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SHIFTING THE DIALOGUE

An Ethnography of Recognition

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Thank you,

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Introduction

“Actually, because when you love them you cannot just destroy those places. I mean I read some stuff and you know there is a lot always a lot on the internet going around. So, then I go to read some more about it to see what is going on. Like with the ice that is starting to melt. Yeah, I just went to Google to read because I just wanna know more... You can’t just tell me that the environment back then is the same as now. Even here they like take care of the environment but are still like destroying it. We can’t be healthy like 100%. There is cars and those ships I don’t know but I think they are hurting the environment somehow. There’s like plastic everywhere, what can we do?”¹

For most of us there is no escaping the messages and alarm bells that have been sounding warnings of the degradation that is happening to the planet. Just like Lila, many of us are curious not only as to what is causing it to happen and for how long but most importantly; what can we do to stop it? Contemporary society is facing unprecedented realities of the persistent destruction and degradation of the planet, so intrinsically entwined with the wellbeing and lives of all humans. The planet is undergoing increasing environmental issues from air pollution, deforestation, global warming and natural disasters occurring at alarming rates (Goudie 2018). Degradation of the natural world is happening alongside social, political and economic issues such as food insecurity, gender inequality, water scarcity and poverty (Bhargava 2006). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were constructed to address such issues and operationalize sustainability on a global scale as fundamental change is being called on to secure a safe present and future (Fleming et al. 2017). Sustainability is based on the premise of committing to development that considers economic, environmental, and social bottom lines. This thesis explores both the environmental and social aspects of sustainability as they remain entangled and relevant to one another. Vulnerable groups are disproportionally at risk of the effects of environmental changes but are less involved in the decision-making making processes of countering it (Hess, Malilay, and Parkinson 2008; Rishbeth, Blachnicka-Ciacek, and Darling 2019). When people with a refugee background feature in environment-related research it is most typically centered on the plight of groups due to environmental changes stemming from climate change. Bringing significant recognition to this through their research, MacGregor, Walker, and Katz-Gerro (2019) highlight the frustrations of Somalian’s with a refugee background living in Manchester, UK that have their own perspectives on sustainability and feel their engagement potential is limited. Rarely, are individuals with a refugee background regarded as “knowing subjects with particular

¹ Quote from interview with Lila 19/03/2022.

ways of performing environmentally significant practices” (144). Through their research Meesters et al. (2022) demonstrate how sustainability governance within the Netherlands has been forged into an “institutionally white space” (2). Their education-based research highlighted this due to their curriculum mapping which indicated the education of sustainability governance is based on the authorship of Europe/North America. Discrimination and stereotypes of national, cultural and/or gender identities within education is experienced between student and teachers. Further to this, teaching pedagogy is narrowly fixated and culturally biased and instead it is crucial to create methods to encourage the inclusivity of ‘non-western’ students. Students were primarily observant of “white role models, read western ideas, and are encouraged to practice western-based academic skills.” (2) As a result, those that are neither educated nor raised in western countries remain at a significant disadvantage. This research is not situated within discussions of the mainstream Dutch education system; however, it remains an underlining factor in ensuring the accessibility of green spaces for people with a refugee background. Schusler et al. (2021) indicates through their research how the environmental field leads with a narrow ‘white’ perspective. This is visible in the lack of representation of people of color in “management, research, policy, education and other practices in the wide range of sustainability fields” (975). However, I argue that this narrow perspective is also dismissive based on citizenship status. Citizenship is not one dimensional and based solely on the legal form, however this remains a prevalent premise of discrimination not only in wider society but within green spaces (Küey 2020). The lack of recognition and inclusion is largely attributed to a key concept of this thesis; the process of racialization. Whiteness is ingrained in the process of racialization, exhibited in “spatial metaphors and practices used to police the borders of whiteness” (Nelson 2008, 43). The spatial metaphor and practices in this thesis being discourses of sustainability and nature. In restricting the access of people with a refugee background into sustainability discourse and spaces, sustainability remains a ‘white space’ that reproduces wider socio-spatial inequalities present in the lives of newcomers. It also then directly contradicts what sustainability is meant to be. Without considering all perspectives of sustainability, the discourse cannot be sustained as it disregards the intricacies present in the lives of those such as refugees. Thus the purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the decolonization of sustainability discourses (Bratman and DeLince 2022).

This thesis explores the exclusion of people with a refugee background in sustainability discourse as knowledge producers and as active participants. The betterment of the planet is not achievable if refugees continue to be restricted economically, socially and politically. With this research however, I add their exclusion from ecological participation as contradictory to the aim of materializing sustainable

development (Kennedy 2021; McGrath 2021; Stibbe and Prescott 2020). Particularly within academia and mainstream media, people with a refugee background are predominantly framed strictly as 'victims' and sufferers of post-traumatic stress. I in no way dispute that these are very real realities. Still, it is harmful and counterproductive to the lives of refugees to be categorized in this 'box'. There is much more to any individual than their trauma and as one interlocutor framed it there is also "post-traumatic growth" that is given less of a platform. The primary intention of this research was to continue the shift in the limiting and stigmatizing narratives of refugees in the Netherlands and to create a space of inclusion in the research and knowledges of sustainability. With migration and the forced displacement of people becoming a politically congested discourse, the negative connotations of the individuals involved are widely prevalent. Pozzo and Nerghe (2020) highlight the prevalence of a harsh rhetoric related to refugees in the Netherlands that repositions refugees as 'a risk' rather than being 'at risk'. Such stigmatizing discourse is harmful to the lives and wellbeing of individuals of a refugee background. This research aligns itself with understanding the lived experiences of people with refugee backgrounds to move further from such narratives. Yan, McManus, and Duncan (2018) conclude in their research that ethnic minorities were more likely to exhibit more environmentally concerned behaviors as opposed to the socially dominant (ethnic) groups. Key in their findings was that referral to (traditional) cultural values of sustainable practices would engage the knowledge and participation of ethnic minorities. Within my own research these cultural values presented themselves through the varying connections with nature that my interlocutors had. Such connections influenced the pro-environmental behaviors that induced their adoption of such practices. This research goes further into exploring processes of racialization and place-making due to the significant role they play in the everyday lives of refugees in Utrecht. This validates the intention and necessity of such widening of the conversations surrounding sustainability. Principally, talking more with people than to them regarding environmental concerns creates a sustainability discourse respectful and acknowledging of cultural differences.

Much of the societal value in this subject of refugee inclusion in sustainability discourse and decision-making is also rooted in the hegemonic anti-refugee discourse that permeates Western Europe (Kreis 2017). Discourse of this kind serves to manifest and legitimize social exclusion, in which spaces for refugees become compromised. Equally the persistent framing of refugees as 'victims' is both limiting and harmful, in that it perpetuates an imagery that removes their agency (Eberl et al. 2018). It is with this research that I contribute to a shift in this discourse as it is counter-productive to the lives of both individuals with a refugee background and the planet. Highlighted in this research is the necessity of

moving further from exclusionary conversations. I would also like to add that there is not only societal relevance here, ecologically it is crucial that discourse on sustainable practices is not limited. In such literature on place-making and the inclusion of refugees, integration is predominantly oriented on the assimilation of refugees into the 'host' country. Missing is the questioning of how place-making should also make space for the sharing and acknowledgment of the cultures, traditions, knowledge's etc. of refugees. Nonetheless, Guma et al. (2019) express refugees, like any migrant group, "introduce new cultural practices, languages, religions and traditions, foods and clothes and other artefacts" (97). Furthermore, they indicate the critical positioning of civil society in the discussion of its effect on place and the process of place-making. Part of this positioning being the capability of such a link showcasing the responses not only to refugees but the "variegated geography of refugee integration" (97). The involvement of local residents has the possibilities to support in ensuring effective social integration of refugees in which networks and personal connections are formed. However, this research will explore how this does always appears to be the case in Utrecht as local residents of the Oog in AI neighborhood remain distanced from people with a refugee background in relation to green spaces. The existing literature on the issue of refugee exclusion within sustainability narratives is immensely limited, thus contributing to the perpetuation of a 'colonized' perspective within academia. It is with this thesis that I expand the pool of this literature through understanding the perspective of individuals with a refugee background living in Utrecht. I have decided to situate this research in including an understanding of how the processes of racialization and place-making possibly affect how newcomers are able to engage in sustainable practices. Thus, I have formulated the following research question:

How are sustainable practices performed and constructed in the everyday by refugees in Utrecht, under processes of racialization and place-making?



2

Terminology – What does it mean to be “green”?

The term ‘green space’ is used to refer to spaces of vegetation that typically includes shrubs, trees and grass while being open to public access (EPA 2022). The word ‘green’ is also being increasingly used as a term to describe companies, products and services that are deemed environmentally friendly and sustainable (Kleiner 1991; Pearce 1992). For the purpose of this thesis, I have re-conceptualized the term ‘green space’. Without defining how I will utilize the term could undermine the research and the arguments that I will make. Explaining the definition of the term as it is applied in this thesis is essential for clarification, especially considering numerous studies that reference ‘green spaces’ do not make explicit how they define this term (Taylor and Hochuli 2017). The use of the topic varies across disciplines due to the differing ways in which it is focused on. For instance, an ecological paper is more likely to discuss aspects such as biodiversity due to the nature of the discipline. As an ethnographic study, the aim of this thesis is to elicit cultural features, perspectives and meanings associated with phenomena such as green spaces (Silverman 2016). For this reason, I do not limit the term to natural landscapes such as the community garden I frequently refer to. Rather I broaden this term for the sake of this research. I use it to also refer to any setting in which discourse and practices of sustainability and the environment are involved. Conducting this research led me to alter my perspective as I came to view green spaces as much more than a physical place. Instead, they are also spaces in which specific knowledge is traded and shared. This knowledge being centered on the key topics of this thesis; sustainability and the environment. For example, I consider the sustainability course I joined during my fieldwork to be a green space, as well as sustainability organizations. Green spaces in this thesis are then inclusive of spaces such as community organizations, career fields, projects and the natural world. This is befitting of the interlinking themes of

² Photo taken by Lila of the Al-Nahdain Mountain in Sana’a, Yemen.

sustainability and the environment that are the dominant topics of this research. I am aware of the nuanced meanings between the term 'environment (al)' and 'sustainability' and as such use them alongside each other to reinforce the differences. Though the environment is part of the definition of sustainability, it has an implicit focus on the protection of the natural world and the human impact on it. To use them alongside one another is not only to underline the importance of both concepts throughout the thesis but also to reengage the term sustainability with the environmental element of it.

Methodology

As a central method to ethnographic research, I carried out participant observation for the entirety of my three months of fieldwork and it was one of the central methods of data collection for this thesis. Participant observation involves 'being there' and engaging in the daily routines and activities of my research participants in order to learn of their everyday lives (Boccagni and Schrooten 2018; DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Subsequently, this allowed me to get familiar with the field and my participants within their surroundings. Most importantly, my frequent presence encouraged my participants to become familiar with my presence. Within the three months I was present weekly in the activities of three organizations: SPEAK Utrecht, Plan Einstein and Welkom in Utrecht. SPEAK Utrecht is an organization that hosts language activities in order to connect people living in Utrecht through dialogue and collaborative learning. I volunteered every Thursday to host an English corner alongside the ambassador of the organization. With Plan Einstein and Welkom in Utrecht I was invited to attend different activities and events they offered weekly. The offices of these two were right beside one another and situated opposite the building of the "*Asielzoekerscentrum*"³ (AZC). This also allowed me to observe, with proximity, the operations of community organizations in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. Due to the location of the organizations, this thesis focuses predominantly on the residents of the AZC. The residents include individuals and families both still in their asylum process and those that have completed their process and are waiting to be housed. As a result of this, my interlocutors include both asylum seekers and status-holders. I did not specify my research population further – for instance, in relation to status, gender, religion or ethnicity. As I did not want to impose unjustified further limitations on the perspectives that I received as I aimed to create an inclusive (non) academic discourse. This materialized in my research as I did not find any correlations between any of these listed and the construction of sustainable practices. The aim of this study was not to produce a sample that could be used to generalize. The perspectives I

³ English translation: Asylum seeker center

received were not linear but were instead diverse and not limiting my research population treated them accordingly as to not re-perpetuate a 'boxing' of all knowledges of my participants.

