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***“Researching refugees with an Affective and Self-Reflexive i”***

*Abstract*

*This paper investigates the role of affectivity and reflexivity in research with (vulnerable) others, and in this specific case, with refugees. It is based on ongoing PhD research with refugees in the Netherlands, in which I have been trying to get to know them and to make sense of their worlds. In this journey, which is far from over, I have so far discovered the undesirability of conducting research with refugees and asylum seekers which is devoid of affect and self-reflexivity, and the futility of any endeavour to be an objective observer reporting facts and figures from a distance. Rather, I would argue that to stand in an ethical relation to the other it is necessary to acknowledge the partiality of the truths we are able to uncover, the fragmentary nature of accounts and the inevitable intermingling of affectivity and emotions, ours and theirs.*

*As a researcher I am writing lives. Lives of refugees which far more than rational narratives, are fully embodied, sensitive and affective. I have come to regard caring as an essential part of conducting 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. This paper presents some of the refugees I have encountered along the way, and reflects some of the dilemmas and ethical conundrums I face in wanting to research refugees with an affective and self-reflexive i.*

Keywords: affectivity, self-reflexivity, dialogics, complexity, care, partiality

***“The sky overhead 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, 2004)***

1. *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 3<sup>rd</sup> edition dictionary – “showing no care or concern”. 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 in my work as researcher with the ‘other’, strange, unfamiliar asylum seekers and refugees?

***Luzia***

Luzia is a refugee from Angola. 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, 2009).

I have known Luzia for more than six years. She was a single mother of four children, living in the north of the Netherlands and attending Dutch lessons when I first met her. I was teaching a kind of ‘getting to know yourself’ course to foreign migrant women; a course which Luzia was only too keen to be a part of. From Angola, Luzia 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 temporarily 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. Luzia 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 diploma’s were undervalued and their experience disregarded, Luzia reminded them that they should be glad that they could live in safety and peace. She spoke especially to those women from other African countries, noting how they probably also had to walk for miles like she had had to in the past, to get water and other supplies. When women mumbled about how they feared being mistreated by Dutch bosses, Luzia would never fail to tell a story which scrambled their, our, perspective once again. Like how when she once worked as a secretary and had to take minutes or listen to her boss dictating what she had to do for the day, she sat across from him at the desk whilst he, hand posed on his revolver, spoke to her or gave her the orders. “*That’s a bit different to how it is here*” she would laugh, “*if you think it can be tough here, try working in those conditions like in Angola*” she’d say.

Excerpt second hearing, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2002 between Luzia 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.

Luzia accepted any kind of work which was available. 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 Luzia 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, at which point she fled Angola.

Despite her optimism and despite getting married just two days before our conversation (summer of 2011), Luzia 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, 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 and about to marry 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). 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 Luzia'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. 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 dilemma's; dilemma's which bring me face to face with the complexity of doing research with this (vulnerable) other; dilemma's 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) 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), 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).

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). Essential in my work with asylum seekers and refugees is embodiment and 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.

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).

Listening to women like Luzia, 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), 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)

Ethnography is about evocation: *“evocation is neither presentation nor representation. It presents no objects and represents none, yet it makes available thought 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). 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?

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 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.

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 Luzia 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, the truth has remained illusive, as I have discovered there are many truths, many ways of accounting for past happenings, of presenting fabrications and imaginations, and of telling, and re-telling experiences. Those who we ask to remember, must sometimes unforget 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). Like Stewart, my aim in research, is to imagine these spaces, to allow for their emergence whilst avoiding the totalisation of “objects” and “gists”, and without the violence of extreme “othering” to which Butler (2005) 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”,* Luzia 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 Luzia recalled numerous occasions during her work with the elderly, frail and sick, in care homes, in which she may be 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 Luzia 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. Luzia 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".*

Luzia 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. Luzia 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".*

## 2. *Making research(ers) CARE*

Hugo Letiche is author of a book entitled "*Making Healthcare Care*" (2008). It seems to me that many of his recommendations, 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 "*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). 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)

