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Everyday geographies of belonging: Syrian refugee experiences in the Northern Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The Dutch government currently underemphasises the interaction between refugees and *place* in the context of refugee spatial dispersal policy. This paper seeks a more detailed understanding of refugee integration by looking at opportunities for, and obstacles to, belonging within the ethnically homogeneous context of the Northern Netherlands. We draw on in-depth and walking interviews to provide a rich illustration of the daily routines and activities of ten Syrian male refugees in and around their residential neighbourhoods. Our findings highlight that a sense of belonging is grounded and embodied in space and place, and emphasise the role of everyday neighbourhood places as sites where refugee (non-)belonging emerges through social (non-)encounters and (non-)interaction with others. Daily life in transitory neighbourhood spaces provides opportunities for refugees to develop and maintain social relationships, asserting their presence and belonging in neighbourhood life. However, at the same time, refugees are demarcated as others because the different time geographies of refugees and existing residents form barriers to establishing nodes of encounter. Their otherness is further accentuated as potential places of encounter are often legally or economically inaccessible. Due to these experiences, or at least in part, refugees develop 'new places' built around shared memories, stories and food practices from their home country. Consequently, we argue for a more constructive understanding of migrant communities and suggest allowing multiple spaces of refugee belonging. Our study shows that achieving belonging is a multifaceted, nuanced and relational process, and one that is undervalued in the context of refugee dispersal in the Netherlands.

1. Introduction

As in many immigrant-receiving countries in Western Europe, refugee[1] integration remains a topic of public debate in the Netherlands (Bakker et al., 2016; Engbersen et al., 2015; Smets and ten Kate, 2007; UNCHR, 2017). According to Engbersen et al. (2015), Dutch refugee and asylum policy focuses mainly on the reception of refugees, and fails to recognise integration issues that seem to haunt many refugees. In a comparison between the current Dutch asylum system and that in the UK, Bakker et al. (2016) state that Dutch asylum system actually impedes integration. Refugees are kept isolated in asylum seeker centres in the more rural parts of the Netherlands to await the outcome of their asylum request. During this stage, refugees remain in limbo and are not allowed to work or study – not even to learn the Dutch language (Engbersen et al., 2015). Once formally acknowledged as a refugee and granted a temporary residence permit, refugees, often with little or no knowledge of Dutch culture and language, are dispersed throughout municipalities in the Netherlands, and often housed in villages or neighbourhoods with a predominantly white population (Bakker et al., 2016; Smets and Ten Kate, 2007). Consequently, and as also asserted in recent work on dispersal by Darling (2016), policymakers working on dispersal should carefully consider the local spaces where belonging emerges and is experienced, and the daily contexts in which exclusion is actually perceived.

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[1] We realise that the term 'refugee' could be seen as inappropriate or might evoke negative associations. We could have referred to the respondents in this paper as permit holders, which would reflect their legal status in the Netherlands. However, the respondents frequently identified and presented themselves as 'refugees'.

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Once they have been dispersed, refugees may obtain paid work, and are also required to learn the Dutch language and culture within a set number of months in order to secure a permanent residence permit.[2] For many types of employment and study, this imposes barriers to participation. The Dutch procedures and policies related to refugee reception and integration impose specific challenges to their belonging in the host country. In recent years, a body of literature has developed that addresses (im)migrant belonging and recognises various dimensions of belonging as well as their impacts on, for example, citizenship and identity (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Duyvendak, 2011; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Although belonging is seen as a human need, often associated with feeling at home, feeling safe and being free to develop and maintain an identity of one's own (Antonsich, 2010; Duyvendak, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 2006), all of which are particularly pertinent to people seeking refuge from suffering experienced as a result of political hardship or war, it seems to be undervalued as a desirable outcome of integration policies.

In our study on Syrian refugees discussed in this article, we consider a sense of belonging on the local neighbourhood scale since this is where everyday practices and routines of belonging are enacted (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Darling, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Many, if not all, of the dimensions of belonging identified by Antonsich (2010), i.e. affective, relational, economic, cultural and legal factors, can be observed at the local level. In addition to a spatial context of belonging, it is important to highlight the politics of belonging in which, as Yuval-Davis (2006) noted, 'us' is demarcated from 'them', resulting in an interplay between 'seeking' and 'granting' belonging, as recent studies in the UK have demonstrated (Hopkins, 2011; Isakjee, 2016; Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2015; Visser, 2017). Feeling or experiencing belonging is therefore relational and conflicted, and, as expressed by Yuval-Davis (2006), "a notion of belonging becomes activated where there is a sense of exclusion" (p. 525).