One of the projects of Plan Einstein that contributed greatly to my participant observation and the outcome of this research was Common Ground Two. It is a gardening project for people with a refugee background both living in the AZC and in housing within Utrecht. The project brings together refugees and people from the local area to encourage people to get to know one another and create a stronger sense of community amongst all residents of Utrecht. The community garden and initiative of Common Ground Two became an integral part of my research due to its embodiment of crucial aspects and concepts. Therefore, this thesis does mention it extensively as it is a significant part of each chapter. I did not plan to conduct my fieldwork there however, through a conversation about my research with a resident of the AZC they informed me about the initiative. A member of Plan Einstein put me in contact with the organizer and I began participating in March and later became an official volunteer in April and have remained so since. I also attended a short environmental and sustainability awareness course for newcomers during my fieldwork. This course was a collaboration between Plan Einstein and an environmental consultant. Throughout the thesis I will refer to this course as the 'environmental course' to shorten the title for easier reading. The snowballing of places in which I could conduct my research contributed greatly to being able to meet more participants and gain further insights. It also encouraged my visibility in the locale that in turn enabled people to be more comfortable with my presence.

As well as participant observation this research included the utilization of photo elicitation. With this method I was able to understand the first-hand perceptions my participants have of the environment and sustainability in their everyday lives, as they see it. This is not visible from viewing the photographs; however, they were a gateway into conversations (interviews) in which they informed of their perspectives. I have adopted method of photo elicitation referred to as 'native image making' as the photos were taken by my participants (Bignante 2010). This enabled the engagement and active involvement of participants, in which the authoritative voice is held by the participant in being able to interpret the material (Lapenta 2011). Photo-taking is only one dimension of this research technique as there remains the act of 'visual repatriation'. This was done to partake in creating a post-colonial photo-elicitation, achieved "by freeing photographs from their immersion within European cultural expectations", such "visual repatriation allows other ways of seeing to emerge" (Bell 2006, 192). To clarify the pictures are placed throughout the thesis not only to support the text if it relates to it but at random to insert the visions of my participants. I have done this because they were collaborators and not just participants in this research as the information is theirs.

Overall, I conducted 11 interviews however, not everyone participated in the photo elicitation. Of the 11 interviews, 5 participants were involved in the photo elicitation and their photos have been included throughout this thesis. The main reasons for those not participating in the photo elicitation were due to busy schedules and uncertainty of what to capture as some were not interested in photography. For these interviews I followed the semi-structured method as its conversational tone and flexibility enabled my participants to express themselves more freely, thus encouraging the capacity to uncover important information that may have been missed in a structured interview (Doyle 2022). Semi-structured interviews also allowed me to carry out the aim of this research which was to gather distinctive perspectives as opposed to a generalized understanding of the themes discussed throughout this thesis (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021). I also utilized the many informal conversations that I had with interlocutors throughout my fieldwork. These informal conversations were a form of 'soft' interviewing that enabled me to gain a deeper insight into the perspectives that people wanted to share with me (O'Reilly 2012). Furthermore, they were indicative of much vital insights that many not have surfaced in a formal interview.

Positionality and ethics

Throughout the process of conducting this research I had to critically reflect on my position as a researcher. It was incredibly important that I carried out this research in a way that was neither exploitative nor extractive. I am aware of my position as someone that is not only producing research but was also born and raised in the global North. The center-point of this research is diversifying the voices included in sustainability discourse. While my role as researcher of the 'North' is not something that can be changed in this research, it remains central to this work that such local knowledge and voices are incorporated and given the central position in this study. The adoption of photo elicitation and the inclusion of photos throughout has supported the attempt in decentering my perspective and instead focus on the realities presented by my interlocutors. For positionality and ethical reasons, I will alternate between the use of the terms 'refugees' and 'newcomers' (Fallon 2018). There are instances in this thesis in which there lacks specific details about my interlocutors. This is primarily to avoid the possibility of their identities being revealed, where specific details could give this away. This is particularly true in the first section of Chapter 2. While I understand that information such as native country, age and gender may be important, I prioritize the anonymity of my participants.



4

Thesis structure

Structured across four chapters, the perspectives of my interlocutors are synthesized with conceptual analysis in order to construct a conceptualization of the data collected. Each chapter examines the prominent concepts key to answering the main and subsidiary research questions. Additionally, through utilizing these concepts each chapter will provide an answer to one of the four subsidiary research questions. These subsidiary research questions serve to construct a clear understanding of the main research questions and concepts included in it.

The first chapter of this thesis, 'Being in the Green' will address the first sub-question: What are the everyday lived experiences of the environment for refugees in Utrecht? To do this and lay the groundwork for the following concepts of the thesis, this chapter will explore the experience of nature-connectedness. Nature-connectedness is integral in outlining the interest that newcomers have in the

⁴ Photo taken by Samuel in Utrecht of a landscape featuring grass, a bike, building and the sky.

environment. The attachments that people have to the natural world are informative not only of their perceptions regarding the environment but of their pro-environmental tendencies, displayed in the adoption of sustainable practices.

In the second chapter the notable influence of place-making within the everyday lives of people with a refugee background is examined. The subsidiary question of this chapter is: How is place-making engaging and integrating the knowledge of refugees? Place-making is critical in ensuring that green spaces are accessible and embody inclusion as these effects how newcomers can perform and construct sustainable practices. Community organizations and their initiatives engage in their own process of place-making that has the capacity to sustain the sense of place that is created and neglect them that furthers the experience of unfairness. This particularly impacts the opportunities present for refugees in green spaces. The presence of community organizations for people with a refugee background in Utrecht is visible through activities and events they offer. The provision of sustainability-related activities is not a commonality but the existing ones play an important role in how people with a refugee background are able to integrate specifically into green spaces.

Racialization is the overarching concept of the third chapter as it explores how the process of racialization impacts the accessibility of green spaces for individuals with a refugee background. To do this, the chapter explores the answer to the question: How does the process of racialization inform meanings of the natural world? This is displayed in the variety of the activities offered and in the use of terms of difference that further exacerbate the exclusion of people with a refugee background from green spaces. Racialized groups have different experiences of green spaces due to the misconceptions of who such spaces exist for. This is notable through the racialization of nature but is also reflected in the community dynamics. Specifically, how local neighbors of those residing in the AZC limit their interaction. Community participation is also necessary to explore when assessing the social sustainable development in Utrecht.

The main research question seeks to understand the sustainable practices that are performed by people with a refugee background in Utrecht. However, it is necessary to understand: What constitutes a 'sustainable practice'? Chapter four explores how newcomers engage in sustainable practices that are both ecologically and socially sustainable. When I planned this question, I had not considered socially sustainable practices and instead focused on activities directed at directly limiting the degradation of the natural environment. However, as will be discussed in this chapter, newcomers are contributing to the development of a socially sustainable society in Utrecht. This chapter comes last as the previous chapters serve to provide the context in which these practices occur. Following from this chapter, the conclusion

of this thesis will synthesize the concepts discussed throughout each of the chapters to provide a holistic answer and understanding of the main research question.

Chapter 1: Being in the Green

If you go to any search engine and type in the words “refugees” and “nature”, you will find a plethora of literature that limits their discussions to refugees as victims of nature and articles that discuss the ‘nature’ of the migration of refugees. You may also stumble across a few that instead place refugees *within* nature as storytellers and producers of knowledge. If there is one thing, I learned throughout my fieldwork it is: if you don’t ask no one will ever know. Without wanting to know I would not have been able to learn of all the ways in which nature means a great deal to the individuals I spoke to. At the core of my main research question, underlining the sustainable practices that one might partake in, is the connection and value that nature might hold. Sustainability considers both environmental degradation and the conditions of society and as such the two are intrinsically interconnected with one another (Martin et al. 2020). As a result, I will explore them in this way, not only in this chapter but throughout the thesis. Additionally, environmental attitudes are invented through an assembly of the behavioral intensions, beliefs, and affect “a person holds regarding environmentally related activities or issues” (Schultz et al. 2004, 31). These ‘environmentally related activities’ are also found in taking frequent walks in order to spend time nature, as did many of my interlocutors. Participating in the community garden initiative of Common Ground Two was essential to the understanding I gained of the connections and perceptions that newcomers have with nature. Place-based perspectives provide an appreciation for local interactions and grasp “the interactive co-evolution of human communities with other species” that enables new ways of conservation-thinking (294). Forging connections and contact with nature present significant opportunities in an individual's likeliness of gaining improvements to both their health and wellbeing as well as pro-environmental behaviors (Wilkie and Trotter 2022; Basu, Hashimoto and Dasgupta 2019). The contact and connections with nature hold stories and meanings often associated with an individual's state of mind. These connections have the possibility of maintaining a positive impact on an individual's wellbeing. This is not to presume that to be merely in the presence of nature that there will have said impact, rather there must also be some form of emotional engagement present. Further to the impact on wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviors, part of my findings included the relation and sentiments of ‘home’ that nature contact fostered for my interlocutors. The connections between people with a refugee background and nature is largely unrecognized due to the invalidation of cultural backgrounds that deviate from the ‘norm’, this being the borders within racialization (Forest Preserve Foundation 2020).

At ease

“When you have a burden in your mind, it relaxes you”⁵

Renel, a Pakistani economics graduate, spends her weeks completing shifts at a nearby restaurant. She also attends numerous classes such as English and embroidery. Joesph, also from Pakistan is a business graduate and volunteers at a repair café. “We have a lot of stress you know, so it is nice to go for walks all the time”⁶, Renel said after I asked them both why they go for walks every day. They had previously mentioned taking the photos was easy for them as they are frequently walking through the neighborhood. They continued to describe specific characteristics of nature that most appealed to them. They told me of the ‘calmness’ and ‘peace’ that green spaces offer them. Being in green spaces contributes a great deal to the improvement of mental health and wellbeing for refugees, as many struggle with the mental distress that often follows traumatic experiences, they have experienced prior, during and as a result of their displacement (Uldall et al. 2022). I make note of this not to fall into a typical research disposition and rhetoric, rather I wish to present the responses I received from my interlocutors when discussing their sought-out contact and personal connections with nature. Being in nature replaces vulnerable groups within their local surroundings by reducing social isolation and allows them to feel more relaxed and present (Leavell 2019). Consequently, their psychological well-being is positively impacted. Further to this, in combatting the social isolation refugees often experience it is easier for newcomers to access social networks that are crucial in their access to green spaces. Their descriptions of their perceptions and values of the natural world tell of their connectedness to nature itself. She continued “We are covered with artificial things that have negative effects and being in nature takes the negative things out of your mind and relaxes your mind...it feels good. But we spend a lot of time on the phone because there is not a lot for us to do”⁷. While the frequent use technologies as a form of entertainment can negatively impact one’s connection with nature, newcomers use their natural surroundings to detach themselves from this (Rosa and Collado 2019). As well as the positive impacts on the psychological wellbeing of newcomers, ecopsychologists argue that one’s connection to the natural world is key to the adopting of ecological behaviors. Such behaviors are achieved due to the positive emotional association with nature that elicits “a stronger sense of morality toward the environment” (2). This was visible in the fact that both Renel and Joesph both attended an environmental course in which they were both proactive in their engagement in the sessions.

⁵ Quote from interview with Renel 30/03/2022.

⁶ Quote from interview with Joesph 30/03/2022.

⁷ Quote from interview with Renel 30/03/2022.



