Story-Telling, Meaning-Making

Personal Storytelling Among Marginalised Groups

in the Late Modern Dutch Society

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Cover page: participant conducting a storytelling performance at the municipality of Rotterdam
(Photo/Artwork by Rosa Vendel)

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Personal Storytelling Among Marginalised Groups in the Late Modern Dutch Society

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"Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way to touch the heart and change the world."

-Allison (1996, 7)

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"Although we do not have complete control over the possibilities of our lives, we can only ever speak ourselves into existence within the terms or stories available to us"

- Drewery & Winslade (1997, 42)

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Abstract

Late modernity has brought about a particular culture of storytelling. As opposed to traditional storytelling, *personal* narratives now serve as a source of insight, and people are motivated to tell their personal stories to provide insight for others. In light of these developments, this narrative ethnographic study aims to examine personal storytelling workshops and performances among participants from marginalized groups, conducted mostly in Rotterdam-South. The central aim of this study is to explore how personal storytelling served as a source of insight for the participants, and, in turn, how participants were motivated to share insights for others by practicing and conducting public storytelling performances. Firstly, it investigates how the storytelling workshops allowed for a space in which participants could narratively make sense of their marginal socio-economic position and stigmatization. Secondly, it explores how the storytelling workshops entailed a meaning-making process, in which personal life stories served as a foundation for critically reflecting on socio-political topics. Thirdly, it is shown how these critical reflections sparked a motivation for participants to share their personal stories as insights for others through embodied performances. These public storytelling performances are analysed as a cultural process of meaning-making, which can both open up and close down the social and political space for stories untold. In this way, this thesis aims to analyse the late modern culture of personal storytelling as a way of journeying together, through which knowledge and insights can be shared and integrated.

Keywords: Personal Storytelling; Storytelling Performance; Marginalized Groups; Individualization; Meaning-Making; Late Modernity

Prologue: Point of Departure

It was a cold winter's evening, and I was on my way to a theatre in Amsterdam. Only a week before, I had coincidentally spoken to an employee from the municipality of Rotterdam, who told me: "*You should really go and see this. I had never seen something like that before.*" Uncertain of what to expect, I entered the theatre and found myself a seat in the audience. The only thing I knew was the name of the performance I was about to witness: 'The Naked Antillean, by Archell Thompson'. Seated around me were people from all kinds of cultures, ages and backgrounds. The lights slowly dimmed, and a Dutch-Caribbean[1] man stepped onto the stage. In the following hour to come he shared his life story, using almost nothing but words and gestures. The story began with growing up in Curacao, gradually becoming a drug dealer, migrating to the Netherlands, and starting to work at the Dutch Railways. Then, all of a sudden, he started to speak more slowly, and began describing the last telephone call with his father. While staring at the floor, he recounted how, hours later, his mother called in terror, telling him that his father had just been murdered. In that moment, tears started to roll down his cheeks, and the audience became completely silent. Shortly after that, when the performance was over, a great number people from the audience started to react. A man sitting on my left stated that he has never learned to express emotions, but that he would like to. Another Antillean man from the back of the room said that he wanted to "break through the culture of not speaking openly". The sparked conversations would last for over another hour, leading to a variety of conversations and personal confessions. At the end of the show, I met Archell Thompson backstage, and asked him about his experiences. He explained that, through this performance, he started to get many responses from people, organisations and even municipalities, asking if he can do this "*with other people as well*". Afterwards, in the theatre café, I had a drink with Maria, a 25-year old Nigerian-Dutch young woman who was so struck by the performance that she wanted to follow a storytelling trajectory with Archell. Finally, when sitting in the tram on my way home again, I wondered, what is it about storytelling that is so opening and captivating?

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[1] In 2010, the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved as a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Baker 2015). Since then, the accurate term of the inhabitants of Curacao is 'Dutch-Caribbean'. However, the inhabitants of Curacao themselves use the term Antillean. In this thesis, these two terms are used interchangeably.

Introduction

"Man is in his actions and practice essentially a story-telling animal. [...] By neglecting the question 'of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' leaves us as individuals unscripted and hence powerless to detect the disorders of moral thought and practice." – (McIntyre in Abbott 1997, 281)

Storytelling has long been a part of humanity, providing entertainment, and insight, and passing on historical, cultural, and moral information (Anderson 2010, 10). Stories are often considered to be ingrained in everyday life, since people constantly make sense of themselves and the world through stories (Cortazzi 2014; McAdams & McLean 2013; Polkinghorne 1988). The traditional forms of storytelling of myths and religious texts have changed in light of the rise of late modernity in highly developed global societies[2] (Sandberg 2016). Late modernity can be understood as an era consisting of intensified features of modernity, such as uncertainty, multiple lifestyle choices, and rapid social change (Bauman 2000; Beck, Giddens & Lash 1997). One of the main reasons for the heightened level of uncertainty and rapid social change are processes of globalization and detraditionalization, although processes of retraditionalization simultaneously take place (Heelas, Lash & Morris 1994). The process of detraditionalization is again characterized by a rise of individualization and a decline of institutionalized forms of identity. In other words, individuals are faced with a major increase of societal uncertainties and lifestyle choices, while lacking the former traditional safety nets. Moreover, formal structures such as religion are delegitimized and challenged, a late modern phenomenon which Giddens defines as *reflexivity* (Lyng 2014; Beck, Giddens & Lash 1997, 6). As a result, "the solid categories (such as tradition, culture, religion) which once defined an individual's choices and actions have become liquid" (Ghorashi 2014, 2). Therefore, according to Giddens (1991), individuals no longer passively inherit who they are, but rather continuously reshape and reflect on the narrative of their self-identity. Overall, late modernity is characterized by ambivalence. On the one hand, there is the closure of confining but secure traditions, and on the other the rise of both freedom as well as risk and uncertainty for individuals (Kraus 2006).

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[2] This thesis follows the theoretical framework of Beck, Giddens and Lash (1997), who define the current era as 'high modernity' or 'late modernity' rather than postmodernity. The proposal concurs with their line of reasoning that there is no radical break with modernity, but rather a radicalized 'late modernity'. Furthermore, the definition of a global society is not a 'world society', but rather a society with universalizing tendencies (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1997).

Some scholars have argued that, through the altered status of tradition and radicalized individualization, late modern societies have lost their shared grand narratives. It is then argued that there is no longer a collective shared narrative to which individuals can relate themselves (Kraus 2006; Frank 2002; Lyotard 1984). However, Achterhuis (2010) has stated that shared grand narratives are not necessarily lost, but rather that they have changed. Moreover, according Paul Verhaeghe (2011) the neoliberal meritocracy *is* in fact the grand narrative of late modernity. Indeed, in light of the late modern process of individualization, highly developed global societies are becoming increasingly meritocratic (Elshout 2016). A meritocratic society can deepen the tracks of social and economic inequality and (re)enforce the marginalization of certain social groups (Beer 2016; Elshout 2016; Farrugia 2016; Brown & Tannock 2009). Verhaeghe (2011) finds the meritocracy to be comparable to grand narratives such as religion, as they both encompass a common idea of a utopia.

The changes that have occurred in the grand narratives of society, have also resulted in different ways of storytelling. Sveinung Sandberg (2016), who has conducted extensive narrative research in the field of narrative criminology, explains how reflexive modernity fosters a new particular culture of storytelling. Within this late modern culture of storytelling, contemporary stories, as opposed to traditional ones, are often *personal* narratives (Sandberg 2016; Anderson 2010; Kraus 2006; Frank 2002). Sandberg (2016, 154) argues that "the sources of insights and truths seem no longer to be gods and magical creatures, but instead personal experiences". Moreover, people are now motivated to tell their personal stories about suffering and success in order to provide insights for others (Sandberg 2016, 154).

In light of these developments, this three-month long ethnographic case-study aims to examine storytelling workshops and performances among participants from marginalized groups, conducted mostly in Rotterdam-South. The main aim of the study is to explore how personal storytelling served as a source of insight for the participants, both as participants and as storytellers, and to examine the ways in which storytelling opened up or closed down the social and political space for stories untold.

The first chapter provides an introduction into the storytelling workshops, the participants and the context in which they took place. It briefly states the aim of the study, and outlines a discussion on the ethnographic methodology that was used within the research and study. Next, the second chapter offers an introduction into the storytelling workshops conducted at the main location 'Drop In Op Zuid' in Rotterdam-South, and then analyses the

way in which participants narratively sense of their marginal socio-economic position in Dutch society[3]. Moreover, it shows how participants often considered personal stories as essential in understanding topics of stigmatization, individual responsibility and morality. The third chapter then outlines how, through personal storytelling, participants could experience the world as a narratable place, by moving from the personal to the political. Although the shared stories were inevitably constrained by dominant discourses, they served as a meaning-making process in which political and societal topics could be reflected upon, such as bureaucracy, power relations and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, it is shown how many participants were motivated to share their personal stories to provide insights for others, and practiced to become an embodied storyteller. Finally, in chapter four, the storytelling performances that were conducted at public and political places are analysed as a cultural process of meaning-making, which can both open up and close down the social and political space for stories untold.

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[3] In Dutch, the name 'Drop In Op Zuid' contains a double meaning. Literally, it can be translated as 'Come in, here in the South'. Next to the literal meaning, 'Drop in' also refers to the common phrase 'Drop-Outs', indicating marginalized groups.

Chapter 1: Research Context and Methodology

1.1 Aim of the study

The purpose of this narrative ethnography is to provide the reader with an understanding of the late modern culture of personal storytelling as a source of insight and knowledge. Moreover, it aims to contribute to the academic debate of the anthropology of storytelling and performance by illustrating how storytelling can serve both as an ethnographic method as well as being the object of analysis, through which not only the *content* but also the *act* of telling can be examined. In doing so, this thesis aims to analyse the late modern culture of personal storytelling as a way of journeying together, through which knowledge and insights can be shared and integrated.

1.2 Context

This three-month long research has followed the storytelling workshops conducted by Archell Thompson. The life story of Archell is characterized by themes such as domestic abuse, ending up in the criminal circuit, migrating to the Netherlands, and the murder on his father. Finally, his life took an important turn when he met Jandino Asporaat, a Dutch comedian and actor, and his brother Kenneth Asporaat who started the management agency called 'Het Huis van Asporaat[4]. Both brothers Asporaat have inspired Archell to share his life story on stage in a storytelling performance called 'The Naked Antillean'. This performance has generated a lot of attention in the media, and also a public statement of the mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, who named Archell a "role model for the Dutch-Caribbean community" and invited him to publish a book about his life story (OPEN Rotterdam 2017; Possel 2016; Baaziz 2014; Zuidervaart 2010). The storytelling performance of Archell generated requests from people from the audience to follow storytelling workshops themselves. Since 2010, Archell has been giving storytelling workshops such as 'the Catwalk Challenge'. The Catwalk Challenge is an individual and communal storytelling trajectory that finally leads up to a performance in front of an audience. The performances take place at private or public spaces, such as living rooms, the Zuidplein theatre in Rotterdam, or the municipality or Rotterdam. Next to that,

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[4] Translation: 'The House of Asporaat', for more info see: http://www.hethuisvanasporaat.nl

Archell gives workshops and interactive storytelling performances at other locations such as schools or cultural centres.

The main location of the research where weekly workshops took place was named 'Drop In Op Zuid', and it was set in Rotterdam-South in the neighbourhood Pendrecht, located in the area of Charlois. In 2007, Pendrecht was second on the list of "worst neighbourhoods" in the Netherlands, resulting in a negative image in the media (De Rooij & van Nes 2015, 5). Correspondingly, according to the Account Manager Fongers, the Safety Department of the municipality of Rotterdam considered the storytelling workshops of Archell as a way to increase communal trust and social cohesion. However, the participants of the storytelling workshops did not necessarily come from the neighbourhood Pendrecht. In the neighbourhood, 3 people were actively involved in the storytelling workshops. The local organisation 'Ik ben Wij' send through 4 participants, who voluntarily joined the storytelling workshops[5]. 3 participants had come to the workshops on their own behalf, after witnessing a theatre performance of Archell. Next to the workshops, storytelling performances were organised by 'Het Huis van Asporaat'. I attended three public storytelling performances: at the municipality of Rotterdam, at the University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam, and at a national seminar of youth workers in Rotterdam.

