Migrant Mental Healthcare, Conflict, and Embodied Experiences

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Abstract

This provocation draws on my experience as an ethnographic researcher conducting interviews structured by emotion and embodiment with a diverse group of migrants about the barriers they face accessing mental healthcare (Ayata et al.). In conversation with these diversely embodied migrants, their capacity to affect and be affected by power imbalances comes to the fore (Blackman). I reflect on these experiences and explore the nuances of what it means to have (partially) escaped conflict to pursue a future only to be confronted with the ever-present traces of colonial history in a world-city like Amsterdam (Quijano). The conversations gifted to me through these interviews form a backdrop for the complexities of meaning-making that sanctions the presence of newcomers. This essay illuminates the extent to which the thriving cultural sector of Amsterdam obscenely includes sojourners in often conflicting discourses around society, livelihood, and cultural production (De Genova).

Introduction

Positionality, particularly as a researcher at a prestigious university, is paramount. I find myself writing this essay interwoven within the temporal and socio-cultural fabric that envelopes and defines my experiences. I am currently a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the University of Amsterdam in the Communication Science Department. I was hired to work as a project manager and researcher in the *Mental Health 4 All project*, an EU-Commission-funded initiative that seeks to understand and mitigate barriers migrants and refugees face when seeking access to mental healthcare. Throughout this text I will refer to these people as 'migrants,' with the understanding that this broader category includes and centers refugees and those fleeing violence and conflict. I am currently responsible for contributing to individual papers that rely on interviews with migrants who have sought mental healthcare. It is one of my responsibilities to do this work and these people justice.

The Mental Health 4 All project, structurally housed within the European Union and supported through European funding, occupies a remarkable position in the current geopolitical landscape. As I write this essay, Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and the rest of the world stands to create more migrants to Europe than we have seen in recent years. Additionally, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa continue to create the kinds of conditions most would flee. This migration "crisis" forms the backdrop that facilitated my employment at the university and allowed me to migrate to the Netherlands. As such, war, conflict, and the city are conceptual and material drivers for this essay.

As a migrant myself, I am struck by the dynamics of power/lessness in our narratives. This dichotomy between a sense of agency and being seen as "less than" characterizes how we move through the world. As migrants, we are faced with conflicts at differing scales: some of us are fleeing inhospitable socio-political climates, some of us experience the conflict of existing between "two worlds," but none of us can ignore the effect conflict has on the mundane trappings of everyday life in the city. The current edition presents an opportunity to shed light on the complexities of these stories; the conflicts we experience are embedded in us, just as we are embedded in the city of Amsterdam.

In my work regarding mental health in Amsterdam and the Netherlands, more broadly, the interplay between racial, ethnic, and national diversity and neurodiversity leads me to conduct my research from a decolonial perspective. This perspective aims for "a critical delinking that offers pluriversal alternatives to modern coloniality" (Enck-Wanzer 17). This "delink-

ing" does the work of exploring how modernity and colonialism (i.e. the constructs that situate coloniality) facilitate the current power imbalances found in many, if not all, systems, including the mental healthcare system. My research participants' voices delink, for example, notions of care and the state, by decrying the barriers they have faced when seeking state-funded care. In other words, the work I do presents our alternatives to this power structure: the modern colonality referenced throughout this essay.

As a member of multiple global diasporas, a migrant, a flaneur, a sojourner, whichever label applies in whichever context, it is of utmost importance to consider my global position when moving through the world. Conducting research is a prime responsibility as it allows me to use my capabilities to affect change on a small scale and perhaps, as Frantz Fanon suggested, "change the order of the world" (Fanon 2). In this process, I take to heart the notion that "decolonization is not a metaphor" (Tuck and Yang 61). I am constantly thinking about ways to disrupt the violences perpetuated by hegemonic powers, often in the form of nation-states.

Throughout my research, as well as in my lived experience, I have been confronted by the arbitrary violence of national borders. As a passport holder of a country in the so-called Global North, I am nevertheless reminded of the immense amount of privilege I have in being able to traverse these borders with relative ease; my siblings of the global majority must often plan and spend carefully to embark on the same kinds of journeys that I can undertake without much of a second thought. That being said, I do face the consistent (micro)aggressions that anyone darker than beige must face when being "randomly" controlled at border controls. As countless anecdotal accounts show, these checks are not a coincidence (Kamaloni 99). The suggestion that your presence is worth scrutiny amounts to the kinds of symbolic violence that can lead to the erasure of that presence; violences ranging from second glances to passive-aggressive remarks to explicit racism and xenophobia all form part of the violence that is constituted by and reconstitutes nation-state borders.