8

Lila is a young woman from Yemen, where she completed an undergraduate degree and in Utrecht, she attends various classes. I met her for the first-time during a women’s embroidery evening class, of which she was also a participant. She and I became closer over the period of the fieldwork and built a friendly rapport with one another. During our interview, I presented the above picture to her and commented on how beautiful the mountain looked after which I asked her “Why did you take this picture of the mountains” she replied:

“So, the mountains were such a nice place where all of me and my friends used to visit in Yemen, when we wanted to meet maybe for a picnic or some lunch. I loved going there, really. It has such an amazing view over the city but really it was just so peaceful up there. I really felt free, like nobody was watching me and I could just be myself and have fun with my friends. Everything was so quiet, being in the city there is so much always happening but being in the nature was just so calm”⁹

This account of the sentimental meaning that being in nature landscapes reinforces the sentiments shared by Renel and Joesph. That nature conjures not only feelings of calmness and peace but also freedom. Here Lila expresses her ability to be present as herself and without the worry of external critique. Ridder’s

⁸ Photo taken by Lila of the Ala’ashash Mountain in Sana’a, Yemen.

⁹ Quote from interview with Lila 19/03/2022.

(2005) concept of 'nature-based autonomy' attests to the experiences shared by Lila, Renel and Joesph. Nature-based autonomy refers to one's dissatisfaction with values that are inflicted from wider society on individuals that result in feelings of entrapment and a loss of autonomy. This dissatisfaction stems from an 'alienation of experience' that takes its roots in technological dependence, disregard for marginalized peoples and community breakdown. As a result of this alienation individuals tend to place nature in a favorable position as opposed to society. This is also due to the 'wildness of nature', as it is associated with much spontaneity and "processes that are autonomous from human demands" (1). This sought-after freedom and lack of restraints from social processes is showcased in the interview quote of Lila. "You know the rooms are not really good, there is a lot of mess"¹⁰ Joesph tells me that the condition of his room is another factor in his adoration for being in green spaces. With a mild frustration in his tone that he always attempts to cover with a cheerful smile, he tells me that the rooms are dire as there are cockroaches, and little is done to fix these issues. The witnessing and experience of community breakdown and disregard for marginalized peoples is reinforced in this admission. Due to this, Joesph likes to spend as little time there as possible as it has a negative impact on his mental health. Exploring the positive influences of nature connectedness on wellbeing is important as therein lies an alternative means to both include people with a refugee background in green spaces while contributing to their social stability (Weir 2020). With much importance placed on ensuring the integration of newcomers into Dutch society it is first necessary to consider the vitality of their wellbeing and mental health. Though my mention of mental health and wellbeing may seem misplaced in a thesis based on sustainable practices, it is indeed integral. Sustainability itself is based on the convergence of planetary and social health, with neither existing without the other. Mental health and wellbeing lie within social health and without this it continues to be difficult to ensure the health of the planet (Dybdahl and Lien 2017). To be able to holistically achieve the integration of refugees into Dutch society and its green spaces, it is critical to consider their wellbeing and how nature plays a significant role for many. Integration requires first the recognition of the realities that people with a refugee background face.

As one and the same

"We are nature itself"¹¹

Being in contact with nature is accomplished predominantly through spending time in areas that offer the opportunity to interact with animals, plants and landscapes. Nonetheless, it remains true that seeking

¹⁰ Quote from interview with Joesph 30/03/2022.

¹¹ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

contact and a connectedness with nature is not solely done through a physical presence. Such contact can also be found through watching television shows, movies and documentaries. After meeting for a coffee and taking a stroll through Wilhelminapark, Adam and I were having a conversation about our favorite things to watch while we eat. We admitted to one another that we have a rather unhealthy habit of always needing to watch a series or movie during every meal. He told me that he prefers to watch nature documentaries, preferably docuseries as these typically feature episodes based on different topics. When I asked him why this stood out to him more than a normal documentary, he explained that this way he would be able to learn about a variety of different parts of nature. When I shared that I also really like to watch documentaries about nature and the environment he became excited that we had this in common. “No way, you like them as well! Are your favorite ones also the ones that have the voiceover thing with David Attenborough?”¹² Further in our conversation, Adam explains to me that watching nature documentaries reminds him of all the other “beautiful creatures” that we share the planet with. He told me “We have to remember that we are not the only ones here, no we are just one of many. We need to respect the animals and all of the nature”. Here Adam signals another key aspect of nature connectedness by perceiving humans as an inherent part of nature. Schultz’s (2004) reiterates through their research how one’s belief and attempt to decenter humans from the natural world is indicative of a relationship and connection with nature. In viewing humans as part of nature as opposed to separate or above it, the likeliness that a person will also adopt biospheric values is greater. Biospheric values refer to having concern for the natural world and its condition. Emplacing humans as an ‘equal member of the ecological community’ (Mayer and Frantz 2004) bridges the gap between holding biospheric values and adopting ecological behaviors. Ecological behaviors extend past the borders of biospheric values as they involve the implementation of actions that are directly for the preservation and improvement of the environment.

“I like to wear makeup, so I think it is better to use the reusable makeup wipes than the ones in the packet because they are not good for the planet, it’s a lot of waste. And you know what I hate as well, seeing plastic in the water. You see it in the canals and it’s not fair on the animals. This is why I use less plastic.”¹³

Ecological behaviors include but are not limited to, committing to environmental organizations, recycling, reducing waste and managing consumerism (Kaiser and Wilson 2006). Deriving from the field of psychology, this research provides a synthesis of the underlining cognitive determinants of conclusions

¹² Quote from conversation with Adam 25/02/2022.

¹³ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

reached by individuals such as Adam. As well as forming a connection with the natural world, Adam acted upon his biospheric values by volunteering in a community gardening activity as well ensuring he was limiting his food waste. While Adam exemplifies the bridging of values for the environment and ecological behavior my research displayed this was not always the case. Inka had a deep appreciation and concern for nature but did not actively engage in ecological behaviors. Inka was a young woman in her late 20s from Iran that had been living in Utrecht for 2 years. Of these 2 years she was living in the AZC for 10 months and has since been housed. She was a very soft-spoken woman and spent a great deal attending activities as her mission was to make friends in her new city. “The thing is Asanté I have no clue where to start or what I can even do. I hate what is happening really, but I am also just trying to just get through the day to day.”¹⁴ While nature connectedness stands to encourage one's likeliness to adopt ecological behaviors and an interest in environmental protection, this is not to ignore the realities of people with a refugee background and its impact on their ability to engage in such behaviors.

¹⁴ Quote from interview with Inka 05/03/2022.

Carrying the torch



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I spent a great deal of my fieldwork attending a community garden in Lombok that is just a 1.3km walk to the AZC. The community garden is home to allotments divided up and tended to by various organizations and initiatives. I spent two months of my fieldwork carrying out participant observation with the initiative Common Ground Two that is part of the organization Plan Einstein. Plan Einstein is an organization in Utrecht that focuses on the integration of people with a refugee background with other residents of Utrecht. The entire garden is an ocean of green and splashes of color from the vibrant flowers that interrupt the landscape. The allotment of Common Ground Two features an assortment of beautiful flowers and plants but also patches of zucchini, strawberry and an abundance of mint and potatoes. Most participants in the garden were residents of the AZC, with a few that had a refugee background but have housing in Utrecht. The garden hosted a truly diverse group of individuals from Eritrea, Syria, Yemen, Iran,

¹⁵ Photo taken by Samuel of his land in Yemen.

Australia, the Netherlands and El Salvador. Being in the garden presented incredible opportunities to learn both from and with individuals with different experiences, knowledge and cultures of gardening. Participating in the gardening project held memories of 'home' for many of my interlocutors. With most usually attending with prior experience they gained in their native countries.

*"I love it honestly. In my country I have a very big garden. Well it is not really a garden, but it is maybe three times bigger than this and we grow all different kinds of fruits and vegetables. More than is possible to grow here because it is much warmer. Yeah when I came here, I really loved it, because it reminds me of my country and it's nice because I can still grow the vegetables like I did before. But you know the most important thing for me is to be here in the nature really, I love it."*¹⁶

Samuel and I met in the garden, where he had been volunteering for over a year. He participated in the photo elicitation, during which he mentioned the above quote to me. Samuel is from Yemen and has been living in the Netherlands for over 2 years. A very witty and humorous man he relishes in explaining the knowledge he had acquired from his time tending to his large plot of land in Yemen. During this conversation, in all his excitement for discussing the garden, he explained the joy he felt when he found this one through the organization Plan Einstein. He also never hesitated to teach me the ways of the garden that he learned in Yemen. From tending to troublesome weeds, providing growing vegetables with the necessary compost to ensure their survival and knowing how to spy a grape vine that is hanging in distress from its crushing weight. Passing on his knowledge to me displayed how green spaces allow newcomers to 'carry the torch' of their native countries. This refers to the ability of newcomers to continue to utilize the knowledge and experiences they already possess. Being in the garden I noticed an easy way to decipher those that had the experience and deep understanding of horticulture to those that were 'newbies' or still adjusting. Samuel never wore gloves in the garden, he was not shy from getting the soil under his nails and all over his hands. This may sound superficial, but I have never gardened, and I still wear gloves because I am not yet that confident. However, through watching, learning and mirroring Samuel I have become less squeamish about the touch of the soil. The confidence and knowledge that Samuel bestows on those in the garden is indicative of his attempt to continue his connection to his home country. While researchers on nature-connectedness provide a significant understanding of how such values and behaviors form, there is no mention of the role nostalgia plays in this connection people may have with nature. I argue that nostalgia contributes to newcomers forming a connection with nature in Utrecht that is typically based on their previous experience with nature-spaces (Rishbeth and Finney

¹⁶ Quote from conversation with Samuel 15/03/2022.

2006). Nostalgia evokes sentiments of the lives that newcomers lived in their native countries that in turn maintains hope of returning to this life. These experiences of nostalgia mean people with a refugee background attempt to connect their “local practices and transnational loyalties” (Norocel, Hellström and Jørgensen 2020, 4). In attempting to retain a sense of connection with their native countries, newcomers are engaging in green spaces such as gardens to continue their own cultures and practices. Notwithstanding, newcomers still attempt to actively attempt to integrate and utilize this nostalgia in their process of integrating into Dutch society through green spaces.

“Yeah when I saw your post on Facebook, I thought yes, it is really important. I really care about the environment a lot, I always have since I was a child. It is how I was raised. In our culture nature is important and we are taught to take care of it. From my childhood I was always taught to take care of nature and how valuable it is.”¹⁷

Adela shares her enthusiasm and adoration for nature stemming from her upbringing. Owing to her Yazidi heritage, she informed me she was raised to be considerate of all beings of nature, this including humans in this (Alibrahim 2021). Like Samuel, here Adela reinforces how maintaining connections with nature endures the connections that refugees have with their own cultures. This also demonstrates how connections with nature are also inherent and taught within cultures to be ingrained as part of life. The meanings and attachments that newcomers have of the natural world is described by Sen and Nagendra (2020) to be ‘environmental place-making’. This entails the creation of a collective identity that forges “a collective identity for a place of nature, as a shared social-ecological ‘place’” (411). The position of culture and existence of various cultures within green spaces is exemplary of how environmental place-making embodies a transcultural and integrative process (Sen and Nagendra 2018). Integrative regarding the co-existence of multiple views that share “the pursuit of conserving natural spaces as commons” (40). Though I emphasize that environmental place-making conserves ‘green spaces’ to be ‘commons’. Furthermore, recognizing these cultural (and religious) influences enables people with a refugee background to integrate into Dutch society without the expectation of assimilation. This would disregard the vital understandings and perceptions that individuals such as Samuel and Adela have of green spaces. Understandings that remain critical in constructing pro-environmental behaviors and subsequently sustainable practices. Re-establishing nature with a collective identity is important in ensuring the inclusiveness of green spaces. This point will be critical when reading chapter 3 that explores how green spaces are branded due to the process of racialization. In this chapter I have set out to demonstrate how

¹⁷ Conversation with Adela on 17/02/2022.

green spaces are integral in the everyday lives and wellbeing's of people with a refugee background. As previously discussed, access to green spaces lies in the involvement and influence of the community initiatives also responsible for their existence. While individuals of a refugee background engage in place-making, in the following chapter I will delve further into the attendance of community initiatives and how the practicing of sustainability and place-making overlap and entangle with one another.