The participants in this study were mainly from marginalized groups with a low socio-economic status[6]. In some of the workshops, the participants had been homeless, or were still homeless. In Rotterdam, there has been an increase in the number of homeless youth of almost 40% between 2015 and 2017 (De Bruijn 2018). Research departments of the municipalities have conducted research on this phenomenon, and found that one of the reasons for the increase is that the Dutch society is increasingly becoming more complex (Markus 2018). Moreover, the participants were first or second generation migrants, with backgrounds such as Dutch-Caribbean, Cape-Verdean or Turkish. Many of the participants had a multi-ethnic background.

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[5] 'Ik ben Wij' (translation: 'I am We') is a local organisation in Rotterdam. For more information see: http://www.ikbenwij.nl

[6] While this thesis supports the notion that identities are fluid, rather than being stable categories, in this thesis, the category of 'marginal' is used for reasons of clarity and coherence. I direct myself to Hindman (2011, 191) who uses the term 'marginalization' as an umbrella term for terms such as "disadvantaged," "oppressed," "discriminated", and not having the same access to conventional channels of political representation and decision-making as the social majority.

The main location 'Drop In Op Zuid' also attracted Dutch-Caribbean migrants from the neighbourhood who did not partake in the workshops, but who experienced the location as low-threshold place where they could discuss certain topics or ask questions. Two family members of Archell were often present at Drop In Op Zuid, to give aid to residents coming by, or to help setting up the rooms. During the 3-month period of research, around 20 residents from the neighbourhood came to Drop In Op Zuid for informal conversations or for advice in their personal or financial administration. However, in order to limit the scope of my research to storytelling, these residents were not part of the study.

1.3 Ethnographic Methodology

From the beginning of February until the beginning of May, I followed the different locations where the workshops and storytelling performances took place. I followed organisations, municipality officials and participants within the network of Archell Thompson, rather than working within the place-based boundary of one fieldwork site. This research can therefore be considered to partially be a multi-sited research (Marcus 2009), which essentially follows "people, connections, associations, and relationships across space" (Falzon 2009, 1-2). This allowed me to examine the dynamics of storytelling in a variety of contexts, and to distinguish communal patterns within these dynamics.

Next to the storytelling workshops at the main location, I attended several workshops at other locations in the Netherlands. I have attended 2 workshops at a college in Amsterdam. I also attended 4 workshops that were part of a trajectory with homeless youth in Rotterdam in collaboration with an organisation that offers them sheltered housing[7]. Moreover, I attended an interactive performance that Archell conducted together with Jandino in a cultural centre in Tilburg. This which was part of a tour called 'What Does Success Even Mean?[8]', which aimed to inspire and motivate marginalized youth to reconsider the meaning of success as personal growth rather than wealth or reputation.

During the time of research, the storytelling workshops of Archell increasingly started to get more attention from organisations in Rotterdam or other cities in the Netherlands. These organisations were interested in using storytelling as a method among their participants

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[7] For privacy reasons, the name of the organisation is not disclosed in this thesis.
[8] Dutch translation: 'Wat Nou Success?'.

or clients, or had already collaborated with Archell in the past. In order to gain more information on the purpose of their interest, I have attended meetings with Exodus, Humanitas and 'Ik ben Wij'[9] [10]. I have also attended gatherings at the Safety Department in Rotterdam.

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the storytelling workshops, I made use of method triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). I used multiple methods of data collection through participant observation, field notes, informal conversations and semi-structured interviews. During the research, I experienced that these different methods often overlap and can thereby provide different insights. For example, interviewing is also a way of doing participant observation (Hockey & Forsey 2012; Sandberg 2009). I conducted 12 interviews, 4 of which were formal semi-structured and follow-up interviews, 7 of which were informal or casual interviews, and 1 formal structured interview with A. Fongers, Account Manager of the Safety Department of the municipality of Rotterdam. The informal and casual interviews made it possible to examine which topics arose naturally for the participants. Notes were then written down immediately afterwards in my notebook.

During the storytelling workshops, I was often able to use a recording device. Although a potential disadvantage of the use of a recording device is that it can make participants more self-conscious, it can also be investigated "precisely what it is participants are *doing* when they orient to being recorded: how might what they do in such orientations play a part in the ongoing construction of specific situated interactions?" (Speer & Hutchby 2003, 317). Indeed, the recorded interviews in this research simultaneously served as a source of analysis of participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were used to test assumptions or ask questions that arose during participant observation in the workshops and performances. For issues of ethical and private nature, pseudonyms were given to almost all the research participants according to the anthropological standards (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011), with the exception of Archell Thompson who has provided consent for the use of his name in the research.

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[9] Exodus is a national organisation, providing care and supervision for detainees and ex-detainees. For more information see: https://www.exodus.nl
[10] Humanitas is a national volunteer organisation, providing care on a wide range of societal issues. For more information see: https://www.humanitas.nl/over-ons/

Given the intimate and vulnerable nature of the context and the stories that were told, it was essential to build rapport with the participants, especially during interviews (Mann 2016). In order to do so, it proved to be an essential part of the research to establish myself as an 'open researcher': to make my intentions as a researcher clear, and at the same time to be a *part* of the storytelling workshops. In this thesis, I direct myself to Tim Ingold (2014), who states that "(...) we should have the humility to recognize that understanding can only grow from within the world we seek to know, the world of which we are a part" (MacDougall 2016). Being a participant during the workshops helped to make the hierarchical relationship between myself as a researcher and the participants less visible, and stimulated a dialogical interaction (Ghorashi 2002). Another aspect that contributed to building rapport was the role of Archell as a "gate keeper", which allowed me to enter the storytelling workshops more easily (Reeves 2010, 315). Gatekeepers in the field "can help or hinder research depending upon their personal thoughts on the validity of the research and its value, as well as their approach to the welfare of the people under their charge" (Reeves 2010, 317). Indeed, Archell experienced the research as an additional way of showing the dynamics and potentials of storytelling. Therefore, his positive approach towards the research allowed me to build rapport with other participants much faster than I would otherwise have been able to.

1.4 Narrative Ethnography

This study is a narrative ethnography, in which the stories and performances of participants are explored. According to Goodall (2008), narrative ethnography can help to "re-establish the centrality of personal experience and identity in the social construction of knowledge" (187). Storytelling can be considered to be at the heart of anthropology (Lane 2018), and anthropologist themselves are, in a way, storytellers (Gottlieb 2016, 93). Likewise, anthropology is in itself a form of storytelling (Symons and Maggio 2015). According to Symons and Maggio (2015, 5), the post-modern attitude of anthropology has become more introvert. In order to become more open, they state that anthropology should keep in mind the storytelling character of ethnographies, and the pleasure of sharing cultural knowledge through stories (Symons and Maggio 2015).

In this study, I made use of a performance transcription according the work of Scott (2018) in order to do justice to not only the content but also the act of the telling. As stated

by Scott (2018, 56): "Just the transcribed words without the performance transcription may indicate to a reader that, as the researcher, I'm more concerned with the content of the words than the act of telling the story." Correspondingly, Taussig (2011, 145) argues that, when transforming a story into ethnographic data, and thus the storyteller into a research informant, "the philosophical character of the knowing is changed. The reach and imagination in the story is lost". Therefore, trough performance transcription, I intended "to recreate the performance of the story on the page from the listener's perspective" (Scott 2018, 56). I included speech patterns and my interpretations of the attached emotion between brackets, such as 'questioning' or 'hesitant'. Increased volume is put in all capital letters (Scott 2018, 56). Pauses and silences are also included in the transcription. In doing so, I direct myself to Mazzei (2007), who argues that silence is not the absence of empirical data or the opposite of speech. Rather, silent speech and spoken speech should be considered as both ends of the same continuum, equally presenting meaningful information (Mazzei 2007, 633).

1.5 Definitions and Principles

Some of the main concepts and ideas used in this research require definitions, before applying them in the data analysis. Three concepts in this research that first need to be defined are story, narrative and storytelling. There is no communal definition of what exactly defines a story (Anderson 2010), but scholars commonly distinguish an element of *temporality*, one event follows another, and *causality*, one event causes another. These two elements, next to structures such as characters or genres, create narrative *meaning* (Sandberg 2016). Next to setting apart these common features, it is vital to define and distinguish between the concepts of 'story' and 'narrative'. Some scholars are in favour or using these terms interchangeably (Polkinghorne, 1988), and sometimes the two terms are described as being synonyms (Oxford English Dictionary 2017). However, it is important to distinguish between the two, since they do not necessarily hold the same meaning (Tammi 2006). In this research, *story* refers to the stories that were created, told, and performed by participants. *Narrative* or *narrative* discourses are then defined as the ways in which those stories are *represented* (Abbott 2008, 19). A story is always mediated through narrative discourses, and at the same time stories shape and reshape narrative discourses (Genette 1988). Through narrative analysis, then,

structures can be detected that storytellers consciously and unconsciously make use of (Frank 2000, 354).

Next, simply put, the concept of *storytelling* can be defined as a "vocalized process of interaction between a teller and an audience" (Palacios et al. 2015, 247). However, Anderson (2010, 1-2) argues that scholars need to be cautious of simplified definitions of storytelling, since they do not "capture the interactive, cultural, and living essence of storytelling". It is therefore necessary to look deeper into the origin of the story, the type of story, and the emotional and cultural implications of the storytelling event. A distinction can be made between informal storytelling and formal storytelling; the former being stories that are told in daily life, and the latter being storytelling in front of an audience that is gathered with the purpose of listening to the story (Anderson 2010). Narrative research is a form of ethnography that often analyses the *informal* storytelling we use in everyday life to recount certain events and experiences. Storytelling is then used as a methodological tool to gather information about people's lives (Fraser 2004).

While this study does examine storytelling as a method to gain a deeper insight in the life experiences of participants, it also investigates storytelling as the source of analysis. This distinction is crucial, as this study focuses on how storytelling is more than the sharing of information. One of the central themes throughout this thesis is how storytelling not only recounts past events, but draws them into the present experiences, making it an act or performance (Bamberg 2006). Moreover, the aim of this thesis is not to assess the level of truth of the stories that were told during the storytelling workshops. Ultimately, whether something is true or whether it is fiction, the way in which a story is framed is a source of information in itself (O'Reilly 2012, 156).

Another concept that demands definition is the notion of *identity* or *self*. The concept of identity in this thesis is inspired by the work of Ghorashi (2017), who perceives identity as a process of becoming rather than as a fixed and stable essence. In this study, identity is therefore understood as "narrative of the self: a dynamic process, a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms through interactions with social contexts and within historical moments" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni 2013, 170). Correspondingly, Ingold (2011) identifies people by the pathways or stories along which they have come and along which they are presently going. This is what Ingold (2011) calls a meshwork of entangled lines of life: each living being is a bundle of interwoven lines or

pathways, in a continuous process of becoming. Following the idea of identity as a process of becoming, this thesis underlines the constructivist notion that people do not *have* stories, but that they *are* their stories (Cox & Lyddon 1997).

Chapter 2: An Intimate Insight

"You've been through stuff. But that's life! And yeah, life will get rougher, but you can also become stronger" – (Rianna: participant, 2018).

In this chapter, it is analysed how participants narratively made sense of their marginal socio-economic position in Dutch society. Moreover, a recurring topic among participants is examined of how personal stories were considered as essential in understanding topics of stigmatization, individual responsibility and morality.

2.1 Unfolding the Untold

On a Sunday evening, I make my way through a grey neighbourhood of flats and houses. There are only a few people out on the street. Eventually, I stand in front of what seems to be an ordinary house. While ringing the doorbell, I can already hear laughter coming from inside. A young man opens the door, says welcome, and walks back into the room. There, I witness a group of young adults conversing and walking in and out. The space is small, behind it are several other rooms. When I ask a young man why he has come to this place, he explains that he just wants to 'see what happens'. On the surface, one could consider the atmosphere to be relaxed and care-free, with conversations about sports, clothing and spicy food. However, there is a tension underneath, subtly visible through nervous laughter, and the way in which everyone keeps observing each other. Everyone who is present, will potentially serve as the audience for the personal stories that will soon be told. At the same time, each person present will also be the storyteller, sharing stories that transcend the conversations of everyday life. Finally, we move into the meeting space, a rectangular room with a long table and chairs placed around it. In total, we are with 8, including Archell Thompson, who will give the storytelling workshop. Archell starts with sharing his own life story. At some moments, some participants nod or hum to show that they recognize his experience. After telling his own story, Archell asks everyone to share their story for about 10 minutes. He looks at Alcindo, a young man who has been homeless for several years, and asks if he wishes to tell his story. Alcindo slides his chair backwards, while saying: "'Wow, I just came in, can't I warm up first?". Everyone laughs, as if his statement also brings relief: we all find this scary. On his left, Rinesh was seated, who said: "All right, I guess it's my turn then, right?", while laughing nervously.