## **Bahaa**

Bahaa is a refugee from Iraq. An ex army officer who served under Saddam Hussein, in charge of an artillery battalion. He was 'someone' back in Iraq, someone with a good job, a big house,

and with status. Others 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?”* Bahaa 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. Bahaa was at home, learning his Dutch. His home was no longer the asylum centre where I first met him more than a year ago; 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 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, Bahaa 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 rubrication of almost everything. In his first week out Bahaa 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 Bahaa. He doesn’t make me laugh like Luzia 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 Bahaa, 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). Veissiere likens it to being a pimp, making a living out of the misery of the marginalized, (2010), as do Diversi and Finley (2010), who reflect on the so-called "*privilege differential*" between members of the academy and those they study, and call on academics to "*decolonize scholarship*".

I certainly feel like a "*poverty pimp*" at times (Veissiere, 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 am convinced 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 eliminates the violent risk of totalisation of the other by embracing 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 messy, life is uncertain, 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). Veissiere 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 Bahaa, 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*" Bahaa 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 Bahaa 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" Bahaa could have chosen to administer further "shocks". Sands and Krumer-Nevo argue that shocking the interviewer is one of the strategies of interviewees to "resist being Othered" (2006). The times when I have been shocked, when I have felt shivers or receded into silence or contemplation, have certainly been moments in which "implicit expectations are disrupted" (Sands & Krumer-Nevo, 2006), although I would argue that it has not always been a conscious move on the part of informants like Bahaa.

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-memembering – so that these become constitutive elements of the story itself" (Stewart, 1996).

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.

3. *Bodies matter. Zaira's body matters*

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.....107,7

08 documented civilian deaths from violence since 2003

***www.iraqbodycount.org***

*(Kim Tsai, Journal excerpt, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2010)*

## **Zaira**

Zaira is a refugee from Chechnya. A single mother of four, she had her first child, a daughter, at the age of fourteen. Her husband, twelve years her senior, had “snatched” her from the streets as she was walking home from the shops one day. She was bundled into a car, driven into the mountains to be presented to her future husband and was married within the week. On being informed a week after the kidnapping that their daughter was married to someone from the hills, her parents, or more specifically, her father, disowned her. Contact with her mother was secret, until her father passed away, when she could resume more or less normal relations.

With Zaira 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...Zaira...? 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’ Zaira? 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 Zaira 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 wrest 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), 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 Zaira remains, you say. I’m after the essence of your personhood, the essential essence of Zaira, 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 Zaira; 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).

Astonishingly, but beautifully simple, you announce that it’s only here, in the Netherlands, that you can be Zaira. Only here are you starting to have a sense of who you really are. There, back then, the ‘real’ Zaira 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’ Zaira, 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 – Zaira; 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 Zaira and how I make sense of you being Zaira. 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 Zaira, 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). 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.

Zaira remains enigmatic, almost sublime. Intensive periods of contact highlight the absurdity of academic essentialism, as Stewart (1996) calls it, or "*the 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 in an order of things*". 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 Zaira, like I like Luzia, and like I like Bahaa; they all matter to me. I like Zaira, though not because she makes me laugh like Luzia. And not because I admire her humility like I do that of Bahaa, rather for her tenacity and strength of character which despite her evident vulnerability and sensibility, is somewhere within, 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 perhaps 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 Armina from Armenia, or other former army officers from Iraq whose names I choose not to disclose due to the sensitivity of their cases and the cruelty and horrors imbued in their past lives.

I am affected by them, by the stories which are told by them and about them; the interweaving 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).

It is not necessary to like in any specific manner the refugee informants with whom I work, but I do care about them, and 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 messy 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, hard working 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.

***To conclude (this paper)***

*“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).

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. It would seem that to do research in order to write lives is ultimately to acknowledge the ways in which we are affected and in which we affect our informants. It is to reflect seriously on how our bodies encapsulate moods, become intertwined 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.

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).

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, 1986). Self-reflexivity is a must. The confrontation with self, which is grounded in the awareness of “*being-two*” (Letiche, 2008), 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 unavoidable risk of becoming undone by the other.

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