Chapter 2: Being in attendance

In the lives of newcomers, place-making is a central element in the navigation of their new surroundings. In this chapter I will first discuss the role of community initiatives and the organizers that lead them. Place-making involves the collaboration of local actors that work to recreate (public) spaces with the aim of promoting community-building and interaction that in turn creates a 'sense of place' for refugees (Eckenwiler 2018). Furthermore, places themselves hold much responsibility in the process of place-making in that they can either be "created and sustained, transformed, or neglected in ways that foster or perpetuate inequities" (562). This was reflected within my research as the conditions of the AZC were often described as "not good" by my interlocutors. This was due to insufficient maintenance of the building and rooms that led to the presence of ants, mice and cockroaches. Such conditions do not reflect a place in which the surroundings are sustained for suitable livability. However, I learned community initiatives mold how specific settings impact place-making. Places are not a standalone physical entity with such capabilities, rather community initiatives in Utrecht embody them. The relationships that are formed between organizations and newcomers inform the sense of place created. Place-making is intricately bound to spaces of sustainability and environmental discourse. These discourses include "frameworks of meanings about the biogeophysical world and its natural and social qualities" as well as economic and social development (Mels 2017,1). The creation and availability of places in which refugees can participate through knowledge exchange ensures that there is access to engage in such discourses. Without the collaboration of local actors such as the participants in the environmental course I will discuss in the second half of this chapter, these spaces would not be possible. As well as the environmental course, these spaces take shape in the form of the range of activities that community organizations in Utrecht offer. Creating a sense of place is neither linear nor absolute and is not always 'made'. For instance, the lack of opportunities presents for refugees to volunteer in sustainability organizations highlights this. Through my interlocutors it is possible to identify the entanglement and intersections of such concepts.

Place in the making



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I am starting to get the hang of gardening a little bit more now, so Charlene has given me the task of weeding and preparing a patch for us to sow in some beautiful flowers. So, I set about this task, enjoying the rare sunshine that we are getting today. Charlene walks over and stoops down beside me to give a helping hand in pulling out some of the stubborn weeds. She begins checking in with me to see how I am finding the garden and the project. They are a parcel after all but still stand-alone, but I assure her that I love both the same. We talk a little bit about my research, and I explain to her the inclusive aim of it. She tells me “It’s good because people can be really insensitive when they speak with refugees” Charlene follows this by asking me if I would like to be a volunteer in the garden. That this would mean I would need to be a little bit more independent and instead help her with creating small events. I would also need to check on everyone from time to time so she does not have to do it alone. I am ecstatic at the opportunity and eagerly agree. “Yeah, I need more people like you that are a little bit more aware, you know...to be a little bit more sensitive and understanding” she says with a warm smile and a nod of encouragement in my direction. ¹⁹

¹⁸ Photos taken by Samuel of the community garden project of Common Ground Two.

¹⁹ Vignette from field notes of 5/04/2022.

To provide further context to the vignette, Saturdays are typically busier than the weekdays, as most participants are either working or have classes. In the Tuesday session an average of 5 people join, as opposed to an average of 10 on Saturday. Due to the busyness of Saturday's the project manager of the garden would often be seen pacing around the garden. This was to ensure that all participants had something to work on but were most importantly enjoying themselves. Each session I would observe the organiser making rounds of the garden and offering a warm welcome to all that attended, regardless of if they shared no common language. If this was the case, she would surely head to her Google Translate app to accommodate the static conversation. This conversation exemplifies a crucial part in the attendance of community initiatives and projects. Involved in various activities and events is the element of attempting to build connections between individuals living in the AZC and throughout the city of Utrecht. I have chosen to include this vignette to underline the duty and responsibility that community organizations have regarding the forming of safe and welcoming spaces for individuals with a refugee background. In this sense, place-making is not only forged by newcomers themselves, as I also observed how community organizations engage themselves in place-making. This vignette allows a peek into this. Wyckoff (2014) argues that place-making builds up to the creation of 'quality spaces', such 'quality places' differ abstractly from places such as a bus station. While this constitutes a place, 'quality places' feature characteristics such as connectedness, allowing 'authentic experiences', sociability and accessibility. In making it their mission to encourage a welcoming space in the garden, the project manager has created a quality space in which participants feel connected through nature. In the first chapter I detailed the diverse backgrounds of origin of the garden participants. A key part of being in this environment meant learning of different ways of carrying out horticultural activities. There was often a giving and absorbing of knowledge from the home countries of the garden participants. This both reflected and enabled the 'authentic experiences' that Wyckoff puts forth. Charlene's activeness in creating a sociable environment in which participants could get to know one another laid the groundwork for participants to work together. Naturally conversations would transpire when working on a specific task together, whether that be preparing the ground for sowing or harvesting. Participants were willing to share their expertise in a task, knowledge that they had learned in their native countries. Accessibility is also integral to creation of a quality place and the locality of the garden to the AZC also ensured that it was not out of reach for those who do not yet have a bicycle. The connectedness that newcomers have with nature and the benefits it has for them such as their wellbeing and ability to remain connected to their native countries also proliferate in the construction of quality places within community organizations. Furthermore, in reconstructing green spaces such as the community garden as a quality place for people with a refugee

background, this begins the deconstruction of it as a 'white space' from which racialized groups are alienated. This deconstruction of green spaces is further visible in the environmental course led by Moise, of which I will discuss further in this chapter.

Furthermore, Wyckoff (2014) details four types of 'quality places': standard, strategic, creative and tactical. Creative place-making centres itself on the involvement of actors such as the community sector in establishing projects and activities of arts and culture to bring diverse people together. Within my research I strongly observed the forming of creative spaces throughout the community organizations that I spent my time with. Each organization offered an abundance of activities, often an overabundance. I mention this as many of my interlocutors both organisers and participants remarked that this overabundance meant activities often clashed. Regardless these activities and events primarily centred on offering spaces in which residents of the AZC and the wider Utrecht community were able to share and learn of different cultures together. Activities would often feature crafts such as embroidery, jewellery making and crochet, sports or cooking. Many of the events would include group dining, live music and topic discussions. One such event I attended in a restaurant next to the AZC was for all local Utrecht residents and residents of the AZC to learn about Ramadan. During this event different activities were arranged for attendees to get to know each other, their reason for attending the event and their knowledge or experience of Ramadan. These activities included performed poetry and an acoustic performance. Over 20 people attended this event and at the end of the evening, when the sun had set, we all sat together to enjoy Romanian traditional dishes to break Iftar²⁰. This event exemplified the possibilities of using arts and culture to create spaces in which a group of people with diverse backgrounds can connect with one another. With organizations situated next to the AZC, their activities are exclusively for residents of the AZC. Nevertheless, they still offered the chance to learn of other cultures either amongst the group of attendees or as the point of the activities. The arguments of Guma et al. (2019) further this discussion as they state people with a refugee background, like any migrant group, "introduce new cultural practices, languages, religions and traditions, foods and clothes and other artefacts" (97). In this way community organisations in Utrecht maintain a pivotal role in diverting from the typical 'assimilation' rhetoric that is most present in integration discourse for newcomers. Janssens (2015) argues that the assimilation of newcomers has long been a feature within Dutch immigration policy owing to the lack of recognition between integration and assimilation. Though the government stated the policies were to integrate newcomers they were situated within an expectation of assimilation. This meaning that

²⁰ Iftar refers to the evening meal that observes the breaking of daily fasting for Muslims during Ramadan.

newcomers are expected to become like the Dutch, such an expectation does not recognize how newcomers and their culture can contribute to Dutch society and green spaces. The abandoning of this assimilation expectation further allows refugees to integrate their own knowledge and experiences into Dutch society rather than having to abandon them. Through this valuable example of place-making those with skills and interest in participating in sustainability can be included in the space.



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Place-making is not a straightforward or one-dimensional process. Community organizations can reinforce the precarity within the lives of people with a refugee background and particularly those residing in the AZC (Ertorer 2021). During a photo elicitation interview I asked about these two photos shown above; one of a cat and another of a car covered in snow. The participant told me these photos were taken in the neighbourhood of one of their previous “camps”²². After detailing their love for this cat and explaining emphatically their newfound love for snow as it was their first time experiencing it, a volunteer from one of the local organisations walked past. At this point the mood of my interlocutor and the conversation

²¹ Photos taken by Joesph. The left photo is of his cat and the right is of his first car in Germany.

²² This is in quotations due to the frequent use of the term by my interlocutors.

changed. They went on to explain that they and people they knew in the AZC believed the workers of the organizations next to the AZC forward information they tell them to the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). COA does not have the greatest reputation amongst many of my interlocutors, particularly due to their aiding of police in the removal of individuals from the AZC. My interlocutor explained that any information AZC residents disclose can be used against them during the procedures. Thus, they feel as though they must be careful when attending activities as they believe organizers may relay details to COA. This experience underlines a contrast in how community organizations are present in the process of place-making. As stated in the introduction places can either be sustained or they can be neglected so they foster inequities. The presence of mistrust in community organisations deters residents of the AZC from joining their initiatives, thus counteracting their very purpose of creating an inclusive environment in which refugees can integrate. The creation of 'quality places' is stunted as connectedness cannot be achieved without trust. Regardless of whether this is hearsay or not, this represents an "internal, personal and subjective view of social space" from which it is possible to grasp social experiences (Trudeau 2006, 437). Though organizations in Utrecht perform a critical role in place-making for newcomers, it remains personal and subjective. This is a critical point not only for this chapter but the entirety of this thesis, all the realities and experiences presented are not mutually exclusive and do not cancel each other out but rather portray alternate standpoints. This is also visible in the next section of this chapter.

Accessing the alternatives

*"I lived here in this room in the corner for 1 year and there are 6 persons living with me and 24 hours, winter and summer, the heater was on. Yeah, and even the tap...the water taps was broken, and I made a complaint to the COA about it because the water was leaking. For three months I asked them to fix it. Yeah, so there are double problems, from the people living here and from the COA. And it is water and energy. So that is my idea, if any newcomer came as an asylum seeker or from another community...if we are at least making training for them, it will give them some beliefs about what they have to do"*²³

Before the beginning of my fieldwork, I contacted Moise, a professor in the process of promoting a sustainability course for newcomers in Utrecht. The aim of this pilot course was to provide newcomers the opportunity to learn about sustainability within the Netherlands. Furthermore, it was designed to decipher its capability to be included in the official process of newcomer integration in the Netherlands.

²³ Quote from interview with Moise 18/03/2022.

Those in attendance of the course included 7 individuals with a refugee background and 1 member of staff of Plan Einstein. It was a learning environment with much diversity as the group included newcomers from Egypt, Pakistan, Yemen and Palestine. In an interview with the organizer of this course, Moise spoke of his boredom with the activities offered by the community organizations for newcomers. The organizations, though separate, mostly featured the same weekly activities such as learning Dutch or English, computer lessons, craft and sports. Moise is PhD educated and a professional in the ecosystem and environmental field. He began his lengthy career in his native country; Egypt and is the CEO of an environmental impact assessment company. There was nothing that he could do that reflected his interests in the environment and sustainability. As a result of this Moise searched for volunteering roles within organisations focused on the environment and sustainability. After gaining his residency, it was his experiences that encouraged him to establish his own programme that would allow future newcomers of all backgrounds to engage in topics of sustainability. Underlining this venture is the embodiment and requisition of agency, visible within the commanding of his relevant skills in order to engage in organizing practices (Long 2001). Agency is particularly constructive in this discussion as acknowledging the agency of people with a refugee background deters regressing to a rhetoric in which they are emplaced superficially as 'victims'. The recognition of agency in this regard positively contradicts this sentiment and observe newcomers in positions they can dictate and transform their own circumstances (Scheibelhofer 2019). I do not suggest a tone-deaf approach of overemphasising the possibilities of using sustainability and the environment as a means of integration (Jacobs 2021). It would be tone-deaf to ignore the vulnerable situations of people with a refugee background and place responsibility beyond their capabilities given this. Instead, I place emphasise of ensuring inclusion and the space to allow the space for individuals like Moise and the attendees of his environmental course engage in such topics should they choose to. Rather a balanced approach is required; one that recognizes the difficulties refugees face as well as their agency. Furthermore, Moise's course is an example of place-making that is directly challenging the 'assimilation' rhetoric. Such effective place-making permits the exchange of knowledge that people with a refugee background have regarding sustainability. As a result of this, the participation in a sustainable citizenship is made possible through the ability to autonomously perform sustainable practices in green spaces like Moise's environmental course.