"But you should know that normally I never ever talk about my life. I don't even know where to start. Ok.. [sighs] there we go…"

The above excerpt was from the first impressions I wrote down in my notebook after one of the first storytelling workshops I attended. Most of the participants did not know each other, and it was their first encounter with storytelling. I vividly remember the atmosphere before the workshop began, it held both elements of excitement and of distrust. Some of the participants had lived out on the streets of Rotterdam, some had experienced the murder of a family member, or felt ashamed about not being able to follow through their education. All participants of this workshop had parents from different ethnicities, who had come to the Netherlands as migrants. The participants themselves had been raised, at least partly, in the Netherlands. Moreover, almost all of them had a low-socio economic status. I was struck by the thought that the participants, who were in a vulnerable marginalized position, were somehow drawn to the idea of disclosing their personal and vulnerable stories. As seen in the reaction of Alcindo and Rinesh, the sharing of vulnerable life stories was not a simple matter. In order to be able to share openly during a storytelling workshop, a safe space, or what Ghorashi names a 'safe space-in-between', is crucial (Ghorashi 2015, 52). An important factor in establishing a safe space during the workshops was the democratic liberty in which the stories were told. Everyone who was present was both the teller and the listener, part of the theatre stage and part of the audience. Moreover, there was no clear order of who should talk first, or of what should be said. *"So, what shall I tell then?"* some participants would ask at the beginning of a workshop. *"Whatever you feel like sharing"* Archell would say. Storytelling was thus framed a method, while at the same time being a methodless free space in which anything was allowed. Stories provides "their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self" (McAdams 2001, 100). However, unity is never fully achieved, as even coherent life stories often contain contradictions. Still, I argue that it is precisely because storytelling allows for contradictions and ambiguity, that it is a powerful tool for making sense of identities as a continuous process of becoming (Ghorashi 2002, 63).

An often-heard phrase in the beginning of the workshop, was *"But normally, I never talk about my life."* The telling of their own stories was an opportunity through which they could arrange personal life events into a more coherent web of cause and effect, and thereby legitimize certain life choices and events. For example, when Rinesh began his story, he

decided to start by sharing one of the first traumatic experiences of his childhood. Rinesh was a young man who smiled a lot, and kept on his leather jacket throughout the workshop. His parents were from Surinam, and he was raised in the Netherlands. He had been homeless for several years, and was still struggling with putting his life back on the rails. While smiling, and looking everyone in the eye, he began his story in a rapid pace:

> Well, in lower school, I was actually bullied, because I was overweight, and I was kind of short. [*pause*] I always found it difficult to stand up for myself, and to make friends.
> So, there was never really a *place* for me, you know? […] It was like that every day, again, again, again. […] Once, they TOTALLY sprayed me wet with a garden hose, *everything was wet*.

While the other participants responded by saying: *"WOW, no way!"*, Rinesh continued:

> Yes, yes! They pulled off my shirt [*pulls on t-shirt*]. And I was quite *fat* at the time [*mimes having more weight*]. They made me walk home in my *bare* belly […] I never stood up for myself. I didn't do it, didn't do it, didn't do it (soft repetitive rhythm). […] And my father [*short pause – sigh*] that's another big thing in my life. When I was seven, my parents got divorced. I didn't see my father for YEARS. Until I was sixteen, so for almost *ten* years [*sighs*]. So, I lacked a father figure, or a brother, someone where I could have… [*hesitant pause*]

For Rinesh, sharing his life story began with sharing the first traumatic event in his childhood: being bullied. He exemplified his story with the scene with the garden hose, to illustrate the severeness of his experiences. It was also a way of saying "this is where it all began", or the first time he experienced disempowerment. Further on, he reflected on how he lacked a father figure, as if he was looking at his life from the perspective of an outsider. In telling his story, he could be both the narrator and the object of narration (Smith 1995, 18), and thereby look at his life from a distance. Rinesh did not finish the sentence on why a father figure is so important for him, but only hints to why it is an important topic. The sentence could be meant as something like *"someone where I could have* turned to" or "learned from". The missing words refer to something Rinesh assumed the others will recognize as a familiar story. In his research on marginalized people in Oslo, Sveinung Sandberg (2016) has identified such missing words or sentences as tropes. Sandberg (2016) states that tropes are words or sentences that only hint at a story that is familiar in societal discourse. In the story of Rinesh, the familiar story was that a missing father figure can have a negative impact on one's life. Spelling this story out would have possibly ruined the "rhythm of the narrative" (Sandberg 2016, 164), and letting the other participants interpret what he means could enhance potential dialogues

(Frank 2010). The trope of a lacking father figure also had an important function for Rinesh, in justifying how he ended up in his socio-economic position. A similar phenomenon was found in earlier research of Sandberg (2009), in which he analysed the way in which marginalized people narratively search for respect. Sandberg (2009) argues that a narrative search for respect is fundamental for everyone, but is especially important for marginalized people. In retrospect, life events and choices are justified through the use of certain narratives that are embedded in everyday discourse (Sandberg 2016). Such a narrative can be found in the story of Rinesh, as seen further on in his story. Rinesh told about the abuse and struggles he experienced with his stepfather and mother. Then, he reached the climax of his story, becoming homeless:

> Because I lacked a father figure, I started to search for that, by having the wrong type of friends. I thought *fuck it, these are my brothers* [*ironic tone*], and so I fucked up three years of my life. [...] When my mother and stepfather moved to Suriname again, I didn't have a mother or a father. I had NOTHING. [...] Then I thought, *now,* NOW I need to do something about my life. So, I went to the Youth Desk of the municipality. There, they said, the youth shelter is full, but you can go to the crisis relief centre [*starts to speak in monotone staccato voice*]. I could stay there for two months, and then get my own room, and then after a year get my own place. So that became my *vision*, my *goal* [*slams his fist on the table with each word*].

The traumatic experiences Rinesh shared meant more than only recounting his past. It was also a way of showing and reaffirming to the other participants that becoming homeless was not just his own fault. The narrative Rinesh used to make sense of his socio-economic position can be described as: 'I ended up in this position, because of the *circumstances* of my past, not because this is who I *am'*. By slamming his fist on the table, his emphasized both how hard it was to be homeless, but also how important a vision of a better future was for him. Telling a life story therefore simultaneously meant being in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing his narrative identity. A narrative identity is the way in which people 'convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future' (McAdams & McLean 2013, 233). Through the telling of his story, Rinesh could make sense of having been homeless, and at the same time reclaim a sense of respect. He constructed a narrative identity of someone who is strong and persevering, rather than someone who is marginal and disempowered. "In this late modern period, identity has become multi-dimensional, multi-layered, differentiated. It is produced as

a personal construction built of multiple repertoires of options" (Sztompka 2004, 493-494). Personal storytelling thereby served as a way in which participants could "'craft themselves', rather than receiving themselves ready-made" (Sztompka 2004, 494).

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

In telling their stories, many other participants narratively searched for an understanding of the course of their life and marginal position of poverty, homelessness, or lacking a proper education. In doing so, the narrative of 'I ended up in this position, because of the *circumstances* of my past, not because this is who I *am*' often recurred. The participants looked back upon complex childhoods, several migrations, and uncertain futures, all of which are characteristics of late modernity (Farrugia 2016; France 2007). Making sense of their marginal position was thereby intrinsically linked to narratively searching for a sense of respect. Another example can be seen in the case of Alcindo, a young man who had been homeless for several years. Alcindo was a Cape-Verdean–Spanish young man, raised in the Netherlands, who spoke with a confident tone and posture. His hair was tied in a knot, his hands resting on the edge of the table. Like Rinesh, Alcindo also began with a traumatic event in his childhood. And like Rinesh, the lack of a father figure in his life had an important impact on his life story:

> Well, my father left us because of drugs. My mother was doing well, she was a guard at that place [*hesitant pause*] with all the buildings where the politicians are, in The Hague. She was both a father *and* a mother. Until another man came into her life, who abused her, and stabbed her [*matter-of-fact tone*]. So, then we had to flee, all the way to Cape Verde, where I am from. Then we came back to the Netherlands, and she came back to him *again*. And then, something like that happened *again*. And all this was when I was six or seven years old […]
>
> Since I was *two*, I've NEVER had my own home. Always lived in shelter homes or at friends' places. […] At some point, my mother deregistered me from our home address. Otherwise, she would no longer receive subsidies or something, I don't really remember exactly. And ever since [*sighs*], I've been homeless. Always on the run. I always run. Moved to family in Spain. Came back. Slept under the Erasmus bridge. Slept at friends' places.

The story of Alcindo described a troubled and disturbing childhood, and whilst the other participants were listening quietly, one could hear a pin drop. One of the climaxes in his story was how it came to be that he had become homeless. He expressed the *experience* of being homeless through the last short staccato sentences, emphasizing the feeling of constantly

being in mobility. The difficult events he described served as a way of justification and explanation for his current position of poverty and homelessness: a lack of a father figure, dealing with domestic abuse, moving between families in different countries. The underlying narrative of 'it was the circumstances that have led up to this, not because of my own failure', was also for him a way of expressing his narrative identity of a "morally decent self" (Sandberg 2009, 487). Indeed, personal stories "are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned" (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992, 1). Further on in his story, Alcindo looked back on feelings of shame about having been a drug dealer:

> I have had to deal drugs (*sighs*). Well, I didn't *have* to, but I was fourteen, fifteen years old, in Rotterdam, and the older boys took advantage of that, because yes, (*indifferent tone*) the police didn't really pay attention to us, smaller boys. Just, bringing bags to different addresses, on the bike. OK! I am not really *proud* of this, but still, (*pause*) at least I was never shot or stabbed.

In sharing the story on how he came to deal drugs, Alcindo stated that drug dealing is not something to be "proud of". Through telling his story, he narratively searched for an understanding, by emphasizing that it was not his own choice to deal drugs. He then tried to downsize the drug dealing by stating that it was only "bringing bags". The final sentence of "never having been shot or stabbed" seems to contradict that the drug dealing was only transporting bags. It can be understood when analysed as a trope. The unspoken sentence Alcindo hints at, is that, in dealing drugs, at least he didn't make any mistakes. At least he was never caught, or ended up in drug violence. He had managed to stay under the radar. Dealing drugs was now something that he could detach himself from, and leave in the past. By "viewing life through a narrative lens (…) we're afforded an affectionate detachment from how we've construed those worlds to date and enabled to envision what changes we should make in the future" (Randall 2015, 9). Telling a personal story thereby becomes a social process for making lived experience understandable and meaningful (Richardson 1992, 79-80). The story Alcindo told was as much telling about the past as it was an *act* in the present moment through which "the meaning-making process" could unfold (Sandberg 2009, 492). In late modernity, personal stories become an important source of insight for making sense of the world (Sandberg 2016). I therefore argue that, in the late modern Dutch society, the

storytelling workshops provided a way in which participants could try to make sense of their own identity and socio-economic position in society.

The more stories were shared, the higher the level of excitement. While their stories contained many disempowering experiences, in this room participants could now express themselves, and make sense of their lives and identities in their own way. Moreover, being the director of their own stories thereby attributed to a sense of control and empowerment (Meretoja 2018; Holloway & Freshwater 2007b). When Alcindo finished his story, his fellow participants expressed their encouragement by humming and saying *"Sooooo…Sooooo"*. Rinesh then looked up with a smile and said *"Wow, I can really relate to your story, man!"* Alcindo looked back at him with a smile and said: *"Ha! Yes!"* as if he only now realized the similarities between their stories. After hearing each other's stories, a recurring theme throughout the workshops was the role of untold stories in stigmatization and marginalization. It often led to a vibrant dynamic of encouragement, and sharing of life insights among participants.