How this relates to my research is manifold. First, as a person occupying multiple identities at once, I exist at the junctures of advantage and disadvantage that characterize so many of the migration flows to the Netherlands. As a highly-educated, cisgender, non-disabled man, my privileges have afforded me certain opportunities to which the participants in my research do not have access. By the same token, as a Queer person of color from a low-income background, the disadvantages I have faced allow me to relate to a certain extent to the barriers and challenges faced by those experiencing a new environment.

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Relying on autoethnographic insights from my experience as a researcher, this essay argues for a sensitive engagement with the city with the diverse individuals that make up its populace. Autoethnography, defined differently in different fields, can be understood as "research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social" (Ellis xix). Through the practice of describing my own research and migration narrative, I present the city, my research participants, and institutions I have encountered along the way with the reflexive intent of illuminating broader social phenomena (Anderson). This essay further reflects on the role of materiality and discourse in how migrants navigate complexities in cosmopolitan settings. Ultimately, I contend that migrants form an integral part of the cultural landscape of a city. This essay exemplifies newcomers' intellectual, embodied, and affective contributions across various interlocking spheres throughout the city.

Post Up

In the current era of "posts" (post-truth, post-structural, post-colonial), we also find ourselves in a posthumanist wave. This movement of scholarly thought encompasses a broad tradition of scholars exploring the boundaries between the human and the non-human from the perspective of cultural studies, feminist studies, and animal rights studies, to name just a few. Rosi Braidotti, a prominent scholar who has helped to shape posthumanist thought, has argued for an expansion of consideration of who counts as human (Braidotti). The dichotomy between humans and non-humans often subliminally characterizes debates around migration. For example, through what colleagues and I have identified as a qualified form of humanitarianism elsewhere (Hernandez et al. 12), migration discourses in Europe often construct the migrant as human only to a certain extent. The qualified nature of humanitarianism has been discussed at length (Pallister-Wilkins 32-35). Still, for this essay, this concept of humanitarianism suffices to highlight how various categories of migrants are positioned in hierarchies, with those who are most 'like us' at the top and deserving of our respect, concern, and care. Particularly for those migrants who flee war (and other threats to their living bodies), humanitarianism proves to be anything but humane. The qualified concern for the often-represented "floods" of humanity (Pruitt 383) positions social and political actors in ways that reaffirm the hierarchies of those who deserve and those who do not.

My research adopts a critical poststructuralist perspective. By critical, I reference Horkheimer here, who conceptualized critical research as intended "to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers of" human

beings (Horkheimer 246). As a researcher aligned with the critical school of thought, I am interested in how contested meanings become preferred by society and, importantly, seek to challenge those meanings with my research. The thrust of a critical stance is not only to describe oppressive dynamics but also to undo them to the best of our ability. This approach means avoiding taking 'common-sense' understandings at face value and approaching underlying meaning with an intent to perceive how these understandings influence our lived reality.

The Role of Culture

Part of my praxis as a researcher means implementing a 'culture-centered approach' (Dutta 4). This approach calls "for the cultivation of a form of humility that begins by noting the ways in which community voices are often erased through the very processes of knowledge production" (Dutta 255). A culture-centered approach further entails understanding culture not as a static element of a given country, region, or city but as an evolving, contested site of diverging discursive meanings (Hall 13). My research as a communication scholar has shown how specific cultural discourses can be accepted, rejected, or negotiated. For example, in my work on racial, ethnic, and national diversity, I have argued that race, rather than being merely 'taboo' becomes rendered discursively and materially unspeakable through dominant discourses common throughout Western Europe (Hernandez). The political and cultural unspeakability of race are present in my ongoing in migrant mental healthcare, though I do notice a shift in contemporary discourse. In this vein, I am often confronted with conflicted meanings of complex concepts like change, conflict, and politics.