Community participation is an important element of sustainable development which the Utrecht community organizations are encouraging through their work (Davids et al. 2009). In their mission of providing means through which members of the Utrecht community can engage with one another, they directly contribute to the development of a sustainable society. This demonstrates the capabilities of

community organizations in the social aspect of sustainability. Utrecht hosts several sustainability and environmental organizations, however; I focus on the organizations I spent my time with over the course of my fieldwork. Within these I observed a minimal focus designated to the planetary aspect of the sustainability goals. Though not non-existent, this disparity became visible not only during my observations but in the interviews, I had with my interlocutors.



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Paul (1986) states ", community participation refers to an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receiving a share of project benefits." The Netherlands in the context of development is a country active in its investment in a multitude of avenues for the progression of sustainable development (Dutch Fund for Climate and Development 2020). The mission of the country to restore the environment and social sphere is carried

²⁴ Photo taken by Adela of flowers blooming in a field of grass and her shadow. She captioned this photo: **Nature is always [a] piece of art.**

out not only through technological investments but is visible in the range of sustainable organizations operating throughout the Netherlands. What is notable is the necessity for such organizations to operate in a manner that is inclusive of members of the community including individuals with a refugee background. Through my research I learned how sustainability as a space remains widely exclusionary to individuals with a refugee background. As told through the words of my interlocutors and my own observations during my fieldwork, such spaces typically operate without the presence and consideration of newcomers. I met Adela at an embroidery activity evening for women in De Voorkamer and she coincidentally saw a post I had made on Facebook about my research and contacted me to participate. Adela is a young Yazidi woman, who has lived in the Netherlands since her early childhood and is a law graduate. After receiving her incredible photos, each with a creative caption, Adela and I met for an interview. We chose the empty terrace of a quiet and tucked-away café as this is where she felt most comfortable as she later revealed that she feels most confident speaking when outdoors as opposed to being inside. She tells me “Being a refugee, it is hard to feel included. There is no seat at the table”.²⁵ She continued by explaining that sustainability organizations fail to maintain an intake of volunteers or employees with a refugee background, and this creates an exclusion for the group. While newcomers may be attendees and the target audience of such projects, there is a fundamental lack of representation within leadership roles. Failing to create representation of newcomers of leadership positions means excluding part of the Utrecht community. Furthermore, the skills and knowledge that refugees have gained prior to their resettlement becomes ignored and lost (Harris, Rowe-Minniss, and Somerset 2014). Community participation in sustainable development implies the entire community and should also not exclude newcomers residing both in the AZC and Utrecht housing. Here community organizations find themselves present in the ‘outcome stage’ of the process of racialization, this being exclusion. The underrepresentation of refugees within roles in sustainability organizations reinforces the existence of sustainability governance as a white space (Meesters et al. 2022). The lack of recognition of the ability of newcomer’s feeds into the construction of green spaces becoming ‘white spaces.

The community organizations are an integral part of the everyday lives of refugees in Utrecht, particularly residents of the AZC. For many the activities offered a means of limiting their time spent in their rooms and allows them to become acquainted with the wider Utrecht community and most importantly their new surroundings. Those still within their asylum process in the Netherlands rely on these activities to offer a routine and engagement. This should not be taken for granted and should be used as an

²⁵ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

opportunity to recognize the range of skills and knowledge that many have. The activities should reflect the diversity of this knowledge which has been made visible in the newcomer's environmental course I attended and the weekly gardening by Common Ground Two. The environments of people with a refugee background are different not only from nation-to-nation but also within the Netherlands itself. Through the many conversations and interviews I had with my interlocutors I came to understand the appreciation and favour that Utrecht has amongst refugees in the city. This predominantly owes to the community organizations that are ever-present in their everyday lives. Nevertheless, living as a refugee in the Netherlands carries its own connotations and experiences that can alter their everyday lives. In the next chapter the experiences of being present as newcomers in Utrecht will be explored, as this adds to the understanding of how individuals are able to engage in green spaces.

Chapter 3: Being Present

The role of community organizations and attending activities are both explicit and visible fragments of the everyday lives of people with a refugee background in Utrecht. Nevertheless, there remain elements of their everyday lives that are vastly understated. This chapter is centered on the manifestation of racialization within the everyday lives of newcomers in Utrecht. Millar's (2020) grounded analysis of racialization maintains it is wider than 'race' as it also pertains to a set of socio-political relations in which populations are compartmentalized. Racialized individuals are instead assessed in their conformity to an 'idealized human form.' Wynter (2003) asserts colonialism constructed an overrepresented 'genre of human' she calls, Man, of which embodies a white, western, bourgeois man. Thus, this personifies the idealized human and individuals that deviate from this are rejected for their difference and their assumptive 'lacking.' The negative connotations of difference and non-conformity to this idealization endorses the racialization of individuals with a refugee background. Within my research this is displayed not only in the terms and remarks that individuals make but is also reflected in their actions. Racialization should also be understood as a social process as it is socially constructed and agreed upon (Gans 2016). The process of racialization is also grounded in the perpetuation of 'othering' due to its fixation on specific phenotypical and non-phenotypical characteristics such as skin color, behavioral patterns, and cultural activities. It is a process that features intersectionality on gender, class and age and I insert with this research citizenship status. As it is a process, it is necessary to note there are outcomes of it. There are exclusionary consequences to racialization and its 'othering' that lie in domains further than the social and political but are found environmentally. This chapter is rooted in answering the sub-question: How does the process of racialization inform meanings of the natural world? However, I found within my research that racialization took most of its effect in the impact it had on the accessibility of green spaces. Like pro-environmental behaviors rooted in connections with nature, the racialization of the natural world is an initial indicator of the racialization of green spaces. The first section of this chapter will explore how the racialization of green spaces is displayed in the perceptions of the natural world and who these spaces supposedly exist for. Martinot (2010) argues structures of racialization remain central in forming and upholding the cultural coherence of 'white society' and for racialized groups to contest such structures the construction of "an alternate domain of cultural existence" is critical (155). An alternate domain permits the formation of an "autonomous culture of humanization" (155). I argue the racialization of nature has encouraged its perception as that of a 'white space' open to those that exist in the frame of whiteness. The contestation of the racialization of green spaces presented itself in my research through

the active participation of newcomers, particularly in which they can utilize their own knowledge and perceptions. Environmental place-making and the participation of sustainable citizenship is an embodiment of the contesting of this racialization as it enables refugees to construct their existence in green spaces without having to conform and assimilate. The second part of this chapter will examine how this further materializes in words and attitudes of difference that enable the alienation of refugees from specific opportunities such as networking. Such opportunities have the potential to introduce refugees into sustainability positions whether employed or voluntary. The racialization of places such as community gardens involves specific landscapes that further the advancement of “racialized social hierarchies, thus facilitating domination and exploitation” (Inwood and Yarborough 2009, 300). Racialization of landscapes reconstructs the lives and identities of those that are subjected to it. Racialization maintains an influence on the ways in which newcomers can interact with green spaces. This process also allows a critical look into its consequences as racialized groups are increasingly represented in groups subjected to social exclusion.

Racializing the natural world



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The garden is still, and I can only hear the birds singing now. Nobody has arrived yet. So, it is just Charlene and I, sitting across from each other on a picnic bench. Charlene is a key volunteer in the garden. A very lovely, bubbly, and cheery woman that always offers me a tea when I arrive in the garden. After a while of general talking about the weather and the lack of participants we begin talking about previous attendees of the garden from the local neighborhood. She tells me about a White² British woman that was volunteering on Saturday's and always wanted the attention of the organizer and would not try to socialize with the participants from the AZC. This was not possible as the priority was to ensure that the participants, particularly those from the AZC, felt welcomed and were given necessary support in the garden. She tells me of the expectations there are for volunteers as opposed to participants. Volunteers should be supportive of those coming from the AZC and should be more independent so they can find their own things to get on with while helping others. Because the organizer needs to ensure all participants are being tended to

²⁶ Photos taken by Samuel of the community garden project of Common Ground Two.

and volunteers need to also help encourage this. Charlene sighs and shakes her head. She said, “well in the end this lady did not return to the garden.” I asked her why this woman stopped attending and she says, “yes, so I tried to message her a few times and she did not respond. Anyway, finally she did reply, and she just said that she did not want to come anymore and that was it. She did not tell me why.” There was a pause, I looked around and said, “well that is quite strange.” She took a puff from her cigarette and said, “actually I found out why in the end.” She exhales the smoke and continues “I asked another lady that she would always sit with why she stopped coming and she told me that the British woman said that clearly the garden was for Black people. At the time we had quite a few young boys from Africa that were living in the AZC coming here” Charlene grimaces at what she just disclosed. She shakes her head and says, “I just don’t understand it, but anyway its better this way.” There is a silence and pause that I think helped us both to collect our thoughts and reflect on what was just said. I looked at the garden and how peaceful and calming it is in comparison to what I just heard. A sea of green and stalks growing fresh vegetables and fruits.²⁷

The incident that Charlene describes here is indicative of the way in which racialization permeates within green spaces. The volunteer attended the garden with the intention and presumption that she would indeed inherit the space as her own. The garden was dismissed as being “for black people” due to a lack of undivided attention from the organizer and therefore the ability to dominate the space. The assumption that they would be the main priority to the organizer is based on the idea that green spaces are spaces of ‘whiteness.’ This reinforces what Braun (2003) refers to as the development of ‘white spaces. The wilderness is attached to notions of whiteness as its ‘emptiness’ provides a getaway space from urban settings that often evoke sentiments of multiculturalism. In the natural world white bodies are able to become ‘white’, an example being the over-representation within outdoor activities. However, in this instance the garden does not offer this solace from multiculturalism as the purpose of the project is to create connections within the diverse community present in Utrecht. For Common Ground Two the garden is a hub of communal connection based on appreciating the diversity of the participants. This incentive is rejected as it does not coincide with the perceived norm of green spaces as it is assumed to be a space of whiteness. In not being able to dominate the space, rather than the garden being viewed as a neutral setting with space for all it is viewed as being ‘black.’ Displayed here is the denial of there being any middle ground possible, it is limited to one ‘or the ‘other.’ Furthermore, green spaces are stripped of

²⁷ Vignette from field notes 26/04/2022.

their ability to be a neutral setting in which any person can exist freely. This incident was not the only instance in which I observed the racialization of green spaces. Before I began my fieldwork, I was rejected to complete my fieldwork with a community restaurant. Their team includes trainees that are residents of the AZC that are learning skills of the hospitality industry. “We are working with a very vulnerable group in a really early stage of their procedure. For them there is no space for other things at the moment.”²⁸ I do not dispute that those within their procedure are indeed occupied with the difficulties of this process. Notwithstanding, during my fieldwork I observed two trainees of the restaurant attend the environmental course as well as engage in discussions pertaining to sustainability. The assumption that none of the trainees would have an interest in such topics highlights a prejudgment ingrained in the process of racialization. The non-conformity to the identity of which dominates green spaces draws dismissal as being legitimate. Furthermore, it further limits people with a refugee background to the confinement of their procedures and disregards their interest and knowledge within discourses of sustainability. One trainee from the restaurant, a young Palestinian man joined the course for a day. In this session he shared much with the group. This was in Arabic but was translated and he noted the degradation that war has on the environment and how it not only contradicts attempts at achieving a sustainable society but that being displaced severely impacts the ability to participate in sustainability initiatives. The purpose of this research was never to judge how much my interlocutors were ‘doing’ for the environment and sustainability. I sought to understand their own (pre-) existing knowledge and perceptions of the discourse. His admission and attendance were just that, being able to learn with and from each other. However, the assumption that people with a refugee background are unaware or uninterested feeds into the process of racializing green spaces and restricts the possibilities of such exchanges.

