at your research participants), questioning your role, thoughts, actions, feelings, ideas, capacities, prejudices, tendencies, limitations, as well as theirs, and wondering who in heaven's name wants to hear the story of our own imprisonment. Who wants to hear **that** story?

Affective Matter (7)
“Imprisoned”

It was a Tuesday when I heard what had happened to Lianne. I had an appointment with Leyla to go to the children’s school to talk about things the teacher had reported to the social services, but not directly to Leyla. “*I got a phone call this morning,” she blurted out, “around ten o’clock. It was Lianne; they’ve picked her up and put her in prison,”* I was told.

Leyla was visibly disturbed, upset but not panicky. She was extremely concerned, and as she does when she tries to talk quickly, or when she’s recounting something exciting, or when she’s irritated, she started to stutter and raise her voice.

Lianne is a young women from Armenia, though she grew up in Azerbaijan. Now without nationality and effectively stateless, her parents died when she was just two years old and she was initially left in the care of her grandmother. When she passed away, Lianne was ‘given’ to neighbours who took her into their care. Later she was promised to their son, a drunk and violent man on all accounts, her husband and father to her two small children.

Though I don’t know her ‘complete’ story, and I doubt whether a story is ever ‘completely knowable’, Lianne has alluded to an extremely violent relationship, in which she was treated “*like a dog, like an animal*”. Physical and mental abuse accompanied her married life. When it became too dangerous for her children, she decided to flee. I don’t know the exact details, only that she travelled overland and ended up in the Netherlands in 2008. Since then she’s been housed in at least eleven or twelve different asylum centres, and her small children have known as many schools in their short, but turbulent lives. Her story is tragic, but doesn’t fit in with what the authorities deem to be a real ‘asylum’ story. She doesn’t fit in with the official definitions of what a refugee is. And so her claim has been turned down.

Lianne had been ‘visited’ by the police in the morning and told she had fifteen minutes to get everything together, as she was being taken to a detention centre, (read prison), for (illegal) immigrants awaiting deportation. She was, according to Leyla, and imaginably so, in a “*right state*”. Her mental disposition is nervous at the best of times (I recalled all the stories she told me about hiding in showers, cowering behind doors, at the slightest indication that the police might be rounding up asylum seekers); so I could all too well picture how afraid she must be right now; not to mention her two small children who’d been carted off with her.

Whilst listening I couldn't help wondering whether it really was a prison we were talking about. Despite all the reports I'd read, I still imagined that it was probably more of a closed centre than a real prison. Leyla kept insisting that those places are just prisons, like any other prison, and when she told me that Lianne's phone, and all other possessions had also been taken away, I really did think she was exaggerating. Why, I surmised, wouldn't it be allowed for a young mother to keep her telephone in her 'cell'.

Lianne was, I suppose receiving adequate food. She had shelter. She had clothes and sufficient warmth (so as not to freeze to death). Yet she was plagued by an insecurity, a fear, an unknowing about her fate and that of her children. She was alone.

Leyla said Lianne had been crying on the phone. She was being taken to a detention centre close to Rotterdam Airport. She'd been told they would be deporting her, yet Lianne was convinced the Dutch government didn't have the necessary papers, or *laissez-passez*, to get her out the country. Who would have her, she argued? Leyla told me that Lianne's been to the Armenian Embassy more than once; she's been told they won't accept her in Armenia, they won't deliver the right papers, so she can't get deported (back) there. Lianne even had an appointment with a new lawyer in a couple of days; the authorities knew that. She figured it was a kind of a conspiracy, a set-up, a means to get her out of the way so she couldn't speak to a better, more decent lawyer; to one who would defend her properly.

It was difficult at such times to make real sense of the stories. So much information. So many details which intertwined, surged forward, then wound back upon themselves, leaving me perplexed. Theories of conspiracy, of fear, of helplessness. Of good lawyers, bad lawyers, friends, new and old, friendships broken then renewed. No, it wasn't that I couldn't make sense of the stories, that's not the right way to describe the feeling when so much information is fired at you, into space, fragmenting before your eyes into tiny pieces of the same jigsaw. It's more so a recognition of the messiness of life and feelings; an acknowledgment of unknowing and transience, change and impermanence. Things once solid, break. Things once known, defy us. Things once sure, lament uncertainty. And we are back in the throes of discovering; that state of questioning our epistemologies, that state which is unspecifiable and often ambivalent.

What I heard though left me feeling sorry. Sorry for Lianne, and for her children;

but especially sorry that such measures appear to be consistently applied to asylum seekers just like her. Asylum seekers who have also fled places of injustice, to what they thought would be a better life. Lianne's story is typical in that sense and whilst I know all the arguments concerning the risks of lenience, and the dangers thereof – opening the flood gates as it were – I can't help, I can never help seeing the particular, hearing the story, this story, the one right in front of me now, and wondering what would happen if we gave her a chance to become somebody here. The years of waiting, the anguish and insecurity, the psychological trauma of uncertainty, of not knowing where the future lies, or even if there is a decent liveable future in store; those years alone are enough to drive someone like Lianne to despair. As Butler states "*The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity,*" (Butler, 2004, p.31).

Leyla knows all about despair. Her mental vulnerability leaves us no doubt about that. Yet her deep kindness and caring aptitude towards others demonstrate how attuned she is to the emotions and plight of others around her. Especially those with whom she has a connection, like Lianne. Despite the seeming break in their relationship, which lasted close on a year, and started as abruptly as it ended, Leyla never once spoke unkind words to me about Lianne and never showed any indication that she had stopped caring. Angry, never; frustrated, maybe; confused, definitely. Leyla hadn't got a clue what caused Lianne to suddenly announce: "*you know what I mean, you know why I'm not talking to you, you always say you don't know, but really you do,*" and then to break off contact. Leyla expressed sheer perplexity every time we spoke of what had happened, or rather what may have happened between them.

It led to rounds of surmising about what or who could be responsible for the break. Could it be the psychologist they both shared in the south of the country? Had he said something untoward, something which indicted Leyla? Or was it the other Hermina from the asylum centre, who had made accusations of one kind or another about Leyla? She did, after all, have a reason for revenge, given it was her boyfriend who had, on more than one occasion, attempted to 'seduce' Leyla. Or perhaps it was the former 'friend' (or rather boyfriend) of Lianne's; the Iraqi with at least four or five children and a wife who had met Leyla, and to whom she had given a reserved welcome when they came to visit (without the wife and children of course). She, Leyla, just couldn't fathom what had happened, and seemed to beat herself up trying to get behind the 'truth', to find out who had said what to whom, when, where and how. It was excruciatingly painful to see how she tossed the question over again in her head, without coming up with a sensible answer.

It was yet another of those instances when I, without reason, started to feel guilty about something I may have done or said, whilst at the same time knowing that it was absurd. Nevertheless the force of the questioning drew me into the plot, and almost convinced me I'd done something unreasonable, without knowing it. Which of course I hadn't. Had I?

We visited Lianne the following Sunday. She'd made a request to the authorities, and had us put on the visitor's list. Saturday night I thought I'd scout the internet to see if I could find any information about the place. I didn't yet have the full address and only knew that it was in Rotterdam. I still felt wary about what I'd been told; still failed to acknowledge that it might be a real prison, still questioned whether it would indeed be next to the airport, still doubted that Lianne had been dispossessed of her telephone, still tended towards believing that Leyla was probably exaggerating, still imagined that the regime would not be as bad as I had heard, still thought that the 'stories' were probably blown up out of proportion (if not completely, then partially), dramatized even, still couldn't picture the situation of a potentially, no definitely, harmless woman being locked up with two small children, not allowed visitors, except during the formal twice weekly hourly visiting slots, telephone calls restricted to a public telephone operated with a rationed telephone card, maximum 10 euro's per week, subjected to a prison diet and eating schedule, no activities and no school for the children, and no stand-by lawyer. To top it all I'd been told that the authorities responsible for deportation were using scare tactics, such as informing Lianne that if she didn't comply with their demands, they could send her away without her children; that they hadn't fully explained what they were up to; nor with which country or countries they were co-operating about her deportation (if any); and that they continually visited her to get her to sign papers, or forms, or requests, without her really understanding the meaning or the consequences of any of them. She hadn't eaten anything in six days, Leyla said, because of the stress. She was only drinking water and tea. It was too cold there; Lianne was sick, psychologically and physically, and the children too. That's what I was told. It appeared momentous, but looking back, was my attitude one of pure condescension? Or naivety?

In "Shapes of Freedom, an interview with Elizabeth A. Povinelli", Kim Turcot DiFruscia notes that the anthropological project is one which must "*negotiate in theoretical terms the social world's unequal distribution of freedoms with the thick, dense and intense reality of people's lives, framed by gendered, racializing, an classist constraints, and to further trace how this uneven distribution of freedoms is perpetually rearranged by historical forms of power that shape ever-changing conditions of humanness...*" (2010, p.88).

During our visit to Lianne that Sunday she poignantly pointed out that: *“they’re doing this to me because they can. They know that I can’t do anything about it. I’m nobody here and I have no rights”*. She was ragged, visibly distressed and uncared for. Her usually long and tidy hair was straggly and uncombed. She looked tired, weary, worn out and nervous. Her eyes bulged, as she was ushered into the visiting room. She stuttered and spluttered, and whilst her words were barely audible, her stress was visceral, palpable. We sat there, Leyla and I, waiting alongside the other twenty or so visitors.

On approaching the prison, which was actually a prison, just like the one I used to live around the corner to in Scheveningen, close to the Hague, I could see the airplanes and the airfield from the parking lot. I’d read on the site of the Ministry that this was a detention centre for, amongst others, illegal immigrants or immigrants who’ve committed crimes and all of whom are awaiting deportation. Driving to Rotterdam on a Sunday morning the traffic was fine. We chit-chatted on the way, Leyla and I, as she recalled how scared she’d been when she’d been put into prison with her children, forcibly removed from the asylum centre, one child gripping onto the bedpost screaming, and Leyla smashing and flailing, hitting everything in sight. *“I was very violent then, because of the stress. I was so afraid of being sent back to Poland. I knew they wouldn’t help me in Poland, that we’d end up in prison there or on the streets, but it was no use. The children were so scared, especially when the police arrived and they put us into the van. They first said that we would be split up, but I refused and made a fuss, and said that the children had to stay with me. We were put into a police van. Me in the back, handcuffed, and the children in the front. I was mad; we were all crying and screaming”*.

Leyla told me again the story about how she’d been sent back to Poland, and how she’d been accompanied by more than one police officer, two doctors, and another person, whose role was unclear at the time. In any case there were five of them. Usually there were less people, but given her background of an attempted suicide, the doctors had been called in to assess her condition, and to assure the authorities that she was fit enough to fly. She told me how she’d also been held in such a prison, and she reiterated once again what the regime was like.

We found the prison easily. It was off the beaten track, though not too much as to get lost. It was around some kind of industrial estate, as we passed a few roads with what looked like warehouses on the side. Then it became more desolate, with empty roads with markings and barriers. We proceeded, following the instructions of the navigator, until we came to what was evidently a prison. I followed the road markings through the parking barrier, taking a ticket on the

way. The wind howled as we left the car, almost smashing the doors. The walls were high, wired, and there were cameras everywhere. We took out our shopping bags, filled with stuff for Lianne and the children and joked about the fact that I had brought my voice recorder just in case.....

Leyla had spent money on warm sweaters for the children and Lianne, different small games, but mainly warm clothes. I'd got them a few bits too, clothing, colouring pencils and activity books, and some toiletries. I thought there might be a shop where she could buy bits and bobs, but imagined that she was probably spending the little money she had on daily essentials. It turned out there was no shop, and that everything except clothes was rationed out to them. The toothbrushes were the travelling sort you get on an airplane, with a mini tube of toothpaste and a kind of screw-on top or bottom, depending on which way you look at it.

It also turned out we couldn't take anything in with us. It was top security. The type of top security that you had to laugh about, otherwise you might cry. I felt like a criminal just walking in that place, observing the security guards behind glass windows, cut off from us, telling us that we had to leave everything outside, including the presents we'd brought. They would be delivered later, as would the money I wanted to pass on to Lianne. We'd be given a locker key into which we had to place our own belongings, as visitors are only allowed to bring in small change for the automatic drinks machine. We'd have to pass through the security machines, and our shoes would have to be removed to pass through the x-ray scanner. Belts and jewellery had to be taken off, especially if there was a chance it might peep; so much for my voice recorder, which I didn't even attempt to smuggle in.

We locked everything up, passed safely through the scanner and then had to wait on the other side for the door to the waiting room to be unlocked. Unknowingly I tried to give it a push, then a tug, and then realised I would have to wait for the guard to release the latch. Once inside the waiting room we were locked in a closed space with approximately twenty chairs, in rows of four. Behind us the entrance with the scanner was blocked from sight by a normal wall; in front it was all glass except the door. On the other side of the door I spied a guard sitting behind a desk looking at television screens, which were obviously connected to cameras. Leyla and I took a seat after approaching the other door, giving Lianne's name and being told to wait. We had some twenty minutes to wait before it was our time – two o'clock. We were alone at first. I made some joke to Leyla about the camera's. There were at least three that I could see, plus what looked like

ceiling speakers. I whispered and laughed that they were probably watching us and listening to us. We giggled and as we did so the guard turned around and I caught her eye. Coincidence or were they really spying on us. *"Of course,"* laughed Leyla, *"why else would they have all those camera's and speakers in here"?*

The guard was fat. Very fat. She sat and stared, occasionally looking around towards us, and it seemed as though the moments she did look coincided with words spoken about her, about the system. I could see how easy it would be to develop a complex, or to think in terms of conspiracies. The guard sat and stared and drank coca cola. Her body would, I imagine, have immense difficulty if it had to spring suddenly into action, or if she had to chase after a fleeing inmate. Though what chance of that, given the tight security and the fact that everywhere seemed to be locked, closed in. Her face was red; her cheeks were red. She obviously suffered severely from broken capillaries, medically known as telangiectasia rosacea; a problem often witnessed amongst alcoholics, though I suspected that that was not the cause of the twisted and broken veins on her face. She was not unpleasant though and as the room started to fill up with more visitors, she endured the small child who kept pressing the buzzer to 'get out' with a smile.

More and more visitors piled into the room. First a Dutch woman with a small child, and an older gentleman. The woman repeated to her son that he would soon see his 'daddy' and Leyla and I guessed that the man was the prisoner's father. Arabic, was our guess. Then a group of Armenians came in. Three women, two men and three small children. Then a group whose nationality neither Leyla nor I could decipher. They were dark skinned, a woman and two men and a child. They sounded like they spoke some sort of creole language, but nothing which I recognised in any case.

Two o'clock came and went, and at around five past two there was movement. The fat guard signaled that we should approach the door, as we would be allowed into the visiting room. She ushered us to the left and we were allowed into an empty room. Empty that is of people. The edge of the room was draped with a table which followed the rooms contours. On our side, that is the side of the visitors, there were clusters of stools around the one long, windy table. Leyla and I moved in and went to the far side of the room, on the right. The other visitors spread themselves out through the space. In the middle of the room there was a kind of built up podium with a table, or rather a counter, with two chairs behind it. It made me think of a spot where a judge might sit. Directly opposite the podium, but then on normal ground level was the drink's machine, which also

had chocolates, cookies and light snacks. There was a small play area for small children, with a few toys scattered around. We sat and waited. Two guards took their places on the podium, observing.

The first prisoner was led in. We were sitting right in front of the door where they came through. It wasn't Lianne. I saw the guards consulting with one another as a prisoner walked over to them and handed in his 'pass'. He made his way to the Armenians next to us. The guards were counting how many visitors he had. I heard them mumble that he exceeded the allowed limit, and as they looked at each other I wondered whether they'd take action. Then another Armenian prisoner entered, and approached them, handed in his 'pass' and went to sit by the same group. Phew, the limit wasn't exceeded after all.

More men arrived for their visitors, then a woman. A dark woman. She approached the group who I thought were creole, in the middle of the room. The child was obviously hers. "*Drugs,*" muttered Leyla. "*I bet she's here for drugs.*" We had no idea of course.

Then in came Lianne and the two children. She too handed in a pass, and she sat quietly in front of us. We embraced, the children too. They were upbeat, but looked sickly. Lianne just looked sick. We asked her how she was and she replied, "*how do you expect. I shouldn't be here. I don't even know what I've done. Why am I here?*". She recounted the story I'd heard from Leyla before. Being picked up, being brought here, having the phone taken off her, not even being allowed to write down a few essential numbers: "*they told me I'd just have to remember the numbers, that I couldn't write anything down. I could only remember one number, my friend. They said it was their problem if I didn't know the number of the lawyer or the psychologist and they just took everything away.*" And so I listened, and Leyla listened. Leyla and Lianne spoke every now and then in Russian, and then Leyla or Lianne translated what was said for me. Lianne was supposed to bring us a paper which the lawyer needed, or rather which the new lawyer needed, if she was going to be able to do anything for Lianne. "*They wouldn't even let me bring the paper down. They said I couldn't bring anything, that I'll have to send it. But I don't know how or when. They wouldn't let me bring anything, even though I told them you need the paper to give to the lawyer.*"

And so I listened, and Leyla listened. "*I don't know why I'm here Kim. This lawyer of mine, this Wapperom, he's no good. If I could see him I would tell him, but he doesn't even phone me, he doesn't do anything. My friend has tried to call him but he can't get hold of him. It's his fault that I'm here. He says I need to pay more, he's just cheating me. He's not*

doing anything for me, he wants me to be here, I wish I could see him, I don't belong here".
And so she went on.

And so I listened, and Leyla listened. And meanwhile I observed the children, who though clean and tidy looking, had a sick, sad air about them. The boy especially had red and swollen eyes. "I'm sick," he told me. "*I have a problem with my eyes*". His nose was snotty, with dried crusty snot stuck in the nostrils, and a very large part of his mouth was covered in a huge scab, a cold sore scab. Daisy looked pale, and sad. They jumped around as children did, and I offered them a drink or a snack from the machine. I put aside my usual health concerns and told them to choose anything they wanted. It would be a chocolate milk and a Fanta, plus a couple of cookies for Daisy and a Bounty for Jack. He couldn't quite decide at first, at which I told him to jump over the counter and to come and choose something from the machine himself. He did so, and we got the stuff out just in time for me to be reprimanded by the guard, as he warned: "*he's not allowed on that side Madam. Make sure he stays over here in future*".

The initial moments of the encounter with Lianne were the most disturbing. It was then that it was the most difficult to hold back the tears. Both Leyla and I were moved, though I sensed an air of calmness and steely strength emanating from Leyla. She held it better together than I did. I busied myself with the children to avoid setting everyone off on a teary journey. Perhaps it was the recognition that it was just as bad as I'd been told, though I didn't expect it to be so. Perhaps it was the appearance and words of Lianne that shook me. She was usually immaculate, and well cared for. Now she was untidy and had smelly breath. Everything about her was worn out and used. She looked broken. Nonetheless I could still glean a fighting spirit, though at times it was hard to spot through the seeming hopelessness of the situation, and the perceived madness of it all. She felt abandoned. Especially by the judicial system. That is, by the very system from which she was seeking protection in the first place.

Leyla laid aside their previous qualms and made no mention of the 'dispute' they had had. It was, after all, the first time they'd seen each other for some time; but everything seemed back to normal between them. The friendship, the caring attitude was evident, as was Leyla's concern for their well-being. Her generosity never ceases to amaze me. Be it in terms of effort and organisation, or economically. She puts aside her own needs and financial problems, and in this case spent what she could on clothing and other items to make Lianne and the children more comfortable 'inside'. The supposition of help was obvious; as though unspoken. If one can help, one must. That's more or less Leyla's attitude.

I've seen how she's rallied for help in other cases: David and Mariah, with their baby from Georgia; Maria from Afghanistan; an Armenian family looking for housing; Lianne and her two children. And others. Leyla's ambition, now that she has a residency permit, is to one day be able to help others for a living. Others who are asylum seekers, or refugees. She knows, she says, what they're going through and she knows, she says, how they can be (mis)treated by the authorities. That's why she wants to help. She stands firmly in relation to others, more or less fortunate than herself. And despite her own problems she extends a hand to others. *"You can't make it alone,"* she repeats.

After hurried phone calls to the lawyer, complaints, and the use of more or less threatening words, the lawyer promised he was just about to send a letter to the prison and to the immigration services protesting at Lianne's detention. I phoned the prison too, to let them know that action was being taken.

Without further warning, Lianne and her children were released the next day, exactly one week after first being detained. She was returned to a 'family asylum centre', to await further news of her procedure.

A couple of years on, the Children's Amnesty is a fact, but Lianne and her children have been denied a residency permit on grounds neither she, nor I, nor her lawyer can explain. The last time I saw her, at the family asylum centre in Amersfoort, she looked drawn and miserable. She doesn't play her electric organ any more, or write music. *"I don't have the strength to do it"*, she told me. *"They want to kill me. The deportation people are still badgering me. My kids don't understand why others got a permit, and we didn't. My psychiatrist has been trying to tell them about my problems, but they just don't listen"*.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Escape as illusion

“The joy of escape defies seriousness and this, as we try to show, is the most crucial condition for revealing truth.”

“Escape is joyful.”

“Joy is the ultimate proof.”

(Papadopoulos, Stephenson, Tsianos, 2008)

There is not much joy to report in the lives of the asylum seekers and refugees that have accompanied me on my research journey and in my professional life this past decade. Of course there is the occasional spurt of gladness or delight, as when an asylum seeker hears that he has been granted refugee status and therefore the right to remain in the Netherlands, but even that pleasure is usually short-lived.

Ordinary pleasures are scattered through the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, just as they are in your life or in mine, but they exist amid a backdrop of great loss and struggle, mistrust and insecurity. The birth of a child, a celebration party, or a wedding or anniversary, or if you are fortunate enough to be a refugee, perhaps the first (language) diploma, or passing one’s driving test or citizenship exam. All might be everyday occurrences which mark new steps, or a hurdle which has been overcome, new beginnings.

Without wishing to present too pessimistic a picture of these ordinary lives, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that romanticising their achievements or exaggerating their resilience is not helpful either. Instead I present a picture of the daily realities of being an asylum seeker or refugee in the Netherlands.

In their book *Escape Routes*, Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos (I shall refer to them as Papadopoulos et al), present a picture of affective possibility and potentiality wherein escape as an attack on power is viewed as *“dissent and construction, it is not protest. It is made up of everyday, singular, unpretentious acts of subverting subjectification and betraying representation,”* (2008, p.61). Their book is a journey into the transformational powers of affective acts; escape routes forged out of the ordinary actions of everyday lives.

They claim that whilst escape may not necessarily lead to a better life, it has the capacity to engender transformation and to change the regimes of power which subjectify our lives. It is an escape from subjectification and from representation. The subject or “*subject-form*” as they call it, is “*productionist, heteronormative, majoritarian*” (p.57), and it is this form which is challenged and put under duress by escape mechanisms or so-called ‘imperceptible politics,’ as described in their book. Representation is “*nothing other than a means to render the forces partaking in a social conflict visible to the gaze of power,*” (2008, p.56).

Papadopoulos et al present a vision about how transformation and change is possible, where change is no longer conceptualised as an event in history, but as a possibility that is present in the everyday ways in which people navigate their ordinary lives. “*Social transformation is not about reason and belief, it is about perception and hope. It is not about the production of subjects, but about the making of life. It is not about subjectivity, it is about experience,*” (2008, p.xii).

Yet the asylum seekers and refugees I know, long for nothing more than subject recognition, than to be part of the everyday system which sees its subjects working and paying taxes, going to school, getting diplomas, being recognised on the labour market as competent workers, yes, being subjected to the everyday of normal subject life in the Netherlands. They may moan about how high income tax is, about how much they have to spend on health insurance, and about how bad the services are, compared with their homeland, but at the end of the day they’d rather work in a regular job, with decent pay, and be ‘part of’ the system, than be outside it.

Even B., who displays little trust in Dutch principles of democracy and freedom, wants regular work. Leyla, with her mounting debts and numerous jobs on the side, desires regular work. Ammar, who probably has more experience than you and me with the Dutch health service, and knows more about social subsidies for this and for that, also longs for regularity, as do all the others. They don’t consciously choose their own exclusion, even though their own actions or attitudes may be a contributing factor towards it; they want to be on the inside, with all its trappings and downsides.

This is where Papadopoulos et al are misguided, in my view. They talk as if escape from subjectification and representation is something that is willed, something desired and desirable. Also for migrants. I argue that it is *not*. Escape in these terms is not possible. Whilst the regimes of control which they describe are real, I question their conceptualisation of imperceptible politics as a means of transformation of the system, which can lead to escape. Rather, the everyday means which asylum seekers and refugees employ to simply get by, to survive, are

predicated on a lack of knowledge about the consequences to themselves and their families, or where (some) knowledge is available, a short-sighted risk evaluation, based on the idea that things can't get any worse. Their everyday survival is mediated by their own lostness.

B's wife returns to Iraq to take care of some business there, whilst it is absolutely forbidden to do so. Her refugee passport states that she may travel to all countries, with the exception of Iraq. Yet she does it, by bypassing (or so she thinks) formal control, by flying first to Turkey on her refugee passport, and from then on with her Iraqi passport. On the return journey on entering the Netherlands, her residence permit is photocopied by the immigration authorities. Why? She has no idea. She doesn't hear anything from them and presumes that there will be no negative consequences. But she doesn't know what effect, if any, it could have on her request for a permanent residency permit in the future. Yet she takes the chance. They take the risk, because they need to arrange stuff in Iraq, pick up more documents which may allow for the formal registration and recognition of her professional skills here in the Netherlands. This is not an act of imperceptible politics, but an act of desperation.

Leyla has no health insurance for her daughter, and she works two jobs on the black market. She houses other illegals, and keeps her eldest daughter out of school, partly because she distrusts the motives of the specialised school, partly because she needs the money which her daughter can otherwise claim as unemployed, and unemployable. Escape? Imperceptible politics? I think not. These are the actions of a desperate mother. She wants to survive, wants the best for her children, and has no other choice available to her.

Haider, illegal, is still sleeping in the house where he used to live with other unaccompanied minors, unbeknown to the mentors of Jade, who are supposedly providing regular and careful support to these young asylum seekers. He's even attending school again, because a caring teacher feels sorry for him. Defiance? To a certain extent yes. Escape? No. His greatest longing is to get a residency permit, and to be able to attend school legally, so that he can take exams and get a diploma.

Ammar, for whom the Dutch health care system provided a lifeline for his sick son, is still getting welfare benefits, unable to find a work employment scheme, let alone a job on the regular labour market. Drifting in and out of debt, in and out of hopelessness, in and out of despair. Occasional, periodic moments of happiness, like a son's baptism, or attending Bible Study, interspersed with the drudgery of everyday living, in a country whose thick notion of Dutchness, (Ghorashi, 2003) prevents the migrant from really ever fitting in, or belonging.

Pot-bellied shadow

Eyes hidden behind glasses, face masked as though expecting imminent germ warfare,

Body worn and tired, huddled under a thick eiderdown,

Only a head visible, almost bald, stubble growing like undergrowth starting to shoot,

Glimpses now and then of skin, pimply, patchy, uneven pigment showing through like mangy scales on the back of a rotten fish,

A fish out of water, with barely any breath left, lying in a sunken, dry pool, wishing for rain....

It was Alim, aged fourteen, just three months after returning from a two month stay in hospital in Leiden, where he underwent a bone marrow transplant and chemotherapy for his potentially fatal illness, though not cancer, not leukaemia, as many might assume.

Alim has thalassaemia, a genetic blood disorder, which affects the production of normal haemoglobin. In Alim's case, his body produces an abnormal form of haemoglobin, resulting in excessive destruction of red blood cells, and severe anaemia. The disease has meant that Ali has had to undergo regular blood transfusions, which in turn have led to a dangerous build-up of iron in his body, which then has had to be managed by so-called chelation therapy to remove the excess. However, for Alim this was not a favourable long-term solution. The only chance for survival in the long-run was a bone marrow transplant, with his older sibling as donor.

And now he's been home for three months, or thereabouts, after a gruelling and frightening stay in the specialist unit in Leiden. His mother remained at his bedside; his father and two older brothers stayed at the three kilometre away Ronald McDonald house – a place specially for the families of those staying in hospital for longer stays. It was the summer of 2011.

The future was uncertain for the family in more ways than one. Having not only to face Alim's illness, the family was fighting a battle to stay in the Netherlands. It was unsure whether they would win either one. In fact the prospects were looking pretty dismal on both accounts.

(Diary excerpt, after visiting Ammar and his family at home)

Examples abound of refugees and asylum seekers, legal and illegal, scraping by, and getting along. The image of potential and transformational chance presented by Papadopoulos et al doesn't quite fit their stories and life accounts, just like they don't quite fit into the Netherlands. The perspective which Papadopoulos et al take on "Zora" for example, a young Yugoslav immigrant to Germany, is exemplary for their refusal of "*the deterministic tendency to collapse the experiences of precarious workers into the conditions in which precarity is lived,*" (p.230).

They take an account of Zora, in which she describes her feelings on working as a cleaner in Germany, where "*people felt superior and they thought Slavs were inferior.....I was just rubbish for them*". Zora goes on to say, "At that time nothing could touch me. So I bent down and cleaned and felt bad, but at that time I just couldn't *allow myself* to think about it," (p.229, italics in original).

In particular, drawing upon her resolve not to think about the way she was treated, Papadopoulos et al suggest that, "*Rather than assuming that this is a tragic or naïve claim of someone who is striving to maintain face, we want to maintain the possibility that Zora is generously sharing a tactic of dis-identification. Through dis-identification, Zora reproduces and at the same time undoes the gendered and racialised orders which accompany every single minute of precarious labour,*" (p.230).

I would suggest that this is wishful thinking on the part of the authors. Their reading of precarious labour, and in this case that of Zora, places her survival technique into the category of an affective act, which surpasses regulation, and which therefore opens up the possibilities of transformational space. Despite the fact that their account of Zora is limited to this short narrative, I would propose that, just as Leyla, B, Ali, Ali, Haider and many others like them, are forced at times to block out their feelings of insecurity, unworthiness, and hopelessness, Zora's blocking off of hurt and pain, is none other than a means of self-protection, in order to maintain what is left of her concept of self-dignity.

Precarious labour, employed as a sociological or cultural category, fails to take account of its transformational potentialities, according to Papadopoulos et al. Indeed, I agree with them that precarious workers do have "*their own distinct sources of pride, respect and autonomy*" (p.229), which need to be taken into account in discussions about their lives and in research on precarity; but, I believe there is a danger in overstating the potential of asylum seekers and refugees to sidestep subjectification, and to meaningfully and affectively go beyond the relations of exploitation in which they find themselves.

Ali was amongst a group of Iraqi asylum seekers who joined forces a couple of

years ago to set up a tent camp outside one of the asylum centres in the North of the Netherlands. They camped out together, getting water and food from the locals, drumming up support and publicity nationwide. Asylum procedures exhausted, and none of them willing to return to Iraq, whilst the Iraqi government refuses to accept forced repatriation of any of its citizens not willing to return voluntarily, this group of asylum seekers faced an impasse in the possibilities open to them. Members of the group got together to set up a protest camp, which eventually led to them being given shelter once more, and a weekly financial allowance. Their optimism at being 'heard' was short-lived however, as within one and half years, all but a few of the ex-tent campers, are on the streets again; Ali amongst them. No shelter, no financial support, and no voice once again.

This is lived precarity. These are not the "*new subjectivities*" (p.231) of whom Papadopoulos et al boast. These are wretched lives, with little hope for a better future. Perhaps one might slip through the net every now and then, a Muslim becomes Christian for the chances of residency, or policy changes in favour of this ethnic group, or the other, but even then, what future lies in store for them, what chance of social and personal transformation?

These people are certainly inventive. In fact, they are probably never more inventive than when they are forced into a creativity necessary for bare survival. They do indeed "*mobilise social and personal investments in order to produce (e.g. social relations, skills, informal networks, ideas)...*" (Papadopoulos et al, p.231), but whether this harnessing of personal and social capital equates with a transformational "*form of politics,*" as Papadopoulos et al would have us believe, I have my doubts.

"When you're on the road to get here you just keep on going. You go through unbelievable stuff because you have hope. You do things you wouldn't normally do. When you get here, you don't only lose that hope, you also miss the risk taking, you miss the excitement. You're like a balloon with no air left in it. Deflated," (a young unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan).

With the evocation of an "*embodied experience of precarity,*" which is a "*form of subversion and possibly a form of escape from the precarious subjectivities manifesting in the realm of the regime of precarious life and labour*" (Papadopoulos et al, p.235), the authors presuppose the creation of an "*excess....in the core of a regime of control,*" (p.235). This so-called excess is what is harnessed by its creators, and which then manifests in the form of an escape. It is an affective excess, embedded in "*transformative processes [which] change the conditions of social existence by paving the*

way for new transformations (rather than by creating fixed identifiable things or identities),” (p.xiii).

What Papadopoulos et al call excess, is that which, according to them, cannot be appropriated by the regime of “*precarious life and labour*,” (p.228). Exploitation abounds, but regulation is incapable of accounting for the totality of a labourers body or actions. Not all value that is created can be organised, regulated and appropriated, they argue. Subjectivities are emergent, fluid and do not “*coalesce into one unified social actor with the same position in production and the same characteristics*,” (p.231). And for this reason, “*there is always an excess of sociability and subjectivity in precarious lives which does not directly correspond to the immediate conditions of work*,” (p.231). What Papadopoulos et al argue, is that this excess is a challenge to embodied capitalism, to the mechanisms of policing employed in neo-liberal societies, and a break with normalising forms of representation.

Whilst I agree with their critique of this regime of control and normalisation, I argue that the perspective they take on escape and transformation is flawed. They overestimate the production of a so-called affective excess, by severely marginalised populations, as well as their capacity to choose a path of subversion to current modes of subjectivity and representation, be it imperceptible or not. In addition, they underestimate the desire of these marginal groups to belong to the very regimes which in turn may repress them.

My research highlights a group of asylum seekers and refugees who, albeit not without agency, on the one hand find their attempts to pursue meaningful lives hampered by the regime of embodied capitalism and its institutions which Papadopoulos et al describe, whilst on the other hand, they themselves, either through choice or chance, lack the capacities, means, will or desire, to pursue a meaningful future in the Netherlands. Neither wholly victim nor wholly author of their own wretchedness, the reality is messier than we might want to acknowledge.

What is this excess in fact? Is it the social networks which most asylum seekers and refugees have, and which they occasionally use or call upon to gather information, find work (on the black market) or to purchase goods? A network that is infused with distrust, imbued with cultural prejudices, which also serve to marginalise or exclude, and a network that is primarily formed out of others who are, more or less, in the same predicament as oneself? Is this an excess of sociability which holds within it the capacity to transform social, economic and political relations?