Hopkins (2011), for example, states that young Muslim males experience a university campus as tolerant and diverse. Nevertheless, it is also perceived as exclusive and hostile due to political discourses such as national policies or global issues, and local acts of discrimination during social encounters in everyday life. A similar observation has been made by Isakjee (2016), who maintains that young British Muslims develop emotional connections to local British spaces, but are torn between their Muslim identities and British citizenship due to the potentially divisive politics of belonging that surround national identity. Visser (2017) adds that to cope with feelings of not belonging, on a national or city level, UK immigrants tend to develop a stronger sense of belonging to their neighbourhood. Finally, a study by van Liempt (2011) on Somalian refugees moving from the Netherlands to the UK illustrates that a sense of belonging emerges through a variety of sources and at sites ranging from local to national and transnational spaces.

The general aim of this paper is to explore how and where Syrian refugees in the Northern Netherlands negotiate difference through encounters in order to develop or impede a sense of belonging. We start by introducing the theoretical groundwork of this study. First, we discuss the mechanisms and dynamics that underlie belonging, how belonging is felt and experienced, but also how it is granted and distributed by those in power. We then move on to a critical consideration of recent work on geographies of encounter in order to understand where and how encounters can be meaningful in order to facilitate a sense of belonging. After presenting the research context of the Northern Netherlands and the qualitative approach to this study, we follow with an empirical account of the spaces and dynamics of belonging in the Northern Netherlands. Here, we identify three themes: social contact in transitory spaces; social contact in third spaces; and the development of a 'new place' of belonging. Lastly, as we will argue throughout this paper, the paper concludes by maintaining that a sense of belonging is nuanced, multifaceted and relational, emphasising the local contexts where belonging emerges and experienced.

2. A sense of belonging: multidimensional, contextual and hybrid

To understand how Syrian refugees in the Northern Netherlands establish and maintain a sense of belonging, we explore, in this section, how social and spatial dynamics within specific neighbourhood places can facilitate a personal sense of belonging, and which processes of spatial inclusion and exclusion determine to what extent belonging is granted by those in power (see also, Isakjee, 2016; Visser, 2017). Here, we also assume the co-existence of multiple forms of belonging to both the host society and to the places that are 'lost' (see also Antonsich, 2010). Migrants, displaced people and people living as part of a diaspora increasingly develop 'new places' in the host society that are reminiscent of 'home'. These can offer feelings of comfort, safety and familiarity (Ehrkamp, 2005; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006). Consequently, as we will assert throughout this paper, belonging is multidimensional, contextual and hybrid (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

A sense of belonging can be described as a desire for attachment in order to negotiate one's identity and to feel part of a larger group (Anthias, 2006). Antonsich (2010), following Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes personal and social dimensions of belonging. A personal feeling of emotional attachment towards a particular place is defined as 'place-belongingness' (Antonsich, 2010) or a 'sense of home' (Yuval-Davis, 2006), in which home represents a symbolic space of security, familiarity, comfort or refuge (see also hooks, 2009). Although the notion of place is often left unnoticed in discussions on belonging (Antonsich, 2010), it is within these everyday places that emotional attachment is negotiated and where perceptions of home and safety are constituted.

Antonsich (2010, pp. 647–648) distinguishes five interrelated factors that shape a personal sense of belonging. First, autobiographical factors, such as past experiences, relations and emotions, as well as the continued presence or memories of relatives in a particular place, attach a person to a particular place. Second, relational factors encompass both emotionally dense relationships and weak social ties that make a person feel tied to their environment. Third, cultural factors include representations of culture through language, traditions, norms and values that can facilitate a sense of 'intimacy' with one's surroundings (hooks, 2009), but which are also able to demarcate 'us' from 'them'. Fourth, economic factors contribute to a sense of belonging by offering material advantages and emphasising that one is economically embedded in society. Finally, to be entitled with rights in a given place contributes to a safe environment. Legal factors determine the circumstances under which an individual can participate in society and the extent to which a feeling of belonging is developed.