There lie multiple paradoxes within sustainability. This paradox being the unsustainability of racialized green spaces as racialization is not limited to attitudes but can induce consequences such as social exclusion. The presence of the social exclusion of newcomers in social domains and systems such as education, healthcare and employment are widely recognized within academia (Day 2021; Lindgren 2010). Contrasting this is the lesser acknowledgement of how social exclusion further appears in green spaces, specifically in the Netherlands (De Haas, Hassink and Stuiver 2021). Social exclusion is both a process and outcome in which specific groups or individuals are excluded from “social production, a denial of opportunity to contribute to or participate actively in society’s social, cultural activities” (Kwok and Wallis 2008, 83). There are various definitions of social exclusion that are also important, but I included

²⁸ Quote from email response 06/01/2022.

this one to spotlight the consequences of racializing green spaces. In racializing green spaces this not only works to affect the way in which refugees are able to form their own meanings of it, but they are also isolated from the social, cultural, and ecological benefits of it. As previously mentioned, green spaces enable refugees to engage in discourses and practices of sustainability (Turner 2011). In Chapter 4 I will delve further into how participating in the garden engages newcomers in sustainable practices. Here I raise this to stress the impact that racializing the natural world has on the ability of refugees to not connect and form their own meanings of nature but in the opportunities to participate in sustainable practices. The concept of social exclusion relates to the racialization of green spaces, such as the garden, due to them being associated with a specific and desired demographic. As further exemplified in the vignette, those that fall outside of the assumed 'rightful' person are thus depicted and considered as an intruding presence. Though much of the work done by community organizations actively encouraged the social inclusion of people with a refugee background, the underlining presence of their social exclusion remained pertinent and further reinforced in attitudes such as that featured in the vignette. Nevertheless, during my time in the garden, I did not witness any participants stop attending due to comments or conversations of this nature. Nor had I been informed by the organizer of this either. On the contrary, I have observed participants from previous years returning to the garden and maintaining a friendly relationship with the organizer and other participants. There has been no deterrence in attending for participants due to the atmosphere of the garden that the organizer pays great attention to creating. It is visible through her movements and conversations that she persistently attempts to ensure that all are tended to and included. The opinions and knowledge of participants is valued and welcomed, thus establishing a co-operative setting in which skills are exchanged.

Through actions and words



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The racialization of people with a refugee background is not only evident within the view of green spaces but is visible in the terms that employees and volunteers of community organizations use. The terms that individuals use gain their meaning through the context in which they are adopted (Kuran 2012). From the onset of my fieldwork, I noticed the regular use of the word ‘camp’ to refer to the building of the AZC in which many of my interlocutors reside. Though residents of the AZC also adopted the word ‘camp’ one of my interlocutors, Hanad, expressed his discomfort with the use of the word to refer to the AZC. He pointed out the fact that the building features rooms and “there are also bathrooms and kitchens like you also have”⁵. Without overstating the conditions of the AZC, Hanad raises a necessary contestation of the incorrect use of ‘camp.’ Hanad informed me that using ‘the AZC’ is not only more accurate but respectful. He requested that I inform others when I can about the inaccurate use of the word and that for many living in the AZC of Utrecht, it is highly unfavored. Though the AZC is not situated in an isolated area outside of the city, a deeper look at semantics highlights the possibilities of words to create this isolation (Niet Normaal * 2021). When cycling through the neighborhood of Oog in AI, I came to understand that those living in the AZC are just as embedded in its framework as are the houses and blocks of flats that also line the streets. The misuse of the term implies refugees and camps are synonymous with one another

²⁹ Photo taken by Joesph in Utrecht of the Amsterdam-Rijnkanaal. He takes frequent walks here because of the natural landscape.

and as though they are not mutually exclusive. Identifying how the use of ‘camp’ is constructed, used and the meanings it holds for my interlocutors became a necessary part of this research as it is culturally revealing (Colby et al. 1966). Refugee camps have been recorded as being at the forefront of the racialization of refugees in that they are constructed socially with negative depictions that are used to reflect the individuals that live in them. However, this examination of the everyday use of the word ‘camp’ is critical in underlining how racialization limits the accessibility of refugees to participate in sustainability spaces and practices. The use of such terms is indicative of the oversimplification and representation of people with a refugee background, inherent in the process of racialization (Augoustinos, Hanson-Easey and Due 2015). They permit the reinforcement of differences based on the negative rhetoric that is associated with such terms (Bhimji 2020). Such rhetoric is rooted in the oversimplification of individuals with a refugee background. Consequently, this perpetuates failure in valuing each individual and acknowledging their personal skills and interests.

*"I told you that I lived here one year in only one room. And all the activities here regarding to COA I didn't like, but for me, for me. Because they were all like okay...come for learning how to use the computer. But it is not useful for me, maybe for others but not for me."*³⁰

Professionals such as Moise with extensive experience within the sustainability and environmental sectors have their skills, knowledge and practices overlooked. Building connections with Dutch citizens encourages the possibilities to network and expand on one's sustainability interests and skills through work and volunteering (Vroome and Tubergen 2018). However, racialized groups are continuously subjected to alienation and as such are restricted from such experiences (Schrock 2008). This process of racialization is one that contributes to the alienation of newcomer's resident in the AZC not only from the neighborhood but Utrecht at large. Such alienation is further visible in the limited attempts at contact from locals of the neighborhood Oog in AI with residents of the AZC. In the final days of the environmental course, the organizer took us to visit a recycling station in Utrecht. On the journey back to the meeting room, I spoke with an employee of Plan Einstein. "It's a shame but not really, no"⁶, they told me when I asked her if local residents attended the open events that the organization hosted. They explained the local neighborhood of the AZC is home to predominantly "affluent" people that prefer to "give charity" in the form of donating money. The donations are given instead of attending events and activities that are organized to create connections within the neighborhood of Oog in AI between newcomers and Dutch natives. What my interlocutor describes here is the unintentional creation of a giver-receiver relationship

³⁰ Quote from interview with Moise 18/03/2022.

rather than one that is based on collaboration and connection as equals (Gullestad 2007). Particularly affluent individuals that reflects a class dimension that is reflective of the nuances within racialization and the non-conformity to the idealized human. Though well-intentioned donating in this context is centered on emplacing refugees as 'passive victims', a stigma that further hinders the everyday lives of refugees in Utrecht (Ghorashi 2005). "People working together locally have more promise"³¹ is what Renel told me during a break in our environmental class. Renel explained to me she believed that local strategies for sustainability have an increased likeliness of being effective. Members of the community collaborating is what will create change for the environment and society. Interestingly the environmental course was open for migrants of all backgrounds I was the only newcomer without a refugee background to attend. If residents continue to uphold the giver-receiver relationship, what Renel describes will not be possible. Sustainability initiatives such as the community garden and the environmental course are not possible without this communication between those living in Utrecht. The distance that is involved in donating, as opposed to attending the same environmental course, allows the donator to spectate the suffering of refugees (Zembylas 2013). Such distance enables people with a refugee background to be 'othered' and othering is key to their being racialized and isolated. Donating is often rooted in sentiments of pity in that it entails one's ability to show momentary sympathy by giving aid and returning to their everyday lives (Balaji 2011). Whereas empathy has longevity as it is based on equality and one has "the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another" (51). Pity is counterproductive as it does not recognize and target the structural inequalities that impact the lives of people with a refugee background (Spelman 1997). Neither does it acknowledge alternative and equally important requirements of refugees in Utrecht such as connections and networking with locals. Pity hinders the acknowledgment of the skills and knowledge that my interlocutors had regarding sustainability because pity is not based on viewing one another as equals but instead focuses on suffering. These sentiments are critical in the perpetuation of the racialization process as it validates the differences between 'the racialized' and 'the racializers'. Regardless, the misperceptions and attitudes inherent in racialization are not representative of people with a refugee background. They attempt, where they can, to forge their own space within sustainability discourses and practices. However, racialization still holds real consequences in the everyday lives of refugees as there are still few examples of collaboration on projects of sustainability and the environment. How people with a refugee background in Utrecht participate in sustainability despite such stigmas will be discussed in the following chapter. It is with this

³¹ Quote from conversation with Renel 23/02/2022.

chapter that I will provide a rounded explanation of the main research question, having provided context with the chapters covered thus far.

Chapter 4: Being Concerned



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Despite this lack of inclusion with sustainable community organizations within Utrecht, people with a refugee background remain committed in their mission to participate. I observed this being conducted through the organization and management of an environmental course for newcomers. As well as through the adoption of sustainable practices for the betterment of both the natural and social worlds. These sustainable practices will be the focus of the following chapter and will draw on the themes discussed in the previous chapters provide a holistic answer to both the sub-question: What constitutes as a 'sustainable practice'? and the main research question. In the active approach of my participants to sustainable initiatives they reflected the construction of both ecological and sustainable citizenships. Marshal (1950, 253) proposes "citizenship is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respects to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed". This proposition of a nation-state and legally confined citizenship commonly dominates research particularly in relation to refugees, but I instead note the restrictiveness of such an approach. Limits are prematurely placed on the construction of alternative understandings of citizenship formulations of refugee populations. I value the crucial role of such formal citizenship in the lives of

³² Photo taken by Joesph in Oog in Al, Utrecht of flowers in the dark.

refugees, but this research inserts a much-needed discourse on their human-nature relations and knowledge's.

Dobson (2007) highlights a contentious debate of environmental attitudes within social and political theory of ecological citizenship, as he simplifies the two main arguments as 'structuralist' and 'voluntarist'. The former contends that the behaviors and attitudes we adopt are influenced by social structures and as such must be changed first before we can. It also dismisses behaviors and attitudes as superficial and remains focused on social structures. On the other hand, the 'voluntarist' approach maintains that our behaviors and attitudes are instead somewhat independent and part of an intricate fabric of influences that impact our ways of acting. What I observed and collected throughout my research process has reflected both 'sides' of this debate. Therefore, my research does not situate in one but rather demonstrates both. Social structures remain impactful in the lives of my participants and influence the behaviors they exhibit (Maldini and Takahashi 2017). During the asylum process for refugees in the Netherlands, it is common to be relocated to another location with only one night's notice. Relocations are destructive to their ability and willingness to participate within society. "It's tiring, to keep making friends all over again"³³ an interlocutor told me in a conversation in which they informed me of the relocations. It also has a direct impact on their sustainable engagement. Samuel was relocated and consequently could not participate in the community garden of Common Ground Two. Fortunately, he was able to return but this is not always the case. Equally, despite the intervening social structures, some newcomers also maintained their attitudes and behaviors exemplary of the environmental behaviors discussed in Chapter 1. Attitudes of care and consideration for animals and nature were prominent with one interlocutor stating "We are not the only ones here; we share the planet with animals too"³⁴. External factors also influenced sustainable behaviors, such as cultural habits like limiting meat consumption to a specific number of days of the week. Furthermore, the health concerns were also instrumental as Renel repeatedly told me of her dislike of plastic use due to its impact on the human body (Wang and Qian 2021).

'Sustainability citizenship' adopts a nuanced approach, in comparison to ecological citizenship, in that it extends beyond environmental issues and actions to include "economic, social, political, and cultural in its remit." In their analysis of sustainability citizenship, Dobson and Bell (2006, 24) contend its sustainable development orientation. Sustainable citizenship discourse takes an individualized and global-minded

³³ Quote from field notes 13/02/2022.

³⁴ Quote from field notes 14/02/2022.

focus, with much language devoted to assessing one's ability to "live up to" identifying as a sustainable citizen (Micheletti and Stolle 2012, 92). Responsibilities such as "always vote or promote vocal elections" and "never use legal loopholes to promote one's own interest or to harm society" may have good intentions but are nonetheless exclusionary (92). I found this to be particularly true within my research as the expectations of being a sustainable citizen are not always possible within the everyday lives of refugees. A prime example of this is the emphasis on recycling being a pinnacle activity of a sustainable citizen (Zain et al. 2011). None of the interlocutors I spoke with and the participants of the environmental course, knew where they could find the recycling stations near their neighborhood. Even if they did, many do not have bikes and paying for public transportation is far too expensive and therefore do not have accessibility. It is these assessments of sustainability that remain crucial when formulating an understanding of how refugees engage in such practices. Still there are ways in which refugees engage in sustainable citizenship particularly in their participation in the social development of Utrecht.