The tensions between and amongst discourses and the material realities they represent must be navigated carefully. Discourse can be understood as "a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed" (Laclau 254). Simply put, everything written, said, or otherwise expressed constitutes discourse. Conversely, material can be thought of as the "stuff that things are made of" (Ingold 1). Importantly, these two concepts are intertwined, as one cannot be understood without the other (Carpentier 13). Understanding that things only have meaning when they are discursively impactful in some way is key here. This conceptualization is not to negate material realities but to understand that how humans make sense of the world is only with and through discourse. It is here that the notion of conflict moves from the discursive (i.e. conflicted meanings) to the material (i.e. the impacts of those meanings on migrants).

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It is my responsibility to illuminate these discursive and material issues marginalized communities face and seek ways to alleviate barriers. For example, in the research for the Mental Health 4 All project, and the other projects I have worked on, part of my work means centering the voices of our research participants, acknowledging their complexity and humanity, and encouraging positive change in systems that disenfranchise.

Identifying culture as constantly evolving also opens the possibility for the culture of the city as a growing force with the power to heal. As a relatively new migrant to the city, Amsterdam has also been a place of revitalization and growth for me. I see the culture of this place in the institution I work for and the social settings I attempt to frequent. While culture exists as a site of struggle (Martin et al. 5), we can also hold space for the restorative implications of culture as a constant means of reinvention.

In resonance with the theme of this special issue, I would also like to expand on the concept of 'conflict'. Conflict is, of course, not limited to national boundaries. Throughout my research, I am reminded of the embodied and often epigenetic traumas carried in the bodies of those who leave their home contexts. By epigenetic trauma, I mean the cultural trauma leveraged at a specific group that can be inherited by future generations of that group (Lehrner and Yehuda). Far from a cultural metaphor, this biological affliction manifests in the expression or suppression of specific genes, impacting physical embodiment (McEwen). For example, descendants of the enslaved peoples in the United States and descendants of those affected

by World War 2 and the Holocaust demonstrate the effects of this cultural trauma at the genetic level (Kellermann; Jackson et al.). This intergenerational impact of war and conflict can also be seen in today's survivors of conflict in the occupied land of Palestine (Atallah). Thus, conflict and war on a national scale find their way into the breathing and flowing crevices of the bodies of people we interact with daily.

Conflict does, however, have the capacity to influence change. Without conflict, humans do not grow. I do not mean to romanticize the notion of conflict; it can have long-lasting psychological, emotional, and material consequences. Rather, I want to offer an alternative way of thinking about conflict that may help contextualize the realities of discord that characterize urban life in the context of global migration. The tensions caused by the presence of newcomers can act as a mirror to the dominant society. In this sense, I propose welcoming the energetic flow that migration can represent. New eyes, new faces, and new perspectives can and do have a rejuvenating effect on cities.

Diversity and Intersectionality

Diversity in the city represents opportunities and challenges. With this essay, I want to center the super-diverse identities of various migrants that come to Amsterdam. In a period of heightened migration, discussing 'just'" diversity as an aspect of cosmopolitanism is no longer analytically sufficient. Contemporary migration has necessitated the concept of "super-diversity" or a modern condition detailing "a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants" (Vertovec 1024). This move to super-diversity allows us to acknowledge differently positioned newcomers in myriad ways and move past bounded notions of migrants as occupying one category (i.e., nationality, gender, race, ethnicity) at a time.

In my experience as a researcher, the concept of super-diversity is in a constant state of emergence. My research participants are differently positioned regarding legal status; some as refugees, some as undocumented, and some as knowledge workers. I encountered those of lower socio-economic status, folks of different genders and ability statuses, and those whose transnational connections position them to understand the city from incredibly unique vantage points. The lens of diversity magnifies the need for everyone, including those of the native-Dutch 'majority', to become accustomed to adapting their worldview to a new and evolving city (Crul and Lelie 187).

These culturally-inflected vantage points are deeply entwined with notions of identity and how migrants interact with the world. Each time I have scheduled a research interview with a new study participant, I carefully consider what aspects of their identity and personality they will bring to our interaction. Especially regarding mental health, witnessing the full humanity of the person in front of you in all of their complexities is of utmost importance.