However, to be able to feel at home in a place is not only an individual affair (Antonsich, 2010). A personal sense of belonging to a place interrelates with processes of socio-spatial inclusion and exclusion. This was defined by Yuval-Davis (2006) as 'the politics of belonging' and is more related to the concept of citizenship (Antonsich, 2010). Yuval-Davis conceptualises the act of belonging as the interaction of groups who wish to belong with those in power who determine who belongs and who does not. Often, this privilege of 'granting' belonging is reserved for governments or dominant group representatives that thus decide on the inclusion or exclusion of individuals or minority

[2] After obtaining a temporary residence permit, refugees can stay in the Netherlands for five years. To obtain a permanent residence permit, successful civic integration is required, and for this refugees need to pass an integration exam. This test measures institutional knowledge and language abilities. It is the responsibility of refugees to organise and finance their own integration procedure, for which they can request a loan from the government. The loan becomes a 'gift' if refugees pass the test within three years. Further, if they fail to pass the test, refugees can be fined up to 1250 euro (Engbersen et al., 2015; Bakker et al., 2016).

groups. Given that belonging is a process rather than a state (see also Visser, 2017), the processes of inclusion and exclusion, that distinguish 'us' from 'them', are subject to change. The politics of belonging are therefore temporally, intersectionally and spatially situated (Yuval-Davis, 2006) such that a sense of belonging is context-specific and thus place-dependent (Antonsich, 2010).

In an attempt to frame belonging beyond geographically fixed and stable boundaries, some authors have suggested the notion of 'trans-national belonging' (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006). A transnational sense of belonging can manifest itself through the development by refugees or migrants of 'new places' in a host society. Places such as Islamic supermarkets, Halal butchers or mosques can represent the traditions, norms and values practised in the country of origin (Ehrkamp, 2005; Wang and Lo, 2007) and can offer a safe and familiar environment for newcomers to explore an unfamiliar host society (Duyvendak, 2011). By providing space to meet other refugees or migrants, such places help people remain connected to their country of origin by sharing memories and stories, or by preparing and sharing food (see also Johnston and Longhurst, 2012; Meijering and van Hoven, 2003); they are reminiscent of home places that are 'lost'.

3. Neighbourhood spaces of (not) belonging

To study the complexities that underlie the different dimensions of belonging in place, this study draws on the geographies of encounter literature to examine how public spaces in local neighbourhoods in the Northern Netherlands can contribute to Syrian refugees' sense of belonging. Given the multifaceted, contextual and hybrid nature of feeling or experiencing belonging, and the politics of difference that shape refugees' feelings of inclusion and exclusion, the concept of encounters is used in this study to look at the different spaces in which belonging is negotiated; we therefore conceptualise belonging as a product of social encounters with others in *place* (see also Visser, 2017). Recent work on the geographies of encounters has put forward new questions around meaning, identity, power and temporality, in search of new conceptualizations of encounters. In an effort to grasp these new thoughts on encounters, this section highlights four aspects related to encounters: difference, temporality, meaningfulness and spatiality.

Encounters have often been used to understand the nature of contact between individuals or groups of people that are 'different'. Wilson (2017, pp.455), however, convincingly argues that encounters are "more than the coming together of different bodies … Encounters *make* difference." A focus on encounters thus enables us to expose the contradictions, entanglements and momentary extensions of power that emerge from encounters, but also put forward the discourses, societal attitudes and structural inequalities that shape and constrain them (Wilson, 2017). It is this moment between different individuals or groups where new ideas and thoughts arise, where power relations surface, where boundaries are drawn or lifted, or where hope grows or fades away. Since this paper focuses on the everyday refugee belonging, the idea that encounters produce difference is crucial as it offers a possibility to reflect on their role within the wider host society (see also Leitner, 2012).

A substantial amount of work on integration between immigrants and host society residents has emphasised the importance of 'sustained' encounters, stating that more 'routine' or 'repetitive' contact in community centres or sport clubs favours long term relations (Amin, 2002; Hurst, 2017; Neal et al., 2015). Given that the respondents in this study were only just granted a temporary residence permit and had developed little knowledge on how to access such amenities, most experienced chance encounters in spaces such as streets, squares and parks. Indeed, Wilson and Darling (2016) argue that although fleeting or momentary, encounters as such should not be portrayed as having little value or less capacity to change norms, values and beliefs (see also Kohlbacher et al., 2015). Encounters are more than a singular event and reflect past experiences, and expectations about future encounters. Encounters might therefore accumulate, "to gradually shift relations and behaviour over time – to both positive and negative effect" (Wilson, 2017, pp. 463).