In consideration of



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³⁵ **Left:** Photo taken by Joesph of "The Botanical Revolution" exhibition in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht. He captioned this photo: "**Nature plus technology, like it...**".

³⁶ **Right:** Photo taken by Adela in Utrecht. She captioned this photo: "**Live by the colours of nature**".

The usual group of attendees are sat in a small classroom for another session of the environmental course being delivered by Moise. The course is open to newcomers of all backgrounds, so the classroom boasts a diverse group. The atmosphere of the room feels joyful, as it does every session. With eye contact there always comes a smile between the participants. So far, we have covered the issues that have led to the degradation of the planet, but everyone is eager to discuss the solutions. This session is exactly that; focusing on the solutions. We are sat in a horseshoe shape, with pens and paper at the ready to record the knowledge we gain today. Moise begins a discussion by asking everyone to make a list of what they think we could do in our lifestyle to be more sustainable. Everyone is thinking in deep concentration, with perplexed faces when Joesph says: *"Hey, I have an idea that I wanted to share with you guys about reusing old phones. I had an old phone that I didn't wanna use anymore because I got a new one and I didn't want to throw it out. So, I went searching on YouTube and I went to see what I could find if there was any information on how to re-use this phone. I learned that you can make the phone into a weather device that will tell you what the weather is today. You can mount it on your wall and just use it for that rather than having to buy a new one."* There is a moment of silence before we all start commending Joesph for such a great suggestion this is. The group is collectively impressed because we had not thought of this as an option. Again, begins the buzz of discussion as we share our ideas of sustainable practices, we can each try.³⁷

The environmental course I joined during my fieldwork was an interesting experience as each participant came with a different level of understanding of the environment. Our understanding of the issues differed but the enthusiasm to learn of the solutions we could adopt was all the same, as displayed in this vignette. This session of the course focused on discussing everyone's views of how they as individuals rather than society can be more sustainable. The sustainable practices that were suggested included: using glass instead of plastic, buying secondhand, giving fines to those that throw waste in the sea, growing small patches of food if you can or pots if you do not have a garden and reducing meat consumption. Key to the suggestions listed here and of Joesph is the 'intention to act' that is instrumental in the fabrication of an 'ecological citizenship' (Asilsoy and Oktay 2018). This intention is displayed in seeking and constructing sustainable practices that are possible for them to implement personally. How an individual believes they can take action is described as their "perceived behavioral control". In exploring this discrepancy between the 'intention to act' and 'perceived behavioral control', I found that my participants were able to execute

³⁷ Vignette from field notes 23/02/2022.

their intentions. This was primarily since all these practices were personal to them and 'within reach'. They were not unreasonable expectations such as buying organic and sustainable fashion brands, as these tend to be expensive and thus inaccessible practices. I saw this execution firsthand, whenever I would sit in the open plan office of Plan Einstein, I noticed that Renel would use glassware as opposed to paper cups as those still contained plastics. Ralph explained to me that he would only eat meat three days a week as they were reducing their meat consumption. Putting forth suggestions of ecological practices that are 'within your means' is exemplary of what Dobson (2003) describes to be a shared dedication and undertaking of sustainability. Further to this, it reinforces the notion of sustainable citizenship also being a collective experience than just one based on individualism. The relationships with nature discussed chapter 1 also aid in the construction of these sustainable practices and pro-environmental attitudes for newcomers. Relative to the expression of ecological citizenship, both environmental educators and ecologists insist on the value of connection with nature in encouraging the adoption of ethics that create engaged citizens (Zylstra et al. 2014). In turn this not only promotes the practicing of "environmentally responsible behavior" but sustains "resilient social-ecological systems" (120). In a discussion of the unsustainable practices of industrial activity Saami, a young Palestinian man, shares the impact that the military-industrial complex has not only humans but plants and animals too. In an interview with Noah, he echoed this insertion of the role of military as he shared "When we have things like war happening this stops people from being able to focus on the environment and be careful of it. Because at the end of the day we will all be affected by climate change, whether you are a refugee or not"³⁸. However, Saami explained that there is not enough attention placed on the degradation of the environment that is also inflicted due to conflict. This uncommon consideration of the impact that wars have on the natural world is exemplary of the ethics that instigate the undertaking of sustainable practices (Closmann 2009). During our interview I asked Adela a follow up question "Why do you feel that it is important for activities about the environment to be created for people with a refugee background?"³⁹ To which she responded that not everybody is already aware once they arrive in the Netherlands of different issues with the environment, but she also stated that it is "never too late to be mindful"⁴⁰. She went on to explain that regardless of one's background or capabilities, every individual should be welcomed and included. According to Dobson and Bell (2006) ecological citizenship is based on 'virtue', It denotes a form of non-contractual and non-territorial citizenship that instead encompasses the common good of the world in its

³⁸ Quote from interview with Noah 27/02/2022.

³⁹ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

⁴⁰ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

entirety through a collective responsibility. Though I previously discussed the personal essence of ecological citizenship, Adela highlights here the collectivity of it. Ecological citizenship is not one dimensional and can be experienced collectively should there the necessary inclusion and accessibility be present.

Joining the community gardens is also a sustainable practice and without the attendance of residents of the AZC the project would not exist (Stocker and Barnett 2007). Common Ground Two contributes a significant amount to the city garden as the space is shared with other community initiatives. As Common Ground Two works to ensure that each participant and volunteer are involved in the entire process of growing fresh, organic foods from sowing the seeds to harvesting and taking it home. The project is ecologically sustainable due to the slower production of the food and disuse of chemicals that undoubtedly reduces damage to the garden's ecosystem. Not only is participating in a community garden ecologically sustainable it also develops social sustainability (Turner 2011). It is through horticulture activities offered in community gardens that allow individuals to be included through 'doing' and 'being' with others. Furthermore, I was volunteering alongside newcomers in the community garden project which encouraged the social inclusion and representation of refugees (Hujale 2015). Furthermore, community gardens represent an 'embodied connection' and form of sustainability as they permit a closer relationship to the food system and particularly locally sourced foods (Turner 2011). This embodied connection also manifests itself in the participation of refugees within sustainable citizenship as a result of practices they engage in within the garden and other green spaces. This is further presented as knowledge of best practices in the growing and harvesting of food is also shared and learned as well as healthier eating, both contributing to a sustainable lifestyle. Common Ground Two is a special setting as it rides on the line between both ecological and sustainable citizenship. Though lacking on the economic front, it still contributes a great deal to local sustainability, that is necessary considering the distance between residents of the AZC and locals of their neighborhood (Holland 2011). Forming a sustainable and ecological citizenship through the garden is impacted as a result of racialization and limiting practices of community initiatives engaged in place-making. At some point during my time in the garden it became apparent that the residents of the AZC were not being made aware of the garden initiative. Focus was placed on other activities such as crafts, sports and museum visiting. Though this changed once the garden leader reminded the organization of this, the number of participants declined momentarily. The performance of sustainable practices is not one completely determined by the attitudes and behaviors of the newcomers but is also influenced by processes such as racialization and place-making. The next part

of this chapter will focus on social sustainability and the engagement in a sustainable citizenship of people with a refugee background.

With an open mind



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Much focus is placed on ensuring economic prosperity under the guise of sustainability and the social element is much forgotten (Kandachar 2014). Leaving behind social sustainability means removing attention from developing the quality of life for all but particularly for vulnerable groups. With increasing economic success and development also comes the degradation of the environment. With this research I argue there is a necessity to refocus on social sustainability as it also has the capability to improve the state of the natural environment and the quality of life for people with a refugee background. The engagement of sustainable practices is not always intentional but remains essential, nonetheless. Hanad, a resident of the AZC, is notable for their frequent advocacy for community organizations and the activities/events that they organize. They remain busy throughout their volunteering in multiple community organizations and attending activities themselves. Through conversations with them I understand that they underestimated the impact that their actions have on developing a sustainable society. They were often reluctant to discuss issues pertaining to sustainability or the environment due to being an asylum seeker and their view it was not possible for them to help or contribute due to this. However, they already do contribute by bringing all residents of Utrecht together through their advocacy of social cohesion (Ricee 2021). Citizens engaging together and encouraging relationships to be formed is

⁴¹ **Left:** Photo taken by Noah of a street in Yemen featuring a lot of waste on the ground. The message in Arabic on the wall reads: **“Brother, citizen. Don’t throw the garbage”**.

⁴² **Right:** Photos taken by Samuel of the community garden project of Common Ground Two.

critical to the wellbeing of people with a refugee background particularly, as it reduces isolation and loneliness (Palich and Edmonds 2013). Like the collectivity of ecological citizenship, Hanad embodies the position of a 'sustainable citizen' and engages in sustainable citizenship through the collective action of the local community that he mobilizes. This does not mean to impose the experience of sustainable citizenship on Hanad and refugees engaging in similar practices, but the endeavor of creating social sustainability permeates the experience and participation in sustainable citizenship. However, their doubt and beliefs also highlight a discrepancy in the way in which sustainability is discussed at large but specifically with individuals of a vulnerable group. The current communication of sustainability is considered to consist of a "nagging approach that focuses on the issues and blaming"⁴³. Rather there needs to be much more understanding given to the situations of individuals and groups such as refugees in deliverance of topics surrounding the environment. "Transition in a more practical way"⁴⁴ is necessary to honour the fact that not all practices involved in transitioning to a sustainable society are applicable in the lives of every citizen. As of 2018 nearly 53% of all refugee households were of low income and are at a higher risk of poverty (CBS 2018; van Leeuwen 2020). Therefore, it would not be practical to expect that people with a refugee should be able to install solar panels on their roofs and purchase electric vehicles.

*"Yeah maybe I might forget sometimes but I always try to remember to bring my plastic bags with me to the shop. No in our culture we don't throw away these bags [laughs] we are always squeezing them in a corner together. I don't know I just feel bad to throw them away every time, I know it's not good to do this."*⁴⁵

Recognizing the current ways in which refugees do contribute to the implementation of sustainable practices is instead the way forward to both avoid the "nagging approach" and exclusion. This thesis has highlighted how imperative their inclusion is to both environmental and social sustainability. Nonetheless it cannot be conducted in a way that is naïve and inconsiderate of their everyday lives. The adoption of sustainable practices does not with a one-size-fits-all approach as there are a diverse range of ways one can participate. An optimization of the approach of sustainability is needed to align with the capabilities of people with a refugee background (Prugh, Costanza and Daly 2000). All my participants shared their adoration of Utrecht in comparison to other cities and villages they had lived in the Netherlands. This was based primarily on the number of activities present that engaged them with one another and the

⁴³ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

⁴⁴ Quote from interview with Adela 21/03/2022.

⁴⁵ Quote from conversation with Hanad 10/03/2022.

organizers, encouraging connections. Creating connections is part of effective place-making that when developed may be adopted as a useful way to create an approachable discourse for refugees in Utrecht (Starr 2013). This way you build trust and understanding that goes a long way in being able to accomplish social sustainability (Karacor 2014).