2.2 Which Story is Behind *That?*

During many of the storytelling workshops, conversations arose about the importance of knowing someone's story, as a key insight in understanding stigmatization, responsibility and morality. This topic was also one of the motivations for schools, colleges and universities throughout the Netherlands to invite Archell to give storytelling workshops or performances. One day, Archell was asked to give a storytelling workshop at a multicultural college for practical education in Amsterdam-West[11]. The college had organized a week to give special attention to the wellbeing of the students, and throughout the whole week, different activities were planned. The storytelling workshops were planned for the opening day on Monday, and were held among different classes. While walking through the halls of the school, I wondered how the workshop would turn out in a setting that was so different from the main location in Rotterdam. The classroom I entered was normally a room in which classes, presentations and exams took place. Now, for the coming hour and a half, it would serve as a room for sharing personal stories. When I asked the teacher of the first class participating in the workshop what

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[11] For privacy reasons, the name of the college is not disclosed, and direct quotes of the students were not recorded or transcribed.

she thought of the workshop, she responded that the school board considered *"storytelling as a kind of education. For us, it is a way of addressing certain topics among the students, especially for those having difficult situations at home."* When I asked her why they considered this to be important, she replied: *"The initiative actually started at the municipality of Amsterdam, because they witnessed an increase of problems among young adults here in the neighbourhood, such as vandalism."*

During the workshop, naturally, the students did not share their vulnerable stories immediately. By telling his own story first, Archell paved the way for questions or remarks of the students. Three or four students then opened up about the domestic violence they themselves experienced at home. Together with the accompanying teacher, a conversation then arose about the connection between the disruptive behaviour a student might show at school, and what the student might be experiencing outside of the school. The conversation took place both among the students, and between the students and the teacher. More students then started to share something about their life, about how they were raised, and how stable or unstable their home situation was.

Several students then also expressed feelings of shame about the level of education they were following, since practical education is the lowest level of secondary education in the Netherlands. They did not dare to speak openly about their education in front of other people, and experienced being bullied or mocked by students studying one degree higher[12]. After having completed their education, in the Netherlands these students will be labelled as 'low-educated people'[13]. The term 'low-educated' has recently become a topic of public debate in the Netherlands (Molema 2018). In the increasingly meritocratic society, being 'low-educated' is associated with having a low social status in society[14]. Therefore, it can negatively affect the level of self-esteem of 'low-educated people' (Elshout 2016). Some of the students openly expressed how they felt better being out on the street than being inside the walls of the college. In this way, the storytelling workshop provided a safe space in which they could openly reflect on these issues. Indeed, as seen in other research, storytelling in classrooms can enhance understanding among students (Nguyen, Stanley & Stanley 2014). At the end of

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[12] Preparatory Secondary Vocational Education (*voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*, VMBO).

[13] In Dutch, a similar term is used, "laagopgeleiden". An alternative term of being 'practically-educated" has been proposed by writer and entrepreneur Marianne Zwagerman (Molema 2018). Since the term 'low-educated' has negative connotations for the participants, in this study it is written down between brackets.

[14] dd

the workshop, the students showed their appreciation by spontaneously waiting in line, and greeting Archell by bumping his fist and saying thanks. I then asked the teacher how she had experienced the workshop. She replied, saying *"Wow, this is very important. I actually believe it should be done everywhere. Sometimes, you don't know why a student is being difficult. Or why they're not paying attention. But the teacher doesn't always know if something is going on at home."*

<div align="center">*   *   *</div>

The topic of stigmatization, and 'not knowing the story behind it' was also prominent in many of the storytelling workshops at Rotterdam-South. On a Sunday evening, one week after the first workshop with the young adults at 'Drop In Op Zuid', a second workshop was conducted. This time, the greetings were warmer and more familiar than the first time. Jokes were made, the titles of good movies were shared, and it seemed like a gathering of friends. Then, it was time to start again. This time, Archell had planned to do a storytelling exercise called "the funeral exercise". Each participant had to pretend to read aloud a letter, as if standing at his or her own funeral. The other participants were seated like an audience, the chairs placed in two rows. One participant after the other went to the front of the room, and improvised a story they would want to share. During their story, Archell played a song that they had pointed out as their favourite song. He said the exercise didn't have *"one purpose, it does what it does. But it can give a better insight in who you are, and what really matters to you."* Most of the stories overlapped with the stories they had told in the previous workshop. Only this time, it was more intense and emotional. The first to start was a young woman, called Rianna. Rianna was a vibrant woman who shocked the other participants when, during her story, she told about how her mother had been murdered by her father. While violin music played in the background, Rianna pretended to read aloud a letter at her own funeral, and shared the following story:

> People didn't know what *really* happened, and what was *really* going on in her life. In the past, she tried to tell her story to friends as well [*sighs*]. But then, they didn't want to be friends with her anymore. They thought something *bad* would happen to them if they stayed in contact with her [*upset voice*] […]. She used to be depressed, but then at some point, she decided to change that. Just to be *positive*. Like, OK! [*puts on an upbeat voice*]. You've been through stuff. But that's life! And yeah, life will get rougher, but you can also become *stronger*. She didn't want to pity herself, or have other people pity her […]. In the last few years, she didn't have

good contact with her brother. In her family, they just [hesitant pause], they just *never* learned to communicate, to talk. And so, she wanted to learn how to talk about her life [SIGHS]. If she could have changed that, she would have. Because her brother is the *only* one she had left [*other participants applauding*].

In the story of Rianna, two important notions can be distinguished, which served as a red thread throughout the workshops. The first was the idea that, when making judgements or stigmatizing, people do not know the *real* story behind someone's behaviour or attitude. Correspondingly, the second notion was that sharing openly about one's life can be a way to break through certain barriers. Similarly, Ghorashi (2014, 8) describes how stories "break through the walls of judgements which are fed by dichotomies of self and other, creating space for the unexpected". This notion is also what motivated many of the participants to participate in the workshops, whether it was breaking barriers for others as a role model, or in one's own life. For Rianna, storytelling was a way to learn how to communicate openly with the people around her, and to potentially restore the bond with her brother. When the exercise was over, a lively discussion arose about judgements, discrimination and stigmatization. The first person to share was Alcindo. He stated that he had joined the workshop to "*become a role model, or a motivational speaker. […] I always think positively. If you get struggles in life, it means you got an upgrade to deal with new things. You are upgraded, you are able to take on new things. Better things!*" Alcindo then shared a lesson he learned on making judgements in the following story:

 I was often fighting at school. But I was always fighting the children who were bullying *other* children.

Other participants: "*Mmmm. Mmmm [Tone going up and down, showing understanding].*"

Alcindo:

One of my friends is one of the guys who always bullied *me*. And one time, I hit him *so* hard, he started to cry. And then I started to talk to him [*softer voice*], I felt bad for him. So, I took him to the store, and there I bought some candy for fifty cents, from Yogi, you know [*questioning tone*]? And then, it turned out, he came from [*hesitant pause*] he came from Burundi, in Africa. And there, there is a war and everything. His father was kidnapped, and his mother was murdered, like a GOAT [*mimes a knife at his throat*], and his sister *as well* [*long sigh*]. So, he also has his problems, you know? I cannot blame him for bullying me, so I forgave him. [*pause*] So, then I learned, really *everyone* has a story.

Alcindo raised the issue of in how far one can be held individually responsible for one's actions, considering his or her past life story. Where, during the first workshop, his story served to show that he had a "morally decent self" (Sandberg 2009, 487), his story was now intended to do the same for the other young man. Alcindo stated that, by getting to know *his* story, the other young man transformed from being a bully into becoming a friend. Alcindo shared the story with the other participants by way of sharing an insight, a life lesson he learned that "*really everyone has a story*". The story is a reflection on morality, a way of saying: what is right or wrong can change in light of the story behind it.

Following, during the break of the workshop, Alcindo and Rinesh had a conversation with Rianna. Rianna addressed the issue that "*you cannot always just share your personal story, because the world is also hardened*". It sparked the following conversation:

Alcindo: I have a few friends. They're all guys. Like my nephew, his mother was shot by his father, just in the *face*, right in *front* of him. While she was heavily pregnant. You know, when you tell him a personal story, he doesn't give a *shit*. He will just think that you pity yourself [*ironic tone*].

Rianna: Yes, I often experience the same with other people. If I tell them, yeah… they just don't *care*.

Hassan: Yes, they've just become hardened.

Alcindo: Yes, but then again, that's what it is about. Which story is behind *that*?

It is in this way that personal stories can make room for negotiating and reflecting on topics such as morality and responsibility. The personal story of Rianna sparked the idea that, even though the world is hardened and tough, there is a story behind it. Inspired by the work of Richard Sennett, Frank (2002, 111) explains how personal storytelling can turn morality into something *legible* in the late modern era:

> Stories give lives legibility; when shaped as narratives, lives come from somewhere and are going somewhere. Narratability provides for legibility and out of both comes a sense of morality– practical if tacit answers to how we should live. This morality is not fixed but is constantly being revised in subsequent stories (…).

Through storytelling, participants could make sense of topics of morality in their personal lives, for "moral life, for better and worse, takes place in storytelling" (Frank 2002, 116). In the constantly shifting late modern world, morality or responsibility are no longer presented as fixed answers, but rather emerge along the way (Frank 2002). Correspondingly, Ingold (2016,

93) describes how storytelling is similar to wayfaring, by arguing that, in storytelling, knowledge is integrated *along* the way, from topic to topic. In the case of participants like Alcindo, Rianna and Rinesh, topics of stigmatization, responsibility and morality were interwoven in their stories. At the same time, the stories that were told were not fixed or determined. In that sense, each story was entailed a meaning-making process through which knowledge could be continually integrated.

Chapter 3: The World as a Narratable Place

"I write myself into existence by the stories that I tell about my life. […] I write fuzzily or, with extra effort and deliberate thinking, I can write clearly. I impress myself upon and into others. I write and am also written upon." – (Bogart 2014, 9).

This chapter describes how, through personal storytelling, participants could experience the world as a narratable place. Although shaped by dominant discourses, the shared stories served as a way in which participants could move from personal to socio-political topics, such as bureaucracy, power relations and a sense of belonging in the Dutch society. Moreover, the motivation of participants to become an embodied storyteller is analysed as part of the late modern culture of personal storytelling, in which personal stories are told to provide insights for others.

3.1 The Politics of Stories Untold

Next to storytelling workshops, the location of Drop In Op Zuid also had attracted residents from the neighbourhood who came with questions about financial issues or letters they had received from the municipality of Rotterdam. Almost all of the residents who came to Drop In Op Zuid were Dutch-Caribbean men and women, who had migrated to the Netherlands later in their life. For them, Drop In Op Zuid was a place where they could come for advice or an understanding of the municipal bureaucracy, which for them was often complex and inapproachable. Together with his cousin, Tamira, and other Dutch-Caribbean residents from the neighbourhood, Archell would help them with their administration or explain the meaning of letters from the municipality. Most of the residents did not partake in the storytelling workshops. For them, Drop In Op Zuid was a place of coming and going. The participants of the workshops, who witnessed the residents coming in with questions or frustration, recognized the experiences of the residents. Especially the anonymity and bureaucracy of the municipality were topics that often recurred. During one afternoon, I spoke with Melisa, a Dutch-Caribbean woman who had followed a storytelling trajectory before, and lived in the neighbourhood. While Archell was in another room speaking to a family living in the neighbourhood, we had a conversation. Melisa told about how she had had a difficult childhood growing up, but had managed to build a good life together with her boyfriend. Then suddenly, her boyfriend passed away in an accident, and Melisa shared how she "*quit living after that. I woke up every day, I was breathing, but for the rest, I did nothing. Literally nothing.*

Not paying bills. NOTHING! So, my administration was not in order. […] I am working on it now. I need to get out of it, because I am almost drowning." Melisa then compared the inaccessibility of the municipality with the openness of the storytelling workshops, saying: *"The municipality just sends you letters. And at some point, you just stop opening them, because you feel like a failure. When I started doing the storytelling, I could really take the TIME. […] I thought I had no reason of being here anymore. No reason to stay in this world. Because of storytelling, I opened up again. I was able to persevere. I was able to go on living again."*

A famous quote by the novelist Karen Blixen states that "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them" (Mohn 1957). This quote aptly illustrates how the storytelling workshops enabled the participants to make sense of the course of their lives, and reflect on the hardships they had encountered. Yet, for the participants, the storytelling was about more than *bearing* the sorrows. It was also about actively and critically making sense of the world around them. The sharing of personal events proved to be a fruitful foundation for conversations and critical reflections on political and societal topics such as bureaucratic institutions, power relations and a sense of belonging. Jackson (2002), inspired by the notion of 'dwelling' by Heidegger (1978), aims to illustrate that storytelling is a mode of journeying. Sharing stories was a way of sharing "journeys" (Jackson 2002, 30), in which insights and knowledge could come to the surface. Similarly, in a workshop on life stories, Ghorashi (2015, 57) has found that life stories can serve as a fundamental foundation for discussing societal issues:

> By discovering common theme's in the life stories, and by further contextualizing these, the personal stories gain a relational and societal component. Now, challenges were no longer attributed only to individual problems, but became experiences that are embedded in societal processes, turning them into something communal.