Is the excess which remains unexploited worth exploiting? Once again Papadopoulos et al illustrate the refusal of exploitation by using the example of Zora. Zora apparently got so fed up one day of her boss that she spontaneously “left him in the lurch” (p.254), much to his dismay. It sounds like a rather heroic act; indeed it could be the act of a subversive element, intent on showing the system just what it can do with it’s exploitation of undocumented labourers. But who is the real loser in this story? Certainly not the boss, who undoubtedly ‘suffered’ for one evening, and then found a ready supply of other illegals to fill Zora’s boots the next day. Is this not a perfect example of “cutting of one’s nose to spite one’s face”?

According to Papadopoulos et al, there is a “vacuum of control,” (p.255) which creates the conditions in which escape can occur, in which domination can be dislodged. New “constructive relationalities” form (p.256), and provide a challenge to existing modes of control and exploitation . Again Zora typifies these new networks of relations, in which (illegal) migrants pursue their dreams of reaching a new future in Europe. The porous borders of Europe, and wider, in which mobility can barely be controlled, are set against relational webs, in which and through which, new possibilities arise and flourish. They “are not, as many believe, just volatile social relations, but strong material and social spaces which cut across the plane of control which is imposed by the regimes of labour and mobility control.” Indeed this new force of “inappropriate/d sociability is the flesh of the imperceptible politics of escape,” (Papadopoulos et al, p.256).

According to Papadopoulos et al, “escape is a constructive and creative movement – it is a literal, material, embodied movement towards something which cannot be named, towards something which is fictional. Escape is *simultaneously* in the heart of social transformation and outside it. Escape is always here because it is non-literal, witty and hopeful”. Escape, they argue, occurs everywhere, as a forum of resistance and evasion, preceding control rather than following it. It acts as a tool of subversion, against the appropriation of subjectivities and spaces by neoliberalism. It is an act of “imperceptible politics”.

Arguably, certain elements of the lives of the asylum seekers and refugees I know, remain unregulated and beyond control, existing in “spaces for the play of purposeless action” (Papadopoulos et al, 2008). Take the way in which some refugees go unhindered in their daily lives, drawing benefits with little or no interference from civil servants, or public authorities, until such a moment that they themselves demand to be seen or heard. The case of Ali is a case in point, but the same applies to Tatiana and others like her.

However, even if a form of escape from any one of a number of control regimes, this invisibility does not bear the promises of social transformation, or mobilisation that is alluded to, (or hoped for), by Papadopoulos et al. Migrants, but especially refugees, long for visibility and the attainment of rights through formal representation. Resistance to the various degrading ways in which they are treated, or have been treated does, of course, take place. They learn how to bypass certain rules, or how to circumvent regulations, and through their networks of cooperation and reciprocity, the majority muddle through their daily lives, avoiding explicit exploitation in a, nevertheless, precarious existence. Whether this is “cunning” however, or pure necessity, I am not sure.

Is Olga cunning when she recruits me to approach her gynaecologist to complain about her treatment, or rather lack of it? Or is she just desperate? Is B. using cunning when he questions me, alongside countless others (friends, volunteers, helpers, professionals), about his chances of getting a study paid whilst drawing welfare benefits? Or is he just confused and lost in an whirl-war of rules and regulations, processes and procedures. Or perhaps he is expressing his fear at never getting out of the benefit rut that he is in, angst at the prospect of never having a paid job again, in order to look after his family in the manner to which they are accustomed, or in the manner in which his custom (and religion) dictates.

Once more, I would argue that Papadopoulos et al present too simple a description of the relational networks in which asylum seekers and refugees operate on a daily basis, be it to get to the Netherlands, or to survive once here. The relations may be functional, even constructive, and they may even enable one to evade control from systematic repression or regulation, but let us not get carried away. Papadopoulos et al also point out that the ways of imperceptibility are not always successful. People die, asylum seekers get raped on their journeys, or left behind for dead, and racism is very much alive on the European continent.

I do applaud their attempt to furnish an alternative discourse and perspective on migration, and on the precarity of modern day lives. But, I suggest that theirs is a desperate attempt to find a means of inclusion, change and transformation for populations that are systematically excluded and marginalised, which fails to recognise a number of other critical factors and which oversimplifies the possibility of escape. The migrant’s role in his own exclusion, as well as that of other migrants, is left out of this account, as is a description of what escape actually entails or what its destination holds for the one who escapes. Similarly the “*spaces of sociability which constitute the ground of escape,*” (p.257) remain

unquestioned; and whilst arguing that precarious subjectivities must be seen as a multiplicity of actors whose experiences cannot be unified, Papadopoulos et al nonetheless point towards the “possibilities for new collectivities,” shaped and connected to each other by their common engagement in “acts of escaping production” (p.258) and capable of creating “a movement of escape from the contemporary regime of labour regulation,” (p.257).

I think about Sayed, who finds Western culture abhorrent or “backward”, and about the lines of betrayal and mistrust in the relationship between Leyla and Lianne, between B. and his cronies (also refugees from Iraq), and I ponder the evident exploitation in the “spaces of sociability,” which render the migrants more vulnerable and more powerless than ever (in labour relations and to smugglers for example), as well as the ways in which cultural difference, prejudices and misguided expectations could stymie the forming of any form of collectivity whatsoever.

Ammar has a new ‘family’ in the church, as do others I know, such as Haider from Afghanistan. But relationships of trust and cooperation are often predicated on the Dutch person knowing, and therefore also judging, the asylum story of the other, in order to be able to decide for themselves whether the person in question is ‘worthy’ of assistance or support. The asylum seeker may well exploit this relationship, by lying about his story, or by going along with what the other wishes to believe, or indeed fabricates for himself about the asylum seeker. I’ve seen this happen on many occasions. Is this a form of purposeful ‘escape’ I wonder? And to what end, and what injury?

Matti is a young refugee from Afghanistan. He is here with his wife and two small daughters. Up to a couple of months ago they were still living in the asylum centre. Their initial asylum request had been denied and they had been through the usual gamut of follow-up procedures, contesting the original decision through all legal means possible, but all to no avail. After their conversion to Christianity, accompanied by their baptism and regular attendance at a Baptist Church close to where I live, they were granted refugee status.

I was introduced to the family via a friend, who also attends the same church, and who asked me if I could assist in a number of issues. The family was preparing their move out of the asylum centre and were still awaiting news of a house at the time. They had received sketchy information on their rights from the local volunteer from the Refugee Council, were unaware of the procedures surrounding their housing application, and didn’t know what to expect from the local government authorities concerning welfare benefits, and the like.

Apart from seeing the parents regularly at the church (which I also attend with the young Afghan who lives with my family), I have met the family on numerous occasions in different settings, providing guidance and information or practical help with moving house. My friend, the churchgoer, who I will call Henk, regularly expresses his concern that the family is at a loss in the Netherlands, and that they are afraid and insecure. The two young daughters are always sick, and the conditions for growing up in an asylum centre are disastrous for the health of the children. An observation with which I agree.

Matti and his wife speak little Dutch, and we therefore always use the services of A., the young Afghan who lives with us. At the onset, the degree of trust between them was limited, and after Matti accused A. of trying to get a commission on goods purchased for his new house, the relationship has cooled intensely, much to the disappointment of Henk. On the other hand, Henk has told me a scanty account of the family's escape from Afghanistan, pointing out that they are "*boat refugees*", who faced considerable danger crossing the sea to get here. Whilst he claims to know the ins and outs of their history, which I personally doubt is authentic, he tells me that "*it's important to know their story, to know why they fled*". Henk has a genuine desire to help this young couple, and has gone so far as to furnish them with second hand laminate flooring, which Matti and his wife politely accepted, and used to cover the upstairs, (and out of sight), floors of the bedrooms. The rest of the stuff which Henk has given to the family, including a profuse amount of second hand clothing for their daughters, has never been seen on or anywhere near the children, according to Henk. He worries that his gesture was not really appreciated, though the family claimed they were pleased with the hand me downs.

Henk's attempts to organise help with painting, wallpapering and cleaning the new house were met, if not with suspicion, then with severe hesitation. Matti's culture prevented him from telling Henk directly that his help was not desired, and instead he informed A. that he didn't really want the assistance, but "*if Henk wants to, then it's OK*", and that he and his wife "don't really know how to say no to him". A. said, that from what Matti has told him in private, neither Matti nor his wife want others to interfere with how they decorate their new home, and A., rather directly accused Matti of only wanting "*donkeys to do the heavy work,*" and of "*taking advantage of the goodness of Henk*".

Needless to say, the move went ahead into a well-positioned house close to the centre of a small town in Friesland, with a group of helpers from the church, who toiled to get everything in order for when the furniture and appliances would be

delivered. I provided the necessary assistance, when it came down to understanding the procedures for moving out of an asylum centre, and the financial contributions of the local authorities, the need to organise language school for the parents and junior school for the eldest daughter. A. provided the requisite translation services. The volunteer from the local Refugee Council was busying herself with questions of health insurance, organising the welfare benefits and the practicalities of actually getting the children and parents to start school, and Henk was (and still is) the all-round helper and chief organiser of the move.

The position of Matti and his wife is rather exceptional. The majority of asylum seekers, come refugees, have precious little help and assistance. That said, there is usually a volunteer from the Refugee Council somewhere in the picture, but the quality and accuracy of the information they provide varies greatly, as does their enthusiasm, competence and overall level of efficiency. Indeed, many problems stem from the incompetence of such support workers.

We could choose to see the assistance offered by Henk as just one more mechanism of control, and the actions of Matti and his wife as deliberate means to destabilize a regime of regulation and normalisation. After all, they made their own choices regarding how to furnish their house (adopting to buy a paper thin, but cheap floor laminate in order to compensate for the prices of the ‘silver’, chrome-look household appliances); they took advantage of the ready-supply of ‘donkeys’ to do the manual lifting and shifting for them; they had me running around for them looking up the same information as the volunteer from the Refugee Council; and they called upon the network which they had built up in the past five years in the Netherlands (other asylum seekers and refugees) to get advice on buying household and other stuff from home delivery organisations, on credit. Escape? Or decisions made and executed, against a cultural (or personal) trait of distrust of others and their advice, combined with a personal desire to have a home that fulfils the expectations of one’s visitors (Matti said that he “*didn’t want problems with the wife on the choice of washing machine and fridge*”), inadequate financial planning and a lack of insight related to the possible negative consequences of making expensive choices without having the income to support them. Leyla is a prime example of this, as is Ammar, both of whom have a long way to go before their debts are settled.

As a local government policy worker has reiterated on many an occasion “*they – the asylum seekers – just don’t know what they’re doing. They make all the wrong choices, don’t get the right advice, or don’t accept it when they do, and end up in debt. The number*

of refugees in our community in debt is worrying. Notwithstanding the financial strain and lack of resources when the credit bank take over managing your finances, these people have psychological problems, marital problems and sometimes even try to commit suicide because of it”.

Matti and his wife are “lost” in a sea of regulations, papers, contractual agreements and policy expectations which they don’t understand, and the implications of which are still too far removed for them to have any noticeable impact at the moment. Glad they have a residency permit, and now a place of their own, they are embarking on a new future. Already their initial experiences of the Netherlands, as officially recognised refugees, have led to feelings of disorientation and stress. Now the journey of confusion continues as they must invest in learning the language, and in looking for work opportunities, despite the fact that neither of them have a good educational background and Matti’s wife is also illiterate.

I have in no way perceived in Matti and his wife, nor in other asylum seekers and refugees who have participated in this research, the capacity to evoke “*the contingent intensities of the production process and the intrinsic possibilities for overcoming its oppressive structures*” as described by Papadopoulos et al (p.231). In fact the “gap” of which they write, which creates the ‘excess’ which can be redirected to subversion and to escape, is rather a chasm of distrust and incomprehension, which gapes wide open and threatens to swallow all those who come too close.

I am presenting a picture of lives which are wretched, yet ordinary. I find little to be joyful about in the lives of the asylum seekers and refugees that I have studied, and of which I have been a part over the past decade or so. That is not to say that there is no love, that there are no moments of happiness or delight, or that there is no cause for celebration every once in a while. There is. But what I am purporting to is a bigger picture. It is a bigger picture in which the configuration of hope is limited, in which resilience is shattered and in which optimism for a good life is severely tempered by a range of factors; from the insensitivity and incompetence of those working for all manner of support organisations and governmental institutions, the inhumanity of the asylum system in general, and the unrelenting steadfastness of cultural difference, and the politics of othering, on both sides. All of this is compounded by lostness in a new world, with new rules, and a new set of cultural norms and behavioural dictates which, in an attempt to recreate a sentiment of familiarity with what has been lost, the asylum seeker and refugee may choose to ignore or rebut, at his peril.

Papadopoulos et al put forward an overly optimistic picture of the likelihood of escape from the entrapment of societies of embodied capitalism. Their endeavour to present a new perspective on transformation and change is commendable, but their affective model of escape fails to convince. In an “*immanent unfolding*” of “*emergent life*”, they propose self-transformation “*across all the multiple co-active levels of organisation,*” (p.132) and in their eyes the migrant, or precarious labourer, is the hero, whose participation in imperceptible politics will help tip the balance and subvert structures of domination and regulation. I only wish I could also see it that way. My own research and immersion into the everyday lives of asylum seekers and refugees leads me to other, less positive, conclusions.

I see instead that an affective engagement in the politics of life as an asylum seeker or refugee does not only not lead to escape, but can lead to a further retrenchment into despair and hopelessness. I began my research hoping that, by making affective contact with and a deep commitment to my research participants, that it would lead to better research, better care, and to a humanism characterised by solidarity and compassion.

However, I have discovered that affect is more complex than many of its champions would have us believe. Affective contact can be liberatory, and may even lead to moments of escape or personal and social transformation; but affect is not pre-social. Affect is not only empathy, care and understanding, love or patience. It is also hatred, anger and frustration, irritation, jealousy and rage. Studying this group on the basis of affect, I discovered all of these, and more, within myself. Uncontrollable tendencies popping up without notice, transforming my relations to the other into mutual respect or sympathy, distrust or dislike. Sometimes railroading me into acts of near mutiny or civil disobedience; sometimes burying me under a concrete block of indecisiveness and frustration; sometimes just deadweight, numbing my senses and preventing me from taking any action whatsoever, in a conspiratorial mood of, “*why should I do anything anyway? It makes no sense and is no use, so why bother?*”

And once such tendencies had revealed themselves, once such affects were known and recognised, they didn’t simply transform themselves, or dissolve, leaving me with surprise or astonishment; though sometimes they did. No, they left a trace, a mark, a line, which might slowly find a groove and begin to sink deeper into my affectual system, like water drips dropping into a stone only to form a deep gaping hole over time. A deep gaping hole, a black hole. But before the hole, there’s a pattern; a pattern of affect, which presides over one’s relations, and which steers its own course. And no matter how hard one might reflect, or wish

to get out of the groove, it is eventually too deep and the sides are too steep, to be able to escape. The lines which define behaviour, and which watch over which affects are conjured up, turn affect into habit, into intuition, into a tower of habituated ways of being in the world, and with others. Embodied affect, a corporeal wedge of affects and affectivity, whose marks form scars deep in one's very tissues, solidifying fibres into accustomed practices and ways of reacting to things and people, where patterns emerge and become normality. We think it's normal, because it is. Because we've learnt new ways to remember the old; ways in which memories too sink into the grooves, knowing which affect to embrace, at which moment and with whom. No escape for them, the asylum seekers and refugees, and no escape for me, the researcher, either. And what of institutional affect, or should I say, institutionalised affect?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stuck in affect?

Institutionalised affect as barrier to escape

The Dutch welfare system is highly formalised and regulated, and the process of “othering” is strong (Ghorashi, 2003). According to Ghorashi’s (2003) study of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands, “*In the first years many were shocked by the way government officials treated them*” (2003, p.169). Ghorashi points out how their sense of belonging is frustrated more in the Netherlands than in the USA and that refugees often feel patronised, and marginalised, where “*the effect of this process is generally stronger on men than on women,*” (2003, p.191).

The hope which the Iranian women felt on arriving in the Netherlands, turns to frustration, according to Ghorashi. She writes: “*After several years of living in the Netherlands, many Iranians felt exhausted because of these confusions and misinterpretations, without being aware of the source of their exhaustion. So the first years of stay, usually the most productive ones for settlement, are partly wasted by these confusions.....In addition, the process of othering existing in the Netherlands makes the trajectory of life fragile and uncertain,*” (2003, p.206).

The same type of frustrations, helplessness and feelings of being lost, are experienced by all those participating in my research. Those who are still awaiting a decision on their asylum claim are worn down by waiting and by feelings of dejection. They describe feeling less than human, treated as “*sheep*” or “*animals*”, dependent on the authorities for virtually everything. Even the refugees in this research, that is, those with a valid residency permit, face the authorities in another, no less dependent way. They have to wrestle with the confusions of learning their rights, and of trying to understand the bureaucratic maze into which they are thrown, often without competent assistance, or a knowledgeable guide.

According to Bauman, “*refugees are human waste, with no useful function to play in the land of their arrival and temporary stay and no intention or realistic prospect of being assimilated and incorporated into the new social body,*” (2004, p.77). As Tassin, an Iraqi asylum seeker once told me: “*I think that once I have a house again, I’ll also become human again, but not now*” (05.08.2010). Or B., before he got a residency permit: “*They [the authorities] can do anything with us*” (28.09.2010).

In this chapter I want to question the interaction between asylum seekers and refugees and the various organisations with whom they have regular contact, either during their asylum procedures, and at least during the first years (if not more) of their lives, once they have received formal refugee status. In particular, I will examine the affective nature of those relations, attending to ways in which affect may become stuck and intransigent, rather than flowing and amenable to transformation and change.

I will describe some of the interactions I have personally observed, where my role as researcher was sometimes explicit, though not always. Sometimes I decided with the research participant to present myself as a 'friend', with little or no knowledge of the system, and at other times, those in an institutional role already knew something about my professional activities with asylum seekers and refugees. Whether or not it was clear that I was carrying out research at the time of the meeting, or that I had a certain professional knowledge of the laws and rules regarding the asylum procedure, or citizenship courses, for example, certainly had an effect, I will argue, on the quality and type of information and services afforded to the asylum seeker or refugee in question.

Despite being greeted with a general hesitancy and annoyance a lot of the time, in general, the more which was known about my position beforehand, (or which came to light during a meeting), the better the quality of the information, and the more time taken to deal with the queries of the particular asylum seeker or refugee in question. It seemed that where asylum seekers and refugees often failed personally to have their needs met in an adequate way, the simple mention of the presence of a researcher, or "integration specialist" in the meeting, was often enough to change the course of events for the better.

My own experience with institutions working with asylum seekers and refugees spans a decade, and whilst it is impossible to relay here all accounts, meetings, interviews or talks, on the whole my journey of institutional encounters is largely a narrative of disappointment and dismay, at the sheer lack of competency and care which many workers exhibit, despite claims that they have the client's best interests at heart (the client being the asylum seeker or refugee). There are exceptions, which I will also mention, where the personal commitment and professionalism of those involved is like a felt presence and a warm blanket, for those who more often than not feel unvalued, unseen and unheard.

The vast array of expectations which come with life in a complex society like that of the Netherlands, leaves the asylum seeker or refugee feeling lost. They have

already lost literally everything which it is possible to lose, and the burden of learning again from scratch is like a double loss. They arrive filled with ideas of a welcoming start and are soon dismayed at the common reality of their “bare life,” (Agamben, 1998); a distant dream which in no way resembles the care which they are purported to receive in the glossy brochures of the organisations responsible for them.

“Putting people first” is the title of COA’s corporate brochure, dated October 2013. The brochure states:

“Support”

Our workers are specialists in giving the right support at the right time. The support we give is tailored to the particular phase in the asylum procedure of the individual inhabitant and to their future perspectives. “The human being” is always central”.

This is so far removed from the stories I hear, and from many of my own personal experiences. Many of the workers I meet are “numb” from their encounters with asylum seekers or refugees, which are not always positive, to say the least. They meet criticism and mistrust, even hatred and violence, in their daily work. And where it all starts is not an easy question to answer. I only know that many asylum seekers and refugees are also “numb”, worn down and physically and mentally tired from their endeavours, and when their expectations of decent care are not met, they either explode like time bombs or withdraw into depression and apathy and self-hurt.

“I got rushed into hospital after drinking so much alcohol, I was unconscious. I can’t take the hurt anymore. I’m so sad, I’m alone, and nobody cares. The next day when the doctors wanted to discharge me, my mentor from Nidos (organisation for guardianship) and my contact person from COA (asylum centre) said that it wasn’t serious enough for them to call me a taxi to bring me back. In the end I walked to school, and they helped me”

(Hafid from Afghanistan, talking about one of his experiences, 18 years at the time, unaccompanied minor, 2013)

“I was in hospital for three months at the university medical centre in Groningen. I was operated on for a hole in my heart and was ages in intensive care. I got one telephone call from my guardian, and not even a visit. From nobody. I was all alone”.

(Unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan, talking about his experience in 2011, when he was 15 years old).

“That’s another one that you can put a bomb under. Useless”.
(Teacher, talking about a guardian from Nidos, 2014)

“You have to take the walkie talkie with you, because of the danger of an incident happening. There is violence. And then you need to be able to call for back-up straight away”.
(Security guard at asylum centre Oude Pekela, 2014)

So, why do so many asylum seekers and refugees experiences rhyme with feelings of abandonment by the authorities and with a lack of general caring and respect? Workers, and ex-workers admit to feeling saturated, and fed up, and those who are brave enough, or for whom other chances arise, also get out; they escape before they become like robots, without affection for those they are supposed to serve. At least that’s what they tell me.

“You’re expected to follow procedures and protocols. People aren’t humans any more. We had the order to just refuse all asylum claims. Once a colleague refused to do so. He got disciplined, but then decided to leave himself” (ex-immigration officer).

Many workers can’t avoid cynicism. Many say they started out naïve, but soon got smart to the stories of the asylum seekers. They soon learned to fish out the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’ and the ‘liars’ from the ‘genuine’ and therefore, ‘worthy,’ asylum seekers and refugees. When asked if she and her colleagues know the asylum histories of their clients, the manager at one asylum centre told me recently: *“No, it’s not necessary for us to know that stuff. What I do know is that the IND (immigration services) know what they’re doing. They have ways to check if the stories are true. They know the facts. And they know when someone is lying. We leave it to them”.* To all intents and purposes she implied that the immigration authorities do not make mistakes.

She also said: *“I also used to feel sorry for them (the asylum seekers) in the beginning. It’s easy to get pulled into the sob stories. But the longer you work with them, the more you get to see that they’re just desperate to stay here and so they’ll do anything, tell anything. You learn to know which ones are lying. And so that’s when I don’t have a problem to say ‘that’s enough now. You’re procedure’s closed, you have to leave. Though I had a case recently of someone who was supposed to be turned out onto the street, but I knew he wouldn’t be able to get his medicines illegally, so I made the decision that he could stay”.*

“Making the decision that he could stay” involved a lot of extra paper work, but it seemed that in this case it was possible to bend the rules somewhat, she informed me.

“You only get stuff when you become real aggressive and make a big fuss. The ones who sit back and just take it all, the quiet ones, they just get forgotten about. Sometimes it really does work to hit someone or to break something. At least then they notice you’re alive. Otherwise you mean nothing to them”.

(Iraqi Kurd, in the Netherlands for more than 6 years, arrived at 17 years, procedure closed)

Is it then a question of seeing, hearing or feeling? Workers see, hear and feel; but what exactly? Lies, cynicism, pity, empathy, fear, mistrust? They can’t get too close they tell me; they can’t become involved. They carry out their tasks, and try not to take their work home with them. *“I’m long past taking the stories to bed with me,”* a support worker told me. And many I have spoken to tell me that it’s essential to cut off the feelings of compassion, or pity, in order to make rational decisions and to carry out their work efficiently.

Damasio (2006) argues *“I advanced the hypothesis that emotion was in the loop of reason, and that emotion could assist the reasoning process rather than necessarily disturb it, as was commonly assumed,”* (p.xvii). According to Damasio reasoning and emotion go hand in hand, and contrary to common belief *“When emotion is entirely left out of the reasoning picture, [...] reason turns out to be even more flawed than when emotion plays bad tricks on our decisions,”* (p. xviii).

Now I am not trying to suggest that all civil servants or support workers working with asylum seekers and refugees are invulnerable to emotions, but from what they tell me themselves, they reach a turning point, and after that they run the risk of becoming cynical automatons . Their level of trust in their client is then further undermined, and whether or not they can still approach each client with the necessary openness depends largely on their own self-reflexive capacity.

“Many of my former colleagues behave like robots, with no consideration whatsoever for the human beings that they’re dealing with”.

(Former IND worker, 2013)

“I felt sorry for them in the beginning. I found it unfortunate for them. But that wore off pretty quickly. It wasn’t long after I started working for COA that I started hearing the first flaws in the asylum stories. You learn about their dossiers. You had to read everything before you had a meeting with them. And then you jump from one surprise to the other. I learnt there to be careful. I have been cynical in the past. And then you learn to relativize. I think I’m in balance now”.

(Team manager COA, 2014)

The mistrust is often mutual, and can be firmly detected in the way the bodies are positioned, where the eyes fall, and how the hands clasp each other as if praying for respite during a meeting, or fists clench as if holding in an indelible desire to hit out, or maim someone or something. I've seen mistrust develop into disgust; a mouth which does its best to maintain an innocent posture but which can't help turning down, with eyes which screw up and glances which avoid one another. I've seen how teachers shiftily regard refugee kids, or project inexistent traumas on to them; how IND workers all but ignore the asylum seeker, as they themselves enter into a process of negotiation with the interpreter about what has or hasn't been said, or about what can or cannot be believed; how workers of the local refugee council tell their clients, expressionless, that their procedures are closed; how support workers inform their clients flippantly or with nervous laughter that their asylum request has been turned down – either in person, or via the telephone; COA personnel, whose words to asylum seekers are condescending and belittling; and how security personnel treat inhabitants of asylum centres as if they were invisible, or less worthy of decent service than you or I. In fact, in the rare cases that they take me for an asylum seeker, I'm also treated in the same way.

I wonder how they manage to turn up every day at their place of work; and I ask myself how they have become so ill attuned to the misery and suffering of the other. Or am I seeing it wrong? They are certainly affected, but in what way?

Is it adverse affect, negative affect? Or affect gone underground, burrowed so deep in the dark folds of layer after layer of disappointment and hurt that it is no longer capable of surfacing to skin level? Or rather, an excess of affect? Lips pursed tight, fists clenched, arms folded tightly, knees crossed with one leg wrapped firmly around the other, buttocks clenched and eyes narrowed to small slits. All signs of tension, of not wanting to let go of one's cramped beliefs. Signs of the fear of opening up and letting in. Perhaps they (too) are ticking time bombs waiting to erupt. Burn out potentials. Stress heads. Hardened and experienced old timers.

This is what is tricky in the language of affect. *"Affects have greater freedom with respect to object, for unlike the drives, 'any affect may have any 'object'. This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behaviour". The object of affects such as anger, enjoyment, excitement or shame is not proper to the affects in the same way that air is the object proper to respiration,*" (Kofosky Sedgwick, 2003, on Tomkin's description of affect, p. 19).

Institutional workers are not devoid of affect. Their affects engender a wide gamut of feelings which then promotes or stills a certain type of action. Different affects arise in interaction with different people; they are intersubjective. Brennan notes: “What is at stake with the notion of the transmission of affect is precisely the opposite of the sociobiological claim that the biological *determines* the social. What is at stake is rather the means by which the social interaction shapes biology. My affect, if it comes across to you, alters your anatomical makeup for good or ill,” (2004, p.74, italics in original).

So it is not a one-way process. Affects altercate and move back and forth, inciting intensities and waves of energy which can intensify and explode or dampen and disappear, just as quickly as they came. And as Tomkins explains (in Kofosky Sedgwick, 2003): “*There is literally no kind of object which has not historically been linked to one or another of the affects. Positive affect has been invested in pain and every kind of human misery, and negative affect has been experienced as a consequence of pleasure and every kind of triumph of the human spirit*” (p.19).

This said, it would appear that both negative and positive affects have the capacity to rouse sentiments of care or empathy in human beings. Anger at inequality can mobilise action to assist others, as can the joy which arises from sharing the same interests. Whereas one COA worker told me that her feelings of pity and ensuing desire to help quickly turned into cynicism and disillusionment, many a welfare worker has told me that their desire to see a client stand on his own two feet, stems not from empathy with the client’s predicament, but rather from their own frustrations with those claiming benefits, who they somehow see as “taking too long,” and therefore no longer worthy of state help. Each worker has his own set of expectations, regardless of those of the organisation for whom he works, and that combined with deep-seated prejudices about certain groups or nationalities, or just plain weariness, can lead to asylum seekers and refugees feeling unheard, miserable and hopeless.

“It’s the Somalians again. They’re a really dirty bunch”.

(Security worker at Immigration Centre in Ter Apel, 2012)

“I told her to pick up the rubbish now. She said she was pregnant. I said ‘do you see the door there and at the back there the gate. Toodeloo. Pick it up now, or you can get out the door and then out the gate and then toodeloo. Bye Bye’. Then she picked it up”.

(Security worker at Immigration Centre in Ter Apel, talking about a heavily pregnant asylum seeker, 2012)

“They hate us. What hope have we got? I came here for a better life, and now I’ve been here for six years, nothing. They’re messing with our lives. My mind is broken”.

(Iraqi Kurd, talking in general about civil servants working with asylum seekers, 2014)

“They think in paper, not people”.

(Iraqi refugee talking about the civil servants of the immigration services, 2010)

Indeed, when I worked on a programme with a local authority a couple of years ago, it was my task to work with the members of the team responsible for arranging the citizenship courses for foreigners and to help improve the quality of the services they provided. The programme was implemented under the guise of improving the intercultural communication skills of the workers, and during the many months that I worked with the various members of personnel, I came to realise that one of the elements which stood in the way of good teamwork was the fact, that the team harboured a lot of unspoken ideas and prejudices about the work they were doing.

The team was used to discussing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of their work - what are we going to do and how are we going to do it – but the ‘why’ was never addressed. The team had never examined their own thoughts and feelings on the policy goals which were imposed from the policy team, and which they were expected to put into practice. Discussing the whys and wherefores of policy opened up a whole new can of worms, as the workers were confronted with new forms of dialogue and reflexivity.

The team members were forced to think about their own attitudes towards their clients, in relation to their working practices and the decisions they took. They could no longer hide behind a sea of procedures and protocols, but needed to reflect on why they took the actions they did, the consequences of their actions for the client, and for policy (and therefore the organisation), and they were challenged to take the organisation’s clichéd propaganda – “tailor-made services” – seriously.

During the course of the year, I attended many of their meetings with individual clients, which I followed up directly with a feedback session. In the feedback sessions we discussed the premises on which the decisions were made, the content of the actual decisions and the ways in which the worker communicated with the clients. Many of the clients were refugees. All were foreigners.

In group sessions, we put their attitudes under the microscope (as well as my own), and we tried to tease out incongruence in opinions, policy and implementation strategies. There was a difference between those workers who agreed without question with the local authority's policy of own responsibility and participation, and others, who felt that a lot of the policy discriminated against the most marginalised who, they felt, were unable to fulfil all the conditions demanded of them.

The first group were the most likely to apply a strict implementation of the rules, and to follow procedures down to the letter. They felt that the rules were clear and that their actions could be justified with reference to written protocols, and work plans, and the like. The second group also applied the rules, but with bigger margins of flexibility. They were more patient with their clients, and tended to treat them more as victims than active agents.

We discussed the consequences of a too strict leaning on one or other side of the fence, as neither was in balance. The procedural workers sometimes expressed too little empathy, care and consideration, and the relationship-oriented workers expressed too much. One group's emotions were frozen; the other let the tears flow freely with their clients.

Many reflection sessions with the workers enabled them to see that continual reflexivity is a must. Bringing their frustrations, attitudes, prejudices and patterns into the open was a relief for them. It allowed for professional learning, and enabled each and every one to question his/her own ways of working, and to provide open and critical feedback to their colleagues, without retribution or fear. The majority of the team had a problem with ambivalence. They felt conflicting emotions about the same clients, and found it extremely difficult to adapt their ways of working to the needs of all clients, however diverse. Whilst recognising that there is not one size that fits all, the workers sometimes became debilitated by dilemma's regarding contradictory policies, whose aims they were meant to support and whose implementation they were supposed to ensure. Take 'participation,' alongside 'child and youth care', and then imagine a single mother from, let's say Somalia, with four young children; on the one hand she is obliged to take a citizenship course and to work afterwards, or take part on some kind of work experience scheme, and at the same time she is expected to be a good mother, supporting her children at home, and in school, in a language and culture which are not her own. The ambivalence of many policy routes lead to interesting discussions about choices and priorities, and goals and values; many of which were irresolvable, and which left workers in a permanent state of disarray and confusion.

Unfortunately, in a change of policy, the team was disbanded shortly after the intervention, and the workers were integrated into new teams. Individually workers have informed me since, that they learned a lot about reflexivity and professional responsibility during the programme, and that they have carried over their skills into their new teams. Nonetheless, the capacity to reflect and its effectiveness as a strategy to improve the quality of one's actions, can remain limited, if it is not supported with a set of enabling conditions and with an acknowledgement of the inevitability of ambivalence. Reflecting on one's own is fine, but for it to have a greater impact, reflexive opportunities need to be embedded within the networks of relationships within we work and study, or research. But, from what I have heard recently from the then team manager, who has since been moved on to another position as senior advisor, the room for constructive criticism within the local authority has anything but increased, in these times of economic crisis and forced savings. One can only hope that it gets better in the future.

No escape from institutions

From the start of one's asylum procedure, an asylum seeker has contact with formal institutions in the Netherlands, from the police and immigration services, to people working at the asylum centres (COA), and volunteers and staff of the local refugee council, lawyers and medical and health professionals. Asylum seekers are introduced to the bureaucratic machinery of the asylum system, to its maze of procedures and to the daily reality of waiting for a decision. The lawyer to whom one is assigned is primarily a question of luck, not choice, as is the location of the asylum centre where you will have to wait for the official decision on your request. Since the introduction of a new eight day procedure, less applicants have to wait for very long periods, but the waiting time of the asylum seekers I know, spans several months, to more than a decade, and the number of asylum centres in which they have been housed in that period varies from four, to eleven or more. Lianne has been in twelve different locations in six years, and her children have been in almost as many schools in that time.

It is more than a struggle trying to learn the rules and expectations. Some are smarter than others and manage to tell their stories accordingly, whilst others are not so fortunate. Hassan explained to me that during his asylum interview he told the interviewer why he had fled and how he had become a victim of an honour feud in Iraq. He had been in love with his niece and was caught one day in a compromising situation with her. Her family vowed to take revenge, and since then his life was in danger. The girl herself was also murdered and he told me he had her death certificate to prove it, (though that was later disregarded by

the immigration services).

During his interview Hassan did not cry, nor show too much emotion. I have known him for about one and half years, and for a while he lived at my house, when he got thrown onto the streets (for the second time) without a place to stay, as all possibilities had been exhausted. I therefore spent a lot of time talking with him about his case, conferring with his lawyer and asking him personally about what happened to him back in Iraq. Only once did he shed a tear, and become emotional. He left a couple of days after that and is still roaming about, homeless, here and there, waiting for a new opportunity to apply for asylum again. I figured that he was embarrassed at his show of emotions, which was why he left, and it got me thinking again about the problems of credibility, which the accounting of one's narrative invariably raises.