Encounters are thus events of relation, making them inherently risky and unpredictable (Wilson, 2017). It is hard to determine the outcome of an encounter, not to mention the difficulty of designing, reproducing and facilitating a desired outcome (Wilson and Darling, 2016). However, encounters have often been used as a tool to facilitate integration between individuals and groups of people that are different, are in conflict or on bad terms. Following Allport's (1954) 'contact hypothesis', intervention policies have relied on the assumption that encounters have the transformative potential to increase familiarity and tolerance, changing people attitudes and beliefs towards the 'other' (Askins and Pain, 2011; Leitner, 2012). Indeed, Henning and Lieberg (1996) describe how "unpretentious everyday contacts" (p.6) can help to develop informal relationships as these do not require much investment and do not necessarily ask for any shared interest. Since refugees have to rebuild their social network in predominantly white neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, developing social relationships can help to understand the host society and develop a sense of belonging (Kohlbacher et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, authors have critically questioned this transformative capacity of encounters and whether meaningful contact should be expected as a result. Valentine (2008) argues that social encounters never occur in a space free of tradition, history and power structures within a host society. A study on neighbourhood attachment by Kohlbacher et al. (2015), for example, suggests that local social relationships strengthen connections to the neighbourhood for both existing residents and migrants, but these everyday contacts seem more important and beneficial to migrants than to existing residents. This potentially unequal relationship is further explored by Phillips et al. (2014), who maintain that intercultural dialogue does facilitate a better mutual understanding between groups, but that power structures between these groups often prevent successful bridge-building social encounters. Indeed, Valentine (2008) suggested "a paradoxical gap between geographies of encounter" (p.325) by questioning whether social encounters are more of an exchange of civilities than a meaningful encounter, which would suggest that tolerance of others is merely an act of power. A study by Phillips (2006) found that Muslim residents in mixed neighbourhoods perceived exclusion because of their different norms and values, and everyday practices, to those of the white majority. According to Amin (2002), "the city's public spaces are not natural servants of multicultural engagement" (p. 967).

Valentine (2008) describes how different communities can coexist in a neighbourhood, while the daily lives of individuals do not necessarily appear to intersect due to differences in language, social and cultural networks, employment and education, or financial resources. Several studies illustrate how marginalised groups are excluded because their lives do not intersect with other residents to produce meaningful contact (Askins and Pain, 2011; Phillips, 2006; Phillips et al., 2014; Valentine, 2008). In general, refugees in the Netherlands are not allowed to work or study in the early stages of their integration. As such, the respondents in this study had few activities to do during the day. Using a time-geographical approach (see also Hägerstrand, 1970) to map the different movement patterns of refugees and existing residents, it appeared likely that nodes of encounter would not be easily established. Not working or actively participating in society hinders integration processes in Dutch society and emphasises a refugee's status as an outsider.

Lastly, many places have drawn attention to study the concept of encounters since encounters are not only shaped or produced by space, they are of significant importance in shaping or producing space (Leitner, 2012). To provide a framework for analysing encounters as events of relation, we conceptualise, in our study, neighbourhood spaces by distinguishing between 'third places' and 'transitory zones' as these are the most commonly cited types of spaces in the literature on intercultural encounters in the public domain. Both third places and

transitory zones are defined by Gardner (2011) as inclusive public places outside the first place (home) and the second place (work). Additionally, third places, according to Oldenburg (1989, p. 22), feel like a "home away from home", where conversation is the main activity (see also Gardner, 2011). Oldenburg (1989) further claims that third places such as community centres, supermarkets and parks (see also Amin, 2002; Neal et al., 2015) are accessible, neutral, comfortable and welcoming. In addition to these third places, the framework includes transitory zones defined as in-between places, used to get from one place to another (Gardner, 2011), such as sidewalks, lobbies, waiting queues and public transport.