The personal stories that were shared and reflected upon during the workshops were imbued with the power relations they described, and of which they were a part. The personal became political, the individual became communal. In that sense, no story was ever individually owned, but always part of larger dynamics and relations (Frank 2012).

*   *   *

The story of Melisa about her experiences with the bureaucratic system of the municipality was a story many participants and residents shared. During one of the gatherings, a discussion arose about whether there is enough room for stories in the bureaucracy of the municipality. The experience of Rinesh at the youth desk of the municipality opened up a discussion about power relations, showing how "small stories can be windows" (Sandberg 2016, 155):

Rinesh: People at the youth desk of the municipality really don't want to hear what you have been through. They are trained to think in boxes.

Archell: Yes, change won't come from above. Above, they are working with graphics and numbers, there is no time for your story.

Alcindo: This is really the Netherlands. It is a good country, but it's all about graphics and not about feeling.

Tania: Yes, you need to be helped quickly, next, next, next. This is how it is everywhere here. You *are* your BSN number. It is like that everywhere.

In sharing their personal experiences with the municipality, the participants could address a larger theme, namely in how far there is room for stories in the bureaucratic system. Like Melisa, the participants of this workshop compared the bureaucratic and impersonal character of the municipality with the personal and attainable nature of the storytelling workshops. In the storytelling workshops, participants could democratically share their stories. However, during encounters with the municipality, participants experienced a lack of room for their stories to be heard and taken seriously. In "Anthropology of Policy: Perspectives on Governance and Power", Shore and Wright (2014, 3-4) argue that "from the cradle to the grave, people are classified, shaped and ordered according to policies, but they may have little consciousness of or control over the processes at work". This notion is seen in the experiences of Rinesh, who felt he needed to fit in a box, and Tania, who stated that she felt classified as being her BSN number.

For the participants, categorization was also associated with having no room for their own story. The latter is a common phenomenon, since stories of individuals with a low socio-political status are often not heard in society (Holloway 2007b, 706). Larger societal discourses determine which stories are told, and which voices are louder than others (Matute 2016). Correspondingly, it is argued that, while we are in an era of "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2000), at the same time, there is not only a decline but simultaneously a re-emergence of *solid* categories (Ghorashi 2017, 2426). As seen in the response of Alcindo, for some participants,

the struggle with solid categories was connected to a sense of belonging in the Dutch society. Classification and systemization though "*graphics and numbers*" were associated with Dutchness**.** The storytelling workshops, as a process of meaning-making, thereby not only served as a way to critically reflect on larger themes such as bureaucracy, but also to negotiate their (non-) belonging in Dutch society[15].

Individually, the participants struggled with the bureaucratic system, but communally in the workshop, they could critically reflect on their experiences and make sense of larger dynamics of power relations or systems. However, while they were critical of the bureaucratic municipality, at the same time the participants internalized the dominant discourse of 'we are *below*, they are *above*'[16]. Thereby, in their stories they also reproduced the notion of being powerless and silenced. In other words, while the storytelling workshops allowed for critical discussions on the political dynamics of their untold stories in the bureaucratic system, participants also internalized and reproduced those political dynamics in their own stories. This can be analysed further in the story Asil told the other participants, after they had discussed their experiences with the municipality. Asil was a young Turkish–Dutch-Caribbean man who explained he had recently been diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability (MID) and having a dysthymic disorder. He was no longer going to school, and when he was asked how he then spend his days he responded "gaming". Asil expressed how much resentment he experienced towards his former teachers at school, because they had never taken the time to hear his story:

> There was *never* a teacher who came towards me to ask me a question. What they did was simply give me a *stamp*. They said things like 'You will go to prison later on in your life' [*uses a different tone*]. Or they thought I was using drugs [*pause*]. And I was still very young, so I didn't understand *why*, you know [*questioning tone*]? In all those years, they considered me a criminal-to-be. And because they already gave me a stamp, I never went to talk to them. There are people who are not *willing*, but I just *couldn't* [*sighs*]. And if I'd tell them, 'listen mister, I just can't'… [*hesitant pause*]. Well, I was just always afraid of then getting *another* stamp, because that's what they did [pause]. It happened to other students as well.

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[15] In paragraph 3.2, the notion of (non-)belonging in the Dutch society is further discussed.
[16] In this study, discourses are defined as frameworks of meaning through which we make sense of the world (Cederberg 2014, 136). They are codes that are imprinted on every individual, and thereby determine and constrain ways of speaking and thinking (Rapport & Overing 2014).

Asil described the experience of being categorized by the teachers at his school. He did not explicitly say it, but he described how his MID remained unrecognized by the teachers, because Asil was already categorized as being a "criminal-to-be". Asil also did not explicitly mention *why* he thinks he was categorized. Thereafter, Asil suddenly started explaining that he also blamed himself for not having been able to continue his education. I was sitting next to him at that time, and turned aside to ask him what he meant by that. He responded by saying: "*Well, maybe I didn't try hard enough*". Asil then offered his analysis of the experience by stating that the cause was perhaps not the teachers themselves, but in the overarching system they were in:

> Those teachers see *so* many children every day at school. So, it's not realistic to expect from them that they are able to focus on every individual student [*pause*]. So, I don't want to blame them [*hesitant pause*]. You can't really *tell* them. You can't tell teachers anything *anyway*, because there is such a ranking system in schools [*sighs*]. You know, the peasants and the wealthy, that sort of thing.

In his analysis, Asil attributed the notion of his inability to tell his story to a larger system of power relations and hierarchies. His experiences at school were personal, and yet they were not. However, while consciously reflecting on his experiences, Asil had also unconsciously internalized and reproduced the hegemonic discourse that teachers, by definition, are higher up in a hierarchy through which they hold dominant power over students and need to "defend standards" (Taylor & Robinson 2009, 167). In reproducing the dominant discourse of a ranking system, Asil seemed to refute his earlier criticism by stating that he does not want to "blame them". Next to that, Asil also internalized the meritocratic idea that failure is inevitably interlinked with "not doing your best" (Elshout, Tonkens & Swierstra 2016). In short, by categorizing himself and the other students as the "peasant" and the teachers as the "wealthy", Asil reaffirmed and reproduced the very power relations he was critical of.

Critical stories are inevitably shaped by dominant discourses (Lawler 2014, 71). However, I argue that the storytelling workshops served as a valuable meaning-making process for the participants, in critically making sense of the world around them. Anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002, 15) has argued that storytelling is a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances". He states that meaning cannot be found within abstract worldviews, but within the everyday details of social life. Indeed, during the storytelling workshops, storytelling was an important

means through which the details could be brought into meaning, and meaning brought into the details (Jackson 2013, 29). Even though dominant discourses entail that "there can be no such things as objective knowledge or independent reasoned judgement" (Rapport & Overing 2014, 298), through storytelling, participants could still make sense of the world. In the current late modern times, where everything is constantly changing, it becomes of great importance to find a sense of coherence (Giddens 1991), something that can especially be sought and striven for through storytelling (Kraus 2006). As stated by Frank (2002, 111), "what continues to count, is not the specific message of a certain story's content, but rather the sense of the world as a narratable place; that is, a place that stories can make sense of".

The sharing of personal and critical stories also lead to mutual encouragements between participants. Despite the disempowering circumstances they were in, participants often encouraged each other in how to cope with these circumstances. At the very end of the previously mentioned workshop, Asil and Rinesh had the following conversation:

Asil: Well, I wish I was as strong as you guys [*soft voice*]. That I could get out of it. That I would have a vision, you know.

Rinesh: You just need to let go of the stamp that *other* people put on you. You need to be who *you* think you are.

Asil: But I don't really know who I am.

Rinesh: Well [*pause*] then *that's* where you start.

The encouragements and sharing of life insights, as seen in the excerpt above, also stimulated the idea of becoming a storyteller, or a role model. Participants went from telling personal stories, to telling critical stories, to sharing stories in order to inspire others. It involved a transformation that was not just expressed in *content*, but also through *embodiment*, as will be seen in the following paragraph.

3.2 Performance and Embodiment: Becoming a Storyteller

For many of the participants, making the world a narratable place was not only aimed for through expressing their own stories, but also through offering insights, and creating room for the stories of others. According to Sandberg, the particular culture of personal storytelling that has risen in late modernity, has also resulted in the fact that "people are motivated to tell their stories about suffering and success so that 'others can learn'" (Sandberg 2016, 154). It is this phenomenon that was also found during the storytelling workshops. Some of the

participants followed a trajectory in which they worked towards giving an inspiring storytelling performance. This trajectory was called the Catwalk Challenge. The idea behind the Catwalk Challenge was that, on a catwalk, participants took on *"the challenge to show their inner worlds instead of their outer appearances"*[17]. Occasionally, performances took place in public and political spaces, such as living rooms, cultural centres or at the municipality. When practicing for these performances, the element of *embodiment* of storytelling became more prominent. Indeed, according to Richard Bauman (1986), storytelling is characterized by the fact that the *way* in which communication is carried out is as important as its *content*. After all, storytelling is essentially embodied (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Through embodied performances, participants could aim to perform their stories and narrative identities *beyond* the societal categories that were imposed on them. Therefore, next to their stories, their bodies served an important role in being able to inspire an audience.

One of the participants who practiced storytelling almost on a weekly basis was Maria, the Nigerian-Dutch young woman I met at Archell's storytelling performance in Amsterdam. A few weeks after the performance, I met her again. This time, we were at Drop In Op Zuid in Rotterdam. Maria had decided to follow a longer storytelling trajectory of a few months, to practice becoming a storyteller. Others who were present that day were Archell, his cousin Tamira who sometimes assisted in the workshops, and Melisa, who had followed a storytelling trajectory before. We sat down in the meeting room, and Archell said to Maria: *"OK, you can start if you want."* After some initial hesitance, Maria started to share her story on how her Nigerian father had been murdered by his best friend when she was eight years old. Now, a few weeks earlier she had decided to temporarily quit her higher education, because of psychological distress. Maria described how a fear of being stigmatized led to the silencing of her story:

> When I came back to school, my girlfriends asked me 'so, your father is dead, right?'. And I said 'yes'. 'How did it happen?' So I said, 'Yeah, with a gun, pjew pjew' [*mimes having a gun in her hand*]. When I told my mother, she said 'you can never talk about it again, never again. It is not good for you, people will think badly of you.' So, we went back to school, and told everyone it was a car accident. It is the story I have told to people ever since.

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[17] Description from a quote in an interview with Archell Thompson.

For Maria, having been silenced in telling her story openly was an important motivation to start practicing storytelling. The fear of stigmatization was partly related to her ethnic background. She explained that her mother was afraid that the murder on her father would be associated with "being Nigerian", and thus with her. She said: "*Well, being colored wasn't prominent or anything. But somewhere, you felt it. Just, I don't know, that I was not allowed to meet with other people. Especially after the incident… [long pause]. Bad for the reputation!*" Maria described how it could be confusing for her to be both of Dutch and Nigerian descent, by saying: "*I am black in this country, white in that country, in which country am I my own colour?*" Maria's struggle with sharing her story openly was connected to her experience of (non)belonging in Dutch society. In order to exemplify her experience, she said:

> After all that, I didn't easily connect to white people. So then, I just became silent. […] And that's when I started to have a lot of *darker* friends. Half-bloods mostly. Because (*hesitant pause*) yeah, you do have more of a connection then.