Hassan was unfortunate not to know what was expected of him. The immigration authorities, in their refusal of his application, stated that his story was not credible, as he had shown too little emotion when telling it.

"I have to get to know how to speak with them, how to behave with them. Sometimes I am very tired".

(B., 2010)

"They said they couldn't believe my story because I didn't show enough emotion. I didn't break down and cry or anything like that. They wanted me to be traumatised. But I won't let them do that to me. I'm not sick. I'm just not. So why should I pretend I am?" (Hassan, Iraqi, illegal, 2014)

Remaining defiant, one may argue that Hassan's refusal to play the game, or to go along with the ridiculous expectations of the authorities, heralds the possibility of escape of which Papadopoulos et al (2008) write. It is true that he has evaded control and regulation for the past months, and he is relying on his extensive network for shelter and food. Hassan has also always worked, mainly in various types of restaurant jobs, and as he told me, he has managed *"to set a bit of money aside over the years"*.

The problem is that apart from the right-wing politicians who want to make illegality a criminal offence (which it is not yet), Hassan is doing no-one any harm. The authorities are glad he's out of their hair, as they don't have to provide him with any accommodation or financial assistance, and at a time when hundreds of Eritreans a week are flooding into the Netherlands (Volkskrant newspaper, May

2014), the extra capacity and saved funds is welcome news to the state, who are relieved of their burden to care for Hassan and others like him. Illegals like him disappear into the shadows, causing little worry to no-one. If transformation follows escape, as Papdopoulos et al argue, then probably the only kind of transformation this type of escape might engender, is growing calls from right-wing radicals who would have the Hassan's of the Netherlands branded illegal, picked up and placed in detention centres. And this last solution would not only prove outrageously costly in financial terms, but would mean that asylum seekers would pay an even higher price in terms of their own wellbeing, through increased traumas and more resentment against the state.

Agier (2008) claims that *“there is a right to life in illegality. Local wars, abandonment and destitution face millions of individuals each day with the question of mere survival. They resolve this by an improvised hotchpotch of solutions to their physical, biological and social destitution, solutions that are generally clandestine, but this minimal life legitimates a social illegality. This can only embarrass the ‘proper’ rich world: let them die or let them act? This embarrassment will persist as long as the countries of the ‘First World’ do not feel concerned by this human (or should we say ‘inhuman’) dimension of the present international order”* (p.97).

Ali has been living illegally for at least two years. I spoke about his visit to the doctor earlier in the book. Taken in by a local, he sports regularly at the same sport club as me, and he jogs ten kilometres or more two times a week. He has no health insurance, and no financial support, and is fully dependent on those who have taken him in. He's applying for residency elsewhere, but I've been helping him more than a year now with that request. Again the bureaucracy involved in lodging a residency claim, this time outside the Netherlands, are exhausting. I have read only parts of Ali's dossier, and I have had no in-depth discussions with him about his case. I know him in relation to his stay here, now more than six years, and assist him with formalities, when necessary. He has a university degree and a high standard of Dutch, but his claim has been denied, which means that his talents as an engineer are wasted for the moment.

“People who have got a university degree in their own country may have to work in a factory here. That's just how it is”.
(Welfare benefits officer, Assen, 2012)

Adapting to the idea that one may never work again at one's previous level is hard. Tatiana, the economist, who even studied here at university level, has only recently got a job as an office manager. A far cry from her position as economist

and team manager at a Ministry in Kazakhstan. Olga, a jurist from Russia, now doing a low-level study in logistics. Varant an engineer from Iran, still unemployed after years of searching. And the countless others like them who have to get used to the idea that they are far less here than they ever were at home. This is a direct effect of loss and lostness.

One might think that those with little or no educational background might be afforded more chances. And to a certain extent that is true. They might be able to attend school (depending on their age on arrival in the Netherlands and sometimes also contingent on whether or not they get refugee status), and once they get a residency permit, learning the Dutch language to a minimum level is compulsory by law. Yet, those with limited formal schooling experience face other challenges, especially if they enter the educational system at a later age. Learning the language becomes more difficult, and progressing to even a low-level diploma is hard, and the barriers many.

“Lots of the youngsters have motivation problems. They’ve never been to school in their own country and despite it being compulsory to attend school until you’re eighteen, even without a residency permit, COA works against us, or at least they do nothing to encourage the minors to come to school,” (teacher at the ISK – a bridging school for foreign children aged between 12 and 18).

“We used to wake them up in the mornings, by going around to their rooms and knocking on the doors. That way we knew they would get up on time and get to school. Nowadays policy has changed. The kids have to be independent and take responsibility for themselves, and we figure they all have mobile phones anyways, with an alarm. So they don’t need us to get them up,” (COA worker, talking about young unaccompanied minors (under 18 years of age) living at one of the Dutch asylum camps specially designated for the care of this group of youth).

The younger one is, the greater the chances of at least perfecting the language, even if the majority of migrant children still end up in the lower realms of the Dutch educational system. Natheer is an exception, due to his intellectual brilliance. This means that even if he is culturally and socially sometimes out on a limb, at least academically he is sailing through high school. He has more chance than most to succeed, at least economically, in the West.

Agier describes refugees as being “on the margins of the world” (2008). According to him refugee populations are “bruised” (p.7), with histories tainted by uncertainty, violence and fear. He notes on: “.....the inactivity that dominates camp life. This problem is a corollary of the sense of abandonment and affects everyone, though most

directly those who before the exodus had a recognized job – a minor civil servant or wages worker, thus urban men in particular,” (p.53).

He goes on to say: “Moral suffering, even psychological troubles bound up with professional inactivity, occupy an important place. Somalians previously employed in commerce, services or administration in Mogadishu no longer know what to do; young people seek ways of ‘pushing time’ in their block; former Ethiopian civil servants, after nine years of exile and camp life, view themselves as ‘physically and mentally imprisoned, homeless and hopeless’ and talk of suicide. In a repetitive way, the refugees express above all feelings of impotence and uselessness” (p.53).

Amid their feelings of loss and helplessness, do organisations and their representatives aid or abet the situation?

“We provide top quality legal services; that is not the problem. The problem is that she is not sick enough, and that is a fact according to the doctor of the IND (immigration services). I can do a lot for her. But I cannot be sick for her”.

(Mr. W., lawyer, 2012)

“I have got a lot of psychological problems, but I can walk. So I’m not that sick. Not sick enough according to my lawyer”.

(Armenian asylum seeker talking about Mr. W., lawyer, 2012)

“It’s a struggle based on who holds out the longest. Can’t she get another lawyer. He’s a really bad lawyer. There should be procedures to suspend lawyers like him”.

(Legal advisor, talking about an Armenian asylum seeker and her lawyer, Mr W., mentioned above, 2012)

Whilst we may have come to expect that the immigration services are just ‘doing their job’ of trying to keep out as many asylum seekers as possible, I have come across a couple of lawyers during my research who seem to also be doing a pretty good job of ensuring their clients don’t succeed in their asylum claims.

Mr W. was the lawyer of Lianne. Due to pure terror and fear she stuck with him for years, afraid that changing lawyers might damage her claim. In the time that she was a client of his, I spoke to the man on numerous occasions. Each time he had ‘just’ carried out what he had promised to have done weeks before, or he had some or another excuse for not having done what he should have done. He had contacts with the Armenian community and was therefore a popular lawyer amongst them. However, by what I could gather from Lianne, and others who

knew him, or who had been clients, he could not be trusted and most were fearful of him.

At some stage, I even contacted a legal advisor from a national body advising on illegal immigrants and was told in no uncertain terms, that she should ditch him as soon as possible. She did eventually change lawyers, and whilst she still has not been granted asylum, she no longer trembles at the thought of a meeting with her lawyer, nor comes away from a meeting like a physical and mental wreck, as she used to do when she went to see Mr. W.

The majority of the lawyers I have met over the past few years are relatively sympathetic. After all they chose the field of asylum or immigration law freely. What many don't realise however, is that their clients still don't understand half of what is going on, despite having interpreters during the meetings, and many asylum seekers long for additional clarity and better insight on their own proceedings.

Recently I met Maria, an Armenian asylum seeker in her late forties, who has been in the Netherlands for more than 12 years. Her procedure is closed and her lawyer is trying to (re) open a medical procedure for her. She is a friend of Leyla, and has known Leyla since she too was an asylum seeker. I had met Maria before on at least one occasion, but had heard about her previously from Leyla, who also talked about how well Maria's son was doing at college, studying pedagogy.

Maria admitted that she trusts no one, and so we had to meet on the street corner, out of eye's view of the house where she's currently living. She lives with a couple from the Baptist Church, who help people like her who have no other place to go. She gets a minimal allowance of about forty euro's per week on which to survive, from the local refugee council, who have strict criteria about which 'illegals' they are allowed to help. She doesn't trust the family though, and says: *"they're too nosy. The woman wants to know everything. She even shouts at me at times and complains that I don't want to eat with them at the dining table every night. She doesn't understand that I'm sick and I need my rest. My head is just too full. I can't take all her prying"*.

Maria has been receiving treatment, including medication, from the mental health services, for her psychological traumas. Whatever her diagnosis, her lawyer explained to me, when I called him to ask for clarification on her procedure, that alongside paranoia, "making up stories" is also a symptom. He said that "she imagines things, and so you just can't believe everything she says".

The lawyer also told me that he regularly receives “very strange” letters from her which though he takes them to be a sign of her illness, he can’t trust what she writes about to be the truth.

Very friendly to me on the phone, this lawyer took his time to explain her current predicament. I already knew that she had no psychologist any more, as the psychologist whom she has been seeing for the last seven or more years was recently struck off the list, sacked, and put on ‘leave’. I know this because this is the same psychologist that Moussa refused to visit, that Hafid had seen in the past but didn’t see any more, as well as Mohammed and many others at the asylum centre.

Maria told me that she’d received a letter which stated that all the clients of this particular psychologist would no longer qualify for treatment, and that the mental health authorities believed that said clients were not actually sick, but were feigning illness in order to get their asylum claims approved. I couldn’t believe that that was true, though Leyla told me she had seen the letter herself and it was true what Maria said. I mentioned this strange state of affairs to the lawyer (about the letter) and to my surprise, he confirmed that that at least was true. Maria wasn’t imagining it. I’ve asked Maria if I can have a copy of the letter.

Another complication in Maria’s procedure is her claim that she is being physically and mentally abused by her son. I heard about it when Leyla had been around there to see Maria, and had called me the same night to say she’d seen the bruises on Maria’s arms and on her back. Her arms were covered in, what looked like large marks caused by fingers, or rather by a hand grabbing someone far too tightly. Her back was bruised, Maria said, when her son pushed her against the wall. He came around when nobody was home, and started pushing her about. The abuse had been going on for years, but she was too afraid to report it.

“He’s my only son, and I am his mother. I’m terrified of him, but I don’t know what to do. He goes about telling everyone in the church that I’m mad, that I’m spreading rumours about him beating me up. Nobody believes me. They all think I’m crazy and that he’s a good loving son. But it isn’t like that,” she told me several days after the incident.

Leyla said to me that night on the phone: *“She mentioned in passing months and months ago that he had hit her. But I can’t believe it. He’s such a lovely boy and he’s doing so well in school. How can a boy do that to his own mother? When Maria told me on different occasions I just dismissed it and thought she was rambling on. I just thought she meant he had pushed her away or something like that, but not that he had been really*

beating her up. What can we do now? I've seen the bruises, but no one believes her”.

I told her lawyer in confidence about the abuse, but he too said he didn't believe it. *“It's a symptom of her illness,”* he confirmed, *“that's why I'm hundred per cent sure that she's sick and that she needs to get a new psychologist as soon as possible”.*

With Leyla, we're now looking into Maria's problems and seeing if we can at least help her to understand her juridical position. About her son and the abuse, we don't yet have a solution.

On many occasions I've been with an asylum seeker to visit their lawyer. I had frequent contact with A.'s lawyer, informing her of everything which I deemed important for his asylum case. She took up his case more seriously, once she knew that there was somebody else looking over her shoulder. Hafid complained about hardly ever seeing his lawyer and about the limited time that was allotted to a visit, and about the quality of the information he received when he was there. The same for Moussa. Hassan pointed out that his lawyer had unrealistic expectations of his own understanding, and Ammar wanted me to go with him to make sure he could ask questions later on about what the situation really was, despite there always being an interpreter, either physically present or on the other end of the phone.

Leyla is one of the few whom I've ever heard praise the services of her lawyer. *“She took six hours with me after my interview with the IND, to correct everything. She made sure she amended all the bits which were wrong and that she added in stuff which I should have said or which they should have asked me about, but didn't. She was really really good”.*

Before changing lawyers, I tried getting a complete juridical file from Hafid's lawyer so that it would help me understand his procedure. His lawyer did everything he could to prevent me getting a complete set of documents, even though Hafid himself signed a consent form and asked for everything to be sent to me. I got some copies double, other copies were missing, some documents had blank pages, or missing pages, and in the end it took weeks to get a complete file, even after several complaints on my part, which he dismissed outright as unfounded.

For M., another minor, I waited almost five months to get his complete dossier from Nidos and getting anything resembling A's complete COA file has been nigh on impossible for more than a year. A's been referred back and forth between the

camp and Head Office and only just got, what he hopes to be a definitive referral back to the camp for his file, after months of waiting.

It's just as hard to get a copy of a medical dossier, even when the asylum seeker himself requests it. Only those working with A., and who know me personally, have always cooperated fully with his procedure, providing complete, insightful reports about his treatment for PTSS. The medical health professional working with Hafid, and Moussa, has despite repeated requests from them directly and via consent forms, refused to send any documents to me on their behalf.

It is as though the asylum seekers and refugees are expected to submit to a certain type of treatment or procedure, without being critical and without asking too many questions. Once questions are asked, the professionals become wary and defensive, and cannot understand what has led the person in question to want additional information. They are baffled by questions. Indignant at any form of critique. Their usual sense of authority has somehow been challenged, and they don't know how to react.

Some professionals relent and gradually either accept additional expertise from outside, even becoming grateful for it, or they take a stance against all questions, insistent on their own opinions and ways of doing things, and refuse to enter into a dialogue or to give any more information than that which is (legally) required.

COA, as with some medical professionals have proven to be largely un-cooperative, unless forced. My experiences with lawyers, local authorities, refugee councils, and other organisations, tend to fall in the first category; initial wariness or reluctance, followed by acceptance and cooperation.

On the whole, my experience with teachers is the most favourable (with one or two exceptions). Teachers I know at the local ISK (bridging school) where A. used to go, and where Hafid goes, are exceptionally committed and empathic professionals. The same goes for the school teacher of Hadi, another young Afghan, who is now unfortunately illegal. The ISK teachers I know have a good understanding of their role as social and emotional support to a group of very vulnerable individuals. They take their teaching task seriously, but have an eye for the utmost importance of relationship, for promoting healthy and resilient development in their pupils. They are an extended family to many, as well as a lifeline. They furnish the help and more importantly the care, which other organisations, which are paid to do so, fail to provide.

“Sometimes I want so much to die for a day, just to see who cares about me”.
(Facebook conversation with Leyla, 2012)

“For them, they don’t care. They can go home at the end of the day. They don’t have a sick daughter to deal with, no nationality, no state that wants us. To them it’s just work”.
(Syrian mother talking about the medical personnel at the asylum centre, 2010)

Two recent suicides of asylum seekers have strengthened calls on the Dutch immigration Minister to improve the level of care of asylum seekers, and particularly of those with psychiatric problems. He has been urged to make the system more ‘humane’, which includes stopping the detention of families with children, and providing better diagnostics and care for those suffering from mental illness.

Moussa is being treated for psychiatric illness, as are Hafid, Mohammed, Maria, Lianne and many others whom I know. Leyla chose to stop her own treatment, as she didn’t want to rely on tablets any more to sleep, and whilst one could argue that she displays many of the symptoms of borderline (congruent with the diagnosis about which I’ve already written), she gets by on a day to day basis, despite her nervousness and a continual lack of a good night’s rest. Both of Ammar’s older children are also being seen by a psychologist on a regular basis and there are worries that Medina, Leyla’s eldest daughter, also needs care to assist her with coming to terms with her deafness and with her physical appearance. Medina has now left school, and is currently awaiting additional assistance to find her a daily occupation. However, she hardly leaves the house, has no friends whatsoever, and spends her days mostly behind a computer watching videos and films, or listening to music.

Trying to help Medina

I turned up early to a meeting with Leyla and Medina, at their home, on the request of a social worker whose job it is to provide assistance to children (and their parents/families) who are hard of hearing or deaf. He’d been put on to Leyla via a colleague of his, who had attended a meeting at Medina’s school. It was that colleague who had recommended the special school for Medina, which Leyla and Medina later turned down. The social worker, who I will call Jan, phoned me first to pave the way to a meeting with the family. He wanted to know if I could act as a spokesperson for him to introduce him to the family. He was amenable on the phone, asked for my assistance and constantly told me of his experience and knowledge about ‘this type of problem’. I said I would do my best.

Thereafter the school had also contacted me to let me know that a woman from a different organisation also wanted to meet with Leyla and Medina, this time about the best way to support Medina into paid or volunteer work. As Medina qualifies for special welfare benefits in the Netherlands, that is benefits for young people who have special needs and who therefore need extra care and support in finding (low skilled) work, she also qualifies for assistance. The woman who wanted to meet her works for an organisation which is hired by the benefits office to carry out an assessment of the claimant's needs and of his/her capacities to work within a given period.

I suggested that it would be better if both parties met Medina and Leyla together, knowing that Leyla's wariness of such institutions would leave her overwhelmed, if she were to have separate meetings forced upon her. Also, knowing that the meeting with the woman (who I will call Marieke) was more or less compulsory (in order to continue to qualify for benefits), I surmised that it would do no harm to let the social worker tag along just in case he could provide additional information about the needs of deaf people. On my advice, Leyla agreed to a meeting with both of them, and we managed to fix a suitable time in her already over-full weekly schedule.

I hadn't seen Leyla for about a week, so arrived early as I had some of her papers, which I'd been sorting out, related to her debt problems. Medina was still upstairs and grandmother was conspicuously absent, having been ordered by Leyla to stay out of the way until the meeting was over. Leyla looked tired, and fed up. I could sense that she was anxious, not about the impending meeting, but about her financial problems, which we discussed briefly. I told her that I was missing a number of important documents and that without them I couldn't help her compile a list of current debts. She went searching again in her cupboards and in piles of letters which stood on top of the dresser in the living room. She couldn't find what I needed. She made us tea and came down to sit next to me. I felt a wave of pity for this poor woman who, despite her best efforts to keep her head above water, was sinking.

"It's not going good with my mother," she said. "she is always crying, her blood pressure is high and she doesn't feel good. She misses her family, her brothers in Chechnya. She's worried about my situation and thinks we'll get thrown out of the house. They've already come to turn off the gas and electricity, but fortunately I was out. I told my mother not to answer the door when I'm out. Then I had to go to the offices to pay the bill, so that we wouldn't get cut off". I had read the warning notice in the papers she'd given me.

“My mother also feels bad because it feels like her brothers sent her away, like they didn’t want to care for her any more. The risks were just too big for them and for her, so they told her than now her own mother was dead, she could join me. My father’s family and the family of my husband are still searching for me. It’s just not safe and so her brothers said she should also leave. She feels sad about that. I don’t know what to do. I have to bring her soon to make an asylum claim, but it’s hard. And I have to fill in the forms to extend my permit. Once it’s indefinite I can apply for the Dutch nationality, but I don’t know if that’s going to be a problem now because of the court case and the debts,” she went on.

“I don’t think so,” I tried to reassure her. *“How can having debts mean they won’t extend your permit? It’s not as if you have a prison sentence or anything,”* I continued.

Leyla looked at me, desperate to hear that going to court about debts wouldn’t have a negative effect on her chances to get the Dutch nationality. The fact was that I didn’t really know, but what else could I say? She has enough problems as it is and I couldn’t really believe that a refugee could be denied residency for not having paid a few month’s rent. I found out some time later that permanent residency can actually be delayed for years, for all sorts of reasons, like having fines over a certain amount; none of the refugees I know have a clue that this is the case.

The doorbell went and we cut our conversation short. It was Jan. A tall dark-haired man, normal stature, entered the living room. Leyla ushered him to a chair at the table and I sat next to him. We shook hands and he took out his telephone and asked if Leyla had a charger. She replied affirmatively and asked if she could charge his phone for him. *“Yes, that would be great,”* he said, handing her the phone. *“What a joke,”* I thought. *“If only he knew that the family was almost cut off last week, perhaps he wouldn’t ask to charge his phone”.*

Jan had told me on the phone that he used to work for Nidos as guardian for young unaccompanied asylum seekers. So I asked him how long ago that was. *“Oh more than ten years ago,”* he said. *“I wasn’t there too long”.*

I told him about my work and study with asylum seekers and refugees. *“Do you mind me asking what is your experience with Nidos?”* he asked me.

“mmmm”, I laughed *“not that good, very variable”.*

“exactly my experience,” he said. *“that’s why I didn’t work there too long. It’s a big organisation, a bureaucracy, with procedures and stuff and it’s hard if you really want to*

help the youngsters. My manager told me that I didn't need to visit the kids at the asylum centre that often, as they can take care of themselves. Only the kids living in small groups needed our attention, but that's nonsense of course".

I told Jan about my own experiences, with A. and others. About how I'd read that Nidos was supposed to work with a method to judge the competences of the youngsters, so as to be able to support them better and to assess which type of living arrangement suited them best. To date I've never seen anything of any such method, and it all seems a bit ad hoc to me.

"Yeah, the kids who make problems just get moved on each time," Jan told me, confirming what A. has said all along. If you make a problem, or dare to react or question your treatment, the authorities don't like it, and they send you to another centre, or another type of housing.

Marieke was 15 minutes late. She'd gone to the wrong street, and couldn't find her way to this new estate. She apologised. Casually dressed, like Jan, she had a very large African bead necklace around her neck, which caught my eye for its oversized nature. She sat opposite me, Jan, next to me and Leyla was facing Jan. There was no chair for Medina, who had entered the room in leggings and a very baggy pullover. *"I can just stand,"* she noted.

"Come on, don't be daft, get a chair," I chided her. Leyla went to the glass sliding doors, opened them up and went into the garden. She came back with a garden chair which she set about fifty centimetres from the table, next to the door. She wiped it dry with a cloth, and gestured to Medina to sit down. Medina sat, knees drawn up to her chest, with the pullover over her legs.

"Can you hear us?" Jan asked, looking at Medina, and making sure he opened his mouth widely with every word.

Medina looked at us and nodded and moved her hair back so as to expose her hearing aid.

The meeting was to look at ways in which to assist Medina with the next steps now that she'd stopped school. The special school didn't seem to be an option any more, despite being accepted there (through a lengthy administrative procedure, where special permission had to be sought through an official committee, due to the extra costs involved in this type of education).

Jan took the lead in the meeting. He wanted to show his expertise in matters concerning deaf children and he reiterated with almost every sentence his 'experience' and that 'I'm working right now with a boy, from Morocco, with a similar attitude' or 'oh yes, that's like a case I worked on, and the girl's parents also went to visit the school and had the same type of conclusions'. And so he went on. He didn't want to 'talk so much' but 'well, I've got all this experience with the same type of kids and I just want to help Medina. It's not that I can just do this work for nothing, but I thought it would be good to be at the meeting in case I could contribute some of my experience to help decide what's best for her'.

Marieke in the meantime, listened, and occasionally contributed a spattering of information, but confessed mainly to not having had any previous experience with placing deaf children into voluntary work, or in trying to find work for them. She was, she said, glad of Jan's expertise and willingness to share his information.

Leyla listened too, and Medina just sat with her knees at her chest, occasionally looking at us, occasionally answering a question very briefly, occasionally looking totally disinterested in the conversation. I butted in when the conversation came around to schooling and to the idea that perhaps it would be better to leave Medina alone for a while, to give her some time out, as it were. The reason being that in July she had an appointment with the orthodontic specialist about being operated on her bottom jaw. It might mean that the operation could be as soon as the summer of 2014, or it could be later. Not sure. Anyhow, Leyla asked why should the authorities act now, if there was a chance that Medina could be operated on within a month, also needing about a month or more to recuperate. What would be the reason to act now?

I could feel at that point a slight nervousness arising in me, the same as when Leyla had tried to convince me that it wasn't because she'd seen a mentally impaired girl at the special school that she didn't want Medina to go there, but it was because of the 'big sturdy boys' at the school and her worry that Medina wouldn't be able to make friends. It was the same irritation when Leyla tried to protect Sayed, and when she was giggling with great joy on the phone to him that he'd gotten a residency permit. And the same annoyance on hearing that Leyla's children couldn't go to a church because they're Muslim, and that my puppy had to be in a box because a dog isn't allowed in a Muslim's house. I recognised the feeling which was bubbling up inside me. I knew it either meant a (sort-of) confrontation or a (sort-of) 'what the heck, if she wants to mess it up, let her do it,' response.

At such a moment, thoughts come swirling into my head of all the previous times I've heard excuses about what Medina can or can't do, about how weak she is, yet about how Leyla wants her to become independent, about her not being able to do sport, or to pick up boxes, combined with the reassurances that she does eat healthily and the pictures of her drinking fizzy drinks and white bread and chips. I can see her laying in the hospital in the emergency department, and then being wheeled up to the cardiology department, wired up to machines, and checked and monitored, then being sent home, the hospital having found nothing wrong with her. And the suspicion of Leyla that the hospitals here don't know what they're doing, and Medina getting ready for the jaw operation and Leyla fitted out in a kind of spacesuit and slippers, holding her hand and going with her whilst she got anaesthetized. A mix of empathy, sympathy, annoyance, relief, anger and frustration. And sometimes, downright astonishment or pity.

I see and feel and hear the sympathy of Jan and Marieke as they look from Leyla to Medina, to Leyla and back again, and nod their heads and shake their heads, and nod and shake in unison, looking and feeling sorry for Medina who, according to Leyla, had none of her current problems before she became deaf. Before, she was strong, she could learn well, she wasn't tired, she knew what she wanted, she was a totally different person. Oh, ok, well she did have her problems at school, with making friends, with eating in public, and with being pestered, and she did need the brace and the operations, but she was totally different, Leyla reassured them.

"Oh yes, I can imagine, I've seen it before. Being deaf puts such an enormous strain on you, you get tired, you can tolerate stuff anymore, it's just exhausting," Jan agreed.

"Oh yes, I can understand it, yes it sounds terrible, not being able to stand different sounds, it must be exhausting and frustrating," Marieke agreed.

Medina being *"totally different before she became deaf"* is not my recollection of how it was. I could sympathise that Leyla wanted to have a reason, something to blame for Medina's lack, but as long as I have known them, she's always been something of a weakling, with little real motivation, desire or capacity to learn. Even now she sat slumped in her chair, only half paying attention, barely able to give a coherent answer. And Leyla was again purporting that it was all too much for Medina, and that it would be better to hold back for a while. And both Jan and Marieke seemed to be in agreement.

So, I interjected. *"Look, I'm not exactly sure that it's good to leave Medina in her room all day waiting until after the operation. We don't even know when the operation is, and so it*

would seem better to me to get the ball rolling because we don't even know yet what she really wants and what's possible".

Marieke looking to Jan and Leyla for support, concluded that it wouldn't be possible to get Medina any time soon into a volunteer position, as she's obviously not yet able to work independently and needs too much support. That also closes off the possibility of work. On the suggestion of a specialised 'day-care' place, Leyla mentioned her concerns that Medina would end up in a good for nothing place, doing useless stuff where she wouldn't learn anything. Not realising that her rejection of the school, and her insistence that Medina wasn't ready for volunteer work, let alone work, meant that a day-care place was the only option which might be available, short of losing her benefits and staying at home wasting away.

Jan came back in, with his experience on the options available when it comes to specialised day-care. Those are places where people with special needs go to in the daytime, where they can undertake group or individual activities and where they can learn. *"Not all of them would be suitable for someone like Medina, but I do have a lot of experience with those places, as I have a client now for whom I'm looking for a place. It doesn't require a lot of research, and of course you'll need a new approval from the committee, but there are good places to be found,"* Jan assured us.

Leyla looked disapproving. I could see the tell-tale signs in her face, in the way her eyes turned slightly upwards and the mouth turned slightly downwards. Disgust.

I added that I thought it might also be the best option for Medina, to avoid her sitting at home doing nothing. On asked what she did all day, she replied: *"sleep, sit in my room, look at the computer, that kind of stuff"*. Leyla said she *"listens to music all day in her room. Sometimes I don't even see her all day"*.

It was already eleven forty five. We'd been talking for two and half hours. Leyla had work to go to. I figured she wanted to round up, but didn't know how, and suggested we draw to a close. Marieke had to rush off anyway, as she had another appointment at twelve. She left, and Jan resumed his place at the table. I muttered that Leyla had to leave, at which point he apologised and got up to go.

"Oh yes, I have to go to my work", Leyla said, informing Jan of her job at the conference centre. *"Yes, yes, of course. Let all of this stuff sink in and we'll get in touch again next week,"* Jan said. He left, forgetting his telephone which was on the coffee table in front of the sofa, still charging. As he drove off down the street

Leyla saw the phone and we charged into the street shouting after him, but he didn't see us. I gave Leyla a lift. Having delivered her car to the garage to be sold, to help pay off the debts, she would have had to cycle fifteen kilometres and she was already late. As it was, I could just about get her to the snack bar on time. She didn't have to work in the conference centre that afternoon, but at the snack bar. But she didn't want to tell them that.

Leyla's mother came down to greet me, just as we were leaving, and Leyla told Medina about the phone, in case Jan should return, on the off chance. Jan didn't return; he phoned me that afternoon to ask if I had the phone or if it was still at Leyla's. He wanted to know how I thought the meeting went. He had a good feeling about it. He thought he made a good impression, and that he created a good rapport between himself, Leyla and Medina. Did I agree? He seemed keen to analyse the situation and to help with Medina. Of course he can't do much, he said, without a formal agreement, which would mean asking the specialised committee to approve his working with Medina. He would like, he said, to also work with mother, to help her to accept the situation and to aid Medina in becoming more independent.

"*Good idea,*" I told him. What else could I say? I think he has their best interests at heart, though it could just be that he needs more clients, and that this is an interesting case for him. Just a bit wary though of setting an army of helpers and new support workers on the family, if I'm not sure of their true intentions. Leyla will have to decide herself though in the end. And I can talk through her options with her. I could feel that "*what the heck*" feeling arising again. Her problems and the way out of them were also feeling pretty insurmountable to me, now that I'd looked at the files and decided that they were in such a mess, God only knows how long it'll take before the debt situation is clear, let alone clearing the debts themselves¹⁵.

Debts

So many refugees seem to have debt problems. With a debt of around five and half thousand euro's, Leyla told me that her debt is less than half that of another Chechen family she knows. "*They get three years to pay a part of theirs' off, and the rest will be cancelled by the local authority,*" Leyla informed me, complaining about why policies seem to differ between municipalities. Not knowing, I just asked how she could be so sure, to which she replied, "*because my friends told me so*".

¹⁵ It is pretty depressing to admit, that almost a year after that discussion, Jan made one attempt to contact Leyla again. Marieke left the house and was never heard from again.

From the refugee council, to local government officials, to social workers, COA staff and teachers, they all know about the financial problems of many refugees. Many shrug it off as a question of their own responsibility, whilst others try to help if they can, by giving financial advice or assistance with budget planning.

I went with Leyla to the court about her overdue rent. Expecting a private sitting, we were both unprepared for the proceedings, when about twelve or thirteen names got called out to go into the court room. We looked at one another in surprise, but followed anyway. Led into the court room, we sat in the second row, along with another fifteen people. The majority were there to have their cases heard, and a few, like me, were partners or friends.

The judge sat in front, behind a long table, with a secretary next to him to take the minutes. In front of the judge was an empty chair, to be used by the person whose case was being heard. The judge mentioned that if anybody didn't want to have their case heard by others, they were free to ask for their case to be heard last. I wondered what would happen if everyone wanted their case heard last.

Leyla looked at me again, and asked, whispering, if I thought it would be a good idea to have her case dealt with in private. I nodded, thinking that each person would have the chance to fully explain his/her misdemeanours. It was about ten past ten when we went into the room, and after a short explanation about the proceedings the judge called the first appellant.

An older man with a plastic bag walked to the chair. No objections. He sat with his back to us. The couple behind us talked loudly and rustled papers. The judge asked them to be quiet. They obliged. The man at the front had rented warehouse space – a kind of garage – it hadn't been paid and now he owed about eleven thousand euro's. Did he agree with the charges the judge asked. No, was his reply. *"I'm sorry, I don't understand anything. I've had debts for years now, and I don't have any control over my own finances, everything is taken care of by a guardian, so I don't understand how this can be right....."* he mumbled. The judge summed up the man's short argument, asked the secretary if he had made a note of everything, and then told the man he could go. The judge would make a summary and send it to the company renting the storage space. The man should write his arguments on paper if he could and deliver it to the court, then the judge would make a decision and the man would receive a letter at home explaining the decision. The man picked up his plastic bag with a blue supermarket logo on it, thanked the judge and left. It probably took less than two minutes to deal with the case.

The rest of the cases proceeded in the same way. All the people there were Dutch, or at least they looked Dutch, and the ones we saw before it was Leyla's turn, all sounded Dutch. There were only about four people left when Leyla's name was called. She decided to just go up front, having seen how quickly all the cases were dealt with. The majority of the other cases were unpaid bills for telephone and internet. People who'd signed up to expensive subscriptions without actually realising it, thinking that they were getting unlimited internet access for twenty euro's a month, but who were actually charged over the top once their access had exceeded a certain number of gigabytes. They couldn't understand, they said, what had happened to them, and they didn't agree with the charges. One guy with a briefcase and crutches had to answer a copyright case, which he also disagreed with, and another man was embroiled in a fight with an architect who said he owed him money.

Leyla was asked the customary question of whether she agreed with the charges, which she did, and then the judge asked if she had financial problems. When she started explaining about the problems with the tax office, the lack of help from the local authority, the housing corporation, no guidance from the refugee council, the judge cut her short and asked if she was willing to pay back the money in instalments. Yes, she said, but she'd asked that and the bailiffs had said it wasn't possible. *"My experience is that if you go back to the housing corporation with a decision from the court that you are willing to pay, the housing corporation will listen as long as you also have proof from the Credit Bank that they are loaning you the money to pay the debts"*, the judge said.

The case was closed, and we left the court room. It wasn't even ten thirty and at least ten cases had gone before us. Only a few still sat waiting when we left.

I was relieved for Leyla, who was also glad. She'd had nightmares that she'd be ordered out of the house and kicked on to the streets. Her anxious mother was waiting by the front door when we arrived, and she hugged us on hearing that it hadn't come to anything like that. *"This isn't Chechnya,"* I said laughing. Leyla promised to visit the financial advisors who were supposedly looking into her case, that afternoon.