4. Research context: dispersal in the Northern Netherlands

The Northern Netherlands consists of the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe, and has roughly 1.7 million inhabitants. Its largest city is Groningen, an international student city with approximately 200,000 residents of whom over 50,000 are students. Although this makes the city of Groningen relatively diverse, the region has traditionally been home to a fairly heterogeneous white population. As Table 1 illustrates, the Northern Netherlands is far less diverse in terms of ethnicity than the Western Netherlands or the Netherlands as a whole. Also in terms of religion, the Northern Netherlands can be considered as the most secular part of the Netherlands. In the period 2010–2014, the percentage of northern inhabitants (Groningen, 34 percent; Friesland 43 percent; and Drenthe 40 percent) that identified themselves as religious was lower than the national average of 50.8 percent. Compared to a national average of 4.9 percent, only 2.2 percent of Groningen residents profess Islam, a rate which drops to 1.4 percent in Friesland and Drenthe (Statistics Netherlands, 2015). Reflecting this low ethnic diversity in the North, culture-specific amenities such as mosques, Turkish supermarkets and halal butchers are relatively few in number and are unevenly distributed in terms of the refugee dispersal policy. You can still find local retailers, supermarkets and churches in the smaller villages and larger towns in the Northern Netherlands, but these mostly reflect traditional Dutch culture.

To an extent, this lack of ethnic diversity and accessible amenities might have prompted non-Western migrants to migrate 'onwards' (Statistics Netherlands, 2017; Engbersen et al., 2015; van Liempt, 2011). Indeed, in recent decades, non-Western migrants have tended, after obtaining a permanent residence permit, to relocate to the Western part of the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2017) or even beyond (van Liempt, 2011). Notably, this shifting pattern has so far not been observed within the Syrian population in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2017), which suggests that Syrian refugees have not left the more rural parts of the Netherlands where they were placed under the refugee spatial dispersal policy. The Dutch asylum system provides an interesting case that can contribute to the debate on belonging, and the geographies of encounter, a debate that is often more oriented towards more diverse, urban neighbourhoods (e.g. Amin, 2002; Gardner, 2011; Neal et al., 2015; Phillips, 2006; Valentine, 2008; Visser, 2017). A notable exception is a study by Hurst (2017) conducted in rural Australia. She maintains that, due to spatial proximity, rural places offer different social and spatial dynamics as the chance for repeated encounters with 'others' is heightened. This argument is also used by the Dutch government to legitimise its spatial dispersal policy for refugees.

Table 1
Ethnic diversity in the Netherlands. Differences in ethnic diversity[a] between regions in the Netherlands compared to the country's average. Source: Statistics Netherlands, Statline (2017).

	Non-Western migrants	Total population	Ethnic diversity (%)
Netherlands – North	93,276	1,722,247	5.4
Netherlands – East	332,342	3,603,406	9.2
Netherlands – South	303,069	3,630,077	8.4
Netherlands – West	1,445,036	8,125,777	17.8
Netherlands – Total	2,173,723	17,081,507	12.7

[a] Based on a high correlation, the percentage Non-Western migrants can be used in the Dutch context as an indicator of ethnic diversity instead of the more detailed Herfindahl-Hirschman-Index (HHI) (van Beuningen et al., 2013).

5. Research approach and methods

In this research, we only included Syrians holding temporary residence permits because at this stage they have been resettled within Dutch neighbourhoods, signalling the start of their integration process (Bakker et al., 2016). Respondents were approached using several non-random recruiting techniques (Hennink et al., 2011; Longhurst, 2010). First, Dutch NGOs involved with refugee reception and wellbeing were contacted to gain access to the Syrian refugee community. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to approach the informal networks of respondents and, further, one of the respondents adopted a gatekeeping role by introducing the researchers to fellow Syrian refugees who were less able to speak Dutch or English. Snowball sampling, in particular, had implications for participant recruitment since the majority of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands in 2016 were young males that had travelled to the Netherlands alone (Statistics Netherlands, 2017). For the data to be as rich as possible, we aimed for a diverse sample by informing the NGOs and respondents about the desired demographics of suggested candidates. At the same time, we had to be flexible. Although access to the Syrian refugee community is not difficult per se, it is hard to put together a diverse group due to language limitations. Eventually, ten Syrian male refugees, aged between twenty-two and thirty-two years old, participated in this research, five of them living in a university city and five in a medium-sized town in the Northern Netherlands. They had been staying in the Netherlands for periods ranging from ten months to three years.