The experience Maria portrayed, was shared by many of the participants in the storytelling workshops, as most of them had a multi-ethnic background, and had migrated to other countries several times. Being what Maria called a "half-blood" is defined by Ghorashi (2004, 332) as having a "hybrid identity". Ghorashi (2004, 330) writes how the late modern era has given rise to processes that "include a variety of cultures and identities articulated and negotiated within newly created spaces." By sharing and openly performing her story in her own words, Maria could negotiate, embody and perform her hybrid identity. The performance of her personal story thereby also entailed the materialization of performativity. Performativity is a concept first introduced by Judith Butler, who stated that performance is not the result of a static identity, but that identity is continually being *produced* by our performance (Bell 1999). Performativity was materialized in the way in which Maria as a narrator embodied and performed her hybrid identity and vulnerable experiences (Langellier 1991, 128-129). Not only was this process empowering to her, she also hoped to "*inspire others who were in similar positions, and are afraid to speak about it.*" For Maria, an inspiring story was not necessarily sharing a certain explicit message. It was rather an implicit message. Through an act of openness and vulnerability about her own struggles, she hoped to potentially inspire and to make room for others in the audience to share their untold stories. Her act of openness was strengthened by the fact that she did not only recount her past experiences through words, but also created new experiences by letting her once silenced

body speak out loud. Her body that once experienced these events, was now the same body openly telling the story about these experiences. "A personal story is first lived through a body; identity and meaning surface through embodied interactions in the world" (Scott 2018, 4).

In practicing to become a good storyteller, embodiment also became prominent in the *way* the story was told. After all, despite having an inspirational aim, stories are also a form of entertainment, and need to remain interesting for their audience (Sandberg 2016). Together with Archell, Maria started working on how to convey a story well. Good storytelling was associated with speaking slowly, having a confident posture, looking people in the audience in the eye, and using miming to enact certain details. Now, through practicing and embodying storytelling, Maria's personal story had become artistic material that needed to be performed. In order to see how strong and inspirational the performance would be for an audience, Maria practiced her story that day in front of me, Tamira and Melisa. The three of us imagined ourselves as being an audience, and gave her feedback on in how far we felt moved or triggered by the performance, such as "*I drifted off when you were talking about that*" or "*that really touched me*". Ultimately, through becoming a storyteller, Maria hoped to "*inspire anyone who is having a hard time, but is afraid to speak about it.*"

*   *   *

One afternoon, Archell called to tell me that he would start a storytelling trajectory with a small group of eight homeless young adults in Rotterdam. They were temporarily placed in supported housing, and were guided by an organisation to get their life back on track[18]. In cooperation with a local foundation called 'Rotterdammers met Talent', the organisation had invited Archell to start a weekly storytelling trajectory with the young adults as a part of their daytime activities[19]. According to Mia, one of the co-workers of the foundation I spoke to at the first gathering, the underlying motivation was that storytelling would be a way to "*help them get their life back on the rails in a more sustainable way*". The participants, two young women and six young men, were between the age of 18 and 23, and were of Moroccan, Turkish, Cape Verdean, Dutch-Caribbean, Polish and Dutch descent. Next to having become

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[18] For privacy reasons, the name of the organisation is not disclosed in this study.
[19] "Rotterdammers Met Talent" (translation: 'People from Rotterdam who are Talented') is a local foundation in Rotterdam. For more information see: http://www.010talent.nl

homeless, many of them had a background of having conducted criminal activities, such as theft, fraud, physical abuse, or drug dealing.

The workshops took place at a cultural centre in Rotterdam. At the first gathering, Archell, Mia and I were already waiting when the young adults entered the room. I immediately noticed the difference with the young adults I had met in Drop In Op Zuid. Here, the young men and women moved more cautiously, and at the same time they seemed to behave indifferent and silent. In the beginning, most of them stared at the floor, or only gave two-word answers. Surprisingly, however, after one workshop, the young adults started to open up. They appreciated the democratic nature of the workshop, in that *everyone*, including Archell, Mia, their supervisor and I, was shared something. The majority of them started to actively participate in doing storytelling. Hamid, one of the young adults, said *"this is the first time a daytime activity is actually meaningful."* When asked why, he responded that now, they did not just have to *"follow rules"* but could co-create what was happening themselves.

David Farrugia (2016, 134), in his book *Youth Homelessness in Late Modernity: Reflexive Identities and Moral Worth*, looks closely at how the struggle for subjectivity in late modernity affects young people who are trying to create a place for themselves in a "society that lacks clear pathways". Moreover, because of forces of late modernity, the fragmentation of collective structures has "created more holes for disadvantaged people to fall down, longer distances to fall, and less ladders allowing them to climb back up" (Farrugia 2016, 26). As a result, Farrugia (2016, 68) states that, when homeless young adults tell stories about their homelessness, they "position themselves outside of the regulatory norms that constitute successful, ethical, intelligible personhood in late modernity" (Farrugia 2016, 68). Indeed, many of the participants considered themselves as being failures, and struggled with how to get out of the disempowering circumstances of their lives. *"I should be happy with anything that comes my way",* Ahmad said.

Subsequently, similar to the workshops at Drop In Op Zuid, the homeless young adults narratively searched for respect in their stories, by recalling 'how it all began'. They recounted having difficult childhoods or having had the *"wrong type of friends"*. Abdul, a bright young man who had committed a major fraud, said: *"It is not right what I have done. But if I keep being hard on myself, I basically punish myself twice."*

A prominent feature in their stories on homelessness, was their body. Homelessness is essentially an experience of embodiment, of missing a space in which the body can be (Robinson 2011). This can be seen, for example, in the story of Hamid:

> I just walked through the streets, and I had this *big* beard. People treated me as a beggar. And, yeah, I *was*. Really [*sighs*] you wouldn't have recognized me."

In stories on homelessness, bodily aesthetics become signifiers for social marginality (Farrugia 2016, 10). Having a beard, or sleeping in public were theme's that recurred in the stories. At the same time, in late modernity, "the body has become the site of reflexive work, as detraditionalisation creates the opportunity for new embodied identities" (Farrugia 2016, 52). Storytelling was therefore an opportunity for the young adults to negotiate and perform new identities, as was the case with Maria. They aimed to perform, not *against* solid categories, but *beyond* them. The storytelling was not necessarily seen as giving others an insight into the lives of homeless youth. It was seen as a way in which they could also portray their own knowledge and individual capabilities. During practicing, they were eager to learn more on how to speak well publicly, or how to stand tall and confidently. All of them had dreams they wished to pursue, and the skills of embodied storytelling were seen as a way to both practice for -and embody those dreams. Abdul wanted to become an expert by experience, who could consult for different organisations. Hamid aspired to become a "*coach for youth at risk*", and also wanted to become a rapper. Lia had a dream of becoming a motivational speaker and an artist. Ahmad also aspired to become a rapper, and already had many self-written raps waiting to be performed. They expressed how motivating it was for them to focus on something they *could* do, in light of putting their life back on the rails.

However, despite the empowering effect of storytelling on the young adults, it is important to remain cautious of individualizing social inequalities by shifting the focus from groups and classes to personal agency (Atkinson 2007; Gilles 2005). Atkinson (2007, 349-350), critical of the individualization of social problems, states that "agents are compelled by the very mechanisms of modernization to make themselves the masters of their own destinies". Indeed, while late modernity creates the opportunity for new embodied identities, there is also the risk that the young adults internalize the meritocratic dominant discourse that one is individually responsible for one's success (Elshout 2016). When looking through the meritocratic lens, one becomes blind to "the social conditions in which actors act and agents make choices" (Lardier et al., 2017; Lamb & Randazzo 2016, 150). Still, storytelling could serve

as an important way of reflecting on the societal dynamics of inequality. Stories can possibly be liberated from their social constraints, if the way in which storytelling is conducted is critically engaged (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). Critical engagement is important, since we will end up living the stories we tell (Maggio 2014, Puvimanasinghe et al. 2014, Bogart 2014). Therefore, the late modern culture of personal storytelling can rather be considered as "a coping strategy", through which each individual can "change one's experience of the world" (Jackson 2002, 18). The homeless young adults valued the storytelling, precisely because it did not place them in the solid categories of being either a perpetrator or a victim. By reconsidering their past as something containing life lessons, they could reimagine their future by considering the possibility of becoming an expert by experience. Reshaping the past instantaneously meant reshaping the future: to remember was to imagine, and to imagine was to remember (Ingold 2016).

Gallagher (2014) argues that precisely because stories are consensus-resisting and non-linear, they are a powerful force in late modernity. For the homeless young adults, storytelling could serve as a tool to creatively reflect on their lives amidst the uncertainty of their daily realities, and negotiate and perform new embodied identities. In the next chapter, two storytelling performances conducted at public places are examined. One performance was given by of the young adults of Drop In Op Zuid at the municipality of Rotterdam, the second performance was given by the homeless young adults at a conference for Youth Workers. I will delineate, through an ethnographic account of two different storytelling performances, how the storytelling performances could both open up and close down the socio-political space for participants.

Chapter 4: A Cultural Performance of Meaning-Making

"Instead of pitying them, we need to tap into their source of resilience" – (Kuipers 2018)[20].

In this chapter, it is analysed how the personal embodied storytelling performances that were conducted served as a cultural process of meaning-making, which both opened up and closed down the social and political space for participants.

4.1 Restoring the Story

In the previous chapters, we have seen the variety of dynamics that occurred during the different storytelling workshops and practices through personal stories, dialogues, critical reflections and embodied practice. Now, it is time to examine the personal storytelling performances that were conducted at public places. In this chapter, the motivation of participants to tell their personal stories as a source of insight for others is analysed as part of the late modern culture of personal storytelling (Sandberg 2016, 154). Moreover, it is examined in which ways the performances opened up or closed down the socio-political space for participants.

One Thursday morning, I was on my way to the storytelling performances of three participants, which would be conducted at the municipality of Rotterdam. Storytelling performances were occasionally organised at the municipality. This time, the performances were part of an "inspiration session" for policy makers around the topic of education, and the event was co-organised by the organisation 'Ik ben Wij', together with a senior Program Manager of the municipality of Rotterdam (Ik ben Wij 2018). While sitting in the metro line that crosses the city of Rotterdam, I was curious about what would happen. I had witnessed a multitude of workshops, conversations and practices. I had seen how participants who were initially hesitant to speak out, were now telling their story more openly and confidently. And, after hearing many conversations about the anonymous bureaucracy of the municipality, I was curious to see the direct interaction between the participants and the policymakers. After a short while, I left the metro and walked towards the Timmerhuis, one of the buildings in which the municipality of Rotterdam is housed. I received a pass, which allowed me to enter

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[20] This quote is from Jasper Kuipers, the director of the refugee council in the Netherlands. The statement as made during the World Refugee Day on the 20th of June 2018. The statement of Kuipers referred to the way in which refugees are perceived in the Netherlands, and the alternative way in which Kuipers argues we can approach refugees. I argue that the same quote is applicable for marginalized groups.

through the security gates. Then, we went to the main room where the performances would take place. Archell had brought an actual blue/grey catwalk, which he placed in the middle of the room. Around it, chairs were placed in two rows in a circle. One by one, people came in and sat down. The audience consisted mostly of policy makers of the municipality of Rotterdam who were involved in the topic of education. The senior Program Manager kicked off the event in the following statement:

> There are a *lot* of young people in this town who are dealing with a lot of struggles. Struggles with life (*pause*), so they are often *surviving*. The situation at home is not always easy. So, *how* can they combine that with school? That can be very complicated. (*pause*). This afternoon is meant to inspire all of you, and to see... (*hesitant pause*) What are other ways in which citizenship can take form? How can we keep the street away from schools, and how do we get society *in* the schools?

What immediately struck me in this statement, was the fact that the performances were framed as being "meant to inspire" in order to better understand complex issues such as citizenship or education. Personal storytelling by marginalized groups is often researched and framed as 'making their marginal voices heard' (Ottonelli 2017). "When members of minority or disadvantaged groups speak with their own voice and tell their real-life stories, they bring to the attention of the public at large and of the mainstream majority motivations, feelings, values, and facts that would otherwise have been neglected or misrecognised" (Ottonelli 2017, 601-602). In this case, the performance was framed as another source of knowledge, not as a form of contestation against the municipal bureaucracy.

Next, the main host of the inspiration session introduced the afternoon programme: *"Today we will be inspired and moved by the real lives of young people. What they experience in normal life. Before we start, I will talk about the unreal life of the policymaker, so to speak."* Surprisingly, in his statement, the host literally made the distinction between the *"real"* young people and the "*unreal"* policymakers. It can be considered as a way to affirm the importance of the stories of the young adults. However, the distinction also had constraining effects, as will be seen further on in this paragraph.