I could tell that for the judge, such cases are to be treated in a matter of fact way. Leyla and I were prepared for another type of meeting, one in which she would be alone and would be able to put forward her case and her reasons for being in debt. But it was nothing like that. It was a clinical operation to treat a stinking wound. The judge's decision was like a band aid, which did nothing to deal with the underlying infection. There was obviously no time for intimacy, for support and

help, or for explanations. It was habit; the way each case was preceded by the same questions, and each case was rounded off in the same way. Did the appellant agree with the charges? And would the appellant write down his or her arguments on paper and hand them in? The appellant can leave now. Thank you for coming.

I realised I expected too much. Perhaps there are so many of this type of case that it would be impossible to deal with all the them individually. Perhaps that's why we were with sixteen other people in one room and the whole thing was over in less than thirty minutes. I wondered about prevention, care, and aftercare, or rather, the lack of it.

An overwhelming (affective) system?

And what of the asylum system? Cut up into pieces; each piece an entity with distinct tasks and mutually exclusive roles. There's the border police whose task it is to keep people out. Then the immigration authorities whose task it is to judge, to evaluate, to sift through the claims and to decide, and at the same time to keep as many foreigners out as possible. Then there's the COA, whose task isn't only to provide a "bed, bath and bread" for asylum seekers, but to also provide a good living space and to help them "*build a new future for themselves, in the Netherlands, their homeland, or elsewhere,*" according to an information factsheet about their services on their website:

(http://www.coa.nl/sites/www.coa.nl/files/paginas/media/bestanden/voortgezet__onderwijs__coa.pdf).

And the refugee council, whose staff and volunteers have contacts with asylum seekers and refugees, even years after they have received official residency status. Or Nidos, who provides guardians for the unaccompanied minors up to the age of eighteen years. Of course, we also have the lawyers and legal specialists and the translators. And expertise centres like Fier Fryslan, for victims of human trafficking, and Jade (with schools and 'protected housing' for (presumed) victims of trafficking, but for which there's no legal basis in the Netherlands. According to a report by the Ministry of Security and Justice's own 'Research and Documentation Centre' (WODC): "*...placements in the protected housing [.....] must be qualified as a restriction of freedom, for which there is no basis in the Dutch law and rule system. This is against international human rights declarations and the Dutch Constitution,*" (from a report entitled: *Tussen beheersing en begeleiding*, 2010, p.14). Then there's the schools, and the local authorities, and the social welfare benefits' offices, though not exclusively for asylum seekers and refugees, some

policies are aimed specifically at them – like the citizenship laws. Let's not forget the IOM (International Organisation for Migration), which helps repatriate foreigners who want to return to their home country voluntarily, and the organisations to help illegals, and the whole array of medical professionals, clinics and outpatient centres, including specialised health insurance for asylum seekers.

The system is massive. It is overwhelming, even for someone like me who doesn't need to rely on it. My own dealings with it leave me drained and edgy a lot of the time, and the effects on asylum seekers and refugees, who have limited social and economic capital, and who may never get out of its all-encompassing tentacles, are visible to me on a daily basis. It's just as if they've fallen into sinking sand, or in some cases, walked into it rather willingly and unbeknownst. Then as both feet go under, gradually the body gets covered in a thick black mass of ever more ways you have to learn to fit in, and more and more rules and regulations you need to know about, and increasingly new and more incomprehensible policies relating to family reunification, citizenship, study, welfare benefits, loans and language courses, referrals to specialists, travel restrictions and travel documents, naturalisation and 'becoming' Dutch. An endless abyss of continual endeavour to make a go of it, which leads one down an endless road of frustration and hopelessness. Struggling only serves to make the final descent into the system's murky depths come around more quickly. Suffocation ensues. Sometimes I've given up before I've even begun, especially when despondency is high and the feeling that I'm just bashing my head against a brick wall causes a sense of deep resignation. Trying to get information from COA on A., or from Hafid's first lawyer and health care providers, were situations in which I felt beaten, and resigned myself to maybe having to abandon the cause, or to at least just go at their pace. The strategy in many of the system's bullyboy institutions, seems to be, go slow and the client will eventually just give up or forget. And I must say, it's a very successful strategy. Then there are asylum seekers who feel intimidated and are too afraid to complain. They fear that if they launch a formal complaint it will be used against them by the authorities¹⁶.

Policies can be absurd; a young Syrian of twenty two recently got asylum status, like many of his countrymen fleeing the war. By some turn of fate, he ended up in the Netherlands, and applied for asylum here. A lot of his extended family members are in Germany. He wants to go to live there with them. It would mean

¹⁶ I launched a formal complaint on behalf of Mostafa, an Afghan, who told me that his lawyer asked for cash (300 euro's) to handle the case. On further investigation, I found several other asylum seekers who'd also given money to the same lawyer; but they were all too afraid to testify. When it came to meeting the lawyer and testifying in public, Mostafa pulled out. He was afraid it would damage his ongoing asylum claim.

he would be morally, physically, emotionally, and financially in a better position to rebuild his future, as he would have the support of close family. The overall chance of increasing his welfare, and of reducing the chance of trauma, would be increased. However, he can't just choose to live in Germany. His main place of residence has to be the Netherlands. At least for the first five years, during which he only has a temporary asylum permit. After five years he can apply for permanent residency and then he would be free to live elsewhere.

"But I want to be with my family. I can even tell them I don't want my asylum permit and I can go to Germany and apply there, can't I?", he asked me.

Grimly and with enormous disbelief, he shook his head when I told him that he could only leave the country for maximum three months at a time and then only with permission from his local authority. He had to think about passing the citizenship course, or at least getting appropriate language skills within three years of having his permit. A local authority would be responsible for his housing, and his welfare benefits, and whilst he had some choice in the type of language school and course he would do, his movements and possibilities were largely restricted by his dependence on the local authority, who would be paying his welfare benefits.

"Yeah, but I don't need those benefits. I don't need anything. I didn't come here for the money, or for the house, I just want to be with my family in Germany. I don't even need anything from the Germans. My family will help me," he insisted.

I felt ridiculous explaining the absurdity of a system which does everything it can to keep asylum seekers out, but which, once they are granted residency, gives them no chance to leave either, and which vitally restricts their opportunities and forces them to become dependent upon it. I looked at him and shook my head. I couldn't defend the system even if I wanted to. It's contradictions are just too incredulous, and serve only to increase the suffering of those bound up within it.

A memory came to mind of a story I'd been told by a previous colleague of a unemployed foreigner, who took great pains in finding herself volunteer work. It was part of the local authority's policy to encourage the unemployed to take up volunteer work, as part of their 'skills training' and preparation for paid work. The woman in question found herself a volunteer job, with the help of her network, and arranged everything. On informing the welfare benefit's officer dealing with her case of her success, she was met with fury and given a sharp

reprimand. Despite 'independence' and 'taking initiative' being the mainstay of the local authority's integration and participation policy, she was not meant to have found a volunteer position for herself, and certainly not without first requesting the permission of the benefit's officer.

Moussa, who've I've already written about, has now been granted a regular permit to stay in the Netherlands. He too would like to go to live in Belgium, where he has a girlfriend. One would think the government would be relieved that he wanted to leave, if only temporarily, and that he wanted to take up the burden for his own living costs, demanding nothing of them. But no. He falls under the same rules as the young Syrian. Despite Moussa's girlfriend living and working in Belgium, and being able to support him financially, he's again not allowed to be outside the Netherlands for more than three months. In fact, if he, or anybody else in his situation for that matter, leaves the local authority, removes his name from the register, without registering elsewhere, he will be earmarked as being without a permanent address, and the gaps in his 'residence history' will be used against him when trying to apply for a permanent residency permit.

It seems that there is absolutely no regard for what is better, or more humane, or more logical for the asylum seeker or migrant in question. In the short term, at least, the system would be relieved of some of its financial responsibilities, whilst the likelihood of refugees like Moussa pining away in some flat somewhere, alone, becoming ever more dependent on the local authority, social services and mental health care providers, would decrease.

Whilst explaining the situation to the young Syrian, in a group with other Syrians and Eritreans at the asylum centre, where I was teaching, the rest looked on in amazement. Ultimately we had to laugh at the tensions inherent in the system because, as one person commented, *"what can we do? We are just stuck here. We can't do anything except wait and hope that we can soon be with our families. If we don't laugh, we will go crazy"*.

I sat on the edge of the desk talking to the group. These were mainly men who had only recently arrived and had been given, more or less immediately, an asylum permit. They had only been in the country for a few months, and this was only their second asylum centre, after the centre dealing with their original asylum application. Whilst one would think they had had too little time to become accustomed to the system and to life in the camps, I am continually shocked to discover that, even though they have barely arrived, their experiences are dire. Compared to many who have taken part in this research project, the

waiting times of the new arrivals are relatively short, and they have not been subject to too many abrupt moves between centres. Nevertheless, when I asked them about their relationship to the workers at COA, they replied in unison: “*what relationship?*”.

I asked if COA ever came around to visit them in the units, for a chat or to get to know them better. That raised a their eyebrows, and a surge of laughter in the group. “*Yes, of course,*” said Sem, “*they have been around. They come around to tell you you have to move the next day or the next week, or to check if the cleaning has been done,*” he laughed. “*They’re not interested in us, we’re just numbers to them*”.

In fact, I asked the COA worker if she would help me try to get a few more women to come to my group, but she conceded, “*it’s very difficult with the women. If there’s a man in the group, they usually don’t come*”. So I told her I would get the woman who came regularly to the group to hold a meeting in her unit with some of her friends, so that I could promote the course. That is how I’d been successful before, by approaching people directly in the camp. She looked at me as if I was speaking Chinese, and I could feel that she was not really amused. “*Oh no, that’s not possible. You can’t visit them in their homes. We don’t do it like that here,*” she blurted out. “*Oh*”, I said. It wasn’t worth the effort to engage in this discussion with her. She was already spaced out by my suggestion, so I knew I’d achieve nothing in this way. I’d just have to handle it in my own way then, without her assistance.

It was my ninth or tenth week of being at the camp every Tuesday afternoon. Usually I would say hello to the workers in the same corridor, and I’d invited them a few times to come and visit the group to see what I was doing. None have ever taken the trouble to come. One did suggest he would come, but didn’t turn up. There was a translator who asked me to tell him if I ever needed his services, and a woman who asked me for general information on citizenship and language courses, as she was delving into this policy area for the benefit of their target group (the young unaccompanied minors). Apart from that, I’ve never been approached or asked to give additional information on my activities; I have suggested many times that I should attend a team meeting, but nothing has come of that suggestion as yet. I was approached once by a young, rather sour looking man, who turned out to be a mentor for the unaccompanied minors. But he only asked why I hadn’t cleared the table the week before of the coffee flask and cups. He gave me a short lesson on leaving the room tidy, and I surmised that he probably wasn’t too keen on me serving coffee and biscuits to the asylum seekers every week anyway. That probably also got him riled. I apologised profusely and promised never ever to leave so much as a crumb on the table. I wasn’t even

angry; just bemused. He accepted my apology.

The air in the corridor is cold. Whilst the doors to the offices may be open, the staff sit around their desks staring at their computers and barely look up as I greet them. They look suspicious. I heard someone asking their colleague, instead of asking me, “*who’s she, and what’s she doing here?*”. They hardly smile at me, let alone say hello. When there’s an asylum seeker around, there are a couple of workers who take the time to stop and say hello; the others are wary, and treat them like intruders.

“They think they’re better than us. They treat me like dirt. He doesn’t like me, so I haven’t had my weekly allowance for two months now. He’s the only one in charge. He can do what he likes. Nobody’s there to check him and I can’t say anything. If you’re quiet like a mouse, you get nothing around here. The other day I rammed a telephone into the face of the security guard at reception. He said ‘why don’t you go back to your own country’. I was really angry. The way they treat us. I had real bad toothache, and for days they just kept telling me to take a paracetamol. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I went to the reception desk to phone the medical office in the camp to arrange for an appointment with a dentist. I had been phoning for myself, but it took hours and hours, and they just kept saying that there was no dentist available. I was in agony. The pain was unbearable. Now I know I’m not the best of people, but they give those Eritreans everything. Me, I don’t get anything, no food, no money. I’m supposed to get a food bag because I don’t get my money. But they haven’t given me anything. And those Eritreans, well they just got here and they get everything. They’re not even supposed to get an allowance. They just got here and the camp where you make the application is full, so they moved them here just to wait. In this stage of the procedure you don’t get an allowance. But yeah, all those Eritreans, they just went with a big group to the local supermarket and raided the shelves and started eating in the middle of the store. So, what do you think? Well COA just decided to give them money. They asked for bicycles and what do you think? There’s brand new bicycles here now. For them. Not for us. Not for me. What do you think is happening with that old school building? Well it can’t be used as a school building now. It’s for them, for their bikes and stuff. Unbelievable. I worked here for years, paid my taxes, and what did they ever do, nothing? My permit got taken away. OK, I may have done some wrong stuff, but I worked and paid taxes like everyone else. They tried to throw me out of here a couple of months ago, made me go to Den Bosch in the South. My lawyer said I shouldn’t go, but they forced me. When I got there, they said I shouldn’t be there, but here. They sent me back. They’re really pissed off with me here, because I came back, but they know I have a right to be here. I still have a procedure, and my lawyer is fighting for me. But they’re trying to get me to leave by not giving me any money. It’s mean. That man is crazy. He just doesn’t like me, so he does what he likes. Anyway, when I hit the guy at reception, they called the police and

everything. The police took me to the station and asked me what happened. I told the police officer what the security guard said. He said 'he shouldn't be saying stuff like that'. I was still in agony. They took me to the dentist in the end, and I had to have three molars removed. I've got permanent damage now to the nerves. They put me in the cell for a few days, then sent me back here. Do you think I want to be here? We're just stupid in Iraq. I'm stupid, The Iraqi's are pathetic. War, war, war. Always war. We just don't know how to live with one another. It's a mess. A real mess. And here we get treated like shit. They don't want us here either. But where should I go? I don't have a choice".

He looked at me. His eyes were glassy and the whites were red. He came to the classroom almost a half hour before the lesson started. His Dutch was excellent. He'd been a couple of times to the lesson itself, but each time he left before the end. It was easy to notice that his body was in a constant state of agitation, his mind disturbed, and in chaos. It looked as though he must have been smoking a joint, though I couldn't smell anything. He was obviously distressed, but attempting to keep a brave face. He was relatively calm, but spoke non-stop about his life in the camp, and the injustices he felt were being forced upon him. My initial impressions of him were of someone to be pitied. In the beginning, I thought he was a victim of the categorical policy for Iraqi's, which had been cancelled and that his permit had been withdrawn with the ending of that policy. That wasn't the case, he told me. He'd obviously been in trouble with the law, probably in prison, but he wouldn't say what for, and I didn't ask. The first time I saw him, I thought he was a bit pushy, a bit aggressive. He had an answer for everything and seemed a bit of a know-it-all. But he remained calm and pleasant in the class. I hadn't seen him the last few weeks, so was surprised when he greeted me outside and said he wanted to come inside.

At the end of his monologue, during which I just sat quietly and listened, nodding in acknowledgement when I recognised his dilemma's and problems, he said he was sorry for burdening me with his story. He just needed to talk and to tell someone, he told me. I felt sorry for him as he spoke. His words were so recognisable; I could imagine all that he was telling. I'd experienced it a thousand times myself, if not here with him, then elsewhere, at other asylum centres, with other staff and other asylum seekers. I'd made a written complaint myself about one of the security guards in the asylum centre where A. used to live. The man had addressed A. in such an offensive way, that I could sense a dissociative episode welling up in A., as I managed to usher him out of the camp before he caused damage to the guard's physical well-being. I got a telephone call and a profuse apology, or rather A. did, and every time thereafter when we went to the asylum centre, we were treated elegantly and friendly, with kid gloves. So I

understood this Iraqi's predicament only too well.

Not getting the weekly allowance on time, or at all, was a problem I'd heard often enough. How many times had I telephoned COA, or made some kind of intervention, or addressed Nidos about this problem? Sometimes youngsters were left for weeks with no money, or with less money, due to an 'administrative error', or the like. It was of no consequence to the staff. As Hafid was living outside the asylum centre, in a psychiatric clinic, his weekly allowance was reduced, but nobody thought to advance the money to him to pay for the train tickets to get to and from the clinic, or to pay for his food at the weekends, or to fund his bus fares. The teacher at the ISK (school), who played a special role in looking out for Hafid often had to fill the gap, advance him some funds, or make endless rounds of calls to sort things out. And if she didn't, I did. The staff who were supposed to be responsible, just weren't.

I told the Iraqi man that he could come whenever he wanted to the class, and that I would always be willing to listen to him. His sadness could be felt in the air. I asked if there was anything I could do, maybe talk to the member of staff, or lobby on his behalf. He said no. He said he had a right to his allowance, and he would do everything he could to make sure he would get it. He thanked me again. And left, looking despondent.

I perused my mind for all the examples like him of asylum seekers angry at the injustices of this system. Angry and maybe also traumatised, like A. or like Mostafa; or depressed and traumatised like Hafid, or Moussa; or angry, traumatised, and even suicidal, like A. had been, like Mostafa, like Leyla had been, and more. In this system, which provides very little sanctuary for the wounded and suffering, apart from the bare necessities, there is hardly any regard for the emotional well-being of asylum seekers or refugees. Staff possess little to no knowledge of trauma or, if they do, I haven't been able to spot it in my dealings with them, and they abide by the rules to not get involved. Relational disconnectedness is the order of the day. A. and his friends felt, or feel, abandoned, or worthless. They are trapped in an institutional quagmire that neither wants them, nor recognises them as equal and relevant human beings. Lost and often disregarded, or ignored, they muddle through, and if they are fortunate enough to find someone who enfolds them in care and support, they may make it without permanent damage. But not everyone is so lucky.

In the asylum centre, Majid's brother, Malek, was cheery and independent, according to Majid, and to A., and to Malek himself. The brothers got an asylum

permit within a short space of time, but as they were both underage at the time, they had to wait until Malek turned eighteen before they got a house together outside the camp. That was a couple of years ago. Since then, Malek has been on a dark descending path of isolation and depression. He started school to learn the language, but soon stopped. He stopped turning up to the class, and eventually stopped going out for more casual stuff like shopping, or to buy clothes. He got fat, and depressed, and stopped taking an interest in life outside their little apartment. In the meantime, Majid got his first diploma, and progressed to a higher level. Majid works occasionally, has a wide network, is intelligent, and likes socializing. But now he has the burden of wondering what to do with his older brother.

According to the teachers in the school I spoke to, Malek has considerable psychological problems. They reported it to the welfare officer at the local authority two years ago, and a meeting was arranged with a local mental health nurse. At that meeting, Malek told them that he was afraid, and that he slept with a knife under his bed. Since then, Malek and Majid have been to a couple of appointments with mental health providers, but there has been no treatment plan and no treatment. Malek is resistant to help, and as Majid told me on numerous occasions, *“we always got away with just telling everybody that he’s OK, and that he doesn’t need any help. And they just left us alone”*.

As a result, Malek has hardly been outside the door for two years, he has no friends and no hobbies. The local authority occasionally requests a meeting, but afterwards there doesn’t appear to be any active interference, and school and other means to activate Malek are put on the back burner. Out of sight is, it seems, out of mind.

Talking to Majid a few months ago about his own schooling, and looking for alternatives for him to study at a higher level, I insisted I go around a few times to speak with him and his brother. He accepted, and admitted that he’s completely at a loss to know what to do with his brother. Every time I’ve been around there, Malek is sloppily dressed and looks as though he does very little to care for himself. His hair is uncombed, and his clothes are untidy. The flat is not too messy, though there’s usually washing in the sink and odd socks on the living room floor. It’s bare and the furniture looks old. There are plastic flowers and one or two cheap pictures on the wall. There’s a glass cabinet which is locked. And I wonder why, though I’ve never asked. And trying to talk to Malek is exhausting and frustrating. When I’m there, I feel that Malek is residing in his own world, cut off from the rest of us. He does make eye contact occasionally, but once he

starts talking, it's impossible to stop him. He's like an old gramophone record that just goes on and on and on. He never ever answers the questions I ask him directly, but repeats the same things over and over.

I ask A. and Majid if Malek was always like this. They both say he is a completely different person to whom he was in the asylum centre. They don't understand it either.

I allow Malek to talk, but feel the irritation in A., and in his brother. Majid often interrupts him, and takes over. He can't wait for Malek to finish, and especially when we talk Dutch, Majid says his brother can't understand, and answers for him. On commenting to Majid that it's probably a good idea to give his brother the space to talk for himself, as it is good for his self-esteem, Majid looked embarrassed, and said he'd never thought of it like that. Even so, it's hard to be patient with Malek. I try to listen, to concentrate, and to wait for him to stop talking, and for A. to translate my words, or to give a response himself, but it's not easy.

The atmosphere is heavy, though not strained. There is no particular feeling of friendship between A. and Malek, but A. wants to help and offers to take Malek to rugby with him. Malek agrees to go to one of the training sessions. Majid and A. are closer; they are both active, and a bit daring, and they recognise those qualities in each other. Malek is slow and seems locked in his own world. There's nothing really to talk about, and when I ask Malek about his life in the asylum centre, compared to now, he tells me that the problems started when they got their house. He was the eldest, and he had to take care of all the appointments about the house, the rent, the health insurance, the welfare benefits, the local taxes, learning the language, registering at the doctors, whilst Majid was at school. It overwhelmed him, he told me. He couldn't cope, despite having someone from the refugee council helping him to read the mail. He became more and more helpless, and eventually just stopped going out anymore. Daily life had become a chore, and his brother was getting along just fine, climbing further up the educational and social ladder, and leaving him behind.

Malek talked a lot about his home country. He couldn't remember how old he was any more and asked A. if they also speak Dari in Afghanistan, despite coming from Afghanistan himself. He was confused and incoherent and neither I, nor A., nor Majid, could follow his reasoning, or his stories. How he could have come to this, I didn't know. A. was astonished. He'd known Malek well in the camp, and hadn't seen him for a while. He couldn't believe the change. Majid tried to play it

down. And I asked if they wanted me to contact school and the local authority to see if we could get the ball rolling to get Malek out of the house and back into society. They did.

The various situations and asylum seekers and refugees that I meet daily never cease to surprise me, to astound me, frustrate me, anger me, or depress me. Occasionally I might be ecstatic, or joyful, as when an asylum seeker gets a residency permit, or when one of them passes an exam or a driving test, or even gets a job. I wanted to help Malek, because I figured if I didn't, who would? As I sat with him, I felt pity, but not distress. I empathised with his situation, yet neither like nor dislike were present. I felt no particular sympathy for his person, but felt drawn to his predicament in general. Yet another young person, isolated and lost, suffering from acute disconnection, or possible trauma. His affect system perhaps shut down, and certainly impaired, trying to cope with life as best he could. Was he, as Bloom describes: *"culturally fragmented and dissociated, emotionally numb, self-mutilative and self-destructive, alienated?"* (2013, p.223). And who was looking out for him in this monstrous, abusive system?

With his brother, Majid, my relationship is different. He's a fast talker; sleek and well-dressed. He takes care of his appearance, likes fashion, and is smart. I get the feeling that he's conniving and manipulative and I want to protect A. from him. A. has lent him money in the past, and still hasn't got it back, despite promises. Majid knows what to say, and can spin a good story. He has friends and likes to party. He's pleasant enough to be around and we've spoken on a few occasions about their asylum procedure and about their journey to the Netherlands, and he entrusted his complete asylum application to me. But I can't say I like him that much. Neither do I dislike him.

Whereas I feel sorry for Malek, there's some admiration for Majid, and for his audacity and evident capacity to rally people for his cause. I get the impression he knows what he's doing and it's only his own clumsiness, and perhaps laziness, that gets in his way. He told me he wants to go to university, so I spent many hours finding out what the possibilities were for him to attend a preparatory year at a local college, in order to qualify for university. He took the tests after the summer holidays, and passed. He started the course, even though things hadn't been settled financially with the local authority. In the end, despite getting in touch with the local councillor and policy makers, and explaining Majid's situation to them, and pointing out the possibilities, they refused to make an exception to their rules and procedures. It boiled down to the fact that students on the preparatory course don't qualify for the usual study financing system in

the Netherlands. That means that the local authority has to give permission for the student to get welfare benefits for a year, whilst on the course, so that the student can finance his housing, transport costs, food, and daily living expenses. Not a problem if the student is over thirty, because people over thirty don't qualify for student financing anyway, and will therefore be on benefits, if not in work. It gets tricky for anyone under thirty. The local authority argued in Majid's case that he should apply for study financing like everybody else of his age, and undertake a lower course of study (because he didn't yet have sufficient educational qualifications to go directly to university). It was not their problem that he would be obliged to first study for three or four years, before getting the necessary qualification to go to university; this way he would be out of their hands, as he would be being financed out of central government funds for the three or four years it would take to qualify for university and thereafter for a further three or four years in university. The alternative was a one year study with welfare benefits (funded out of the local authority's budget), followed by a university study with study financing (for three or four years).

The policy officer told me, *"yes, I know, it's a shame he has to study via this route, and that it will take a lot longer, but yeah, we can't do anything about that. He's young, and he has to apply for study financing. I'm afraid that's the rule"*.

Despite my best efforts at trying to persuade her about the absurdity of a system that forces young people to study many more years than necessary, at the expense of the Treasury, whilst a simple solution existed which was far more efficient for Majid, and far less costly to the state, and also to the taxpayer, she repeated that she was only able to follow the rules. It was a shame, but there was nothing she could do. I've been told that other local authorities manage to bend the rules and find loopholes, but in the end, I gave up trying. Majid dropped out of the study and started a level two course in a local college. I fear that he won't go the distance. If he does persevere, he'll first have to do a level four course, (he can go from level two to four, missing level three, if he's lucky), and only then will he qualify for what's known in the Netherlands as a University of Applied Sciences. If he wants to go to a traditional university, then his road is unfortunately several years longer. The preparatory course of one year, would have prepared him for both a University of Applied Sciences or an academic university.

No matter how hard I look, I find no sense in a system which promotes higher education in a country which boasts that it is a 'knowledge economy', whilst at the same time discouraging highly educated asylum seekers and refugees from studying and developing their maximum potential. For the local authority, Majid

is now active. That's what counts to them; they don't appear to ask the question whether it's the best possible route for him. They too, seem not to care. The last message from the local authority to me said:

"In an (eventual) meeting with Majid, I won't be able to tell him anything different from what I've already told you. Disappointing, naturally, for him, but that's the message"
(email from a policy maker at a local authority, dated 2nd September 2014).

I used to wonder whether it was a system devoid of affect. But then how can it be? Affect is ordinary and contagious, and can muster our best and our worst emotions. In the same instance, I question what seems to be a sense of chronic indifference, which is violent in its refusal to recognise the other. Or is the system suffused with something more heartless, and more cruel, underscored by a wilful volition to cause harm to the other? Many institutional workers I come across are truly affective beings; they exude hatred and arrogance in their dealings with asylum seekers and refugees. Others are fearful and anxious, brutal or intolerant. Many are numb, suppress their emotions, and are incapable of connections that are embedded in empathy and compassion. All of these affective intensities are incapacitating and toxic. And, more than anything else, they constitute the building blocks of the affective tendencies of many of the institutions within the asylum and refugee system in the Netherlands.

On occasion I encounter a beacon of affective sanctuary, though not often.....

Affective sanctuary

"True self is non-self, the awareness that the self is made only of non-self elements. There's no separation between self and other, and everything is interconnected. Once you are aware of that you are no longer caught in the idea that you are a separate entity".
(Thich Nhat Hanh)

Hans

Hans is a social psychiatric nurse working in a specialised unit of mental health provision for refugees and asylum seekers. He was assigned to A. a couple of years ago, when I managed to get A. referred to his particular department, and away from the stone cold psychologist that he'd seen a couple of times up until then.

Judith Jordan, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and one of the founding scholars of Relational Cultural Therapy (RCT) writes: *“Despite the increasing acknowledgement of RCT’s therapy contributions, the dominant therapeutic culture, with its emphasis on therapist “neutrality”, makes it difficult for therapists from all different approaches to appreciate the importance of therapist responsiveness. RCT therapy suggests that neutrality or objectivity may not actually be achievable and that to the extent it encourages an opaque demeanour on the part of the therapist, it may contribute to disconnection rather than connection,”* (2010, p.64).

Certainly, the psychologist who A. first had dealings with, was a proponent of the clinical model of care which extols complete professional distance from the client, embedded within a truly non-relational paradigm. This traditional model, to which she was an adherent, seemed callous and authoritarian to me. The psychologist sat at opposite A., with an oversized notepad in her hand and barely looked A. in the eyes. She fired questions at him, and when he became entirely unable to handle her questions, she continued, and said he had to learn to deal with it, and to speak about his traumas.

He sat in the chair, with his whole being shaking, starting from the legs which were tapping the floor with a certain vigour. He kept placing his hand on his knee to try to prevent the tapping, which slowly developed into a heavy stamping. His eyes were cast downward, and when he did look up, I recognised the dissociation¹⁷ which was occurring. I felt an immediate surge of empathy and a protective shield rising. I suggested to the psychologist that it would be better to stop. A. started to cry, and she sat just staring at her notepad and waiting. I went to reach into my bag for a tissue, but she said it wasn’t appropriate for me to support him at that moment. At that point, she stood up calmly, and went to her cupboard. She picked up a box of Kleenex and put it on the table in front of A., without uttering a sound. He grabbed a tissue.

This scene of prodding him with questions continued on for a while. He didn’t speak at all, just sat head hung low, and moved his head up and down every now and then. After a short period of time, the psychologist had managed to frame her

¹⁷ According to Bloom (2013, p.261): “The hallmark of trauma is dissociation, and dissociation is self-deception. Through dissociation we are able to convince ourselves that something that did happen did not, that we do not feel what we feel, that we do not remember what we remember, that we do not know what we know. The loss of integration, this separation into parts, has always been considered a signpost of disease. One word for the Devil is “Diabolos” – the divider, the splitter-into-fragments. Health, both mental and physical, individual and social, has traditionally been characterized by balance, when all the different parts are able to operate together harmoniously. If balance is lost, so too is health.”

own version of his trauma, as she'd taken his head movements as confirmation of the plot she was piecing together, all on her own. She surmised that A.'s trauma had developed out of an incident with his mother, who had probably been raped by unknown intruders into their house. A. had apparently been unable to protect his mother from this atrocity, and had subsequently developed a trauma.

Knowing the truth of his life in Afghanistan, I knew that she was far off the mark. I told her we should stop. He'd had enough and so had I. This was leading us nowhere. Agitated by her lack of consideration and her evident inability to connect in anyway whatsoever with A., I was still totally amazed by her confidence and visible pride that she'd worked out what his problem was. I didn't want to put her out of her misery, and left her to think she knew what she was talking about. This would be the last time A. would visit her appointments; so much I was sure of.

She didn't want to release us immediately, and went on to suggest that A. come back next week to join a group of young asylum seekers, like him, she said, who played volleyball together once a week, with therapeutic motives. She led the sessions with them and would also lead the group therapy meetings. This would be perfect for A., she assured me. I promised her we would think about it and we left.

It took a while for A. to calm down after this meeting with the psychologist. Neither he, nor I was in any way inclined to want to repeat the experience any time soon. That's when I decided to find alternative treatment and care, and that's how we arrived at Hans. Both the setting, the atmosphere and the person could not be more far removed from our first experience with the other psychologist.

Hans offered us coffee immediately, and made us feel welcome. He wanted to establish rapport and was more than happy that I accompany A. on every visit, in fact he encouraged it. This was unlike the psychologist who had remarked that it would not be desirable for anybody else to sit in on her appointments with her patients. Seeing how she had totally fabricated a new life for A., without him even being aware of it, at the time, I wondered how many more 'patients' of hers had been given new backgrounds in which to embed their trauma histories?

With Hans, A. has never felt like a 'patient'. He's never been subjected to endless rounds of questioning, or prying. Hans has always made it clear that A. is free to say whatever he likes, whenever he likes; he's in the driving seat as it were, and

not Hans. As Jordan states: *“while many approaches suggest that an authoritative approach is best, RCT therapy recommends an appreciation of fluid expertise, whereby both client and therapist are seen as carrying important wisdom and knowledge”* (2010, p.64). Hans is first, and foremost, busy with building a relationship, developing a connection, rather than proving he knows what’s best for A.

There’s a remarkable sense of ease when sitting with Hans. He is relaxed, and we can feel it. He is smartly dressed in casual clothes, and he sits around a table with us. Hans avoids sitting behind his computer, and does everything he can to make A. feel at home. Every now and then he makes a note on his small notepad, but when he does so, he mentions that it’s to help him to remember. He sits close, but not too close, holding just the right distance. And when A. gets upset, Hans acknowledges his distress, asks if he should stop, and hands him a tissue or a glass of water.

I know from A. that he really likes Hans and appreciates how he behaves with him. A. trusts him, which makes it easier for Hans to make suggestions or to give advice. Where condescension sometimes reigns in the doctor-patient relationship, there’s empathy and compassion here. Hans feels around to discover where the limits are for A., time again, and he never crosses those boundaries. It’s not only what Hans does, or what he says, he emanates care and respect from his being, and where the first psychologist was taut, and somewhat tight with nervousness, Hans is alert, and radiates a kind of natural calmness.

I too feel I can trust Hans’ knowledge and insights. He knows what he’s talking about and consistently gives good advice about how to overcome certain problems, or to handle tricky situations. In moments of extreme hopelessness and sadness, when I’ve been at a loss to know how to cope with A’s trauma, I’ve shared my dilemma’s with Hans, and he’s always been a reliable and caring sparring partner.

Nestled in his attentiveness, there’s also a hands-on mentality, from which flows an appealing practicality. Hans thinks about problems from the point of view of what’s practical, what’s realistic, what can be achieved and what not; and underlying the everyday reality of working in this over-regulated system, is a concern for what’s best for the person in question.

As a gesture of thanks to Hans, A. brought him one of his hand-made wooden pan holders one day. Hans chose the butterfly design, mentioning that his daughter loved butterflies. His private life entered into the conversation, as it had done on previous occasions, when Hans tried to illustrate various points about skills and competences, or personality traits, or learning new behaviours. Hans wasn’t

afraid to use himself as an example and to let A. see that he too is only human. There was a real sense of identification at such times, and I could literally see A. 'growing' in confidence and self-esteem at such times. It was then that the 'treatment' was most effective; learning that we all have our ups and downs, and being complimented for his progress and development. There were neither airs of arrogance, nor pretence. What Hans said, Hans meant. And A. could feel it through and through. Me too.

The system bears its toll though on people like Hans. If they're not careful, it will drag them under, strangling them with its all-encompassing tentacles, dripping in regulatory covenants, protocolled ways of working, behavioural guidelines, evidence-based practice, and proven methods. Not to mention minute for minute, and hour for hour registration and justification of how one spends one's time. Common sense, intuition, tacit knowledge (Bart, 2001), and craftsmanship (Sennett, 2008), seem to count for nothing in this colossal system, where money and the market supposedly define what good care means. But even then, ambivalence reigns.