To capture patterns of daily life, in-depth interviews and walking interviews were used. These were conducted between May 2016 and August 2016. On two occasions, the respondent and the principal researcher, [name of author], met in a public space, but most interviews took place in respondents' homes (see also Longhurst, 2010). To maintain a conversational and informal dialogue during the interviews, we used a semi-structured interview guide, which matches the exploratory character of this study (Hennink et al., 2011). Since this research focuses on capturing experiences and perceptions, open questions were formulated to encourage respondents to share their stories in detail (Richards, 2015).

In addition to sit-down interviews, walking interviews were conducted in a respondent's neighbourhood or near the interview location. Weather conditions sometimes complicated a full-walking interview, but the seven walking interviews that were achieved produced more place-specific data than the indoor interviews (see also Evans and Jones, 2011; Kusenbach, 2003). The respondents decided on what route to take (Kusenbach, 2003) and, as researchers, we gained specific input from elements and events that shape neighbourhood life. To give structure, a topic guide was used during the walks to relate to statements made during the earlier in-depth interviews. At the same time, new data were generated as the senses of both the respondent and the researcher were exposed to a respondent's everyday spaces. Often these walks evoked specific emotions, memories and stories that otherwise might not have been raised (Jones et al., 2008; Trell and van Hoven, 2010). By walking alongside the respondents, the principal researcher was allowed to participate in their daily activities and was able to observe the opportunities for, and obstacles to, social interaction and encounters with existing residents.

Finally, it is important to note that cross-cultural research demands a sensitive approach due to power relations, language and translation biases, and cultural similarities and differences (Smith, 2010). In

preparation for the data collection process, the interviewer attempted to become well informed about Syrian customs and values in order to enable a safe and informal environment and to minimise the loss of potential data. Inquiries with social workers proved to be helpful in managing expectations and two pilot interviews were organised to familiarise the principal researcher with Syrian customs. English proficiency varied considerably between the respondents. Therefore, to grasp the perceptions and experiences of the respondents, in order to ensure the richness of the data, some interviews involved translators and/or translation apps on mobile phones. Due to spoken or grammatical errors, and the occasional use of Dutch words, some quotations in this paper have been edited to ease comprehension. Prior to the interviews, the research objective and procedures were explained prior to seeking informed consent from the respondents. Any information that could be traced back to a specific respondent was either removed or altered to ensure anonymity (Hennink et al., 2011). Names used in this paper are all fictional.

6. Time geographies, third places and 'Turkish supermarkets'

The everyday lives of the respondents mainly centred around their homes and residential neighbourhoods. Most of their daily routines consist of activities such as attending Dutch language courses, grocery shopping, exercising, meeting fellow refugees and, for some, volunteering. Dutch language courses are offered for approximately eight hours a week and are often taught in local schools. This allows respondents to walk or cycle to classes, which is very convenient since owning a car would be prohibitively expensive. Respondents commented that they liked walking or cycling to school as this was often in the company of other refugees. Furthermore, respondents mentioned that they actually preferred walking because it offers opportunities for social encounters and interaction with existing residents in their neighbourhood. Indeed, this desire for social contact, with both existing residents and fellow refugees, seemed an important aspect of respondents' daily life.

This is reflected, for example, in the voluntary work that two respondents engaged in. They supported an NGO that assists refugees by mentoring them or by offering their services as a translator. This not only allows them to establish social ties with other refugees, it also boosts self-confidence as they contribute to the wellbeing of others. However, not all respondents are able to volunteer as their language skills are insufficient or because they live too far away from these organisations. To meet other migrants, some engage in sporting activities with fellow refugees or meet in public places such as parks or squares. Additionally, all the respondents would visit Turkish supermarkets and Halal butchers, not only for groceries but also for social purposes. Social ties to the host society mainly consist of formal and repetitive encounters and interaction with teachers, civil servants or Dutch volunteers. Spontaneous, everyday contact with existing residents is rare, and only two respondents mentioned frequent community engagement by participating in neighbourhood barbecues or drinking coffee with neighbours. As such, most seem to struggle to connect socially with existing residents in their neighbourhood.

We address three themes that help explain the opportunities for, and obstacles to, establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging by our respondents: social contact in transitory spaces; social contact in third spaces; and the development of a 'new place' of belonging.