After the introduction of the host, it was time for the storytelling performances to commence. First up was Gia, a young girl who shared her experiences at a gymnasium in Rotterdam. While walking up and down the catwalk, she said:

As students, we are *constantly* being compared. Teachers constantly tell us what we *cannot* do, and not what we *can* do. I will tell you an example from my own life [*upbeat voice*]. I recently had a talk with the dean. I am in the third class of Gymnasium, and I need to make a decision on what profile I will choose. I hardly *ever* see or talk to him [*sighs*]. And he told me: 'Looking at your results, I think it is better if you go to HAVO[21]'. So, THIS is what teachers do [*moves her hands up and down*], they tell us what to do and DEMOTIVATE us instead of *motivate* [*pause*]. But, I didn't come here to complain, there are also positive things [*pause*]. Teachers who do exactly the opposite. For example, the teacher who teaches in Latin. And you might think, what the fuck, why Latin? [*laughter by audience*]. Oh, excuse my language! But [*laughs, recomposes herself*], he encourages us, and gives compliments. He *motivates* us to persevere.

While the storytelling performances were framed as stories of *inspiration*, the story of Gia also exemplifies how their performance was a form of *contestation* against being categorized. Gia addressed the issue of being labelled at school, without being able to share her own story. She specifically emphasized that the dean who made the decision on her future school career, had hardly ever seen or talked to her. Yet, her story at the municipality was not meant to "*complain*", or just to be brought "to the attention" (Ottonelli 2017, 602). The *act* of her personal storytelling performance was also a form of contestation against the procedure of the municipality itself. It was a way of saying that better policies can only emerge from making room for personal stories. Where, during the workshops, larger themes of society surfaced in individual stories, here, the individual voice and bodily performance emerged as "a crucial site where the realms of the cultural and socio-political link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice" (Weidman 2014, 39).

When Gia had given her storytelling performance, next up was Asil, who shared his experiences of being stigmatized at school. During his performance, I became more aware of the power relations that were distributed across the different individuals who were present. While direct communication with the policy makers would normally be unattainable for Asil, now, the sound of his voice filled a political space which he would otherwise not have been able to enter. However, at the same time it can be argued that the fact that Asil could only share his story by giving a storytelling performance for the policy makers, only reinforced the

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[21] Senior general secondary Dutch education, literally 'higher general continued education'

unequal power relations. In other words, the act of contestation was present in the *content* of the stories, as well as in the fact that the stories needed to be *told in the first place*. As Brooks (1996, 16) states:

> Narrative has the unique ability to embody the concrete experience of individuals […]. Narrative is thus a form of countermajoritarian argument […] – a way of saying, you cannot understand until you have listened to our story.

When all the performances had finished, the policymakers appeared to be moved and applauded loudly. The host asked if there were any questions for the storytellers. Then, one policy maker raised his hand and said:

> If I listen to your stories, it becomes clear that education is about the courses that you follow, but that, next to that, you have a lot of questions about your *own* personal development [*hesitant pause*], from being a child to being an adult. So, do you mean to say that schools should give *more* attention to that, next to the courses you are doing? On how to *survive* in the society of today [*questioning voice*]?

The answer Gia gave was only partly a response to his question: "*Well, I think, in the courses, there should be more attention given to how things are really going on in society. Because, let's be honest, we won't apply the things we learn at school in society. Like in economics, we are now creating a marketing video ourselves*". In her answer, Gia did not address the question of in how far schools should give attention to the personal development of their students. Their interaction did not proceed easily. While the policy maker asked a question by using more formal language, Gia answered by only sharing her personal experience. When Gia had given her answer, the policy maker thanked her, and there were no other questions for the storytellers.

The interaction between the policymaker and Gia showed the complexity of translating personal stories into a larger theme. Moreover, the difficulty of finding a common language seemed to further emphasize the difference between the participants and the policymakers. Correspondingly, in 'Democratic Deliberation, Respect and Personal Storytelling', Ottonelli (2017) critically examines events in which marginalized groups tell personal stories in order contest against the mainstream majority. Ottonelli (2017) states that publicly telling personal stories risks further widening the gap between the teller and the listener. This phenomenon can be seen in this case as well. The policy makers were categorized as "unreal", namely those in power who no longer have knowledge of "normal life", and the storytellers were categorized as "real", but needing room for their performances in order to be heard. In that

sense, there was an emergence visible of solid categories between the participants and the policymakers (Ghorashi 2015). These solid categories further affirmed the unequal power relations between the policy makers and the participants.

When I asked Asil about what he had hoped to achieve at the municipality, he said: *"Oh well, you never know if it will change something"*. Gia, in turn, stated: *"Just, that they can hear what is really important for us"*. After the storytelling performances, two teachers were asked to give a speech. The storytelling performances had motivated them to also tell their personal stories, as both of them spontaneously started telling personal stories about their youth in order to bring their message across. At the end of the event, the participants were discussing their own storytelling performances. Remarkably, their conversations were mostly about the quality of their storytelling, not the content of the discussion: *"Do you think my story went well?" "Did I talk slow enough?" "I was afraid I was going to trip over their feet.* When the event was over, the organisation 'Ik ben Wij' (2018) stated a Facebook post:

> The responsibilities within the area of education are complex and challenging. In order to help unravel the complexity, […] the municipality of Rotterdam has organised an inspiration session together with IK BEN WIJ and Catwalk. […] With IK BEN WIJ and the Catwalk method, we were able to touch the policy makers who were invited, so that the stories of students and teachers get priority in the agenda of policy makers. @Timmerhuis

The post contained the dual way in which the storytelling performances were framed, both as a source of inspiration ("in order to help unravel the complexity") and contestation ("so that stories get priority in the agenda of policy makers"). The framing of the storytelling performance at the municipality as "inspirational' had opened up the space for the stories of participants as sources of insights. However, the categorization of the personal story against the impersonal bureaucracy also further widened the gap between participants and policy makers, thereby closing down the socio-political space for the participants.

<p style="text-align:center">*　　*　　*</p>

A few weeks after the performance, I conducted an interview with Fongers, account manager of the Safety Department of the municipality of Rotterdam, in order to get a better understanding of the view of the municipality on the storytelling workshops and performances[22]. We met at the local office of the municipality in Pendrecht, and sat down in

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[22] Drop In Op Zuid was arranged by the Safety Department of the municipality, as explained in paragraph 1.2

one of the offices. I asked her what had motivated the municipality to arrange for the storytelling workshops to be conducted at Drop In Op Zuid. She answered: *"Well, we got the impression that, with storytelling, Archell would be able to really touch people, to really get to them in a more sustainable way*. […] *Instead of enforcement or rules, with storytelling you can connect to something that actually matters to people".* Then, I asked her what she thought of how people experienced being stigmatized, and lacking room for their stories within the bureaucratic system of the municipality. To my surprise, she immediately confirmed their experience:

> I do understand that people are distrustful of the municipality. Unconsciously, stigmatization or ethnic profiling happens, it *does*. In the Netherlands, everything and everyone needs to fit into a box. […] The society is complex. Not everyone understands the system, all the rules that apply. Where you need to register for this or for that. And so, people can get into huge debts, or become homeless. […] Yes, we send them letters, but not everyone is able to *read* them. […] We use this *horrible* official language. Internally, we are working on it. Writing more simplistically. Recently, there have been courses for that, within the municipality [*laughs*]. […] A friend of mine is working at Social Services. Once, there was a woman not responding to her mail. And then people said, 'she must be too lazy to respond' [*uses a different tone*]. But when my friend went there, it turned out her husband had left her, and had left behind a huge debt. And she had three young children. The woman was suicidal. So, when you go to her house, you understand why she is not responding. THAT! *That* is what I mean! [*frustrated tone*].

While listening to Fongers' statement, I was surprised of how much it resembled the experiences of the participants in the storytelling workshops. The anecdote she shared on the woman not responding to her letters, corresponded the previously cited notion of 'what is the story behind *that?*'. Moreover, she mentioned that stories were important, not necessarily in order to raise empathy, but to obtain a better understanding of what is going on in the "complex society". Following, I asked her: *"And so, what do you think of the Catwalk performances?"* Then, her response was more hesitant, as if trying to say something difficult in a polite way. She said:

> I thought it was (*hesitant pause*) *impressive*, the Catwalk. I also found it very entertaining. My colleagues were also very moved, they also found it *very* impressive. But (*hesitant pause*) what I did think was, you know, everyone finds it impressive. But then, afterwards, the effect *disappears* again. It fades. So, they do get an idea of the actual struggles of people. But that awareness then quickly fades again. So, I wonder how sustainable the effect is.

Fongers described how the performances, despite being moving or impressive, did not naturally lead to a having a lasting effect by changing rules or policies. Similarly, Sinding et al. (2016, 5) state that personal storytelling in public or political places can create a kind of backlash. It "may produce feeling, but at the expense of the speaker 'as moral agent and critic'" (Sinding et al. 2016, 5). It is another example of how personal storytelling can risk individualizing social problems. I then asked: "*And so, why is it even important? Do you think people at the municipality know too little about the actual life worlds of people?*". She thereupon replied:

> Yes, yes, yes, yes, definitely. The distance is *huge*. […] What we are doing from our ivory tower. And the same is happening in The Hague [*pause*]. The gap between what we observe, here in the neighbourhood, and the kind of policies that are made… That gap is *so* incredibly big. I have the feeling it is only widening.

"*So, do you mean to say this system is actually making inequality of opportunity worse?*" I asked. She responded that, although personal stories may not have the desired effect, they are still a crucial missing link. According to the statement of Fongers, personal stories were an important way in which the political system can make sense of what is going on in society. Frank (2002, 112) explained the importance of stories by saying that "people can move from experience to politics only when their experience is narratable to themselves and others, and thus made legible". Likewise, it can be argued that stories can serve as a way in which the government can move from politics back to experience, as seen in Fongers' answer:

> Yes. No doubt. Everyone has a *picture*, of why people are in debt, or why their position is marginal. And in our meritocratic society, we think 'it is their own fault.' Because we don't know the stories anymore. Maybe they should do the Catwalks in The Hague as well, HA! So that they hear the stories again.

4.2 Stories and Journeys

Now, having examined the storytelling performance conducted at the municipality of Rotterdam, another storytelling performance is examined in by the homeless young adults. A few weeks after the first workshop in the cultural centre, the homeless young adults were to give a performance at a national conference for around a hundred Youth Workers. As one of the organisers said, the idea was to "*also have their voice heard there, and to get inspired*". The young adults were very excited, either constantly moving around or sitting down quietly.

We were all placed in a separate room, an hour before the performance would start. Archell asked if anyone wanted to practice beforehand, and then one by one, they practiced their performance. Hamid and Ahmad, two of the young adults who aspired becoming a rapper, were going to do a rap as a performance. Four others, Abdul, Rayan, Ilja and Lia, were going to tell their personal story.

In the conversation the participants had during their last practices, they mostly spoke about how they could best inspire the audience. As opposed to the participants who had performed at the municipality, these young adults did not speak about missing a room for their story. They were mostly concerned with how to perform well, and which techniques they could use in order to do so. Abdul, for example, decided to sit down when telling his story, so that he would appear "*more relaxed*". Rayan had practiced to tell his story while not using his hands too much. Lia had almost completely memorised the story she would perform by heart. Then, finally, it was time to start. Everyone got up, and walked towards the conference room. "*Wow, a lot of people*", Hamid said. The supervisor of the young adults guided them until they were next to the stage, and whished them good luck. First up was Abdul, who sat down on a chair on the stage, and began his story. While talking about his personal life, he also reflected on how making mistakes and deserving second chances is something everyone encounters in their life. Next was Ilja, who shared about how a childhood in poverty had led to making the wrong choices, but how it is still possible to always choose for the "right path" again. Then, it was time for Hamid and Ahmad to perform their raps. For them, the performance was a way to "*practice becoming better at it*" as Hamid later told me.