Take the cost of keeping an asylum seeker like Hafid in a psychiatric clinic. To 'prove' to the immigration authorities that he's traumatised and needs help, he has to be locked away for a long enough period of time that the institutions will believe that he's 'sick'. No matter that he would be far better off in some kind of supported housing, with other young people, following a daily programme of school and maybe work, combined with psychological help being provided to him as an outpatient (which would also incidentally be much cheaper); no, in order to remain legally in the Netherlands, he has to be shut away indefinitely in an institution, which might cause more psychological harm than good. I wonder which mother would choose this latter option for her child of nineteen years old, rather than a solution which involved staying closer to home, in a community mental health care setting?

Like Hans, I not only believe that the success of specialised mental health interventions for a large part depends on the quality of the therapeutic relationship; this factor is also backed up by research to this effect (Lambert, M. J., & Barley, D.E., 2001, Priebe & McCabe, 2006, Shirk & Karver, 2003).¹⁸

¹⁸ Priebe, S. & McCabe, R. (2006). The therapeutic relationship in psychiatric settings. *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 113, 69–72.

Shirk, S.R. & Karver, M. (2003). Prediction of Treatment Outcome From Relationship Variables in Child and Adolescent Therapy: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71, 452–464.

According to Lambert and Barley (2001): “Factors that influence client outcome can be divided into four areas: extratherapeutic factors, expectancy effects, specific therapy techniques, and common factors. Common factors such as empathy, warmth, and the therapeutic relationship have been shown to correlate more highly with client outcome than specialized treatment interventions. The common factors most frequently studied have been the person-centered facilitative conditions (empathy, warmth, congruence) and the therapeutic alliance. Decades of research indicate that the provision of therapy is an interpersonal process in which a main curative component is the nature of the therapeutic relationship. Clinicians must remember that this is the foundation of our efforts to help others. The improvement of psychotherapy may best be accomplished by learning to improve one’s ability to relate to clients and tailoring that relationship to individual clients”.

The affective component in the relationship, such as highlighted above, ‘empathy and warmth’, come natural to Hans, as he has been able to manoeuvre in the minefield of emotions expressed by A. over the last one and half years of treatment, continually demonstrating his ability to attune, and to resonate, in an undefended and respectful manner. I and A. can only hope that Hans manages to stand his ground and to continue to trust in his way of doing things, even if the entire mental health care system seems to be on its head, and taking off in the opposite direction; that is, more protocols, more regulatory devices, and less time for what matters most, like relationship and connection.

Mrs M.

Hafid calls her by her first name, which is M., for the purposes of this book. But she knows who she is, as do all the young people she teaches at the local international bridging school (or ISK for short). She is a teacher of practical skills, like cooking, and she is also the school confidant. This is the person in Dutch schools who is available for confidential advice. It is their job to help promote a safe and caring environment, free from bullying and intimidation.

M. is a Dutch woman, with a sturdy posture, by no means too heavy for her tall stature. She has a friendly appearance, and one of those caring, motherly faces. She has a large family, with four children at home, just like me. She’s readily available when I phone, and if she’s teaching, she calls back promptly.

For a change, I was welcomed by a professional who was open to the help and support I was providing to one of their students. She came to A.’s birthday party when he first came to live with us. It was a surprise party and I’d heard her name and the name of another colleague. Both came that Sunday in 2013. Especially

through my support to Hafid, I've come to appreciate M. greatly. When he was all alone, she was there for him. She's like the mother and father he has lost. She patches him up, sometimes literally, lends him a listening ear, takes him to appointments when no-one else is available, and argues his case when need be. All that before I came on the scene; and now she continues to be there for him regardless.

Where COA and Nidos have been absent, M. has filled the gap remarkably.

Despite our many dealings with one another, I wanted to get to know M. more, in the context of my research, and I invited her to my home for an interview. I'd usually met her in school, with others around, and I was interested in learning more about her experiences with the local asylum centre and her opinion of her own role in general, when it came to working with and supporting young asylum seekers. She came one evening and we first had dinner together. I recall it was a usual weekday evening, with everybody at home. So, six men and boys, if we don't count the two dogs, and Mrs M. and myself. The usual racket, the usual mess, and the usual babble at the table. The boys need not put on any special airs and graces; they're used to having different types of visitors eating with us. It was loud and boyish, with the everyday fill of squabbling and bickering. I felt no embarrassment; I knew she was used to it. She chuckled in recognition at their silly jokes and bantering. We felt comfortable and at ease; the air was relaxed.

After dinner we went into the garden into my caravan. I've had a caravan for about a year now, parked on the drive way, filled with my books and used as a peaceful study place, to escape the hustle and bustle of the house. A. followed us, with tea on a home-made wooden tray, and then he left us to it. What I most remember about that meeting were the words which M. spoke about the importance of not 'heaping up' or 'piling up' experiences. She said that there were always snags, problems, and arguments with pupils; it would have been so easy to hold grudges and to let them get the better of you. But she could see past such experiences, and she knew that everyone has their off days. She was attuned to the pain of trauma and the suffering caused by grief and loss. She recognised that the anger which many of the young asylum seekers spewed out in school was really a mark of their immense and deep frustration, and anguish. They had no other way to express how much they were hurting, and nobody in the system was listening to them: not COA, not the IND, not Nidos. M. could see this, and realised that what they needed at such times was not recrimination, shame and guilt, but somebody they could trust, and somebody they could rely on. This didn't mean that she accepted everything they did or said; she made it clear that there are boundaries, and that aggression or bullying is not

acceptable. Nevertheless, she let them know that she was there to listen if they wanted her to, or that she would be there once they had calmed down. It was her task to look out for their safety, and for that of other pupils, but also to be a confidant.

“I try never to pile up experiences. I want to start every day afresh. If you don’t, and you just hold on to everything that’s happened, or if you add on and add on, then you just become bitter, and I don’t think you’re capable of doing this job properly then,” she said. “These kids have it real bad. A lot of them are alone, they have no-one here. And the people who are supposed to look after them are useless. They don’t care at all. It’s a big mess. We end up doing stuff we shouldn’t be doing, because the ones who are really responsible just neglect the kids. Like going with them on appointments and stuff, making sure they go to the lawyer, or to the court when they need to. Usually they’re just left to their own devices. In the camps they don’t even care if the kids come to school. They couldn’t care a less,” M. went on.

M’s eyes looked around, sensitively and at times with tears in them. It was easy to feel the tenderness she exuded, and I had a real sense of how much she cared. Not only from her words, and my own bodily sensations whilst listening to her, but because I’d seen her in action, and I’d heard enough from A., and Hafid, and others like them, how important she was (and still is), for them. M. went on to explain that she’d found it difficult before to keep herself from a breakdown. She wanted so much to protect her pupils and to do her best for them, that it had been difficult to guard her own mental and physical health. She spoke of the importance of a supportive partner for her well-being, but never once did she mention ‘professional distance’, or ‘not getting too close’, or ‘keeping private and work separate’, like most other professionals I’ve spoken to. She was a far cry from the boss at the asylum centre for unaccompanied minors, who repeated insistently that she and her workers must maintain distance, and who called giving out my telephone number to asylum seekers – ‘curious’ – but then in a sly, and sarcastic way. Some of the kids have M’s mobile number and she’d been called once in all these years in the middle of the night.

“It’s just not true what people think. These kids don’t take advantage of you. In fact, they do their absolute best not to bother you for trivial things, when they know you’re available for them. I’ve never felt they abused me by trying to get me to do this or that for them.” I couldn’t agree with her more, and explained that it was rare for a worker to allow herself to be contacted at home. I always give my telephone number when I’m doing teaching work and I’ve been rarely, if ever, ‘disturbed’ by anyone. The fear of being overrun by needy asylum seekers or refugees prevents the workers I know from becoming engaged.

As I sat talking to M., I felt that for once I was in the presence of someone who really is doing a good job, if a good job is to be measured by values of integrity, care, commitment and flexibility. This was not a 'tough' person; her vulnerability wept out of her being, as she spoke of her own disappointment and pain with the current asylum system; with its absurd rules and with its intentional harshness. She spoke of her disbelief that a young person like Hafid still didn't have an asylum permit, and of her disgust at the workers of COA and Nidos, for their incompetence and disregard for the welfare and safety of asylum seekers like Hafid. The school was a real safe haven for boys like him; a place where education and learning stood hand in hand with making sure the youngsters felt physically and mentally safe, and taken care of. The asylum centre was, (and still is), a far cry from being a safe refuge for the most vulnerable amongst the asylum population.

M. spoke of the problem with drugs and alcohol at the centre. She confirmed what I had heard from others; young kids almost running riot, with no real supervision, left to drink and take drugs at night, and to sleep all day. Only the most disciplined, or motivated, made it to school, and when M. complained to COA that COA should also take some responsibility for the kids attendance, she was met with the usual excuses and stony faces.

Talking fondly of the pupils, M. beamed as she spoke of her work and of the chance she got to teach practical skills to them. She wasn't a strict follower of rules, she said, *"you just can't be, though not all my colleagues are like me. In fact most aren't. But I think you have to take each day as it comes, and even if I have a plan or a programme, I have to wait and see what's going on with the kids. Sometimes there's been an incident, or I'll notice that they're finding it hard to concentrate, and then I just change the plan, and pick up on some topic or something that they want to discuss. You have to be flexible. You have to adapt to their needs, and not the other way around"*.

M.'s passion was evident. As she talked I felt her affection for her pupils. Her warmth made me warm too, and as she spoke of the injustices and sad stories that her students had shared with her, my mind veered towards hers, and connected. I attuned to her moods, feeling the ups and downs, the temporary excitations, and the momentary sadness, which could have easily descended into despair, but didn't quite make it that far. She tried to remain an optimist; if she didn't, it would break her. But she knew the hopelessness that some of the kids felt, and she fought for them, trying to break through the system where she could. Sometimes she succeeded; oft times not. Her strength was in her own vulnerability, and in her openness to the pupils, and to external support from

people like her partner, and on certain issues, from people like me. She wasn't afraid to share; she didn't feel threatened when I turned up on the scene to help A., or Hafid. On the contrary, she was delighted for the youngsters themselves. She felt joy that they were also getting attention from others; glad they were being helped.

I felt a profound sense of gratitude throughout our talk: gratitude for people like M., who approach obstacles with courage and who make the effort to relate to young asylum seekers without judgement. M. is engaged and committed. She is willing to love, and her generosity is manifest in both word and deed. M. admitted that she knows some kids, like Hafid, better than others. "He's just very special," she told me. "He has no-one, and is so sensitive. He really has problems, like I guess they all do. He talks with me a lot, and comes even now nearly every Friday when he gets here from the clinic". She spoke tenderly and with a sense of pride that Hafid felt so at home in the school. She knew that the reason for that was mostly down to her.

I couldn't help noticing every now and then her own dolefulness. Her eyes had a melancholic air during those moments, and she spoke of her own difficulties at negotiating the system and those working within it. These moments were interspersed with episodes of defiance and rebellion, when with fire in her eyes she demonstrated her own boldness, sparked with contempt. I followed her dance of emotions and felt sympathy and awe at the same time. It was clear that she was deeply affected by her work and by her felt responsibility to her pupils. They, in turn, were obviously moved by her protective demeanour and by her "attempt at creating safe environments that can promote creativity, rational thought, the expression of emotions, and, ultimately, wholeness," (Bloom, 2013., p.266). We were like kindred spirits, facing a richly absurd and ambivalent world, on a path which was sometimes marked by dissent and audacity, and sometimes by obedience and submission. I had discovered at least one person who was working, if not right at the heart of the asylum system, at least on its perimeters, to create what Bloom calls a "sanctuary" or "a new way of being, of learning, of acting, of working, of playing, of healing in the world," (2013, p.269). We both contended that we are on an almost impossible quest, but nevertheless, like Sisyphus, we persevere and keep on going. In that, we have no choice.

Affective Matter (8)
“Implausible and unreliable”

Moussa tells me that he felt that his lawyer didn't take him seriously before I started going there with him. On my first visit with him, we sat there for one and three quarter hours making sure she went through the procedure and the possibilities. Then I informed her about IMMO¹⁹– an independent organisation which can make psychiatric tests, do assessments and provide a diagnosis. I suggested it might be good for Moussa to be seen by their psychiatrists, to back up his claims and to 'prove' that his traumas are not made up. The lawyer hadn't heard of IMMO.

“I have to thank God now that you are helping me,” he says. “Before they were trying to kill me, but at least now I think they are listening”.

He repeats the same things over again, and talks about his health problems and his grave concerns for his procedure. Now that his residency permit has been withdrawn, his life is in disarray. He was allowed to finish his language course, did part of the exams, but couldn't complete, because in between time his permit was taken away. So now he sits at home, waiting. He sports, or at least he tries to. He has a membership card which allows him to sport in the daytime, when it's quieter at the sports club. It's cheaper then. He has a few friends, here and there, but no more school, no more learning. His life is on hold.

I've been with him twice to appointments at the immigration office. The first was at a prison complex close to Schiphol airport, because the usual officers were too busy to deal with his interview. After driving two hours to get there, we had to pass through various security systems to get inside, get lead through corridors and finally up to the waiting room, only to wait a further thirty to forty minutes for the immigration officers who were dealing with his file.

Once in the small interview room, with the lawyer and translator, the interview started. A substantial meeting failed to materialise because on hearing the translator I urged Moussa to tell what language they both spoke. It turned out that the translator spoke Malinke, whereas Moussa speaks Malinke Koniake, another dialect. According to the immigration officers *“we always get Malinke translators for people who speak Koniake....”*

¹⁹ IMMO – Instituut voor MensenRechten en Medisch Onderzoek (Institute for Human Rights and Medical Research)

Moussa had told me on several occasions that the problem is not that he cannot understand Malinke, the problem is that somebody who speaks Malinke cannot understand everything that a person who speaks Koniake says. So as nobody can actually verify whether the translator is translating properly and if there is nobody who actually understands the Koniake language, mistakes can be made.

The immigration officer asks a standard question; whether the asylum seeker can understand the translator. Then she asks if the translator can understand the asylum seeker, and the standard answer is usually yes. But in this interview, the woman translator, looking rather bewildered said *“yes, usually I can also translate for Malinke-Koniake speakers, but if I’m really honest, no I can’t understand him (Moussa) if he speaks his own dialect, and especially if he speaks quickly”*.

The immigration officer, now also bewildered, and somewhat agitated at this disruption, looked to her colleague for support. Moussa’s lawyer interjected, also looking surprised. This was new to her. She asked for confirmation that the translator couldn’t understand Moussa. The immigration officer asked once more if she could understand him enough in order to carry on the interview. The female translator looked around and repeated that if she was honest, then no, she couldn’t understand him enough.

Moussa looked fed up, despondent. For him the most important thing was to get it over and done with. The immigration officers consulted one another and then decided to halt the meeting. With an apology they stated that a new meeting would have to be scheduled. Next time with a Koniake translator. They noted the request on their papers and thanked everyone for their attendance. Meeting over.

Outside with the lawyer, we evaluated the proceedings and agreed that it was definitely better to reschedule. Despite the time delay, meaning more waiting for an already very stressed Moussa, it would not do to have a translator who wasn’t sure if he or she was actually translating correctly. We said goodbye and I left with Moussa.

I told Moussa it could even be positive for his case as the immigration officers had said that his past interviews were also with a Malinke translator. Surely, I thought, this could be a good development, showing not only the haphazard nature of such procedures, but also the sloppiness of the immigration services. Moussa was tired, and down, despite my reassurances. He slept for most of the homeward journey.

We received word of the rescheduled appointment a few weeks later. Another immigration centre, not the prison, but close by in the city of Hoofddorp. Moussa was ready once again; tired and fed up of waiting, his physical and mental health were deteriorating, and each time he came around I made sure he ate properly and if there were any, I gave him the leftovers for the next day. He'd not been eating well at all, in fact he hardly ate, as he has a fear of witchcraft and suspects his food is poisoned. It's only at our home that he eats normal portions, and seems to enjoy his food. He says he trusts it at our place, and he sees everybody else eating the same stuff, so he's less afraid of the consequences.

Moussa's interactions with the rest of my family are good, but superficial. He never mentions his problems in any detail, only saying that he has problems in general. He confines himself to eating with us and then taking part in (children's) games of hide and seek, or jumping competitions in our sports room. He's sporty and competitive, which goes down well with the rest of the family. His chat is repetitive. He repeats the same stuff over again, talking about the waiting, and how it's killing him, or of his triumph in the jumping games with the kids, or of missing school, or of the cruelty of the situation he is in. Most of the time though he is still, sitting quietly at the table or watching TV.

Once I've seen him go wild, literally singing and dancing, sharing his favourite songs with us. It was over the Christmas holidays 2013. The evening of the 26th of December, we decided to download karaoke songs via the computer and to project them onto the television screen. With a microphone, we all took turns one by one to sing our song. Listening to the others, Moussa was smiling, looking unusually relaxed. I would have sworn he wouldn't have wanted to take part but when it was his turn he jumped up and started searching frantically on the internet for his song. He chose "Plus rien ne m'étonne" by Tiken Jah Fakoly, a reggae singer from the Ivory Coast. He sings about injustice, poverty and corruption in his own country and Africa at large.

Ils ont partagé le monde,
plus rien ne m'étonne
Plus rien ne m'étonne
Plus rien ne m'étonne
Si tu me laisses la Tchétchénie,
Moi je te laisse l'Arménie
Si tu me laisse l'Afghanistan,
Moi je te laisses le Pakistan
Si tu ne quittes pas Haïti,

Moi je t'embarque pour Bangui
Si tu m'aides bombarder l'Irak,
Moi je t'arrange le Kurdistan

They have divided the world
Nothing else surprises me
Nothing else surprises me
Nothing else surprises me

If you give me Chechnya
I will give you Armenia

If you leave me Afghanistan
I will leave you Pakistan
If you don't leave Haiti
I'll send you off to Bangui

If you help me to bombard Iraq
I'll arrange Kurdistan for you

Moussa's song began. We were all amazed as he started dancing, moving his arms up and down alongside his body in tune to the reggae song. He had a microphone in his right hand and he started singing, loudly and with a passion I hadn't seen before. He knew all the words and was definitely moved by them. He danced with ease, and without shame, or embarrassment. His legs 'marched' up and down to the music, and he played with the microphone as he put on his show and boomed out the lyrics to the politically charged tune he had chosen.

We all watched and enjoyed. We had never seen Moussa so alive, so obviously feeling at home. Another song followed, and then he sat back down again and joined in with the others who were also singing their songs.

This wasn't the first glimpse I'd had of Moussa's interest in the woes of Africa in general, and in particular of Guinea. He's told me a bit before about the situation in his country, about the massive bauxite reserves and mining, of corruption, voodoo, witch doctors, violence and ethnic difference. When talking about such affairs, he 'wakes up'. It's as if all his fibres are enlivened, as if he's touched by an electrical spark which sets off a current which activates his being. It's at such times that there's a nervousness to him, something contagious which reaches me and which implores me to listen, to act.

Moussa constructs his own space of remembering in those moments; and whilst there is no fit between his memories and mine, there is an encounter with alterity and an intimate sociality which binds us together. When Moussa starts telling his story, he conjures up images of black magic and voodoo spells, talismans as protection against evil, forest rituals, daily poverty and suffering, struggle and violence and fear. His words coalesce into signs I try to understand, as he mixes his local language with French, with Dutch, with English, to talk about 'donzos' and the like. Despite my efforts, I cannot place everything, so I watch for signs in his body language, in the visual mimics and gestures that he uses to get his story across.

He loses himself in the ruins of his imagination and cannot remember dates and places accurately, for such things hold no particular significance to him, in his unsystematic chronicling of events. Time holds no sway; it is 'thereabouts', or approximations, or rough guesses. It is fragmentary and inconsistent as Moussa tries to recall but will never live up to our expectations of being able to account 'properly' for his past.

"In the ruin that remembers, history and place, culture and nature converge in a tactile image that conveys not a picture-perfect re-enactment of "*living pasts*" but the allegorical re-presentation of remembered loss itself," (Stewart, 1996, p.90, italics in original).

Moussa's asylum story was not authoritative enough for the authorities. It was not 'credible' according to the immigration officers who dealt with his case. He couldn't remember dates; nor could he give specific enough information about events which happened in his past like the exact date his brother was poisoned, or his sister passed away, or his father or his mother, or the precise date of his imprisonment. He couldn't even tell them with any degree of accuracy the birthdate of his mother, father, sister, brother, or step-mother. Not even the year, so certainly not the month either. It goes something like "*about ten years ago, or about three years before I left Guinea, or five years, or about one year after my brother died*". Get one date wrong and you get them all wrong.

Regardless how many conversations I've had with Moussa, it's impossible to pin him down to specific dates and times. And it's not that he doesn't want to; his language paradigm and his cultural background ensure that he talks in roundabouts, and generalisations. It's 'about three or five days', or 'I walked over there, in the forest, for two or four days', or 'he lived somewhere in the centre', or 'it was probably about five or ten hours later', and the like.

Combined with traumatic events, like losing all his family members to violence or illness, and suffering the injustice of being wrongly accused and then imprisoned in deplorable conditions, Moussa has had his fair share of pain. Falling into the hands of a human trafficker when most vulnerable, meant another period of degrading treatment at the hands of male clients. And let's not forget his abject fear at the powers of voodoo, even from afar, and combine that with nightmares and paranoia, and I doubt few would argue that it should be a piece of cake to put together a coherent, well-oiled narrative that pleases the authorities.

Of course, getting to know Moussa, I suggest that it's not that easy. In fact, it's pretty hard.

On the one hand I could argue that he struck 'lucky', because as a victim of trafficking he was given a Dutch residency permit for the time that the authorities were investigating his case. That meant little time in an asylum centre, little time waiting, getting a house pretty quickly, starting on the citizenship course, claiming welfare benefits and setting up a future with plans for getting a diploma and hopefully a job.

But can we really call that 'luck'? *"It's appalling if you ask me. You set them up for disaster and disappointment. It's playing with lives, by giving people hope that they can settle into a new life, and then tearing it away from them again. It's inhuman policy,"* (representative of the IOM, in a conversation with me in 2013).

Moussa never got to put in an asylum claim, as he was a victim of trafficking and came under a different law. Once the authorities suspected trafficking, he was assigned to a different procedure, allotted a case manager from Fier Fryslan who would supposedly help with the juridical side of things, as well as support him in his new life, and his asylum claim was put aside. However, once the police concluded that the information Moussa provided was too scant to charge a perpetrator and bring him to trial, the police investigation was officially closed and from then on Moussa lost his right to legally reside in the Netherlands. So despite being here for several years, and despite having served the justice system by being willing to help the police try to find the traffickers, he couldn't give the police enough to go on in order to track anyone down. His usefulness to the system had run out; he would have to depart the Netherlands.

As Moussa has no official documents, such as a birth certificate, or passport, his nationality has also been questioned by the Dutch authorities. And in order to make a claim for a regular visa to remain here, he needs to prove his identity. The

fact that he speaks a dialect which is only spoken in Guinea, is irrelevant, it seems, to the Dutch authorities.

So that leaves us where we are now. With a lawyer who's fighting the case for him to remain, by appealing the decision to return him to Guinea, on the grounds that a return to his home country is not feasible (no family anymore and no friends, therefore no network, no livelihood, shame on account of his experiences with the sex trade, fear of the traffickers and the likelihood that due to his vulnerability he might end up in their hands again, not to mention his severe psychiatric problems and the threat of suicide). His whole asylum story doesn't yet come into the picture, as he's never really been given the chance to tell everything.

I went with Moussa a few months ago, when he went for a whole day of psychiatric diagnostics at IMMO. He was very nervous travelling there, unsure of what would await him, but knowing that it would be a stressful experience, having to go over everything again with a new psychiatrist. We travelled by car to Amsterdam, and spoke little on the way. I didn't want him to feel under any pressure to talk, but ensured that he was aware of the types of things that he might be asked. At the same time, we were both aware that this could also be a chance for him to have an independent mental health professional diagnose him and assess his situation.

Once in Amsterdam Moussa got quickly out of the car, and walked on ahead to the building. I asked the way and he went on, up the stairs to the second floor. We were welcomed by the secretary, with whom I'd had previous contact to arrange the session. Then the psychiatrist came to greet us. He asked us to wait as the translator had not yet arrived. Moussa, visibly nervous, just sat silently with his head in his hands, rocking back and forth, as he usually does. We waited.

After a short time the psychiatrist reappeared and informed us that the translator had phoned, from a hospital. Unfortunately he wouldn't be able to make it to the session. The psychiatrist, it turned out, also spoke fluent French, and asked if Moussa would want to go ahead in French. Moussa said he would, and then suggested it might be a good idea if I went with him. Not having planned to go with him, and having prepared Moussa for the fact that he would have to face the meeting alone, I declined, and said I thought it would be better if he tried first alone with the psychiatrist, who agreed. Besides, I had asked A. along, thinking I would have to spend the next four to five hours alone, and we had planned to go into Amsterdam. I could hardly leave him alone.

On standby, the psychiatrist took my mobile number and assured me that should he need any assistance, or should there be any problems, he'd call immediately. I went off with A., and left Moussa. I got a call after about three and half hours that they'd finished, and that I could come back to collect Moussa.

The psychiatrist told me that it had all gone OK. It had been a tough meeting, Moussa was exhausted, physically and mentally, as the recalling of past events and traumas had taken its toll on him. He was emotionally drained, waiting in the fresh air, lying on a bench, when we returned to pick him up. They'd had to pause on a number of occasions to give Moussa time to recompose himself, but all in all the psychiatrist had enough to make a diagnosis and to provide a report.

It took a few more weeks before we got the concept report. It was not in time for the second rescheduled meeting with the immigration authorities; a meeting which turned out to be another fiasco.

After the stress of the first meeting not taking place because of the translator not speaking the same language as Moussa, when we got word of the second appointment we were sure everything would go ahead as planned, but disappointed that the IMMO report wouldn't be ready on time.

We travelled again together to the second meeting, getting there on time, finding a car park just around the corner and a two minute walk from the immigration building. Moussa rushed out of the car, desperate to go to the toilet, and when we couldn't find one, he couldn't wait either. He launched himself off to the other side of the road, found what wasn't really a hill, but a grassy slope, and stood there and urinated. I walked on, rather embarrassed, and waited for him at the next corner.

Inside the immigration building Moussa's lawyer was already there. Moussa was bleary eyed, as he'd taken a couple too many sedatives before setting out. With bloodshot eyes, he sat down, head in hands, and waited in silence, whilst I talked to his lawyer. A woman appeared, an immigration officer, one of the women who had been at the first meeting. She apologised that the translator had not yet arrived, and suggested we remain in the waiting room for now. Which we did.

After another ten to fifteen minutes, she reappeared and again apologised, this time saying that the translator had apparently taken a wrong turn on the motorway and should be here within fifteen to twenty minutes. Looking miffed, she said *"I think it's terrible, I really don't like waiting, we really did want to start on time,*

but the translator is late. I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do for the moment, so let's just sit tight and wait. You might as well stay here. I can bring you coffee if you like". We declined the offer of coffee, and I turned my mind back to our first encounter when she and her colleague left us waiting for more than thirty minutes. We got no apology then. She didn't appear to find it as shocking when she herself was the one being late, I thought.

She returned again in ten minutes and said we should go into the meeting room as the translator still wasn't there. We could start with the preliminaries, she said. We followed her; Moussa looking morose and tired. In the small room there was a rectangular table with a computer, and behind the computer a second immigration officer. This one wasn't the same as at the first meeting. She was black too, though I surmised from Suriname, not Africa. We shook hands and this time accepted the offer of coffee. At least I and the lawyer did. Moussa didn't want anything. He just sat next to me, flopping down in to the chair, also refusing to remove his jacket.

Before we could start, the translator arrived. He hurried in, accepted a coffee, shook hands and sat down, apologising that he'd somehow managed to miss the exit, then had to drive on for miles before he could double back on himself to the right turn off. The two immigration officers wanted to get right on with it, and started immediately, without asking whether Moussa and the translator could understand one another.

"Mmmmm, excuse me, I'd first like to check the language," the lawyer interrupted.

"Oh, but we already wrote down the language in our request, so I presume that there shouldn't be a problem with that. You are a Koniake speaker aren't you?" the white immigration officer asked.

The translator looked perplexed *"eeerrhhhhmmmm, no, I'm Malinke, not Koniake, but errrrmmmm we always translate for Koniake people, that's never a problem, I can understand them no problem....."*

"Oh, but that wasn't what we agreed," the lawyer spoke.

"Mmmmm, yes, that's right, we specifically asked for a Koniake speaker. I can't believe it," the immigration officer said, visibly irritated.

"no, no, but it's not a problem because I can understand him and if there's anything I don't

understand I'll just say it, so no problem, I always translate for Koniake people, because there aren't that many Koniake translators," he continued.

The translator looked imploringly at Moussa and at the immigration officers. Moussa had meantime swallowed a couple more tablets, and looked ever more spaced out. He didn't know what to reply, but muttered that he just wanted to get on with the whole thing, as he was fed up waiting.

I shook my head and commented that the problem was that nobody could actually be sure whether the translator could understand Moussa.

"I'm sorry, but I just don't think we can go ahead. There's nobody here who actually speaks Moussa's mother tongue, so there's no way to really know if what he's actually saying is being translated. I'm afraid I object to continuing in this manner," the lawyer said adamantly.

I consoled Moussa, who looked worse and worse, and who was also shaking his head. Despite additional pleas from the translator to continue, insisting he would definitely let us know should Moussa say something he couldn't understand, the immigration officers, looking at one another, agreed that the meeting couldn't go ahead.

"I'm sorry, but we have to cancel again. I agree that it's just not good enough. I can't understand it. See, it's written down here that we want a Koniake translator. But we can't carry on. And look at him," she said, gesturing to Moussa, "he also doesn't look too fit, so it's better not to carry on anyway," the white woman said. The black woman nodded in agreement.

The meeting was closed. We left once again, having travelled several hundreds of kilometres for nothing. Again I tried to convince Moussa that this might turn out positively for his case. We went over to the café at the train station facing the immigration offices and ordered a coffee. Moussa needed the toilet again.

I remember that a Persian speaking translator told me that his Muslim colleagues (he is Christian), intentionally sabotage hearings and interviews which take place between the Dutch authorities and asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity, from Islam. Countless numbers of asylum seekers have reported problems to me with translators, and how they interpret what they are being told, instead of giving a direct translation, and I have witnessed first-hand the power

which lies in their hands to effect a plausible interview or not. An ex-employer of the immigration services also told me of the crucial role played by translators, who sometimes purposefully try to discredit the asylum seeker, if he or she is from a different religion, tribe, or ethnic background. And one man recently reported to me that he's been waiting for almost a year for a residency permit because the translator told the immigration authorities that he wasn't really a Kurd. The man is from Syria, where the Kurds speak a different language to Kurds from, say Iraq. The translator was from Iraq and couldn't understand the Syrian Kurd. The Syrian Kurd had just arrived in the Netherlands and didn't understand the consequences of conducting an asylum interview with somebody whom he only half understood. He was too afraid to complain at the time, and so he never mentioned the language difference as a problem. The immigration authorities took the translator's word, and refused the Syrian Kurd's application for asylum, arguing that he wasn't really Kurdish. Now a year on, and the man's sister has come in from England, where she has lived for more than a decade, to conduct DNA tests to prove that they are family, and that he really is a Kurd. The last I heard was that the DNA results came out with a ninety five percent possibility that they were family, but the IND asked for new tests to be conducted, as they still couldn't be 'sure' that the two were related.

"Did you see that black woman?" Moussa asked. "They are worse than the white. You can't trust them, they are real racists, I knew it wouldn't come to any good if we went ahead with her. She thinks she's white. Worse than white. Worse than white," he muttered. During the journey he'd repeat several times how black people are more racist against other blacks than white, and that he was glad the meeting didn't go ahead. "They want to get me, you see I've told you before about the translators, they can't understand me, but I can understand them, that's why there's too many mistakes, and there's nobody there to check them or to stop them, not even my lawyer, she's only in action now because you're around, otherwise she never did anything about it, and not the immigration people, because they don't care either, you see they do what they want with us, because we don't know our rights, we don't know how things work, they get away with everything, they are racist, but the black ones are even worse than the white, now we have to wait, so we'll just wait. Maybe I'll get the IMMO report before the next meeting, that's good for me isn't it, if I get the report before?" Moussa continued.

In the car on the way back, he slept. The sedatives were doing their work.

The last meeting

The last meeting with the immigration office was in a different location; this time closer. We went by car, the two of us, and wondered on the way whether they would get it right this time, with relation to the language spoken by the translator. After two false starts, I figured it had to be right this time.

At the IND office in Zwolle, we waited with the lawyer to be called. The translator was not there when we were called upstairs to wait, so we waited a bit more. When the translator arrived, we were ushered into one of the meeting rooms. The two officials were different to the ones we'd had previously. I guessed that the woman was foreign, though probably born in the Netherlands. She showed no outwardly religious symbols, no headscarf or the like. The man was older than the woman, and when we entered the room, I saw he was sitting behind the computer. He would be taking the notes, he informed us. The younger colleague, the woman, was in charge of conducting the meeting.

Surprisingly enough her first words were an apology that we were back for the third time. She apologised for the previous mistakes concerning the translator, and for the additional stress of having to wait longer for the interview to take place. It was extremely annoying that they had organised the wrong language for the translation, the last two times, and she reiterated that she was sorry, on behalf of her department. I was relatively stunned by her amenable attitude and at, what seemed, her genuine concern for the welfare of Moussa.

Moussa's lawyer went on to ask if they had received the medical report which had been conducted by IMMO's independent medical specialists, and which, the previous times was not yet completed. The lawyer had, she said, already sent it by fax, and hoped that the officer had already received and read it. The female officer apologised once more for the inefficient system which meant that all documents which came in by fax, were firstly delivered to a central point, before being delivered to the various locations. *"The system is a mess. It doesn't work at all. I even sometimes get the wrong files and turn up at a meeting with the file from a different asylum seeker,"* she told us. She hadn't seen the report yet.

"I wanted to ask you straight away," she said. *"I think it's important that we wait for the results of the medical examinations, so that we know what comes up before making a decision. I was going to suggest to wait for it".*

I looked at the lawyer, just as she turned to look at me. We were both amazed. This woman had a tenaciously different attitude to the other colleagues who we'd

seen at the previous two meetings. Then, they'd said, there was absolutely no chance whatsoever that they would even consider waiting for the report. "Oh, oh," mumbled the lawyer, *"that's good to hear. It's just that your other colleagues said they couldn't wait for the report. I'm a bit surprised, pleasantly surprised, that you say you would have waited for it"*.

"Of course, I think it's very important to have a full picture," the official repeated. *"Perhaps you could give me a copy and I could read through it before we start,"* she asked. *"There's probably a lot of stuff in there, which might mean I don't have to ask all the questions I've got written down here"*.

The lawyer handed her the original report, and stressed that she needed it back. *"Of course, of course, I'll just make a copy,"* the official repeated.