6.1. *"We are not used to these 'empty streets'… I always have to look for social contact"*

Our data analysis suggests that respondents experience the neighbourhood as an ambiguous space. Specifically, they recall feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood *as well as* feeling out of place. Our respondents' sense of belonging is related to the frequency and character of social encounters and interaction with people in their neighbourhood; i.e., it is relational. Many of the respondents did report positive encounters and meaningful interactions with neighbourhood residents. For example, Aziz, one of the respondents, maintains a social relationship with one of his neighbours who is special to him. He mentions:

> "*Did you see my neighbour? He is always sitting in front of his door. He is so nice, because he always ask me how I feel and if I need something. He also gives us food sometimes. My mother, she doesn't speak English or Dutch, but he always greets her or waves to her! I like that, that is very good!*" **(Aziz, 25)**

The interactions that Aziz describes can be categorised as 'nodding relationships' (Kohlbacher et al., 2015). Such interactions recognise the presence of 'the stranger', and can make individuals feel noticed in that specific place at that specific time. As such, they represent meaningful social interaction. It is important to note that it is largely in what Gardner (2011) defines as transitory spaces that these nodding relationships, or fleeting encounters, occur (see also Oldenburg, 1989). Nevertheless, as Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015) and Neal et al. (2015) maintain, sharing space contributes to feelings of belonging within neighbourhoods. Indeed, our respondents expressed feelings of happiness whenever they experienced 'successful encounters' and 'shared space' with existing residents. Ayman explains how he specifically seeks out places and opportunities to experience social interaction and how this affects his sense of place:

> "*I really like my town [name of place]. All the people who are living here are very nice to me. Every time I am walking here in [name of place], all the people are speaking to me […] I don't like other places. People are not interested in me and not talking to me. In [name of place], people are interested in me, so I like walking to the supermarket or the park.*" **(Ayman, 23)**

Transitory spaces are places for respondents to make contact with others. However, in spite of the social encounters in transitory zones as described by Ayman above, respondents at the same time regret the lack of *frequent* encounters. This may be attributed to, at least in part, the different activity patterns of local residents due to work and study. These different 'time geographies' (Hägerstrand, 1970) refer to the daily life-paths of individuals or groups of people in space and time. By recording movement across space and time, time geographies highlight times and places where multiple paths converge, creating nodes of encounter. Often, such nodes are characterised by similarity, i.e. people who are employed meet at work during the day, and may do their grocery shopping in the evening. As a result, encounters with others can contribute to the formation of social identities (see also van Hoven, 2001) structured by social, cultural or economic background.

In this context, it is important to note the impact of the Dutch dispersal policy on the way in which a neighbourhood presents nodes of encounter. By dispersing rather than concentrating refugees, the Dutch government aims to develop more effective social integration trajectories based on the assumption that refugees will be encouraged to initiate social interaction with people from the host society and will depend less on existing ties with friends or family. However, when neighbours work or study throughout the day, individual daily life-paths do not necessarily intersect. For our respondents, who are not allowed to work or study in this stage of integration, their daily routines and activities contrast with the daily lives of most other residents. Valentine (2008) conceptualises such neighbourhoods as 'series of parallel lives' (see also Phillips, 2006) in which residents co-exist, but where social contact is not or barely made. This was very apparent when walking with Abdul-Halim and Azwer where, in both cases, there was no sign of other residents in their neighbourhoods. As such, the

walking interviews emphasised that what both of them mostly encounter within their neighbourhood is 'empty streets':

"*My neighbourhood in [name of place] is boring. There are no people on the streets during the day. I don't speak with any Nederlanders (Dutch citizens) because they stay in their houses after 6 PM. During the day, they work. When I do see people in my neighbourhood, I only see old people. They cannot speak English and they don't say hello. Therefore, I don't like my neighbourhood. I want to speak with people who have the same age as I have. I think this is normal […] we are not used to these empty streets. Talking to everyone all the people on the street is typical Middle-Eastern culture, but, in the Netherlands, I always have to look for social contact.*" **(Abdul-Halim, 28)**

The quote below was part of an emotional outburst by Azwer that occurred when we only saw older adults during our walk:

"*I'm not to be out and live here. Because when you are young, you want to be where young people are, so we can talk more. You know, maybe we can make friends there also. But here, I don't see anybody that is my age. […]. I have neighbours here in my apartment building. We are almost of the same age I think. We only say hello sometimes, because they are always working. I don't see them often being home.*" **(Azwer, 22)**

Apart from the non-encounters in empty streets that Abdul-Halim and Azwer mention, they also observe that actual social encounters are mostly with older adults. Although encounters with older adults confirm that they are taking part in neighbourhood life and belong; at the same time, these encounters mark them as being different. Their not-belonging is emphasised by Azwer and Abdul-Halim not sharing space with their peers.