One tool that has helped researchers and practitioners think of individual and structural complexities in the past is the now ubiquitous term 'intersectionality'. Originally coined in the legal context of the United States by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term has been adapted (for better or worse) to fit many social realities (Crenshaw 140). The work of intersectionality has also extended into "resisting racialized, heteropatriarchal oppressions of global capitalism and colonialism" (Roshanravan 42). However, at its core, intersectionality is a Black Feminist understanding of how oppressions intersect.

Often, one sees in the social sciences a rather superficial engagement with intersectionality. Diversity in Europe is often seen solely through an "either/or" lens that dichotomizes gender and migration status (Hernandez 121). This dichotomy has several implications; diversity work is seen as predominantly or solely addressing the problems of gender inequality, as though those of various genders cannot also have other intersectional aspects of their identity. This reductive view can manifest as, for example, administrators in various municipal institutions perpetuating racist/xenophobic microaggressions towards women of color, lack of affordances for disabled women in public spaces, or a lack of acknowledgment of ignorance of the way non-Christian religious holidays are adapted for various LGBT communities, to name but a few examples.

The city does, however, offer intersectional solutions to the problems facing diverse communities. As a researcher and educator, it is my responsibility to seek out and magnify these solutions with whatever recognition my voice can bring.

Concrete Examples: the City in Movement

In a recent volume published by Pakhuis de Zwijger, the *Designing Cities for All* (DCFA) collective organized written contributions from the perspectives of eighteen diversely positioned designers, artists, academics, and activists. The volume identified "Cities of Belonging," "Everything is Design," and "Making it Work." as relevant themes for the diversity of topics of the various essays by the contributors (Ader et al. 10).

The essays that make up the other two sections are impactful and challenging in their own right. However, for this essay, I would like to turn to the concept of "Cities of Belonging". To open this section, cultural anthropologist Aminata Cairo raises the question, "What is a city for?". She adroitly points out that systems of inequality are perpetuated through the material construction of cities, often excluding certain members of the populace (Cairo 15). This point moves further in not only the material construction of the city but the discursive representation of "all" in questions of who is included/excluded. Nishant Shah, Professor of Global Media at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, emphasizes the interplay of sameness and difference in considering who counts as being seen as worthy. As Shah says, we are more likely to include those who look, think, and act like us (Shah 25).

My intent in highlighting the conceptualizations of these thinkers is to draw attention to the linkages between the discursive and material constraints that define existence within cities like Amsterdam. The interplay of materiality and discursivity here has practical implications for those living or trying to live in the city: issues like gentrification, inequality, and inaccessibility are consistent problems when trying to imagine a fairer place to live for everyone. The work by the DCFA reminds us to consistently turn a critical eye towards the city and consider for whom and what a city exists. Further, this work reminds us of the importance of considering how each of us is responsible for contributing to an inclusive city.

In/Excluded Migrants

Examples of migrant presences in the city abound. However, migrants to a new urban context are often "obscenely included" to fulfill certain societal positions but disallowed from participation in society at all levels (De Genova 1181). This obscene inclusion takes place in a context where migrants represent a form of necessary labor, not only in a manual sense (i.e., agriculture, service jobs, etc.) but also in terms of cultural production. The desire for migrant cultural work is evidenced by the consumption of art, music, dance, and other forms of cultural production from elsewhere that nevertheless does not guarantee the producers of these forms anything other than a precarious and contingent place within the cultural landscape (Drzewiecka et al. 462). One powerful trend I have noticed is that cultural producers (i.e. both artists and institutions) will use art to speak back to the oppressive forces of the nation-state while thematizing their precarity. For example, artists I have met during my time in the Netherlands while conducting this research rely on their experiences to inspire their

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performances, drawing attention to the myriad ways they have navigated conflict, both here and elsewhere. This phenomenon means that for cities like Amsterdam, San Francisco, Berlin, and New Delhi (all of which I have called home at some point), migrants make up a large part of the cultural scene. In Amsterdam, a global hub of creativity, the impact of migrants on the cultural sphere is undeniable.

Additionally, my experience in identifying new cultural venues and opportunities has led me into contact with exemplary individuals and organizations that work towards improving the cultural and academic landscape of the city. For example, the *Salwa Foundation*, a collective of migrant artists based in Amsterdam, and lecturers and researchers at the *Royal Tropical Institute* (KIT) have allowed me to witness them doing this work. Their endeavors have shown me specific exemplars of the myriad ways migrants contribute to the diversification and enrichment of the city of Amsterdam.