She left the room, and came back a few minutes later with a copy for herself. Once again, she asked permission to read first. She took several minutes to go through the conclusions, looking seriously at the report, and occasionally nodding her head and murmuring sounds of confirmation. When she closed it, she looked at us all in turn, and said, *"yes, as I thought, this report answers a lot of the questions I had, so I won't have to be asking you to repeat everything again. It's very clear, and makes a lot of sense. I'm glad we have it"*.

Again, rather dumbfounded, I almost couldn't believe Moussa's luck. This was the first time I attended an interview with, what seemed to be, a decent, caring human being. Throughout the questioning, the female officer made great efforts to express herself clearly, and to make sure Moussa understood what she was asking. When something appeared difficult for him to answer, or when he appeared unsure, or unable to understand, she addressed me, and asked if I would like to add something. She acknowledged that I knew him far better than anybody else there, and asked me to give extra information on his situation, or to add to his own answers. She checked back and forth, at the end of each question, whether I, or the lawyer, wanted to say anything else, before she proceeded with the next round.

Her manner was pleasant. She listened intently to what was being said, and she addressed each person in the room equally. She gave the impression that she felt that each one of us had something important to say. She gave the impression that she cared. Moussa was at ease. The translator was doing his work; in the right language. The atmosphere was calm and relaxed. It didn't feel like an inquisition, like most interviews I have attended did. There was a real air of wanting to understand, and of wanting the best for Moussa. We all felt it.

When the interview was finished, the female officer told Moussa that she wanted to warn him that, should he receive a positive decision (i.e. that he could remain in the Netherlands), because his procedure was, in effect, a normal procedure, he would still have to prove his nationality. The fact that he hadn't been able, to date, to produce a birth certificate, or passport, would not be accepted a second time around. He would have to make every effort to prove that he'd taken sufficient action to get himself a passport or birth certificate.

"I have to tell you this now," she said. "Because, if you get a residency permit, I won't be seeing you again, so I won't be able to give you this advice. It's important, therefore, that you do your very best, with the consulate, with the embassy, with the lawyer, however, to prove that you've done your best. Otherwise, you'll just have more trouble later on," she continued. "Now, you understand, I'm not anticipating what my decision might be, but I have to tell you this now, just in case".

We stood up, and shook hands. Moussa and the lawyer left first with the translator, and went to wait at the stairs for the security guard who would accompany us to the exit. As I left, I said goodbye to the man sitting behind the computer. The woman was just outside the door, standing slightly behind it. I walked up to her, and as I got outside, I commented on her approach: *"I just wanted to say thanks. I've been at many interviews and had a lot of dealings with different colleagues from the immigration services, but I've never yet come across one who has a genuine desire to help. I've never got the feeling that they really care, until today. I just wanted to compliment you on your way of doing things. It really made a difference,"* I said. She looked stunned at first, then she mumbled something about it being her job. As I shook her hand again, she put her left hand up to her cheek, to wipe away a few tears which had just appeared. She looked choked up. I left and joined the others at the stairs. The lawyer made another comment about how surprised she was at how the interview had proceeded, in a positive sense, and that she felt that it was a good sign. Moussa and I were both happy at the outcome, and Moussa kept asking whether I thought it was good for his case. I answered with an emphatic *"yes"*.

Several weeks later, whilst I was on holiday, Moussa got the good news. I got an sms message from Moussa. *"I got residency permit – five years,"* it said. Shortly after, another message from Fier Fryslan, saying the same thing, only more elaborate, *"Fantastic news, just got word from the lawyer that Moussa has been given a residency permit for five years. Really pleased for him"*.

I felt ecstatic. All our hard work paid off. I was grinning from ear to ear, when I called him. He started crying, and confirmed it was true. All he could say was, “*thank you, Kim, thank you*”.

I thought back to the day at the IND, and remembered the immigration officer who cried when I thanked her.

PART THREE

Is this what an Affectivist Autoethnography of
Asylum Seekers looks like?

“So imagine life when the third is dead; when the container cracks and there is no presence beyond ourselves to represent continuity. It is a world constituted by absence, where meaning is ephemeral and cynicism passes for wisdom; a world in which psychic numbness is the balm against unbearable affects, where feelings of ennui and emptiness replace guilt and shame, and where manias of all sort masquerade as Eros”,

Gerson, 2007, p.2

Affective Matter (9)
“Interdependence”

“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another”,

Thomas Merton, 1966

Hafid

Hafid was discharged from the psychiatric clinic on 5th December 2014 and returned to the asylum centre, temporarily. Despite different telephone calls and emails to his ‘contact person’ at the asylum centre, requesting that Hafid be housed in a single room due to his medical history and psychiatric problems, there has been no response. When I first spoke to her on the phone her automatic answer was “no room” and “we’re too busy at the moment” and “our asylum centre is full”. She asked me to send a mail, which I did.

Van: Kim [mailto:kim@typischkim.nl]

Verzonden: maandag 24 november 2014 14:40

Aan: 'xxx@coa.nl'

Onderwerp: Hafid G.

Urgentie: Hoog

“Dear xxx

I’m mailing you as a follow-up to our short conversation about Hafid.....

As I said, Hafid will be discharged from the Clinic Centrum 45 in Oegstgeest on 5th December.

He is returning to the asylum centre in Drachten whilst waiting for a suitable place to live and whilst a treatment alternative is being found. Given his vulnerability and the fact that he probably has to wait for a place in a protected housing unit, I would like to request that he gets a single room. He shall be treated by the mental health services of the Evenaar clinic in Beilen (out-patient psychiatric treatment) and as I said, we’re looking for a protected housing unit. You mentioned that it’s very busy at the asylum centre and that it’s not possible to get a single room. I understand how busy you are, but I hope that you are willing to think with us on what is the best type of care for Hafid. He is, after all, formally in COA’s care.

You questioned whether COA would 'pay' for the protected housing; but as far as I know he complies with all the necessary criteria for medical help of this type from the medical insurance for asylum seekers. If however you have other information, please let me know.

I am supporting Hafid and co-ordinating the procedures with the lawyer. I hope that together we can find a good solution for him.

*Thanks in advance.
I look forward to hearing from you.*

Kim Tsai"

I never got a reply and so I sent the following message on 9th December 2014:

"Dear xxx

I haven't yet had an answer to my email dated 24th November 2014. Hafid is already back in the asylum centre since last weekend, though for the most part he has been at my place.

I find it rather disappointing that not one person from COA has taken the time to even check on him. I know that you are busy, but even so...

Presently we're still looking for protected housing for this vulnerable youngster and I had hoped that in the meantime it would be possible to allocate him a single room. His psychiatric health forms a risk for his general wellbeing and it is, after all, partly the responsibility of COA to ensure the right type of accommodation for people like Hafid.

Next week I have a meeting with [yyy – manager of the asylum centre] to talk about the results of my research project which was also carried out with asylum seekers from the asylum centre in Drachten. I shall also put this request to her, and I hope that together we can find a good solution for Hafid.

*Best wishes,
Kim Tsai"*

I received the following reply from [yyy]:

Van: [yyy] [mailto:yyy@coa.nl]

Verzonden: dinsdag 9 december 2014 9:54

Aan: 'Kim'

Onderwerp: Cancellation appointment

"Dear Mrs Tsai

Thanks for your mail addressed to my colleagues. Given the language and tone in your email to my staff, I have cancelled our appointment.

If you want to talk about COA policy, as is it implemented by my staff, then I refer you to our Head Office in Rijswijk.

Best wishes,

[yyy]/Manager Asylum Centre"

I was fuming. On the one hand it was hilarious that she had the audacity to respond in this way. On the other I was so angry I felt like smashing something. It was the second piece of correspondence that week with one of her staff. The first was an on-going saga of trying to get travel costs refunded for A., for the period that he was officially registered at COA but was living with us. It concerned his regular trips to the psychiatrist. A., was signed out of the asylum centre in Drachten in the summer of 2014, and at some stage before this occurred, I'd written an email saying we'd get the travel declarations to them before that date. However, that never happened due to generally being too busy and so a couple of months later I informed COA that we'd bring around the declarations.

At that point we were informed that a refund wouldn't be possible any more as we hadn't kept to the agreement. As far as I knew, there was no official agreement as my email had never even received a confirmation. I certainly hadn't received information about there being any kind of deadline. When I confronted the member of staff in question and asked her to point out the exact law, or rule or procedure, she couldn't. I was told that she'd have to put the question to the legal advisors of COA at their head office. I knew that that was a dead end way of avoiding taking any responsibility for the affair. Once more, I was annoyed that the worker was carrying out one or another procedure but wasn't even capable of telling me upon which rule this procedure was predicated.

Not surprisingly, I got a letter several weeks later saying that the COA had ruled

that the worker had acted correctly and that the travel costs wouldn't be refunded. I was fuming once again, but also jubilant at having got the only answer I ever could have expected to get.

I wrote to the worker stating that I would be writing an appeal, but that unfortunately I was in no way surprised by the answer. The reply only served, in my eyes, to prove the total incompetency of the organisation. It was evidence, I said, of the inefficiency of COA's bureaucratic machinery, in which staff failed consistently to take any responsibility for their own actions. I noted that there were countless examples of their total lack of professionalism and rather cynically I mentioned that this was yet one more example which I could use for my research.

I imagine that [yyy] was also referring to that email. Nonetheless, I couldn't let it rest, and so I wrote her a reply. It read:

"Dear [yyy]

What a disappointment that you have chosen not to meet me to discuss the results of my research and COA's policies and their implementation by your staff.

As I already said in a mail to your colleague [xxx], my experience with COA is one of a bureaucratic organisation which has lost contact with its target group. Honestly though, I expected a different approach from the Manager, from you.

According to your own LinkedIn page you are:

"Enthusiastic, analytical, trustworthy, strategic, result-oriented, with an eye for what it means to be human. I like working for service-oriented organisations. I work in a motivating and coaching way in order to get the best out of others. I can handle criticism, know how to push things forward, am pragmatic and innovative"

I also read that you're working on an internal project called "the Work we Do: Craftmanship in supporting others". The goal of this project is to improve the professionalism of staff by, amongst others, increasing their sense of responsibility. I must admit that this is definitely necessary in COA.

I hoped to meet you to talk about these things. The fact that you have now cancelled our appointment is once again proof of the closed character of COA, as well as of a complete lack of self-reflexivity.

In my emails to your personnel I always emphasize that it concerns the interests of YOUR target group. There have been serious errors made in the care for these vulnerable people, that have led to the traumas with which asylum seekers are already inflicted being made worse by the system. Not to mention the number of asylum seekers who become addicted because of the lack of help and support provided to them, as well as those who engage in self-harm practices for the first time in the Netherlands. Personally I find this tragic.

Unfortunately the knowledge and competences of workers at your asylum centre are poor. I still do not have an answer about the refunding of A's travel costs and about the legal position. I would have expected that if staff carry out such procedures on a daily basis, that they at least would be able to justify them. As far as I'm concerned this is also an integral aspect of professionalism.

The information which is given to refugees with a permit is abysmal. A., was told that the local unemployment office carries out the citizenship courses and that his MBO1 diploma does not meet the necessary criteria to get dispensation. This is not true. I have many examples such as these.

All in all, it is deeply disappointing that you don't want to meet. It was a chance to talk about COA's target group, about the professionalism of your own staff and about improving your services.

*Best wishes,
Kim Tsai"*

I didn't get a reply.

Handing in my notice

I realised rather quickly after starting work at Jade, (remember my ominous beginning from Affective Matter (4)?), that the organisation wasn't all I thought it could be in the beginning. There were too many complaints from everybody, and too little action from the top. The Manager told me, and everybody else, over and over, how little he could do to change things and how they treated him 'like a child'; how it was in the hands of the bosses, who weren't too keen on putting the finances or the manpower where they were needed; there was too little support, and too few materials to teach; the staff was overworked; and the overall atmosphere was one of mistrust and fear. The children complained that it wasn't

a 'real school', and that they weren't taken seriously. They didn't know their rights, and when I started to inquire and to give them information so that they could make informed choices, I was told to stop meddling and to 'just get on with teaching'. It wasn't my job, it would seem, to try to develop policy, to improve the situation, to make plans or to co-ordinate, (despite being hired as a co-ordinator), nor was it my job to put together a small internal training scheme, where teachers could use their skills to train one another, (that was the job of the Manager), nor should I be asking for sector plans, inquiring about responsibilities, mandates and tasks.

In the Netherlands, school associations need to have a registration number and an administration system. Jade does not have this. Instead they enter into strategic partnerships in order to qualify as 'schools,' and 'borrow' the registration number of their partners. How the financing actually works is a mystery to all but those at the very top, as the organisation is highly opaque.

Whilst there appeared to be no real vision behind the provision of education by Jade to asylum seekers, there was a 'sector plan' for Jade College, but hardly anybody had seen it. According to the team manager, the plan for the school year 2014-2015 had been blocked at the management level for six months already, whilst the school year had long started. Staff told me that they are not consulted on management decisions, and there's an atmosphere of fear and angst running through the organisation. The school counsellor, or confidant, is a friend of the boss, so staff don't dare report anything to him, nor do they discuss private matters, for fear of it being reported back to the boss.

Talking to Hans, the psychiatric nurse, he sneered when I mentioned the name Jade. "I could tell you a few things about that organisation that would make your hair curl", he said. "Just don't mention them to me. I've just about had enough of those cowboys", he sniggered.

My curiosity was heightened. My stomach felt a flutter, and I wanted to know more. I leaned towards him and asked him to explain his remarks. "We've got patients who live at the protected housing of Jade. There should be an internal complaint. I got a call from someone from Jade, from the financial department". Hans mentioned a name which I didn't recognise. "It's about patients being asked to pay cash for their rooms at the protected housing. The person from Jade who was supposed to be investigating the complaint asked me if he could interview my patient about the claims. I told him to leave the guy alone. He's only just getting on his feet. He's severely traumatised, and he doesn't need the stress of all

this. It doesn't surprise me one bit. That organisation's rotten through and through. We've been building up our own file of complaints", he went on. "I don't know how they manage to get all those funds. They have a team of three people who are making weird constructions to be able to get the housing financed. I don't know how they do it, but believe me, it's not kosher. We tried to take our own complaints to our own bosses, but they were having none of it. Jade is a big partner. They told us to bury our complaints, and to leave well alone. In the end, I get on with my work, and do the best I can for the patients. You can't fight a whole system alone".

No, I figured. Perhaps you can't fight a whole system alone, but I can bloody well try. It wasn't only bad schooling, and absent care, there may even be corruption and fraud. The teachers had already told me that they didn't know where the educational financing went to and that they had their doubts that it was all managed properly.

"F, even told us that they don't use all the educational financing for schooling; that they need it for the care sector which is losing money. He even said it to all of us during a meeting, publicly. We have no idea where it goes to. We only know that when we need anything, they tell us there's no money", one of the teacher had told me during a meeting.

One of the pupils, a young boy from the Congo, wrote me a poem on about my third day. There was pain and suffering in all of the children, but some of the children from African countries seemed really troubled and tormented. In one of our creative sessions they drew pictures of death, guns, violence; parents killed or bayoneted, with blood all over. I didn't ask them what had happened, or why they'd left their countries; it wasn't really relevant. Their distress was evident. Had they been child soldiers? Were their families dead? One boy told me he'd lost everybody and that he'd come to Europe on a boat with his aunt, but she'd drowned in the sea on the journey to get here. Now he had no-one. He did tell me his story. But it wasn't something he'd told the authorities. He hadn't known what to say to them. Nobody had explained his rights to him; nobody had talked to him about what the consequences could be of the different procedures open to him. He could, he said, find the man who'd kept him, and abused him for years, by taking him all over Europe to sleep with his 'friends' at parties. He knew exactly where the man lived; but he'd told no-one.

“Sanctuary of Hope”

*“From the first moment, I had a desire to know more,
A “Kim”, who was calm, reasonable and kind,
Whose advice and orientation gave hope,
Her working at Jade was a victory.*

*She’s a strong lady,
Who gives life to the dead.*

*Teacher for our school
Fuel to derailed children with difficulties,
Interested in the futures of guilty students,
A mother who mobilises.*

*That the Almighty gives you a long life,
And stays with you always,
We have got a brilliant star,
Jade can become a canvas”.*

I tried to tell the management what my concerns were. They didn’t have time to meet me. They said they were too busy. In the end the Manager of the schools did meet me, in a hotel. It was a shame, he said, that “we’re just too quick for this organisation, you and me, and too efficient. I’m going to give it a few more months, as I really need this job. But they didn’t even extend my contract until I made a fuss. Turns out I’ve only got a contract now until the summer. The boss told me that one of our school partners has a manager who they need to get back into work. He’s been on sick leave a long time and now they think he could also work for Jade, doing the same work as me. They assured me though that he wouldn’t be taking my position. But I was still mad that they didn’t give me a new contract for a year. I’m going to wait and see how it goes. See if things get better. But people like me and you, we’re just too quick for this type of organisation”. He continued with the same spiel about him having no mandate, no clear responsibilities, no financial budget, saying for the umpteenth time that he was just a mouthpiece for the big bosses.

The Manager told me that the bosses had accepted my resignation. “It’s probably better this way. They say you shouldn’t interfere and should just get on with teaching”. I resigned and in his acceptance letter, the boss wrote:

“Plus the fact that you expected me, and others, with our full agendas, to jump to attention, by sending around copies of your mails to others”.

I was told by staff members and the team manager that *“the boss doesn’t like anybody to tell him what to do. If he wants to fire someone from the organisation, because they don’t do what he wants, then he’s told us before that it doesn’t matter what it costs him to sack them, he’ll do it”*. They said he talks in a demeaning manner about his employees during meetings, and if anybody complains, he makes comments such as: *“if they don’t like it by Jade, let them get a job at the checkout of the local supermarket”*.

I heard a week later that the Manager had gone on sick leave. He’d been taken queasy and had to go to hospital to have his heart checked. It was stress he told me in an email.

I got contacted by the local radio and television company. Apparently they’d received an anonymous letter with all the correspondence in it between me and the boss. I was stunned. It could only have been a colleague. I think I know who, but have no proof. Before agreeing to speak to the media, I contacted the boss again and told him. I said I thought it would be good if we met. This time, he agreed.

I went there with an acquaintance; an accountant with a position on the board of the school organisation where I had been chairwoman. The boss kept us waiting at least ten minutes. He turned up looking hot and sweaty and very flustered. He told me that he’d been *“mandated by the board”* to deal with me. I smiled. Then he thrust a letter into my hands. It informed me that I was banned from all of Jade’s premises, as I was deemed a *“danger to the public order”*. It was hilarious; at the same time it wasn’t. He was deadly serious.

Another reason for the ban was because *“the children are afraid of you”*, he said wryly. *“They didn’t want to go to school the other morning because they said they were afraid of Mrs Kim”*. Strange, I thought, the children already knew I had left the school long before the day he mentioned.....

I recalled my trip to the school a few days after having handed my notice in, and before this meeting with the boss. I’d even laughed with the staff about potentially being forbidden from entering the school. The security guard and I had giggled. *“They can do what they like, but there’s no way I’m going to prevent you from coming in”*, he told me. He was the person who’d compared the way they shunted the children around as *“slave trade”*, a few days earlier.

I wanted to speak to the children to explain why I wouldn't be coming back anymore. I gathered a few of them together, and told them the truth. I gave them my telephone number and said I would always be available if they needed anything. They weren't allowed phones, but one day they'd be getting out of the protected housing. A few of the African boys, the older ones, asked what they could do about the problem; they asked about the boss. I advised them that if they wanted to speak to the boss they should get together before school time and refuse to get into the school bus. They should ask to speak to the boss, so that they could voice their complaints directly to him. I said they should stay calm, and not get violent or heated. They said they'd refuse to go to school and that they'd ask to see the boss themselves. I couldn't help grinning when the boss told me, sweating profusely, that because the children were afraid of "Mrs Kim", they'd refused to go to school.

The boss became hotter and hotter and more and more flushed during the meeting. His round face grew redder and redder, until finally, when I mentioned the possibility of residents being asked to pay cash for their housing, he almost exploded. A red wave had spread from under his collar line right the way up, past his throat, to the top of his neck. He stood up and said the meeting was over. He didn't recognise any of my signals or worries, he said. He had nothing more to say.

A recent report from the health inspectorate on the protected housing for mentally handicapped that Jade also provides, showed that the organisation failed on most criteria. The '*repressive sanctioning policy*' was especially shocking to the inspectorate and Jade was called upon to change this immediately. There were also serious failures in terms of taking into account the wishes of the clients, (the so-called 'client focused policy'), including shortcomings in terms of client representation, and a lack of clear support plans for clients. All in all, the inspectorate reported that it was very worrying that the organisation had failed to implement the necessary framework for the provision of adequate care to the target group.

I am left wondering if this isn't the standard of all the housing projects and educational establishments run by Jade. The many colleagues I spoke to only confirmed my worst fears, as did the youngsters. During the short time I was at the organisation, I was shocked by what I heard about the boss and sector manager. The staff appeared disgusted at the director's attitude and lack of caring, reacting on occasion with anger, always with disappointment, that they were not heard and not taken seriously. They considered themselves professionals, but complained that the management did not facilitate them to provide good education to their target group.

I have no reason to believe that it's any better in the housing and support sector of the organisation; not after all the stories I've heard from A., and other unaccompanied minors, and certainly not after what I've heard from the youngsters at school. The Manager of the schools told me that he hears frequent complaints from his colleague team managers, who are working in the protected housing and small-scale housing units. According to him, they complain that they often end up at the cash desk in the supermarket with a trolley full of food for the youngsters living in Jade accommodations, but when they try to pay, there's no money in the bank. The debit card which they have been given by Jade is useless, as the bank account has insufficient funds to pay for the groceries. No wonder, I think to myself, that the food for the youngsters is rationed.

Course evaluation at the asylum centre in Oude Pekela

I requested an evaluation meeting about the course I had been giving to refugees at the asylum centre and in December 2014 the meeting took place. It was my misfortune that the manager with whom I'd made all the project arrangements had left to work at the asylum centre where Moshtaba's parents were living. I was due to meet the teacher who was my direct contact person, the same woman who'd told me: *"I don't know what's going on out there in the camp. I just give lessons. I don't have much call to go out there"*. She didn't want to have the meeting with me alone, and asked the manager of the ama's (unaccompanied minors) to conduct the evaluation. It was the woman to whom I'd taken an immediate dislike (see Affective Matter (5)), even before I knew who she was; the same woman that Moshtaba's brother had called a 'monster'. I hoped for the best.

Sitting listening to the two of them drone on about their expectations, whilst the manager in question knew nothing about the project, gave me a sickly feeling. Nevertheless, I stayed polite and smiled. They insisted that I had 'broken the rules' by not speaking in Dutch to the asylum seekers, and by giving them my telephone number. *"We have house rules. We're absolutely not allowed to give our personal numbers"*. I wanted to tell her she could stick the house rules up her She reeled on about 'professionalism', and her face did nothing to hide her discontent. She actually disgusted me. I even felt sorry for her. I figured it was sad to be so bitter. I explained that I was being practical. What would be the use of giving a course if nobody could understand it? At least this way the asylum seekers were getting the most out of it, I argued. I was looking for a whisper of logic, and of reasonableness. None was forthcoming. She just ranted on and on about my style of working not fitting in with theirs. She complained that I hadn't stuck to the agreement on who could join the group; I asked what the problem was. Surely we should be glad that the class was popular and that more people were coming than

had been formally invited? That wasn't the point, she moaned. That's not what we agreed. The teacher nodded, and every now and then said something. The manager hadn't had a thing to do with the course. I was flabbergasted that she dare be the one to evaluate me.

She called her relationship with asylum seekers a "business-like involvement".

"None of my staff are indispensable; all are interchangeable. Once they leave here at five o'clock, they have to know that they won't be missed. Others have to take over the work from them then. They complain the whole time that they're too busy, but I don't see it personally. Work is work, and when we're at home we don't have to worry about what's happening at the camp. We have rules about what we can and can't do. We can't give our telephone numbers. That's against the rules", she repeated. "I don't know who decided that, but it's all been very carefully thought out and planned a long time ago, and we have to abide by those rules. Our residents just shop around the whole time. We have a strict policy that everyone has to give the same answers. We discourage shopping behaviour. One of our central tenets is 'own responsibility'. That means we tell the asylum seekers where they need to look for the information, and then they have to sort it out for themselves. We can't do everything for them. I'm convinced you can't get anywhere in this world if you don't learn to do it yourself. If you don't watch it, they just go around asking everybody the same questions, until they get the answer they want to hear".

As she sat there spewing out her venom about asylum seekers and what was expected of them, whilst telling me that COA staff actually know what they're doing, I felt sick, disappointed and angry. I was full of a desire to beat her, even physically cause her pain, whilst at the same time I felt sorry for this sour old woman before me.

"The course is not filling anybody's needs", she declared. "As far as I can see you're doing work which our staff should be doing. You should be referring people back to COA, instead of encouraging them to 'shop'. When people come to me with questions, I tell them to go to my staff. I don't answer questions, I'm a manager", she stated. I tried not to, but I couldn't help smirking when I heard those words. I suggested that she could have a meeting with the participants; with the asylum seekers themselves, to ask them what they got out of the course. That wasn't 'their way', she said. She wouldn't be speaking to the asylum seekers directly.

At some point during the meeting, I knew there was no point arguing. She was insistent that my way of working was wrong. The course itself was finished, but there were a few other tasks in the plan, like transferring the method to their own

workers. *“The new manager for the adult camp is starting soon”, she said. “So you can speak to him in January”.* As we ended the meeting and I stood up to go, she remarked:

“Oh, and I was really upset that you sent an email to my staff telling them about why you quit Jade, and informing them about your worries and complaints. That was quite inappropriate and quite arrogant”, she added. “If anything, you should have contacted me. That’s not the kind of information you give to staff. It caused quite a lot of upset and unrest, which I could have done without. Me and my team are very happy with Jade. In fact, I signed the contract with them for the schools here, so if you had anything to say, you should have told me. It just wasn’t appropriate to do what you did. And I certainly don’t agree with your conclusions”.

So this was one of COA’s tactics to get back at me for being a whistle-blower. This woman seemed even more of a bitter monster than before. A mean, hateful person. But also someone I should feel sorry for.

A new manager, a new chance?

In January 2015 I met the new manager. It was a man. The same female manager was also present (the one I called a ‘monster’). She’d obviously told him everything. There really wasn’t much point to a meeting. I still harboured the idea that the project would continue for a couple of months. I even brought a complete file of all the lessons for the new guy, plus publications about the course. I was optimistic. But I shouldn’t have been.

I was treated to the same rigmarole, and the same excuses, or reasons why they *“couldn’t work with me”*. The new guy reminded me of the Manager at Jade. He was a mouthpiece. He incited a feeling of pity in me. He was small and weedy. I was slightly bemused at the whole spectacle of the meeting. It felt rehearsed. The poor guy didn’t have anything to say; he just repeated what the woman said, noting that I hadn’t followed the rules, that my way of working was, well, ‘special’, that they wouldn’t be able to continue the contract, that I wouldn’t be required to take any additional steps as the project was now formally finished, and that:

“oh yes, we’ve had instructions from on high that not being able to work with you anymore also applies to all asylum centres in the Netherlands. You’re also not allowed to carry out any kind of work here. You can play football with the residents (asylum seekers), or drink tea, but if we find out that you’re helping people, by phoning lawyers, or contacting housing associations, or doing the work we should be doing, then we’ll ban you from here, and from all centres in the Netherlands”, she said, with a slight smile on her face.

I was incensed; in fact, more than that, I was reeling from shock. I stayed calm, and tried not to raise my voice. I protested that I would find it very difficult to split off the part of me that has certain knowledge or information which could potentially help somebody, in order to just ‘hang about and drink tea’ with asylum seekers. Is it not reasonable to expect that all of me is present; also my professional self?

“Absolutely not. When you come here, it’ll have to be to visit, not to act in a professional way. That’s our job. Not yours”, she repeated.

I wanted to shout that if her own personnel did what they were supposed to be doing, I wouldn’t have that many people asking me for help, would I? I wanted to tell her that it was obvious she was mad because of the complaints I made about Jade, and that she was using this poor guy to affirm a message which wasn’t even his own. And he was stupid enough to go along with it. I wanted to ask him where his balls were, but I didn’t.

I left the office. I didn’t bother to give him the file and the publications. I just went to visit Sem, and whilst sharing our disbelief at what had just happened, we also mustered up a good laugh at the absurdity of it all. Together we poked fun at the suggestion that I shouldn’t help, whilst I phoned the IND for one of the other asylum seekers present, to check on the family reunification procedure, and we plotted how to make sure I wouldn’t ‘get caught’. Sem was hilarious: he said that wherever he had lived, he always watched the national television programme “[...]’s got talent”. *“It’s absolutely the best way to get a feel for a country and its people”,* he assured me. *“Did you ever see Holland’s got talent”?*, he quizzed me. I had to admit that I’d never seen it. *“You have to watch it. You have to. It’s the absolute best programme you could ever imagine. I watch it for all the countries. It’s the best way to know what a country is like, what its people are like, about the culture and everything. And if you watch the Dutch one, then you’ll see there’s not one shred of talent in the whole of the Netherlands. Not one. It’s so terrible. You should watch it and then you know why it’s so bad here”.* We were all in stitches. The tea was good too. I wondered if laughing with asylum seekers was also forbidden.

The Educational Inspectorate

I sent a complete report about Jade to the Inspectorate for Education in December 2014, and followed it up with copies of all the mails which I had exchanged with the bosses of Jade, and with colleagues. Since I blew the whistle on the organisation, hardly any of the colleagues who had previously supported my

claims had been willing to go public. I'd been interviewed by local TV and radio, and had given an interview to a national newspaper. A colleague, who had left just before me, also emailed the national newspaper to tell her story, and in support of mine, and at least one other (ex) colleague had been in touch with the journalist, but anonymously. The lengthy article never got published though, due to the Charlie Hebdo occurrences in Paris. The newspaper was too full of terrorism and stories about the freedom of speech, that when all that stuff died down, the article had been outrun by events. The Inspectorate had already visited one of the Jade schools by that time, and I heard that improvements were underway.

The Inspector phoned me in March 2015 to tell me of their progress. They had visited the school I had been working at, and he was glad to report that the management were taking steps to invest in new educational materials and methods; the groups had been re-arranged, and there were special measures to cater for the Eritrean students, who weren't fitting in that well with all the rest; the building was getting a once over; and there were new teachers (being) employed. All in all the Inspector was pleased that a plan had been designed to improve the quality of the education at the school. He would be visiting all the other Jade schools, he told me, and the visits would be followed up next year, to make sure the schools were adhering to the plans. He thanked me for my commitment and engagement, and said that my signals had definitely had an effect.

I was chuffed by his call, though there remained an element of cynicism in my thoughts. I wondered how much was actually happening, and how much had Jade been able to fob the Inspectorate off by designing fancy plans and by giving a well-rehearsed speech about 'student-centred education'. I imagined that Jade had been shaken up to a certain extent, and that whatever was going on, something was bound to be happening for the good.

Absent "Moral Third"?

An email from the COA to discredit me

A member of the Board of Directors of COA sent this mail to the President of the University in January 2015:

"Friday 16th January 2015 15:39

We, as COA, have a dilemma and we are checking out a few things. Mrs Janet

Helder, member of the Board of Directors received a request from Ms Kim Tsai to discuss her research findings. She stated in a mail that she hopes to get a Phd next year with a research manuscript about refugees and asylum seekers. She would like to exchange views with a member of our Board of Directors. The portfolio of said Board Member is that of performance execution.

Now Mrs Tsai has caused quite a stir and is subject of heated discussions. We heard about this because of a function she held at a school for young asylum seekers. These young students are also connected to COA.

She has a curious way of working, which has resulted in her being barred from the premises of the schools. She informed COA that she wanted to inform us about abuses (in the schools). A few years ago, she also had contact (with COA) and tried to undertake research with us. At that point she was also informed that we refuse to do business with her because of her curious way of working.

I do not want to go into too much detail here about the situation because we do not know one another, and that would also not be fair to Ms Tsai. What really concerns Mrs Helder is to know if Ms Tsai really is registered as a Phd student of your university. With all the information that we have been able to gather about Ms Tsai, we are trying to gain a picture of this person.

I asked these questions to the telephonist, and she told me to address these questions to you. The text hereunder is the description from the CV of Ms Tsai about her research.

2010 - 2014

University for Humanistics, Utrecht

Phd – research with asylum seekers and refugees

“The Turn to Affect: researcher/researched – affective relationships with asylum seekers and refugees”

Yours faithfully

Corine van Heerikhuize

Secretary to the Board Member – Performance Execution, COA”

The consequences?

[to be discussed in a separate, not unrelated, publication].

CHAPTER NINE

Taking stock

This is not a classical ethnography. I employ ethnography's methods, but my goal is not to write an ethnography. It is also not a classical autoethnography, in the sense of Ellis and Bochner.²⁰ Rather, via direct engagement with refugees and asylum seekers, I have used (auto)ethnographic methods to explore involvement and social-relatedness, from an affect-driven perspective. Whilst I write in the first person, I am not personally the object of research. And out of this inquiry, the question of social responsibility has arisen.

This book, inspired by the turn to affect, addresses both the positive and negative dimensions of that turn. It renders a critique of affective research where the author's own affect is absent, and where affect is an idealised or abstract position. Using the term 'Affectivist Autoethnography', I claim that affective social studies is about engagement and caring, and about not knowing where our research will lead. I argue that affect in this book is more than intellectual contemplation. It is research which has not been 'decontaminated' (Stewart, 1996), and which presents a vision of what studying the social might look like.

In this final part, I reflect on this affective journey by conceptualising my own role as researcher through the notion of 'thirdness'. In particular, by using the writings of Jessica Benjamin, I explore what the concept of The Moral Third and the 'failed witness' implies for this work on affect. The conceptualisation of a space of 'thirdness', in which witnessing becomes possible, enables me to illustrate what occupying this 'third' space has meant to me, and to consider what it might imply for researchers conducting research that leads with affect. Consequently, I argue that the 'third' is a platform for activism and a springboard for social action.

Thirdness

The 'third' as I employ it in this last chapter fulfils a number of functions. Firstly I 'occupy' the third as a position from which to reflect on this research process. I imagine that it lends me a particular panorama from which to consider what I have been doing and where this project has led me up to now. In this sense,

²⁰ See Ellis, 2004: Here Ellis says "Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture," (p.37, italics in original).

thirdness is the ethnographic ‘participant observer’; where I also affirm that the observer is never only observing. In writing this, I am learning whilst writing, doing whilst surveying, witnessing whilst understanding. The participant observer is therefore never passive, but is always acting (upon) that which is being observed. As Ingold notes, “Anthropology, surely, cannot passively acquiesce to this excision of knowing from being. More than any other discipline in the human sciences, it has the means and the determination to show how knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others”. He goes on to say that, “this is to refute, once and for all, the commonplace fallacy that observation is a practice exclusively dedicated to the objectification of the beings and things that command our attention and their removal from the sphere of our sentient involvement with consociates”, (2014, p.387). Here thirdness mediates between the ongoing synthesis of learning and reflection. Whilst opening up a reflexive space, it is of itself that mediating (reflexive) space.