In March, I began volunteering with SPEAK Utrecht holding an English corner for individuals wanting to improve their speaking level. The group averaged around 8 people and was therefore a small, intimate gathering. As with other activities and events, this weekly activity was open to all but most of the participants (and some weeks all) are residents of the AZC. Hanad and I were delivering these weekly sessions together and would liaise with one another on the best way to organize them. In the sessions for the English corner a variety of topics are discussed from celebrations, nature and foods to stereotypes and music. Participants come from a range of countries; Syria, Sudan, China, Yemen, Ukraine, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey. As a result, the sharing and learning of cultures, knowledge and ideas is shared. This is done in a safe space of mutual respect and understanding that encourages intercultural dialogue necessary for community building and social inclusion (Garrido et al. 2020). Like the environmental course of Moise, these sessions were also spaces of cross-cultural collaborative learning. Gyasi et al. (2021) stress the importance of adopting such learning styles as a promising means of encouraging the sustainability of both social and environmental development. This is due to several reasons such as the small group size, cross-cultural learning topics and cross-cultural competencies. The English corner embodies a space in which people with diverse skill sets can freely contribute within a group of open-minded individuals. Furthermore, a learning space such as this reduces the involvement of unsustainable power relations and will instead be empowering for newcomers (Angelstam 2013). The local level of this also reinforces the statement of Renel in relation to working locally for sustainability. Furthermore, these spaces both exhibit ecological and social sustainability due to the positive impacts on social relationships and the promotion of environmental practices. The communal nature of these spaces facilitates how ecological and sustainable citizenship can be experienced collectively by people with a refugee background. Additionally, the active adoption of social and ecological sustainable practices further embodies place-making. Place-making entails the creation of quality places through community-building, made visible throughout this thesis. In sustaining and transforming these green spaces into quality places, refugees are constructing a sense of place in Utrecht in which the possibility of their participation becomes a reality. Sustainable practices are far-reaching in both what they are and their impacts on the local environment and the lives of people with a refugee background in Utrecht. They are not limited to ecological practices that directly benefit the natural world (as well as human bodies) but are also integral to the building of a socially

sustainable society. As explored at the beginning of this thesis, humans are also viewed as part of nature rather than separate from it. The repairing of the degradation of our societies works to also repair the planet on a wider scale. The participants of this research were all a key part in this process through their ideas and engagement.

Conclusion

People with a refugee background in Utrecht construct and perform a variety of sustainable activities despite the very real impacts of racialization and place-making. These sustainable practices promote both ecological and social development. For the environment these practices include repurposing items to extend their use, reducing plastic consumption, and purchasing secondhand. Repurposing items reduces the amount of waste that enters landfill and the same goes for reducing plastic consumption. Purchasing secondhand limits, the amount of product waste results from the production of new materials. Furthermore, other sustainable practices included reducing meat consumption and growing small patches of food. In growing one's own food there is less reliance on the mainstream food system and reducing the consumption of meat contributes to decreasing meat production that contributes to a harmful food system. These practices are beneficial for reversing the degradation of the natural environment. Nonetheless, there are socially sustainable practices that newcomers perform. Being active members in the events and activities that are present is substantial in creating connection between citizens. Such connections facilitate the exchanging of ideas and cultures which is important in establishing social cohesion, an important element in achieving social sustainability (Ricee 2021). Not only are newcomers' active participants but they promote these activities and events in order to create further inclusion.

The connections that people with a refugee background have with nature are often taken for granted as they are not recognized for their capabilities of encouraging pro-environmental behaviors. It is granted that such connections do not always materialize into pro environmental behaviors, however this remains a possibility and present within this thesis. Amongst my interlocutors there were correlations between their connections with nature and their pro environmental behaviors as well as pro environmental attitudes. Many had already developed connections with nature prior to arriving in the Netherlands. These connections and time spent in nature elicited pro-environmental behaviors that are visible in the sustainable practices they adopted. This was visible, for instance, in the connection that Renel made with nature and the mutual exchange in care through its improvement of her wellbeing and her reducing her use of plastic. On this point, it is important to acknowledge this exchange in care between humans and nature. The natural world has a positive impact on the wellbeing's of people with a refugee background, and through these connections' individuals reciprocate the positive impact through sustainable practices. What is necessary is to facilitate the access of the natural environment for refugees, which is particularly possible given the green spaces available in Utrecht.

A fundamental conclusion of this research regarding the performance of sustainable practices is remaining aware of the intricacies of everyday lives and how this shapes experiences of newcomers. Ensuring that the outlook on their participation in green spaces is not perceived with naivety that assumes the ability to carry out activities that remain part of the overrepresented expectations of citizens such as recycling. Rather consideration is needed of the realities of vulnerable groups and the limitations that are present. Equally, it remains essential that the oversimplification that buys into exclusionary racialization rhetoric of refugees is discarded. This serves only to undermine and diminish knowledge and experiences already present as well as opportunities for those interested to learn. Not only is this harmful to the lives of refugees but it remains unsustainable and contradicts any efforts of sustainable development.

Recognition and accessibility

The community organizations in Utrecht have a positive effect on the everyday lives and wellbeing of people with a refugee background, particularly when they arrive in the AZC. The various activities that are arranged and promoted that work towards eliminating the isolation that is a common experience for newcomers. Subsequently the presence of the community organizations is greatly appreciated. The activities not only provide an opportunity for individuals to become more familiar with their new surroundings, but it allows residents of the AZC to also meet one another and make relationships. The process of place-making in which the community organizations are engaged in are resourceful in establishing a sense of place due to their active presence and attempts at making connections with people with a refugee background. Still the presence of the racialization of green spaces remains prevalent and impactful in the everyday lives of newcomers in Utrecht and their ability to perform and participate in sustainable practices. This materializes in the frequent use of words of difference such as 'camp' to refer to the living accommodations in Utrecht. The incorrect referral to the accommodation highlights an underlining trait of racialization of the misrepresentation and oversimplification of people with a refugee background. Despite their emplacement and access to the neighborhood the use of the word reinforces a state of difference. The different words that are adopted and the discourses surrounding newcomers, like place-making, can either be transformed or neglected in a way that further reproduces inequities (Eckenwiler 2018). Ethnography in this regard is key to being able highlight the importance words and semantics that have lasting effects in the everyday lives of people with the refugee background due to their meanings and misuse. The racialization of nature is inherent in reinforcing such difference as green spaces thus become assumed as existing for a specific preferred group and those most able to conform to it (Wynter 2003). The negative impact on racialized groups is the lack of rightful recognition of their individual experiences. Failing to recognize these means exclusion that ensures that green spaces remain

inaccessible. This has a direct effect on the access present for certain opportunities within green spaces. Accessibility is the fundamental underpinning topic amongst the construction and performance of sustainable activities.

Both place-making and racialization shape the accessibility of participating in green spaces in their own but simultaneous ways. There are not many opportunities present as of now for people with a refugee background to engage in environmental-related activities. During my fieldwork I observed that the only regular green space activity that existed for those living in the AZC was the gardening activity of Common Ground Two. This is by no means enough as there are countless other activities marketed for sports, crafts, languages and day trips. The point of this thesis is not to disregard the importance of these activities as they are not only enjoyed by many of the residents of the AZC. I aim to point out the necessity to further develop the diversity of the opportunities offered. This is not only in the form of activities but also volunteering and employment/training opportunities for people with a refugee background to integrate them into green spaces. I met several individuals that already had invaluable experience and expertise for the social and environmental development of not only Utrecht but also for the Netherlands. Place-making must be adopted consciously by community organizations with the purpose of integrating the knowledge and perspectives of people with a refugee background. Through local collaborations, representation of refugees within green spaces can be transformed. Furthermore, for green spaces to be considered as what Wyckoff (2014) describes as 'quality spaces' they need to embody sociability, accessibility and a hub in which the authentic experience of each participant is recognized. The gardening project has currently established a 'quality green space' as it remains accessible, connected and recognizes each participant without expecting assimilation. This last part is key as assimilation does not permit the recognition of existing perspectives and knowledge that refugees already have. What I suggest is the development of green spaces that have accomplished what Common Ground Two has, but in different settings and contexts. Not every person will enjoy horticultural activities, thus it is important that a range of green spaces are present. This is also visible in the form of environmental courses or the volunteering opportunities that Moise found during his time as a resident of the AZC. This does not imply that this is only possible if community organizations host their own green space activities. The creation of volunteering and employment positions within partnerships and collaborations with sustainability organizations would create opportunities for people with a refugee background both living in the AZC and those not. The provision of these alternative opportunities recognizes that newcomers are interested in green spaces in different ways.

Collaborative learning

The collaborative learning environment has the capacity to facilitate a space of knowledge and cultural exchange that is necessary to engage individuals with green spaces through inclusion. A collaborative learning environment deters the prevalence of power relations that inevitably creates the exclusion that people with a refugee background already experience of green spaces. This is because each participant communicates in an environment of openness, respect for the diverse backgrounds present. Such a space also echoes 'quality places' that will encourage the performance and construction of sustainable practices for people with a refugee background. The environmental course is an example of the possibilities of collaborative learning executed in a green space for newcomers. As the course was specifically for newcomers of all backgrounds, it was grounded in the exchange of perspectives on sustainability and environmental discourse. This directly countered the more common exclusive green spaces, resulting from racialization that in turn deems them 'white spaces' thus limiting who can participate in them. Instead, the course created the opportunity for those typically excluded, that might be curious about career prospects or wanting to develop their skills and knowledge. This course followed a formal format as it features a teacher instructing lessons that may be of preference to some as it includes more structure. Subsequently, those that may not be versed in discussions surrounding sustainability can learn within this setting. Similarly, the gardening project of Common Ground Two permits such exchanges of knowledge as participants of the garden work collaboratively together to ensure the success of the season. In seeing each other weekly and growing more familiar with one another the connections formed mean that people began to share tips and skills with each other. Such exchanges are taken for granted but play a significant role in people with a refugee background integrating their knowledge of the environment and sustainable practices into green spaces. The alternative setting to the environmental course also creates further opportunities of access to collaborative learning in a green space. Being in nature and learning amongst it is also not only a preference but suitable for those that have previous experience from their native countries. The English corner activity is a frequent activity available for newcomers in Utrecht that facilitates the practicing of English speaking by discussing various topics weekly. These sessions work well in being able to cipher and exchange knowledge due to the diverse backgrounds of the participants. The 'corner' activity is an informal setting in which attendees can participate more freely as it is based on open dialogue. I suggest that these be developed further for the use of discussions pertaining to the environment and sustainability. The organization of a similar informal set-up based on topics of sustainability would be able to actively increase engagement with people with a refugee background. The

informality as opposed to the nature-based and classroom setting of the garden and environmental course would provide yet another alternative to those that may not favor them.

Further research

Due to the small timescale of this research, I was not able to include a larger number of participants and perspectives. For further research I would carry out the project for a longer period so it would be possible to maintain a larger sample that would create an increasingly accurate and in-depth understanding. Furthermore, due to the insight into the possibilities of collaborative learning the opportunity to adopt this as a research method may be effective in having a direct insight into the possibilities of these setting impacting the construction of sustainable practices for newcomers. As a research method it could follow a similar format of a pilot program/focus group that would be able to assess the influences of the learning environment on pro-environmental behaviors. Integration is a key point of discussion regarding newcomers and there is a necessity for further research into the possibilities of green spaces to be adopted as a means of integration. For this to materialize it is first necessary to research how this would materialize and if it would be effective. The environmental course discussed in this research provided a glimpse of this possibility. Most importantly, for green spaces to be effectively decolonized and deracialized, academia and research specifically plays an integral role. To further representation further research needs to be conducted by people with a refugee background and/or within a collaborative fashion. As this research was for a master's thesis, I could not adopt this myself however where it can be done, it should.

Epilogue

On June 25th 2022, SPEAK Utrecht held an event called “We Recognize It!” The event marked World Refugee Day that takes place annually on June 20th. An open community event, personal stories were heard from two newcomers, conversation ensued and connections were made between attendees. The founder and I discussed months prior the possibility of organizing a photo exhibition featuring the photos of this thesis. The aim of this was to find a way to further the engagement with the work the participants and more importantly their literal perspectives. Pictures and words were clipped, stuck, hung and observed. Attendees asked questions and were genuinely curious about how I approached the topic of sustainability with newcomers. It was an afternoon of learning. Though, all the while I was gutted that the photographers themselves could not explain their meanings behind the photos. We understood this was necessary to ensure their anonymity in this research. The captions that each participant provided with the pictures made sure they were able to speak for themselves in some way. The photos were taken across different countries: Yemen, Netherland, Lebanon, Oman and Germany. Showing these pictures to Lila before the exhibition to told me how great it was that they showed a different light to her country (Yemen) and stepped outside of the narrow ways we see the native countries of newcomers. This is what the exhibition was all about; recognition. Recognizing all stories that people with a refugee background tell and not just those that fit neatly into a harmful stereotype. As Lila reminded me it is also about recognizing the beauty that we so often miss.

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⁴⁶ Photo taken by me at the exhibition.

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