Following, it was time for Rayan. During the workshops, he had had the hardest time sharing openly, and had tried to remain tough. Therefore, Rayan surprised everyone when he started his story with a vulnerable sentence: "*I find it scary to stand here, to share my personal story openly with all of you.*" Later on, the other young men encouraged Rayan by saying: "*That was really cool, when you just openly said that*". When Rayan had finished his story, the last to perform was Lia. Lia had had a rough life. She had experienced heavy abuse when she was a small child up, up to her teenage years. As a young teenager, she had migrated to the Netherlands, and had finally ended up becoming homeless. Yet, despite the hardships she had faced, and the disempowering circumstances she was in, her story was hopeful. While telling, she looked at the audience in a charismatic and confident way, and everyone in the audience became completely silent. She ended her story, saying: "*I have seen the deepest depths. I really*

hit rock bottom. But I am climbing back up again. I am not there yet, but I'm on my way. So, for anyone who is feeling horrible right now, know that one day, you will get out of it." When Lia had finished, there was a big applause, and around me I heard people saying *"Wow…Wow…".*

In their stories, the young adults had no intention of "making their marginal voices heard" (Ottonelli 2017), or being pitied. While walking thought the hall towards the other room, Ilja asked his supervisor: *"I think I saw pity on their faces. Do you think they pitied me?"* *"No, definitely not."* The supervisor replied. *"It was respect, I am sure of it, Ilja".* When we arrived at the separate room again, Lia said: *"Wow, I REALLY enjoyed that".* *"Why did you enjoy that so much"?* I asked her. She looked at me and said: *"Just… the kick I get out of it, you know?".* The "kick" Lia described, refers to the liberating effect of performing as a *storyteller* rather than being perceived only as a homeless person. Therefore, in giving their embodied performances, the homeless young adults could perform their stories and narrative identities beyond the category of being homeless. Considering performances as a meaning-making process for narrator and listener, Lane (2018, 34) even goes further in exploring embodied storytelling performances in itself as a *way of knowing*.

Later on, I asked some of the Youth Workers how they experienced the performances. They were excited, and one of them said: *"This could actually be performed anywhere! I mean, everywhere there are people who are struggling, but cannot openly talk about it."* The Youth Workers also described recognizing elements in their own lives, as for example one man said: *"I mean, of course I also deal with sorrow in my own life."* The recognition they described is what Ghorashi (2015, 53) calls the "surprise effect of recognition", namely having radically different lives, and yet sharing the same story. In that way, stories can make room for what is communal. "Life stories have the capacity to show ambiguity, layering and similarities, if one takes the time to listen to another person (Ghorashi 2015, 51).

As opposed to the performance at the municipality, this performance was only framed as inspirational. The storytelling performances were as much about the personal stories they shared, as about *being a good storyteller*. The participants could therefore perceive themselves as being inspirational storytellers, role models, or experts by experience, which for them was an empowering experience. Through the personal stories the participants had shared, vulnerability, hardship and resilience were framed as *universal* themes of human life. As Carger (2005, 237) has declared:

In the factual information needed to survive or the inspirational example of overcoming hardship and accepting transformation […], recounting the experiences of people is a way to see the world through a particular lens in a specific context.

Correspondingly, Ghorashi (2014, 8) aims for "safe and delayed interspaces", in which personal stories can be shared, allowing for reflections and understanding beyond dominant dichotomies. In this way, stories can serve as a source of inspiration by focussing on what is communal. Ghorashi (2014, 8) states that:

By sharing life stories one gets invited to start a journey with the narrator, a journey to different times and places, to a variety of experiences which are shared by all humans in spite of the particularities of those moments.

In overcoming hardships and dealing with difficult circumstances, the homeless young adults had also obtained knowledge and insights that could inspire others. Along the late modern culture of personal storytelling (Sandberg 2016), participants were motivated to share these insights during the journey of the storytelling performance. In this way, the storytelling performances served as a meaning making process, in which narrator and listener could start a communal journey. Stories inevitably go beyond categorization (Ingold 2011, 160), and thereby serve as a fundamental way in which knowledge can emerge and materialize (164).

*　　*　　*

It was a late afternoon, and I was sitting in the meeting room of Drop In Op Zuid. I was almost at the end of my fieldwork. In front of me, a catwalk was rolled out across the room. On the one side, Archell was standing, on the other side Nadia. Nadia was a middle-aged Dutch-Caribbean woman, who had followed a storytelling trajectory three years earlier. Since then, she had given several private and public storytelling performances. Now, both were rehearsing for a joint theatrical performance about domestic violence. Archell represented a person's future, his or her dreams and ambitions. Nadia represented the past, which she described as *"everything that is baggage, but also the material that you can use to move further."* In the performance, they slowly walked towards each other, and then planned to meet in the middle and start conversing with the audience. The performance was meant to inspire and help people suffering from domestic violence.

A week earlier, I had interviewed Nadia, Tania and Melisa, since I wanted to hear how participants who had already completed their trajectories looked back on the workshops and

Catwalk performances. Tania described that performances in front of public audiences meant most to her, as she could then really inspire people. Through her performance, she felt that she could make room for others to share their story. For Melisa, the most important thing was that the trajectory had helped her to start getting her life back on track. The last person I then interviewed was Nadia. We sat down in one of the rooms at Drop In Op Zuid. Enthusiastically, Nadia started telling me how much impact the trajectory had had on her life:

> I used to be very insecure. Never talked. But now after the storytelling, I am out of debt, I have my own car now, I am feeling very strong now. *Very* strong.

"*And is this directly because of the storytelling*?" I asked Nadia. In her response, instead of answering directly, Nadia began directly sharing her story:

> Yes, that's right. You know, I hated *everybody*, everybody. Including myself. And I hated doctors. Because my daughter died because of a mistake in the hospital. And she was only a *year and a half* [*upset voice*]. A day before, three doctors had looked at her, but they just didn't take me seriously. Even though she was already bleeding. […] And the next day, I woke up and she had died in my arms. I wanted to jump *out of the window* with her, when I saw she was dead. My mother was with me, and we went to the hospital, and my mother screamed: '*You killed her, you killed her!*' […] And there was nothing they could do. I held her until she turned blue [*whispering voice*]. […] And then, I was allowed to walk her towards the mortuary myself. And many *many* doctors and nurses came to the hallway, and closed the doors behind them, to show their support. And while I walked, her lips turned purple [*whispering voice*].

Listening to the story of Nadia almost left me speechless. It was a story full of abuse, violence and loss, the loss of her young daughter being the most traumatizing event. For Nadia, I needed to hear her story *first*, before I could really understand what the storytelling trajectory had meant for her. It was a way of illustrating the journey she had undertaken, from the point of departure up until now. She explained how, after the loss of her child, she had ended up being depressed, and fallen into debts. "*Until the Catwalk challenge*", she said. "*I now know I can do a lot more. I learned how to deal with things. I have become so strong.*' Again, I was amazed by the fact that she was now publically sharing and performing the story that she had kept silent for so long. When I asked her why, she said:

> After giving a performance, people will come up to me. And they start sharing about their lives. We share experiences… [*pause*] and insights... [*pause*], anything. It is something REAL.
>
> […] Listen, Rosa. Storytelling is not just for *us*. It is for *everyone*.

In the last sentence of Nadia's statement, "us" can be considered as a trope which hints at "us marginalized" or "us participants in Rotterdam-South". Nadia thus shared her view that the storytelling performances were something universal, something that can provide insight for "everyone". When talking about how she was practicing a performance on domestic abuse, she said that *"everywhere there are women who deal with domestic abuse. But there is a lot of shame about it, for instance about why they don't just leave their husbands. I want to share my story to break that taboo."*

Bogart (2014) states that late modernity has become liquid to such an extent, that it is changing our understanding of impact. The tiniest movements can have effects on a major scale. Bogart then argues that, in times of great uncertainties, it is stories that become necessary to frame our experiences. She explains that "those who can formulate the stories that make the world understandable will redefine the experience of those who live in it" (Bogart 2014, 5). The personal storytelling can be considered as a way in which participants could make sense of their own lives and life worlds. At the same time, the storytelling was a way in which they could tell stories to others in a cultural performance of meaning-making, as described in the words of Scott (2018, 54):

> I focus on storytelling as a cultural performance of meaning-making because identity and cultural power surface within the exchange with the potential to reiterate, challenge, dismantle, and reconstitute meanings, identity, and reality. Storytellers don't just recount past experiences, but struggle to co-create self, other, and culture.

Through storytelling performances, individuals go on a communal journey together (Ghorashi 2014), in which knowledge and insights can be shared and reflected upon. Personal stories can turn into political, societal and universal themes. "If stories are artefacts of dwelling, articulating relations of *identity* between people and places, they are just as obviously products of journeying, and thus sometimes depart from fixed itineraries, unsettle orthodox identifications, and open up horizons to new patters of association" (Jackson 2002, 31).

A Journey Made

As this narrative ethnography is in itself a form of storytelling (Symons and Maggio 2015), somewhere the story must come to an end. The central aim of this study has been to explore the personal storytelling workshops and performances as a part of the late modern culture of storytelling in which, as opposed to traditional storytelling, personal stories serve as a source of insight. It has been analysed how, during the storytelling workshops, participants could narratively make sense of their marginal socio-economic position in Dutch society. During personal reflections on their pasts, presents and futures, it was seen how participants considered personal stories as essential in understanding topics of stigmatization, individual responsibility and morality. As stated by Carger (2005, 237), recounting personal stories "represents the most fundamental way in which knowledge reveals itself".

Next to making sense of their personal lives and socio-economic position, it was seen how shared stories served as a way in which participants could move from personal to socio-political topics, such as bureaucracy, power relations and a sense of belonging in the Dutch society. In analysing their critical reflections, it was explored how, when telling personal stories, participants inevitably internalised dominant discourses. Still, through storytelling participants could shape the stories that made and unmade them (Matute 2016, 130). Another aspect of the late modern culture of personal storytelling was found in the way in which participants were motivated to share their personal stories to provide insights for others. Moreover, in practicing to become an embodied storyteller, participants could also negotiate their hybrid identity beyond categories of ethnicity or marginalisation (Ghorashi 2004). Overall, storytelling proved to be an important meaning-making process, through which participants could experience the complex and global society as a narratable place.

Finally, after having analysed the personal and political stories during the workshops, the public storytelling performances were examined in two different contexts. During a performance at the municipality of Rotterdam participants aimed to make their stories heard for the policymakers. However, the policy makers and the participants were also strongly categorized during the performance, which further closed down the socio-political space for participants. Indeed, while non-categorical character of storytelling fits with the fluidity of late modernity (Bogart 2014), liquid times also entail re-emergence of solid categories (Ghorashi 2015). In contrast, the performance of the homeless young adults conducted at a national

conference of Youth Workers showed how the performances were also a way in which participants could perform and embody their hybrid identities beyond imposed categories. In doing so, it was seen how storytelling can also form a communal journey between narrator and listener, through which knowledge can be shared and integrated.

As seen in this study, during the research I followed different contexts and locations. A disadvantage of this multi-sited research is that a broad view can be at the expense of a deeper understanding of the localized context (Falzon 2009). The researched context was the space in which storytelling workshops or performances took place, not the daily life worlds of participants. Future one-sited and in-depth research would therefore provide a valuable contribution to the field of anthropology of storytelling.

Overall, this narrative ethnography has aimed to illustrate that, as traditional grand narratives in the late modern era are eroding (Verhaeghe 2011; Achterhuis 2010), personal storytelling can serve as an important meaning-making process amidst the uncertainties of global societies. Now, what is to be said of the future of the anthropology of storytelling? I direct myself to Boylorn (2016) who, in honoring H. L. Goodall, has declared that anthropologists should answer the call of narrative ethnography (12). Boylorn (2016, 14) states that anthropologists should oppose the expectation that good researchers are "objective soulless reporters". Instead, anthropologists should focus on the messy, experiential and expressive way in which stories and storytelling can deepen our understanding of the world. Through narrative ethnography, stories will thereby help to make anthropology more relevant, accessible and engaging (Boylorn 2016). In this sense, storytelling is not a point of arrival but a mode of being in the world, "a journey made rather than an object found" (Ingold 2016, 17).

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In light of knowing the 'story behind it', this thesis also has a story behind it. I have seen many highs and lows, from being inspired and moved, to feeling uncomfortable or insecure. From sharing jokes with participants, to ending up in conversations about the meaning of life. Much of my thesis has been written in-between hospital visits for my beloved partner, and many stressful sleepless nights. But it has also been written amidst our joy, quirky jokes and profoundly meaningful conversations.

I am indefinitely grateful to Archell, who has welcomed me into the world of storytelling, and has helped me in every way possible. And finally, my biggest thanks goes out to all the participants, who allowed me to be a part of their intimate, humorous and thought-provoking stories. Each of them had to cross a threshold to dare tell and perform their vulnerable stories. I can only hope this thesis does justice to the courage of their telling.

To end, let me share one of the greatest insights I have obtained during the previous year, by quoting the words of Zadie Smith: "You are never stronger...than when you land on the other side of despair."

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