Secondly, I interrogate how ‘thirdness’ can be occupied as a space for bearing witness to the (ongoing) suffering of marginalised groups, enabling mutual recognition, care and trust to emerge in our affective relationships with one another. Thirdness becomes a safe holding ground in which our affective tendencies are able to manifest openly, without fear of recrimination or rejection. In these affective interstices we “dignify and validate” the other, instead of “denying and dissociating”. We accept and acknowledge our own affective scope, without recoiling from the fearful or becoming blind to the monster in us. It is a space of connection and relatedness which Jessica Benjamin calls the Moral Third (2014). We are stepping beyond the role of bystander to re-align “*identification based on intimacy with the one who suffered*”; this is “*primal witnessing [...] rooted in the primary embodied relations of recognition and attachment, that is, in the rhythmic third*”, (Benjamin, 2014).

Lastly I argue that thirdness must go beyond witnessing, be it witnessing in retrospect or in situ. I do not deny that the Moral Third is also an active position; to do so would be to commit the same fallacy that Ingold highlights (see above). Because learning can occur in this realm, thirdness is a springboard for activism; and it is the zone in which direct action can take place. In fact, acting from without a third space is a reversal which returns us to a place of denial, where we can become once more overwhelmed by our affects and overcome by helplessness. Transformation becomes impossible in a zone of dualities. Rather, the third is an expanse which can calm and balance our affective turmoil, empowering us to make wise choices and more especially, to take compassionate action. This is the territory of affectivist autoethnography. I reflect hereunder on what the

implications are of occupying this arena, and examine the challenges in terms of the failed witness. A look at these challenges leads me to critically question the supportability of this activist stance.

It is important to note that these three 'elements' of thirdness cannot be separated out from one another. There are no clear distinctions to be made between them, as they interweave and overlap in a paradoxical zone of affective intensities and sensory imaginaries. As Levi points out:

“What we commonly mean by “understand” coincides with “simplify”: without a profound simplification the world around us would be an infinite, undefined tangle that would defy our ability to orient ourselves and decide upon our actions. In short, we are compelled to reduce the knowable to a schema: with this purpose in view we have built for ourselves admirable tools in the course of evolution, tools which are the specific property of the human species – language and conceptual thought”, (1989, p.36).

The Moral Third and witnessing the social

“The survivor response of disidentification with those who do perish is common, and as I said, may be one aspect of self which is experienced by most people. The response can arise as a manic defense against vulnerability but also as a reflexive shut down in the face of pain or fear. But another matter is the etching of such responses into the collective psyche as superiority or triumph: justifying the inflicting of harm and permitting avoidable suffering as the deserved fate of the unworthy, those who fail or don't keep up in the race. The disavowal of public social responsibility for helping over harming is part of a complex process of withholding acknowledgement of injuries to victims in an unlawful world. This constitutes a form of failure to dignify suffering through witnessing that perpetuates the breakdown of the moral third”.
(Benjamin, 2014)

When we lose the power to connect with our basic affective system, or when our affects become distorted in mechanisms designed to protect us from harm, we have a tendency to rationalise suffering in ways that cut us off and separate us from the other. Benjamin's work is revealing in this respect. In a recent seminar with Benjamin, talking about the role of the therapist, she pointed out that *“idealisation is pernicious and destructive if it is attached to a notion that the analyst has no hatred or anger for the client”* (Seminar “The Moral Third, Utrecht, 21st April 2015).

She argued specifically that the patient must have insight into the analyst; and not just the other way round. Recognition is a 'shared third', in that it provides a moral space in which mutuality becomes possible. It is a mutuality in which "we can survive our own hatred and the hatred of the other", because we come to see that hatred is only one part of who we are. This so-called Moral Third is a place from which 'bearing witness' to the suffering of the other becomes not only possible, but essential. It provides a possibility, according to Benjamin, to "hold a patient's strength and insight, as much as it can hold their vulnerability, without infantilizing them".

Benjamin argues that we find safety in denial, because we find incongruence too difficult to deal with. It might be denial of our own shadowy affects, or of the needs of the other; but either way it is a failure to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of the other. Because we could not bear it if the suffering of the other got through our defences, we shut down (or dissociate) and suppress the experiences we find too difficult to handle. As researchers we are witnesses to the social field about which we write. If our research embodies our affects we must, I argue, transcend dissociation, which is also "the dissociation of the others' humanity", according to Benjamin (2014). And we must identify with interdependence and assume responsibility for our affective ambivalence.

"There is more implied in the ability to hold opposites than merely recognizing one's own capacity for destructiveness or wrong action. There must also be an ability to tolerate the possible incursion of the badness that has been identified with the other into the good that has been identified with the self: the so-called primitive or early feelings of discarding and projecting that which is abject, fecal, disgusting in the human body have to be countered by an acceptance of bodily or psychological weakness within self and other. Otherwise what dominates is the powerful impulse to project it outward into a vile and dangerous Other who must be kept out of the self and excluded from the group at all costs (see Theweleit, 1987;88). Preserving the safe pure realm of Us against the impure, dangerous Them makes violent action appear "good" rather than "bad," and so confuses the notions of right and wrong", (Benjamin, 2014).

In the intersubjective space, there are not only pure affects. Our dark side, and that of the other, is ominously present. Relationship is about confronting what is most difficult in our multifaceted selves, without dissociating, running away, or denying what is. Only then is recognition and reparation possible. A move from victimhood into agency can take place when we can acknowledge the fully embodied, affective self, versus the dissociated, absent or numb self.

“The less able we are to genuinely identify with all parts of self, the more we leave unchallenged our own propensity to identify with one side of the doer-done to opposition, the more abstract our entry into other’s experiences and the more likely we are to turn the moral third of seeking truth and lawfulness into mere moralizing. So the embodied moral third is especially relevant to transcending binaries such as weak and strong through multiplicity of identifications” (Benjamin, 2014).

Multiplicity on the edge

This journey into relationship has taken me to the edge of an affective precipice. Leading with affect has launched me into critical engagement with my research participants, steeped in a practice of reflexivity which has continually questioned the articulation of my own affects, as well as those of others. Whilst affect can induce greater solidarity and feelings of mutuality and reciprocity, it can also inculcate us humans with hatred and frustration, repression and discrimination. As Letiche puts it: *“Affect can reveal joy, triumph or creativity, but it can also centre on jealousy, revenge and greed. There is no guarantee that researching affect will result in more fairness or social justice, since vengeance and hatred are strong affective logics,”* (2014, p.158).

I always used to want to help or to fix. I think it also had something to do with feeling good about myself, not only because I could change a situation, but also because of the sense of control it gave. There was definitely a power aspect involved; using knowledge and skill to achieve what I wanted, gave me a thrill. When I would look at my actions in this way, I felt a lot of self-condemnation arising; I blamed myself for helping others only to make myself feel better or to look good. It took a while for me to realise that an integral part of generosity is also feeling happy about oneself and for the other. There’s nothing intrinsically wrong with that.

In looking for ways to deal with overwhelming affects in relation, I had to recognise that powerful images of myself as the saviour or helper were only part of the story; I too have frustrations, feelings of guilt, periods of anger and despair, fear and loss. I was making myself *“grandiose”* and *“self-righteous”*, by repudiating the parts in me that could also be *“monstrous”* (Benjamin, 2014). I had to learn that my capacity to enact violence resides next to my capacity for immense love and compassion. Staying with a skewed picture of myself as ideal, was taking its toll on my capacity to be in an open relation to the other and to be reflexive and self-critical.

Trying to transform affects like contempt and disgust or revulsion for those working in the asylum system, into a greater understanding and compassion, is an ongoing challenge. I am more patient and tolerant of asylum seekers than professionals (or volunteers) within organisations and institutions which are supposed to be protecting the marginalised. In fact, I often fall prey to what I have argued in this book that we should guard against; the idealisation of the poor.

Reaching out to those working within the system is harder for me. I see how they too may be caught in a vicious circle of systemic violence, or just lost; yet I somehow manage to play down their suffering or fail to acknowledge their shortcomings in a way that could be a source of understanding, rather than recrimination. One COA worker told me once how difficult she finds it to be critical of and within the system. She even got denied a promotion because she was 'too critical'. She told me that she bypassed the rules, or ignored them at times, like when a young asylum seeker might miss the last bus, she would pick him/her up from the bus stop, even though it was against the rules. She works at the asylum centre where A. used to live. She can't have been on duty the night he missed the bus and had to sleep in the freezing cold for a night in the bus shelter.

Care-less

A. told me how he spent a night cowering in a bus shelter because neither COA personnel, nor his guardian, (he was fifteen at the time), would arrange for him to be collected when he missed the last bus home. He was terrified and alone and he had to sleep outside because he had nowhere else to go and nobody was willing to pick him up. Another story was about how he walked home from the hospital, having spent a night there after a severe alcohol intoxication, because he was deemed 'well enough,' by his guardian.

One night I was at the gym and I got a telephone call. It was A's friend. "*You have to come, now, quickly*", he shouted. "*A. has been taken badly. I don't know what's wrong with him. He has heart pains. He's just lying on the bed, calling for you. I think he's having a heart attack. We don't know what to do. He's got a lot of pain. He's calling for you*", he repeated.

I got my stuff together and left the sports club. The asylum centre was only a five minute drive. I ran as fast as I could to the friend's unit, not bothering to stop at the reception desk to register. I needed to get there as soon as possible. Nothing could happen. It couldn't. When I got into the unit, several friends were standing around A., talking to him. He was still awake, but very pale, and holding onto his

chest, in pain. He said he didn't know what happened. Something had spooked him, and he'd panicked, on his way to the asylum centre, cycling. Then he'd gotten chest pains, and collapsed. I called an ambulance, and then told my husband that I'd be going to the hospital. The ambulance arrived, and the personnel came in with a stretcher. They did their tests, and the ambulance stood outside his unit at the asylum centre for more than half an hour. Not one member of staff of the asylum centre came to see what was happening. Even when he was stretchered out, nobody asked if he was OK. A couple of staff members stood outside the personnel room, smoking. They watched me bolt past them, but didn't ask anything. Later I heard from the hospital that *they* (COA) were officially in charge of his welfare, alongside the guardian from Nidos, and not me. The staff of COA had apparently phoned to the hospital to make sure that the hospital knew that they were his (official) carers, and not me.

At the hospital, A., underwent a whole series of tests. They asked for his file to be sent over from the cardiac unit at the specialist hospital he'd been in when he got operated on his heart a couple of years back. He was in pain, and didn't want to be left alone. He had had a flashback, and panicked. He was scared. Eventually the doctors assured us that his heart was fine. He'd had a severe panic attack and had hyperventilated. They needed to keep him in overnight for observation.

The doctor left and we were handed over to the nurses. The charge nurse quickly let me know I would have to leave, despite A., asking for me to stay with him. I promised him the day he came to live with us that I'd never leave him when he needed me, and it wasn't now that I would walk away. The staff insisted and I refused. They insisted and I refused. A. insisted I stay, but they ignored his wishes, and tried to suggest that I was pressurizing him in some way.

I penned a letter to the staff, a copy of which I gave to them the next morning. It was a way to deal with the emotional upheaval of seeing A., in pain, and to come to terms with the way the staff treated both of us. I had a whole night of just sitting in a chair, keeping watch, and checking that A. was ok. The letter (not all of which is published hereunder), was an inquiry, through text, into the nature of care. I never got a reply.

"Dear hospital staff

What is good care? He sleeps, soundly it would seem, though how do I know what is happening in his head? For weeks now I have observed him, awake and asleep, testing my own frames of reference against what I see and hear, feel and am affected by. I ask him questions, listen, watch for signs, try to suss things out and sometimes I think I get

it. At other times I am completely baffled and confused.

Last night I phoned an ambulance for A., a young asylum seeker of seventeen years old. He has been operated on his heart, and every now and then he still complains of pain in his chest. He has been living with my family for a while, but was visiting friends at the asylum centre, when he started to get pain.

After a quick intake at the heart department, it became clear that his situation had stabilised, but that it would be wise for him to remain in the hospital overnight for observation. A., has a traumatic past, and suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome. He has terrible nightmares.....and was suffering at the time from a severe panic attack stemming from an incident earlier on in the evening.

As the sole carer for A., (who lives with me, my husband and four sons), I asked to be able to remain overnight with him in the hospital. I was told, in an unfriendly manner, that it was not possible, and that A., would have to stay alone.

In the first instance, when A., was operated upon approximately two years ago, he spent two and half months alone in intensive care. I did not know him then. He received no visits from COA, nor from his Nidos guardian; both of which are legally responsible for his well-being. Not one person from either organisation has a relationship of trust with A., and nobody knows the nature of his problems. I am the only person to whom he has confided his entire story.

Nevertheless, the hospital personnel were not in the least bit interested in what I had to say. They didn't want to know why it was so important for me to stay with A., during the night.....In fact they didn't listen to me at all.

In fact, they even doubted that my intentions were honourable and tried to give the impression that A., would rather spend the night alone. Even when A., confirmed that he definitely wanted me to stay, they reacted in a laconic, distrusting fashion.

I stayed anyway and slept in a chair beside the bed, even though I was continually told that this was 'not normal'.

The nurse in charge of the night shift told me repeatedly:

"you are nothing for this young man, you have no formal relationship to him whatsoever, you have no responsibility for him, according to the law; COA is responsible, so we cannot offer you anything whatsoever. According to the law, you are

nothing to him. This is not a hotel, this is a hospital, and a department for intensive care, and we cannot offer you anything. You are not his mother. He is almost eighteen, almost an adult and we can take care of him perfectly well alone. You are nothing to him, according to the law”..... and so she continued.

The ‘informal relationship’ I had with him didn’t count. It didn’t matter that I was the only one taking care of him, nor that I knew him so much better than those in the official role of carers or guardians, who were responsible for him, according to the law. It didn’t matter, morally or ethically, that the officials have never cared for him. It didn’t matter that I had promised never ever to leave him. That didn’t matter.

Even worse were the eyes of mistrust....and that the hospital personnel chose the route of the bureaucratic rationality. A rationality less interested in the ‘good’, but looks for legitimacy through rules and protocols.

Did any of the nurses on duty see through their glass windows how A., was awoken by a terrible nightmare at 02.15 am? Did the night sisters give him the attention they had promised? Where were they the whole night actually?

When did care lose the ‘care’ and become clinical? Instrumental in its rationality; care-less, too careful, not caring at all?”

The next morning A., was discharged. The hospital staff said COA had called to insist upon their formal responsibility. We went back home. No one from COA got in touch. No one bothered to contact either me or A. to ask if he was OK. Nobody inquired. I did get a call from his guardian though, to complain that I had ‘purposefully excluded COA’. He said COA was unhappy that when the ambulance came, I failed to inform COA adequately about the situation. I mentioned the fact that the ambulance had actually been admitted through the security barriers, and had been outside the unit for at least half an hour. The door of the unit was open and lots of asylum seekers had come in that time to see what was happening. COA staff was outside smoking. They couldn’t have missed the ambulance, I suggested. He failed to reply. There was no need. They decided it was my fault anyway.

Affective learning

Ingold (2014) calls it “*learning from the inside*”. Participant observation, he says, has two essential qualities, which are “*ontological commitment*” and “*education*”. He refutes that there is a contradiction between participation and observation and argues that anthropology is, in effect, “*a practice of education*” (2014, p.388, italics in original). I agree with him on this point, and note that the border or the edge is a

productive learning zone, in so far that it extracts us from our comfort zone and forces us to examine our deepest convictions and our most firmly held views. This is the space of the third, because in order for the learning to occur, there also has to be openness and awareness. If discomfort in the border zone is accompanied by pernicious affects which entail disconnection and dissociation, learning cannot take place.

It's not always evident though that we're learning in the moment of learning. Especially when something is unpleasant. Especially when we're afraid, or in the throes of some unbelievably desperate situation, and we think there's no way out of this one. Time passes too slowly, and we think it's always been like this, and we can imagine life no other way. Doom sets in, accompanied by its good friends despair and moroseness, and before you know it, everything's black, static, unending and unchanging.

It's easy to lose faith in such moments; faith that the other is strong enough and will survive, because he already has. Because he already made it this far, and you weren't always there to hold his hand. Yet now you are, and so you should be, and letting go of that hand is the most difficult thing in the world. You can barely imagine that he could survive now; that he could go through it all again a second time, alone. You don't want that for him; you want him to be comforted and to feel loved and wanted. Like he'll never be abandoned or let down again, ever ever again. You want to make it better and to stop the pain and the suffering. Yet time and again, you realise you can't. You can do a lot, but you can't take away what's already happened, you can't even make sure the present will always be ok, and you certainly can't control the future.

Then you realise that despite our essential interconnectedness, you're still you, and I'm still me. You somehow manage to assume thirdness. I can see your pain, I can feel it, I can recognise it, but it's still not my pain. Why not? It hurts as if it's my pain, but it's still not. Perhaps what hurts most is not being able to stop the pain, rather than the actual pain itself. It's the pain of insecurity and of powerlessness. It's the pain of always doing too little, and not enough. Of recognising your uniqueness, even as our bonds are tight. Of trying to soothe you, but not being able to get rid of all that's hurting you. Whose despair is greatest? Yours, for everything that's ever been done to you; or mine, at not being able to change it?

Sometimes I've curled up crying at the harms people cause one another, and at not being able to change things, fix them, alleviate the suffering. But I've learnt

that me being hopeless or caught up in my own helplessness won't serve anyone. I think we sometimes enjoy, no enjoy is not the right word; I think that because we sometimes feel so useless, so unable to do anything, our only comfort is to feel miserable. Anything's better than standing by and just looking. We feel we're active if we're crying too. But the idealisation of our own goodness (or that of the other) is nocuous; whilst denial of our shadow side is just as deadly.

We might get really mad, and angry, at the world and at everybody in it. Or we point our anger to one group, or one characteristic. We lose sight of balance and our whole view becomes skewed toward the darkness and inevitability of badness. If we're lucky, our anger can reveal a new form of consciousness which, instead of hatred, initiates clarity and awareness of what needs to be done. If we can, we invite ourselves to become the third and to become a territory of possibility. But if not, our affects can take us to a prison of guilt or blame where all we can apprehend is misfortune and outrage, and which in turn sabotages our attempts at understanding and compassion.

"Bystander guilt is not the guilt that can recognize the "badness" within the self, or acknowledge the commonality of destructive fantasies (...) but rather projectively offloads it onto the other. Guilt, and at times moral outrage, too often constitute a reactive reversal against denial that fails to liberate our capacity to witness and empathize, or to act on behalf of dignifying suffering and protecting those who might be discarded", (Benjamin, 2014).

Compassion

I thought I knew what compassion was when I started doing this research. I tried to help just about everyone who asked me for something. I had difficulty saying no. I wanted to be there for everyone, all the time. It meant that I learnt a lot about all facets of the asylum system; from housing, to legal procedures, medical assistance and mental health, trauma and social welfare. However, I was swamped by the sheer amount of work and help that was needed. It left me drained. It wasn't just one or two asylum seekers or refugees; they were all struggling to rebuild a life here, and suffering a lot in the process.

Thomas Merton (1966) writes:

"The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in

violence. The frenzy of the activist...destroys his own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful."

Glorifying affect, and sentimentalising relations with the most vulnerable, like asylum seekers and refugees, imprisons us. We can become oblivious to our own part in perpetuating violence, by failing to recognise the extent of the misfortune and affliction of the other, and by discrediting the negative experiences of those with whom we disagree. We deride the complexity of the asylum debate and we fall short of owning up to the full scope of our affective potential.

It's easy to confuse empathy with compassion. Compassionate responses are empathetic, but they are also more. They incorporate compassion for self, as well as for the other. They challenge us to confront our own fears and misgivings, and to take action to transform suffering and misery. Perhaps in empathy we are still locked into a situation in which we can become easily overwhelmed, or where we confuse empathy with pity for the other. The world is effectively divided into the good and the bad, or the fortunate and the misfortunate, and whilst the third is lurching close by, we are not quite there. We must face up to the full range of our own affects; acknowledging the pro-social next to the negative, to avoid skewing our moral values. We must overcome our own reticence to bear witness to suffering, in order to cultivate compassionate relations. And whilst this is not a book about compassion, I mention compassion as a vital resource in the third, helping us to face the challenges of affect-directed research and of bearing witness to the adversity and pain suffered by ourselves and others²¹.

Bearing witness

Leading with affect is to try to bear witness. It journeys the reader to otherwise inaccessible places. It's like pointing out the stuff that cannot be avoided, but which might otherwise be dismissed in social research; the messy and the unpleasant, as well as the hard to script experiences, which defy neat explanations or rational analyses.

A lot of what Primo Levi writes about in "*The Drowned and The Saved*" resonates with what I mean when talking about bearing witness or occupying a 'third' space. Levi writes about the systematic denial of the atrocities carried out in the

²¹ For a full discussion on categories of compassion and empathy as a building block of compassion, see Halifax: "The Precious Necessity of Compassion", 2011, "A heuristic model of enactive compassion", 2012, and "G.R.A.C.E. for nurses: Cultivating compassion in nurse/patient interactions", 2013.

Third Reich, and highlights the act of looking away or of distorting reality “*not only in memory but in the very act of taking place,*” “*for purposes of defense*”, (1989, p.33).

Whereas Primo Levi (1989) invites caution in reading the recollections of survivors of the holocaust as they were “not always a good observation post: in the inhuman conditions to which they were subjected, the prisoners could barely acquire an overall vision of their universe”; he notes equally that it was mainly the political prisoners who were the main historians of the holocaust because they were “*disposed of a cultural background which allowed them to interpret the events they saw*”, (p.17/18). Reflecting on the capacity of asylum seekers to protest or to expound their own theories of their treatment in the Netherlands, or to illustrate their own sense of ‘lostness’, I feel less of a “poverty pimp” than I might otherwise have done on listening to their stories of loss, and being present in their dealings with institutions. Bearing witness through presence, and in text feels right. And taking action feels like an inexorable necessity.

Affect is embedded in relationship and text is a form of relationship between writer and reader. In this way affect engages with the reader in order to encourage reflection on the complexity of relatedness, and on the goals of social studies. Social studies should be unique, situated and relational. If it is not, the risk of massive injustice can ensue. It is an injustice which does not see the pain of asylum seekers like A., nor does it value relationships enough to try to prevent suicides, or self-harming, or addiction; indeed, it does not even consider taking responsibility for these things when they do happen. They are inconveniences, or casualties which cannot be avoided.

We long for relation and connection, but so much in the current asylum system seeks to destroy, or to ruin our sense of belonging to one another. We dispatch ambivalence, as we yearn for certitude and scorn inconclusiveness. Troubled and incoherent accounts by asylum seekers hatch misgiving and make us uneasy; they destroy our calm and incite anxiety by their messiness. They become liars, spinning their far-fetched accounts, and in our endeavour to weed out the ‘good’ from the ‘bad,’ or the ‘real’ from the ‘false’, we become ruled by fear, and forget ‘*what really matters*’ (Kleinman, 2006). The suffering and pain of others is no longer seen, but dismissed as being their own fault, or if it is seen, we do our best to block it out, or to find solace in all manner of excuses, procedures and protocols. The traumatised can remain locked in their traumas, and our systems not only confirm but also confound their nightmarish experiences.

Whilst judging the applicability of an asylum seekers' claim may not be easy, the ways in which interviews are carried out, are far from conducive to the process. The proceedings take place as if in a courtroom, and it's the asylum seeker who is on trial²². They are guilty until they prove themselves innocent, and not the other way around. Showing emotions sometimes works for the asylum seeker, sometimes against. Not answering in a logical manner is more often than not, translated as a lack of credibility about the truth of the story, rather than seen as being related to cultural difference, or a sign of trauma and fear, shame and distrust. The cases of Hafid, Moussa and A., are exemplary in this manner. Authorities fail time and again to recognise the trauma of asylum seekers, and are ill-informed about the way in which post-traumatic stress syndrome plays out in the everyday lives of their target populations. Dissociation is a common coping mechanism (Bloom, 2013, Levine, 1997, Siegel, 2003); traumatised persons have learned to cut off a part of their experiences, as the reality of their suffering is too great to handle. They dissociate regularly in stressful situations, as their affective system becomes overly aroused. In such cases, they have great difficulty remembering things, and their talk and actions may become incoherent and difficult to grasp. The authorities may look upon what is said or done at times of dissociation with disbelief; proof that the asylum seeker is lying, by trying to patch together some story or another. Mutual distrust is embodied and can be sensed in the pores of one's body. And on the one and only occasion when I experienced authentic empathy on the part of the immigration officer for the asylum seeker, she cried when I drew her attention to it.

To bear witness is to stand in not-knowing, and to be present to what is, pushing away nothing, and acknowledging whatever arises. It is a state of social connection, and affective attunement, from which compassionate action can be born in relation to the other.²³

²² On the problems of trust and credibility in the asylum procedure see *Mistrusting Refugees* by Daniel & Knudsen, (eds), 1995, and *Rejecting Refugees, Political Asylum in the 21st century*, Bohmer & Shuman, 2007.

²³ The Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers (socially engaged Buddhists) are: Not-knowing, Bearing Witness, Loving Action.

The unaccompanied minors longing for relation

Despair

When the room closes in
And it's dark outside
And the envelope doesn't dare
Get opened
For fear of revealing
Its dreaded content

Stomach churns
Hands writhe and turn
Fingers rubbing in the sweat
Into palms turned red
With exhaustion
From this repeated
Exfoliation exercise

Face hides panic
In its blanket glance
Fear is revealed
Comforted by its brother, shame
Who revels in his appearance
Shamelessly

Lost
Alone
Without
An inkling of hope.
All seems
Lost
Alone
Without
An inkling of hope
In this desolate camp

I am only human too
Do you see me
Suffocating in shame

Fumbling in fear
Blank and listless
Unknowing in my angst
Losing faith in the future
My future

Born by chance
There
Not here
Our tears alike

I am only seventeen
I am only a child
Too

(Kim's diary, 2013)

A. lived for a time in the more protected form of housing, where staff actually live-in, known as KWG (Kinder WoonGroep – Children's Housing Unit). The staff changes, taking turns staying over. A. and other who have also lived in KWG's describe a situation in which the degree and type of care and attention received is fully dependent on the particular members of staff working in that particular house. Some are more committed and engaged than others. Some are open to relational connections, others less so. And it is certainly strange, though not at all surprising, that some of the most vulnerable young asylum seekers I know slipped through the net, and ended up in large, anonymous asylum centres, rather than in smaller living units. Those, like A., who were 'problematic', were cast off as troublemakers. Trauma and grief were not seen as reason for their difficult behaviour, despite the symptoms glaring in the face of the workers of the system.

A. complains even now, that whilst he was living in the KWG, the food was rationed. In the weekend the youngsters were allowed one egg per person. Eventually A. organised a protest with others about this policy, though I've recently heard this same complaint from many other young men living in the protected housing for underage (potential) victims of human trafficking, run by Jade.

Those who are most in distress, and who most need a kind and caring environment in which to regenerate themselves, are barely helped to consider the

options open to them, nor are they supported in making the right choices; rather they are separated from mainstream society, in the case of the victims of trafficking²⁴, or left to the mercy of COA and other support workers²⁵.

Thinking about the youngsters in the Jade school I worked in, I try to stave off my ambivalence, or to avoid thinking of them as just youngsters trying to get to Europe for a better life. Not all of them will be found to be victims of trafficking, and many will go on to ask for asylum (and not for protection on humanitarian grounds against trafficking), and some will undoubtedly get residency permits, whilst most probably will not. That is, except the Eritreans, who have priority within the system, or so I have been told.

The huge influx of Eritreans has presented the system with a problem, and with a group that is new. My experiences with them has been less than positive. The older Eritreans I've worked with have been pleasant enough, whilst I've found the younger generation to be unreasonable, disrespectful, and sometimes downright rude. Confused, I was unable to make head nor tail of their motivations, nor of their behaviour. They told me they don't trust anybody, because in Eritrea they can't, yet outwardly they appear to function as a group. In the classroom, I had several run-ins with young Eritreans. They seemed oblivious to the rules in the school, just ignoring the instructions given to them. A common problem according to all the other teachers in the school and at the schools I've either worked at or been in contact with for my research.

How to rhyme my desire to help them, or to at least see them all treated with a sense of dignity and respect, whilst being given the chance to build a better future for themselves; with my frustration and anger, disappointment and irritation at the lack of respect which I, and others face, with groups of asylum seekers, like these Eritreans? It's hard not to put them into categories. Especially when affective intensities are revving me up into negativity and urging me to see the

²⁴ Several research reports highlight the problem of sheltered housing for underage, unaccompanied, (potential) victims of trafficking in the Netherlands. According to GATE (2012) "The WODC report concluded that the protected shelter has a custodial and closed setting. Dutch legislation appears to have no legal grounds for the custodial and closed setting of the separated children within the protected reception system. The children are only allowed to leave the protected shelter under supervision after they received permission to do so. There is no judge involved in the decision making process to give a judicial review on the placement in the protected reception. According to the report this violates international human rights treaties and the Dutch Constitution (Kromhout et al. 2010, p. 154-155)".

²⁵ See the Defence for Children and UNICEF report (2013) entitled: "Bescherming Alleenstaande Minderjarige Vreemdelingen in de Knel" (Protection of Unaccompanied Minors under pressure). According to this report the Dutch authorities are failing to protect children in need: policy is 'careless', and likely to drive children into illegality; repatriation is put before protection and care, and children are stunted in their development.

unpleasant side of things. These affects move between bodies, and spread, and pass from one to the other, like when a COA worker in the asylum centre in Oude Pekela said “*those Eritreans are really stupid*”, and I desperately wanted to agree. I felt it rising through me, and I was appeased in my own notions of the difference between them and us. It is so easy to get carried away and to follow somebody on a crusade that is not your own.

According to new policy presented in October 2014, the government has decided that as of 2016, no asylum seekers who fall into the category of unaccompanied minor (under the age of eighteen years) shall live in an asylum centre, or camp. Minors with a permanent residency permit will be separated from those who might be deported at the age of eighteen, and from those who are still awaiting a decision from the immigration authorities. The idea, according to the Minister, is to provide more clarity to the different groups of asylum seekers. Those with a permit should ideally be placed in a foster family, to booster their integration chances, but if this is not possible, they will live in small units together, under the supervision of COA workers. The government claims that it has nothing to do with cost cutting.

“In this new housing model, we will try as much as possible to take account of the individual circumstances of the unaccompanied minor. If necessary, we will tailor our services to their needs,” (“Kleinschaligheid voorop: een nieuw opvangmodel voor alleenstaande minderjarige vreemdelingen”, letter from the Minister to the Parliament, dated 15 September 2014).

According to guardians with whom I’ve spoken, working for Nidos, it is already extremely difficult to find enough foster homes for these young asylum seekers. They have too many who are waiting for foster families, and too few families to take them. Where relationship and stability are by far the most important factors for all asylum seekers, let alone young unaccompanied minors, I wonder about the competences and skills of those who might be involved in the care of this group in the future, (not only the professionals but also the foster families). What attempts will be made to address extreme affective arousal, or to bolster affective systems which have been traumatised by years of neglect and indifference? And what levels of support and care will be provided to foster families, whose job it will be to ‘integrate’ these youngsters into Dutch society, many of whom are severely traumatised and require intensive treatment from mental health specialists? What will be the costs to these youngsters, and to society, if they are faced with more than one unsuitable foster family, and more disappointment in their relationships to others? I am sceptical. The care has not been up to scratch until now; so why should it be any different in the future?

“We always try to find someone from the same cultural background. We find that that’s easier, because when we place these young people in Dutch families, the Dutch people get too attached to them. If they then have to get sent back to their country of origin, the Dutch people know more about the way things work here, and then they start campaigns and petitions to try to keep the kids in this country. They even sometimes contact the media. And we want to avoid that kind of stuff. Foreign families tend not to get too attached, and so they find it easier to let them go once they become eighteen and might have to leave the Netherlands,”
(discussion with Nidos foster family co-ordinator, 2013).

Failed witness

“We’re in an open jail. We’re not actually locked in, but we might as well be. The immigration authorities, the COA, they think they’re better than us. They talk to us as if we are stupid, as if we know nothing. They make us feel really bad. They don’t look at us like humans any more. And I’m starting to even feel that way. I’m afraid if I lose my dignity, I’ll lose everything. That’s the only thing they didn’t manage to take from me yet. And I know it’s worse for all those people back there in Syria, so I know it’s better here than there, but I still feel like we don’t get treated right,” (Sem, asylum seeker from Syria, November 2014).

Denial of our need as human beings for affective relations is harmful. Indeed, denying our affects in the face of our research participants (or clients), is a failure to recognise the crucial role our emotions play in the organisation and execution of our research. We risk downplaying or disqualifying our need to be self-critical and self-reflexive, both before, during, and after the research process. We need to be fully aware of all of these dangers, and willing to confront them as they arise.

Despite our very basic human need to be in relation with one another, where our sense of self is intrinsically tied up with our relational being, those working within the asylum and refugee system, continually overlook, or even quash, their own potential for nurturing ease and development in relationship, leaving asylum seekers and refugees isolated and alone in their suffering. Instead of providing a sanctuary for those most in need, the system even manages to generate more trauma, as a result of disconnection and a lack of care.

Fear pervades the air in asylum centres. Security guards hanging out at reception desks very often ignore asylum seekers, myself included, when you first enter. Is it a game, or a well-intended strategy to put people in their places from the

beginning. Like *"I'm in charge here, so I decide when you can talk to me"*. Just a couple of nights ago, clad in track suit and trainers, I went to the asylum centre where Hafid lives. Hafid was down and depressed, and had taken tablets to calm his nerves. He'd arrived back from the clinic on Friday, only to find once more that the whole unit was filthy dirty, and in disarray. The men who'd been living there had been moved out, sent back to other European countries where they'd landed first. His new 'room mates' were young Eritreans. On Saturday Hafid went to COA to complain. When COA made checks the last time in their unit, all the inhabitants of the unit, including Hafid, got a fine because the place was unkempt. This, despite the fact that Hafid only resides there two nights a week. According to COA, the whole unit was responsible, so there was no getting out of the fine.

Hafid approached a worker from COA to complain. He told them that the unit was filthy again, that they knew he came home once a week, yet nobody ever bothered to ask him how he was, nobody cared. The man looked on, and Hafid's voice got louder. He was, he told me, angry that the man was disinterested. Hafid asked why he couldn't get a room on his own; he'd been asking for that for years, mainly due to his psychiatric problems, but to no avail. The COA worker in turn got mad, and told him to keep his 'big mouth shut' and to go away. Hafid went back to the unit, took some tablets and went to the city centre, where he hung about all day. In the evening he returned to the centre and phoned me around eight forty five. With A., we rushed down there to see how he was doing.