The Salwa Foundation does ground-breaking work creating community and providing access to the Dutch cultural landscape for artists with a migrant background. While this can look like funding, mentorship, and other forms of infrastructural support, as I attended some of their gatherings, I also see the disruptive power of groups coming together for the sake of simply existing in community. Often, as subjects of late capitalism, we are told to produce, produce, produce without any regard for our own well-being. This self-destructive tendency is particularly true for migrants and newcomers to a country who have to prove they are "worthy" of being allowed residence. The Salwa Foundation seeks to disrupt capitalist notions

of production by providing the space for artists and activists to exist in community.

Another example of work that seeks to disrupt globalized capitalism is a course I assisted in creating at the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam. The course entitled 'Strengthening Disrupted Health Systems' featured an e-learning session on Mental Health for 'Refugees and Vulnerable people'. The course took place within the *Masters of Health Policy* at the KIT and is geared towards professionals from the so-called Global South. The course aimed to provide these professionals with practical insights into understanding and improving access to mental healthcare resources in contexts disrupted by conflict.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention the Netherlands' role in global (de)colonization. The Netherlands' historical role in colonizing many countries in the Global South has resulted in continuous, ongoing hierarchical relations with large portions of the Global South. Another institution that does excellent work in this regard, the *Black Archives*, highlights the colonial relationships that the Netherlands has with its former formal colonies, particularly (but not only) Surinam. Their work has implications for local, regional, and national power relations. For example, local school classes attended their recent exhibition, "Facing Blackness," which thematized issues of representation of Black bodies, particularly Zwarte Piet (*Black Pete*), in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. This exhibition did a phenomenal job of linking the local Dutch context with the global uprisings, illuminating how the conceptualization of the colonized impacts how we think of marginalized people today.

The Black Archives, through outreach and activism work, speaks truth to power. What we can gain from this perspective are potential ways of thinking through the meanings of war, conflict, and the city. The Black Archives and the other examples I have offered here are only a few among multitudes of contributors to the brilliant cultural sphere of the city. In highlighting their efforts, this essay represents a singular perspective, but one that can hopefully spur thoughts and conversations that will further inform and challenge the reader.

Where Shall We Go From Here?
In conclusion, I ask the reader to consider the confines placed upon us by the modern colonial system. More specifically, I must ask, in the Black Feminist tradition, how to render the political personal and think of how the ways we exist in the city can continue to perpetuate and also undo the conflicts I have described throughout this essay. The tensions between

so-called majorities and minorities can serve as productive points to enter the discussion.

In her seminal essay '*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*', Hortense Spillers notes, "We are also reminded that 'geography' is not a divine gift." (Spillers 70). While her commentary was originally intended as a materialist understanding of gendered and racialized politics in the United States, I want to highlight the applicability of this insight to a global context. Geographic contexts and origins, while certainly aleatory, are highly contested literal and metaphorical sites of struggle. Geography that connects certain people of certain phenotypes through the process of racialization is the result of centuries of meaning-making processes that have constructed global hierarchies. In this sense, our geography is far from providence bestowed upon us, but rather a discursive and material conflicting force that imprints upon human bodies.

The material presence of diverse bodies can only be understood through discourse. By emphasizing this entwinement, I have provided the basis for an argument that suggests a sensitive and sensitized engagement with our fellow city dwellers. Understanding the material needs of those fleeing war and conflict is but a first step in advocating for their rights. Furthermore, understanding our material and discursive position is another crucial step in adopting a culture-centered approach.

In this essay, I have argued that a rich understanding of migrants is necessary to advocate for their presence in urban social landscapes. As a closing provocation, I would like to take this a step further and assert that migrants' contributions to a local context are, in fact, irrelevant to whether or not they should be allowed to live there. One should not have to have escaped war to lead a happy, self-actualized life. The argument that purports migrants should first contribute to a context before being conditionally accepted is rooted in an inherent supremacist mindset that ignores the humanity of specific kinds of people. The same humanity that affords a Dutch person to live in the Netherlands without being questioned should be afforded to all, regardless of national origin. This should be the case the world over.

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