On arrival, the security guard, a woman, was just coming out of the side door. She proceeded to the small wooden shelter just outside the door, marked with a sign "VIP area", to smoke. She glanced sideways at us, but didn't bother to address us. As we walked past, I walked up the ramp in order to go in the front door to register. *"Come on, let's just go in"* A. said. *"No, I want to register,"* I told him. We went in together and the guard saw that we'd entered in the front. She stayed outside smoking her cigarette. When she was finished she sauntered into the room, behind the desk and looked at us. I informed her that we were coming to visit someone. She looked us up and down and said *"it's late"*. I said: *"I know the rules"*. She repeated, *"it's late and there's hardly any time. It's almost ten"*. A. was already bursting with infuriation. He interjected, *"no, it's nearly quarter past nine. It's not ten yet"*. *"I know the rules,"* I repeated and handed her my driving license. She took it and made a photocopy, then literally threw it on the counter. *"I'm sorry, but a little friendliness would not go amiss,"* I told her. She just looked back at me and said, *"sign in"*. I put my signature on the copy of my license, though I'd never been asked to do that previously.

“Where are you going?” she inquired. I told her the room number and she wrote it down. She didn’t address A.; as she probably assumed he was living there. We both looked scruffy which is probably why she didn’t think I was a visitor at first. We left to visit Hafid. A. was fuming. I was livid.

Hafid was drowsy and downhearted. He recalled what had happened, and his incapacity to understand why the workers at the asylum centre treated asylum seekers like they did; without respect, and without care. It’s a difficult question to confront, and even more difficult to answer. Such a question reveals a deep and structural pain, which is embedded in a system grounded in fear and mistrust of asylum seekers and refugees, (Daniel, Knudsen, (eds), 1995). The actions of the staff highlight the chasm between workers and asylum seekers; systemic misunderstandings, insensitivity, rudeness and arrogance, ignorance and indifference.

“Their mission is to frustrate us. They’re just out to pester us and to make our lives miserable. I don’t know why they do this job, because it’s not as if they care about us”,
Hafid.

The Dutch asylum system encourages disconnection on a large scale. Asylum seekers endure traumatic experiences at the hands of systemic violence and brutalization; direct or indirect. Years of waiting around for life to begin deadens the soul and leads to severe mental health problems (ACVZ, 2013, and Laban, 2010). It is a far cry from being a system of care and compassion; distance is applauded, connection and closeness highly disparaged. The system is geared towards providing for the basic necessities of asylum seekers, so as not to openly welcome their presence in the Netherlands, and to actively encourage them to return home.

“Some foreigners are like ticking time bombs. The Dutch don’t realise that when they treat us badly, it’s all getting stored up inside. I know one youngster who was in Germany and then in Russia. All that time he was discriminated against. He eventually went back home to Angola. One day he was at the coast, and there was this German family. The young guy had an AK47, and he just opened fire on the whole family, even the two year old baby. He just blew their brains out. He still felt so mad at what happened to him in Europe, that he just wanted to kill those whites on the beach”.

(Delilah, from Angola)

The researcher as witness

As I continue to reflect on what it means to be a witness, I am grasped by the question whether every researcher can automatically be dubbed a witness. Stewart places great emphasis on the beauty of the oral culture of those she researched, but in so doing creates an imbalance with the horror of poverty which is also present. The same goes for Agee, whose work in creating awareness of the abysmal lives of the farmers he wrote about is highly commendable, but still inadequate. Both are clearly witnesses to a certain extent; both write testimonies about the lives and woes of their research participants, and in this way attention to injustice. However, their beautification of their stories leaves a space for ethical considerations which are left unaddressed. It is *this* gap which I seek to fill.

What is the use of social studies if not to ignite compassion in the reader for that which lies beyond one's own direct experience? This does not mean to succumb to anecdotal tellings, or to gross exaggerations for the sake of creating effect (or affect). What it does mean is not balking at malevolence, or turning away from suffering or trying to make it seem better or more than it is. It means being thoughtful, and manoeuvring in this intricate scene of multiple interests and ambivalent affects, without losing sight of our common humanity. Affective engagement and commitment are crucial facets of this process. I do not believe that I could reach my reader otherwise. I use text to bring all of this together and to change the way we see and understand social crises pertaining to refugees and asylum seekers, and to alter how we write about them.

Affectivist autoethnography

Research that is affect-driven provides us with invaluable opportunities to address complex research fields, and to gain rich levels of insight into the lives of marginalised groups, such as asylum seekers and refugees. We are not only observers; we are witnesses in the social field with a moral obligation to identify with the suffering of others.

I argue the researching with affect affords us a chance to reside in thirdness and to become social activists, or activist ethnographers (Veissière), and to direct our work towards creating more just social conditions for vulnerable groups. Affect's contagion can be a unifying force, rippling through relationships in edifying and empowering ways. But it demands insight and awareness; that we are mindful of our own affects, and how they influence our intentions and our actions.

“Thirdness is that quality of human existence that transcends individuality, permits and constricts that which can be known, and wraps all our sensibilities in ways that we experience as simultaneously alien as well as part of ourselves. Thirdness is the medium in which we live and that changes events into history, moments into time, and fragments into whole”, (Gerson, 2007, p.2).

In order to become more than helpless bystanders, we must acknowledge which affects emerge on encountering the other; what our reactive tendencies are, and how we deal with them in relation. Relationships can be a great source of healing. But there must be a deep-seated commitment and a personal engagement to transform the ways in which we relate to one another. I cannot determine how you may choose to relate to me; I can only stay present to myself, guarding my own inner awareness, and acknowledging my own affects. By taking responsibility for my own intentions, and being mindful of my thoughts, feelings, emotions and corresponding actions, I am also taking responsibility for the relationship. And for the creation of a ‘third position’ of acknowledgement and mutuality. I am tending to the relationship’s potential for reciprocal support and encouragement, learning and empowerment.

As Jordan so aptly writes: *“A part of the ripple effect of growth in connection often spills into participating in social change through creating alliances or communities that are built around relational values”* (2010, p.33).

It is in the space of thirdness that these relational edifices are bolstered and provide us with a springboard to act. In the openness and fluidity of the third, we can move across affective registers, without falling back into automatic pilot, and we can take steps to develop new, more just, forms of co-existence. We surpass the bounds of bearing witness, embrace ambivalence, and move towards an active solidarity with the poor and marginalised whom we are researching. The third has no room for unconscious stylization, convention or rhetoric. It is not a place for *“stretching the truth”*, or for rejoicing unnecessarily. Rather it affords us an opportunity to be with what is difficult or brutal, to manifest our commitment to justice and to exemplify what matters most.

“Judging by the stories told by many who came back and from my own memories, Leopardi the pessimist stretched the truth in his representation; despite himself, he showed himself to be an optimist. In the majority of cases, the hour of liberation was neither joyful nor lighthearted. For most it occurred against a tragic background of destruction, slaughter and suffering. Just as they felt they were again becoming men,

that is, responsible, the sorrows of men returned: the sorrow the dispersed or lost family; the universal suffering all around; their own exhaustion, which seemed definitive, past cure; the problems of a life to begin all over again amid the rubble, often alone” (Levi, 1989, p.70/71).

I argue therefore that from this position of the third, we gain access to a launch pad for positive, emancipatory change. For the researcher it reinvigorates and enlarges the reach of our research, and for the professional, it enhances personal resilience and acts as a defence against administrative numbness and systematic dissociation. The third heals and restores relational bonds, which have been weighed down by nihilism or indifference; just as it can release us from feelings of entrapment or helplessness.

Yet, it is of utmost importance to note that whilst we may try as individuals to surmount the position of the failed witness, when violence is systemic, our task is even more daunting.

“The cause of a problem is always systemic, no matter what part of a system manifests the problem,” (Bloom, 2013, p.258).

An ex-team manager of Jade told me recently that when he started working at Jade’s sheltered housing unit for young asylum seekers, *“the mentors would just sit around all day smoking cigarettes and drinking cups of coffee and chatting in the canteen. It was the culture of the organisation. They’d leave the bedrooms looking like pigsties, whilst they should have been setting a good example to the youngsters. It was really hard getting them to do a good job. They were just lazy”*. He told me that he didn’t stay long in this job.

This does not mean that we should sit back and accept that we can’t change anything. In the intersubjective relationship we can, and must, dignify the suffering of the other by being an emotionally embodied witness to that suffering. However, our job is made more difficult when the role of witness is itself not validated, because the institutional apparatus which we have to deal with denies that it is causing injury or harm. Where a state fails to recognise its own wrongdoing, or the fact that it is acting immorally, it cannot create the Moral Third, which is necessary to *“break down the fictitious line between those who deserve mercy and hence to live, those who do not, those who consign others to die and those who perish”*, (Benjamin, 2014).

Is Affectivist Autoethnography bearable?

“Thoughtfulness begins in opening one’s heart to what is given. It involves vulnerability and risk. Truth means seeing what exceeds the possibility of seeing, what is intolerable to see, what exceeds the possibility of thinking, Georges Bataille wrote. “And I would not know what is, what happens, if I did not know extreme pleasure, if I did not know extreme pain!”²⁶

In speaking one can put oneself forth, to counteract one’s sense of vulnerability. But in thoughtful speech one instead seeks only to offer to others what one has been given to see. In thoughtful writing one loses sight of oneself, and one writes not for a distinct person but for anyone. For a reader I am only a self-effaced one who offers what has been given to see and to celebrate or suffer”.

(Lingis, 2004, p.195).

We cannot act if our eyes are closed. Taking action begins with opening one’s eyes to see. It is followed by active witness bearing, which includes testimony in the form of research and writing. I have argued, however, that we have to transgress the bounds of traditional social science studies by acting upon what emerges from our research, in order to reclaim justice and restore community bonds of dignity and recognition.

I have argued that those working in the Dutch asylum system perpetuate the trauma continuum and stand by as the system fails to protect the most vulnerable; partly because the individual worker can never compensate fully for a denial at the social level that a problem exists. The burden of implementing a Moral Third might well be at the institutional (state) level, where the state should uphold its duty of care and alleviation of suffering. But when this does not happen, we cannot and should not close our eyes, or be satisfied with disengaged, abstract analyses of the problems of our research participants.

Looking at the idealisation of affect, as well as the disavowal of negative affects, from Benjamin’s perspective, we realise affect’s challenge in terms of how to conjure up the moral third in our relations with the other. And as I discovered throughout this project, occupying the third is not always evident. We might, as individuals, be able to help, fix, or serve²⁷, but the potential to embody the shift from a paradigm of violence and denial, to one of care and compassion is

²⁶ Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:12, 10, in Lingis, 2004, p. 195.

²⁷ These paradigms are from Rachel Remen, 2003.

exacting. Especially when the current asylum system not only reinforces the likelihood that individuals will fail to become ethical witnesses to the suffering of others; or even worse, when the ‘failed witness’ position is already institutionalised at the level of Dutch society.

And let’s not forget, our own potential as individual researchers to foster relationship with our research participants and to commit ourselves to action is severely limited from within the academy. Researchers are not expected to lay bare their own affects, nor to acknowledge interconnectedness with those they research. To do so is to compromise the ‘scientific’ validity of research and to contaminate what is supposed to be highly objective research data. I address these concerns in the methodology section of this book, where I undertake a dialogue with Blommaert; but I dare not suggest that a ‘solution’ to this ongoing discussion is by any means within reach.

Another aspect to the challenge of affect, and of doing affectivist social research, and arguably its greatest predicament, is our own ability to sustain the position of the third in the long-run. If the third, as affective expression of our inherent relatedness and capacity for mutual recognition, was so simple, there would be no violence or oppression in the I/thou relationship. Yet there is. The third is an undeniably hazardous position to penetrate, let alone maintain. Does this mean that our ability as humans to rupture relationship, is just as strong, perhaps stronger, than our faculty for intimacy and reconciliation? To this question I have no definitive answer. I can only note, once more, that we all too often live in “*a world so absorbed with its own losses and needs that it remains silent and unmoved by the plight of the victim; it is a world that exists, but without provision for shared experience, and so it comes to occupy the space of a “dead third”*”, (Gerson, 2007, p.6).

Being a witness to suffering, and attending to our affects in ways which might engender mutual growth and development, is hard enough. So what about taking social action to alleviate the suffering which we perceive. I have seen how workers dis-locate with the suffering of asylum seekers by not ‘seeing’ it, in order to protect themselves from their own precariousness. They hide behind their formal roles, as disembodied professionals, following the rules and carrying out procedures. Is it any different for us as researchers?

“Hyperarousal (fight-flight reaction) and dissociation close the window of affective tolerance and combine to prevent the actual feeling and communication of specific emotions as part of an intersubjective process”, (Fosha, Siegel & Solomon, 2009, in Benjamin, 2014).

A Nidos guardian, in a meeting with an unaccompanied minor, Joseph, who was living in Jade's sheltered housing, because he was a (potential) victim of human trafficking, informed me:

"The rule is that the youngsters are not allowed out. Also not in the weekends. They have to stay in the sheltered accommodation. They aren't allowed to have telephones or internet for their own safety. I presume they have good relations with their mentors there. He's allowed to call you, if he wants. But he first has to inform the mentor, the mentor has to get in touch with me, and then I will make an appointment for him to come here to our offices, where he can phone you. If something happens in the middle of the night, no he won't be able to call you then. I know it's a bit of an unwieldy procedure, but that's the rule".

The young man in question had just told me that he thought a lot about committing suicide. He had not mentioned this to anyone else. I questioned the guardian about his psychological state, and she told me he had seen the "doctor's assistant". She indicated, by rubbing her thumb and fingers together, that seeing a psychologist was 'too costly'. I asked if I could pick up the young man to take him to the church at the weekend, and I questioned her what would happen if he wanted to call me in the middle of the night because he felt depressed, or if he just wanted to talk. Or worse still, if he felt suicidal.

Joseph said:

"I spoke to the doctor's assistant and told him that I missed my mother so much. He told me that I should write down all my memories of her on pieces of paper. Then I should throw them in the dustbin and just try to forget about her. He said I have a new life here now, and it's no use thinking about the past. He said it's better for me to forget my mother".

He cried as he told me what the doctor's assistant had advised him to do. The guardian looked at us both, then suggested it would be better if we stopped the meeting at that point. She had another meeting to go to, she said. At first I complied. I was almost embarrassed to insist that we should carry on. Then the memory of Moshtaba's brother jolted me, and I argued that we weren't finished talking yet. Perhaps I was still only half-hearted. I was already not very popular, so I didn't want to push my luck. Next to a moral indignation about what I'd just been told, I felt a tendency kick in to defend and protect, whilst at the same time having thoughts about how I didn't particularly want to take on the responsibility for the well-being of another unaccompanied minor. Practical considerations, like how much time it would take, and what it might entail, whizzed through my mind, but something else overran them. I was moved by him and by his story; I

could see how he sat there, despondent, and I had the urge once more to rally around him and to protect. We continued our conversation, and I hoped that I'd managed to comfort him.

Then he asked me whether it was a lot of trouble for me to keep meeting him. He mentioned the costs of petrol and the amount of time I had to deploy to travel up and down to meet him. Joseph told me that his Nidos guardian questioned him the last time we met about my intentions. She'd said, "*why would anybody want to help you for nothing? She must be getting something out of it*". As a result the youngster was confused. He wasn't sure he could trust my intentions, as a seed of doubt had been planted by his Nidos guardian that perhaps there was something I wasn't telling him. I tried to reassure him that I wanted nothing from him, and explained that if one of my own children were to face the same things as he had done, I would very much hope that somebody would also reach out to him.

Flying in the face of what I felt like doing, I took no action on these comments. I knew I needed the guardian more than she needed me. I did question her on why he'd been so long in protected housing, and on what was happening with his (asylum) procedure. She was cagey about the juridical process, but was more than willing to explain how they supported Joseph (and all other youngsters in their 'care') with a 'competency model' which was split into phases. Joseph, who was nearly eighteen, had gone through the first phase of introduction and settling in, and was now only in the second phase. That's why his independence and freedom were severely limited, she asserted. He wasn't 'ready' for responsibility yet. But they were doing everything they could to help him, I was assured. Joseph told me that he had never heard of the competency model and he didn't know what she was talking about²⁸.

"The children interviewed for this report were not aware of any plan of action. Maybe the guardians discuss the plan of action but the children do not remember this as such. They also found it difficult to talk about goals and their future perspective. An explanation for this can be that the separated children do not receive a copy of their plan of action. In this way they cannot read the plan of action or let the information sink in". (Defence for Children National Report: "Closing a Protection Gap", 2010

²⁸ At a meeting with the boss of Nidos, I asked him for a copy of the book in which their methods are described. Several copies of the book were on the shelf next to us. He refused, stating that "it has to be renewed shortly, and we don't have many copies left." The book is called "*Jong en Onderweg: Nidos Methodiek voor de Begeleiding van Ama's*" (Spinder & van Hout).

When I got home after the meeting, I decided I couldn't leave the situation as it was. I considered Joseph's situation to be too precarious to stay quiet about it. I was worried about his state of mind, and afraid he might harm himself. I sent a follow up mail to his guardian and to her boss, expressing my deep concerns for his physical and mental welfare. Whilst I couldn't contact him directly, I reiterated my wish to see him regularly. I imagined they'd be put out by my mail, but I pressed the send button anyway. I sent him a card by post with my telephone number on, so that he could call me when he 'got out'. A few weeks later I got a telephone call. It was Joseph. He explained that he'd been informed on the Friday that he was moving on Monday to a normal asylum centre. He'd had no preparation and no prior warning he said. He was pleased about the location of the camp, as he had a friend there. He didn't know whether his asylum file was handed over to the volunteers at the Refugee Council at the camp, and now that he had turned eighteen, he had no personal mentor either. He didn't expect to hear from his guardian ever again.

In the case of Joseph, short of picking him up and removing him from the sheltered housing he was living in, there wasn't much else I could do to help him at the time. He was more or less cut off from the outside world, hidden away from view. I noticed in my dealings with him that I still felt a compulsion to do something, but that I was less agitated by the way he was being treated. Although I wasn't thinking about what it meant to occupy the third at the time, perhaps any sense of moral indignation I may otherwise have felt, was tempered by the ease of being an affectively engaged witness.

It doesn't take much effort, however, to recall times when thirdness has been starkly absent. I can look back on research moments and remember a sense of flooding, when I felt immediate hostility or aversion to certain people; where I became so enraged, or filled with anguish and despair, that I was incapable of even thinking that there was a different horizon, a third, let alone opening up enough to encompass it. At such times, the prospect of a shift is inadmissible and chasm between self and other expands inexorably. Othering dismantles solidarity and blame and prejudice abound. It is only when I recollect myself, that I can resort to mindfulness in order to rebalance my affects and restore the basis for taking responsibility for my role in breaching trust in relationship.

The question as to whether an affectivist stance is bearable in the long-run cannot be answered conclusively. I don't know. But I do know that it matters enough to try. And that the risks of turning away or of failing to assume responsibility are great. It's a question of vision and of intention to confront the obstacles which

emerge in affective territories; obstacles like denial and disconnection.

“[And] there is another, vaster shame, the shame of the world. It has been memorably pronounced by John Donne, and quoted innumerable times, pertinently or not, that “no man is an island”, and that every bell tolls for everyone. And yet there are those who, faced by the crime of others or their own, turn their backs so as not to see it and not to feel touched by it. This is what the majority of Germans did during the twelve Hitlerian years, deluding themselves that not seeing was a way of not knowing, and that not knowing relieved them of their share of complicity or connivance”, (Levi, 1989, p.85/86).

Affect matters

Affect is an expression of our human interrelatedness, and of our embodied, vulnerable, sensitive nature. If we take the view that our realities are co-constructions, and that we are interdependent beings, then we need to wholeheartedly embrace the intricacy of our humanity, and our mutual entanglement. We are not separate from our research participants. What other way do I have, as researcher, than via *these* writings, *this* text, to express our relatedness and to implicate the reader in each and every experience? Beyond and behind my words is the experience I am remembering. Words point to an awareness, but whilst words are not the awareness itself, they can lead us to the intersection where the two meet. We can develop an internal relationship with the experience, which rests on our external relationship to the text about the experience.

Researchers embarking on affect-directed research should be willing to take on the burden of insight into all their/our many affects, shying away from none. Our fundamental tendency to romanticise, deny or demonize our own affects in relation to the other is a *matter* of great significance, be it as researcher or as professional working in the asylum system. How can we live without the numbing; without trying to keep the world at a distance? And how to enlarge our willingness to go to the darkest places, and to destabilize the constructs that we have built in order to survive? How to transcend the perpetuation of our own dissociation with regard to the suffering of others, in order to protect ourselves? It is this demarcation between them (the asylum seeker) and us (the researcher, the professional), which prevents bearing witness, maintains binaries, and denies an embodied moral third position.

“The move from dissociated to embodied language and affect creates a third in which the binary of perpetrator and victim, invulnerable and vulnerable breaks down, as the suffering body itself is dignified through the acceptance of pain” (Benjamin, 2014).

The dynamic of human relatedness is one which demands thirdness as a space for reflexivity as well as mediation. In addition, the third enables our commitment towards the other, and facilitates bearing witness and the reassertion of our common human dignity. Nonetheless, whilst this position might already be radical for social research, I contend that we must go further by breaking with our hesitancy to engage. We must be prepared for social activism for the cause of just social conditions for the most vulnerable in society. As researchers we have a moral duty to provide an urgent and rigorous response which not only addresses the ethical gaps in social studies, but which also aspires to take an active responsibility for direct action to alleviate suffering and injustice. The pitfalls and challenges of carrying out affective research which transcends abstract epistemological goals are many, and I am sure that this type of Affectivist Autoethnography is not for everybody. It doesn't have to be.

However, I conclude this book by reiterating that what matters to me is to be able to contribute to a discussion about *the possibility of doing social studies research in a way that does justice to the researcher and researched relationship, from the perspective of the turn to affect*. I have called it Affectivist Autoethnography. It is a research paradigm that stands for relational engagement which embraces the positive and negative aspects of affect, whilst acknowledging affect's full potential. This might be the only way in which we can contribute to instating a Moral Third at the institutional level, and to restoring a moral community which affirms lawfulness and accepts its responsibilities toward the injured and suffering. An unwillingness to engage is to recant from relationship, and to subsequently risk creating or perpetuating violence and injustice. It is to abdicate responsibility and to “harm us all, for it severs the bond of social attachment”, (Benjamin, 2014).

It is to occupy the position of the ‘failed witness’.

AFTERTHOUGHT

Our most fundamental sense of well-being is derived from the conscious experience of belonging. Relatedness is essential to survival. When we feel part of the whole, connected to our bodies, each other, and the living Earth, there is a sense of inherent rightness, of being wakeful and in love. The experience of universal belonging is at the heart of all mystical traditions. In realizing non-separation, we come home to our primordial and true nature.

Tara Brach

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NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

Leven (en dood) in een asielcentrum

Moshtaba lag drie, misschien vier dagen dood in zijn kamer in het asielzoekerscentrum in Oude Pekela. Hij was zeventien jaar oud en met zijn oudere broer naar Nederland gekomen, op zoek naar veiligheid en een nieuw leven. Hij heeft, volgens officiële bronnen, zichzelf opgehangen. De toenmalige verantwoordelijke minister zei in een brief aan de Tweede Kamer dat er geen nader onderzoek nodig was.

De broer van Moshtaba en zijn familie (die later naar Nederland kwam), probeert een kopie van het dossier van zijn broer te verkrijgen, maar gemakkelijk is dat niet. De broer vertelde mij dat hij niet begrijpt wat de motivatie is van de medewerkers die werken met jonge asielzoekers. Volgens hem is de manager op het asielzoekerscentrum in Oude Pekela **“een monster. Zij heeft geen hart. Voor die mensen is het alleen werk. Wij zijn niet belangrijk. Ze doen hun best om onze levens nog moeilijker te maken. Ik vraag mij af waarom ze hier werken”**.

In bijeenkomsten met dezelfde manager, vertelde deze mij dat het bij haarzelf en haar medewerkers gaat om ‘professionele betrokkenheid’ en dat alle medewerkers inwisselbaar moeten zijn. Ze verwacht dat haar medewerkers het asielzoekerscentrum loslaten zodra ze naar huis gaan en er niet meer aan denken. “Het is werk, onze betrokkenheid bij hen is zakelijk.” Persoonlijk heeft zij geen contact met bewoners van het asielzoekerscentrum, want zij is een **“manager”**.

Mijn manier van werken daarentegen, vindt ze onprofessioneel, omdat mijn betrokkenheid affectief is. Dat wil zeggen dat ik mij laat raken door wat ik zie, hoor en voel. Ik maak derhalve geen onderscheid tussen wie ik ben als professional en wie ik ben als mens. Ik kan mijn professionele kennis en ervaring niet uitzetten als ik thuis ben of als ik bij een asielzoeker op bezoek ben om koffie te drinken. Ik kan en wil niet doen alsof ik niet geraakt ben.

Relaties en Affect

In deze studie stel ik dat relaties de kern dienen te vormen van het werken met asielzoekers en vluchtelingen – ook als dat werk sociaalwetenschappelijk onderzoek betreft. Affect Matters is een boek over relaties - relaties met asielzoekers en vluchtelingen. Het gaat over het cruciale belang van affect – het vermogen geraakt te worden en daaruit emoties te ontwikkelen - in onze levens

en in onze relaties met anderen. Door affect kunnen wij ons zodanig bij anderen betrokken voelen dat zij sterker worden (empowerment). Door affect kunnen solidariteit, vertrouwen en compassie de basis vormen van een relatie. Maar affect kan ook leiden tot afstandelijkheid, voortkomend uit haat, aversie, hebberigheid of wreedheid.

Voor hulpverleners (en voor onderzoekers) is het niet gemakkelijk om te gaan met de absurditeiten van het dagelijkse leven. Professionals, zeker zij die werken met mensen aan de randen van de samenleving, hopen een bijdrage te leveren aan het verlichten van tragische omstandigheden. Helaas raken ze maar al te vaak verward in gevoelens van hopeloosheid vanwege de complexiteit van de problematiek, of ze raken teleurgesteld en ontmoedigd omdat ze onvoldoende dankbaarheid ondervinden. En maar al te vaak raken ze verstrikt in ondoordringbare bureaucratie.

Sommige hulpverleners doen hun best voor de vreemde ‘ander’ en zien de asielzoekers als slachtoffers van hun omstandigheden. Voor andere hulpverleners zijn asielzoekers voornamelijk leugenaars en dus niet te vertrouwen, of ‘domme mensen’ die niet snel genoeg leren hoe het hier hoort.

Hoe dan ook: het affectieve vermogen van veel professionals raakt afgestompt en verhard. Veel asielzoekers voelen zich in de steek gelaten door degenen die eigenlijk het meeste hulp en ondersteuning zouden moeten bieden.

Lijden

A., een alleenstaande minderjarige asielzoeker, sliep als vijftienjarige in een koud bushokje omdat hij de laatste bus had gemist naar het asielzoekerscentrum. Noch zijn voogd, noch zijn mentor wilde hem ophalen. Het was ‘zijn eigen verantwoordelijkheid’.

Lianne en haar twee jonge kinderen zijn in de laatste zes jaar meer dan twaalf keer verhuisd, haar kinderen bezochten even veel scholen in Nederland. Maar in het vreemdelingendetentiecentrum in Rotterdam konden ze niet naar school. Ze waren opgesloten. Gevaar voor de samenleving? De kinderen doen het nu goed op school, maar moeder is nerveus en bang voor alles. Volgens haar advocaat voldoen zij en haar kinderen aan alle voorwaarden voor het kinderpardon, maar toch krijgt Lianne steeds afwijzingen van de Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst. **“Ze willen mij en mijn kinderen kapot maken”,** zegt ze.

Een docent die les geeft aan asielzoekerskinderen zegt: “je moet er een bom onder leggen”, doelend op het COA (Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers) en de voogdinstantie Nidos (voor alleenstaande minderjarige asielzoekers). Zij ondervindt dagelijks de problemen van zorgbehoevende kinderen die te weinig

aandacht en zorg krijgen van het asielsysteem en van de in dat systeem werkende ‘voogden’ en ‘mentoren’.

Ambivalente Affecten

Gedurende een onderzoeksperiode van ruim zeven jaar trok ik vrijwel dagelijks op met asielzoekers en vluchtelingen uit allerlei landen. Ik heb ze gevolgd in hun privéomstandigheden en in hun publieke levens, in hun relaties met elkaar en met instanties en organisaties. Ik vergezelde ze bij een bezoek aan de tandarts, op school, bij een interview met de Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, bij een spoedopname in het ziekenhuis, bij het boodschappen doen en thuis of op het asielzoekerscentrum om thee te drinken.

In al die jaren heb ik een grote waardering ontwikkeld voor het belang van affect in onze relaties. Affect is dat wat ons aanzet tot het ontwikkelen van gevoelens en emoties in een relatie – ‘the power to affect and to be affected’. In dit boek lever ik een kritiek op het grote deel van de wetenschappelijke literatuur over dit thema dat affect idealiseert. Deze literatuur schrijft inherente kwaliteiten van schoonheid en goedheid toe aan de armen en gemarginaliseerden in de samenleving. Ik beweer dat het romantiseren van affect op deze manier gevaarlijk is en simplistisch.

Met dit boek wil ik een nieuwe dimensie aan het discours over affect toevoegen, door de ambivalentie van affecten te benadrukken. Het is moeilijk om de ambiguïteit en absurditeit in onze eigen levens in te zien. Zeker voor onderzoekers ligt het blootleggen van de eigen affecten en emoties tijdens het werk niet voor de hand. Hetzelfde geldt voor professionals.

Ik erken ook de complexiteit van het asielsysteem en van de ingewikkeldheid van de netwerken en relaties daarbinnen. Tegelijkertijd stel ik dat dit niet mag leiden tot een niet-werkend systeem. Asielzoekers en vluchtelingen zijn ‘verloren’ – zij hebben op alle mogelijke manieren verlies ervaren. Maar in plaats van een toevluchtsoord te bieden waarin positieve ontwikkelingen worden gestimuleerd en mogelijk zijn, is het Nederlandse asielsysteem doordrenkt met negatieve attitudes. Wantrouw en frustratie zijn het gevolg. Het Nederlandse asielsysteem is een systeem waarin affect negatief geïnstitutionaliseerd is. Dat leidt tot schadelijke praktijken en negatieve gevolgen voor betrokkenen en samenleving. Het asielsysteem is zelf getraumatiseerd.

Ik beredeneer dat als wij een menswaardig asielsysteem willen, wij genooddaakt zijn om de ambivalentie in onze eigen affecten serieus te nemen en grondig te

onderzoeken. Alleen dan is het mogelijk om een echt toevluchtsoord te creëren voor asielzoekers en vluchtelingen en alleen dan kunnen we werken aan het opbouwen van relaties die gericht zijn op groei en ontwikkeling.

In dit boek vindt men geen simpele conclusies over hoe het systeem zou moeten zijn. Het is een affectieve dialoog die laat zien dat reflexiviteit een belangrijke metgezel is voor zowel onderzoekers als professionals (in het sociaal domein). Terwijl ‘verloren zijn’ voor de meeste asielzoekers en vluchtelingen geen keuze is geweest, kunnen wij als onderzoeker en professional wél kiezen om onszelf open te stellen, om ‘verloren’ te zijn in de ontmoeting met de ander - in ieder geval tijdelijk. Wij kunnen proberen om onze eigen zware culturele bagage en ingebedde vooroordelen af te leggen.

Ik stel dat wij als onderzoeker niet alleen getuige zijn van het lijden van de ander, maar ook een morele verantwoordelijkheid hebben om zorg te dragen voor de ander: door het opbouwen van zorgzame relaties en door concrete actie te ondernemen. Daarom heet dit boek een “affectivistische auto-etnografie”, waarbij het woord “affect” wordt gecombineerd met “activistisch”.

Wij moeten manieren vinden om te herkennen dat alle mensen affectieve wezens zijn: naast ons vermogen voor liefde en compassie, schuilt het vermogen tot haat en wreedheid. Door deze ambivalentie onder ogen te zien en door manieren te vinden waardoor we ons affecten in balans kunnen brengen, kunnen wij onderlinge relaties creëren die gebaseerd zijn op solidariteit en wederzijdse erkenning. Dit, stel ik, is een van de grootste uitdagingen van onze tijd.

LIST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The asylum seekers and refugees listed below were asked to choose for themselves a name. The majority of them chose a pseudonym for themselves and their children (when relevant), or chose to be known by their own initial. On a couple of occasions they asked me to choose a name for them, which I did. For the reader's ease, the list has been compiled in table form and includes the name and country of origin of the person in question. This list is none-exhaustive, as it does not include the tens of asylum seekers and refugees with whom I have had contact over the past years and with whom I have held interviews or meetings, but whom I chose not to mention specifically in this book. I also do not list the tens of civil servants, professionals, social workers, health care workers, teachers, COA staff, volunteers and staff of the Refugee Council, lawyers and others, about whom I also write in this book.

Name	Home country
Leyla (and four children)	Chechnya
B. (married to Safia, with three children)	Iraq
Safia (married to B., with three children)	Iraq
Hafid	Afghanistan
Tatiana	Kazakhstan
Olga	Russia
Delilah	Angola
Moussa	Guinea
Ammar (married to S. with three children)	Iraq
S (married to Ammar, with three children)	Iraq
Moshtaba (deceased)	Afghanistan
Moshtaba's brother (and family)	Afghanistan
Lianne (and two children)	Armenia
Ali	Iraq
M.	Afghanistan
Sem	Syria
Abdel (and his wife)	Libya
A.	Afghanistan
Majid	Afghanistan
Malek	Afghanistan
Sayed	Iraq
Rami	Syria
Lala (and his wife)	Afghanistan

Ahmed	Syria
Hassan	Iraq
Haider	Afghanistan
Mostafa (and his mother)	Afghanistan
Hermina	Armenia
Ahmed	Syria
Matti (and his wife)	Afghanistan
Joseph	Democratic Republic of Congo
Maria	Armenia

PLACES OF RESIDENCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The asylum seekers and refugees who have participated in this research have lived in asylum centres or other forms of housing for asylum seekers (accommodations for single unaccompanied minors or illegal housing), in the following towns in the Netherlands²⁹:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------|-----|----------------|-----|------------|
| 1. | Eindhoven | 12. | Amersfoort | 23. | Zuidlaren |
| 2. | Amsterdam | 13. | Emmen | 24. | Oisterwijk |
| 3. | Frisian Islands | 14. | Gilze en Rijen | 25. | Wassenaar |
| 4. | Markelo | 15. | Grave | 26. | Assen |
| 5. | Drachten | 16. | Almere | 27. | Burgum |
| 6. | Oude Pekela | 17. | Baexem | 28. | Lelystad |
| 7. | Oranje | 18. | Delfzijl | 29. | Veenhuizen |
| 8. | Bellingwolde | 19. | Den Helder | 30. | Rotterdam |
| 9. | Musselkanaal | 20. | Dronten | | (detention |
| 10. | Ter Apel | 21. | Deventer | | centre) |
| 11. | Dokkum | 22. | Leeuwarden | | |

²⁹ This list comprises only the places where research participants lived as asylum seekers. This list does not include the towns where refugees moved to once they left the asylum centre or other housing for asylum seekers. If I included all the towns where the research participants have settled, this list would be considerably bigger.

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