The data show that respondents feel they need to engage with young Dutch people to understand how things are done in the Netherlands. They seem aware that social ties or 'weak ties' with Dutch peers are essential if they want access to knowledge and information about, for example, language, finding jobs or housing. Yamen explains:

"*I know now something of your language by talking to you, but you know if I want to learn everything I must have contact with people from your country. Because in school you learn something, but you learn better if you talk to your people.*" **(Yamen, 23)**

Powell and Rishbeth (2012) argue that knowledge of the locality and its practices, norms and values is a priority in placemaking, and can foster a sense of belonging for newcomers. However, due to a lack of frequent encounters, even weak ties with neighbours are not easily established and maintained by our respondents. Whilst Dutch refugee dispersal policy aims to stimulate these ties, it fails to acknowledge that this process is nuanced and multifaceted as we will argue throughout this paper.

6.2. "When meeting new people, what do you say: I am a refugee and I do nothing?"

Building on the previous section, where we elaborated on the respondents' desire to meet peers in transitory spaces, we now focus on negotiating belonging in third places. Authors have claimed the relevance of semi-public places as spaces for inter-cultural encounters driven by shared interests or common venture, or of repetitive and sustained contact (Amin, 2002; Hurst, 2017; Neal et al., 2015). This section uses Gardner's (2011) concept of 'third places', which she defines as inclusive public places that enhance the lives of residents by encouraging social contact and offer space to develop and maintain social relationships. As such, we look at how third places, such as supermarkets, cafés, libraries and community centres, relate to different dimensions of belonging as suggested by Antonsich (2010). We will argue throughout this section that, despite seeking it, politics often obstructs respondents in being granted belonging.

Unlike with transitory zones, access to third places is not equally available for all neighbourhood residents. The analysis reveals that respondents are aware where they might meet peers, but it is difficult or even impossible for them to access these places. Due to the integration policy in the Netherlands, there are barriers that impede frequent contact with peers. For example, refugees only start to learn Dutch after obtaining a temporary residence permit (Bakker et al., 2016) but, at the same time, they are expected to engage in social encounters and interaction with Dutch people. However, as Meijering and van Hoven (2003) observed, language proficiency is key in transmitting thoughts and ideas between different cultures. With insufficient language skills, many respondents struggle to keep a conversation going. Consequently, a supermarket, although accessible, was often perceived as a place of exclusion. Waled provides an example:

"*When I am in the supermarket, I try to ask for the price in your language or English. But most people in the supermarket do not understand me. I now know something of your language, but you know…it seems as if we don't understand each other*" (**Waled, 22**)

Since respondents were still learning Dutch, they were not allowed to work or study. All are dependent on welfare benefits, making it harder to meet like-minded people. During his interview, Hevdem expressed the desire to meet young people in bars, cafés and restaurants, but he and his friends are often limited to spending time in other places:

"*A bar is too expensive. Sometimes I go, however I don't drink because I'm Muslim. Still, sometimes you have to pay for entrance, so I don't go. Me and my friends go to the city square. We hang out there.*" **(Hevdem, 30)**

Aside from financial limitations, the analysis suggests access to relevant meeting places is often physically denied. The respondents in this study all had ambitions to pursue a diploma in a Dutch school or a university degree, and seemed to have a need to be around students to get a grasp of college life. Ferhat, for instance, wants to obtain a degree in economics, which he had studied in Syria. Whilst learning Dutch, he wants to study and reinforce the knowledge he has already gained. However, he cannot enter the college library since a student card is required to enter the building:

"*Many students are in the library for studying or reading. I want to read in the library, but I can't go in the building, because I'm not a student yet.*" **(Ferhat, 24)**

Although various authors (e.g. Amin, 2002; Gardner, 2011; Neal et al., 2015; Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2015) have suggested that third places are places where different groups interact and where uncertainty and unfamiliarity between 'us' and 'them' diminishes, our data analysis suggests that, at least for our respondents in the Northern Netherlands, third places seem rather to emphasise their not-belonging as a refugee. The experiences and perceptions of respondents in both transitory zones and third places not only influence their emotional or personal sense of belonging, they may also be 'scaled up' and reflect the 'politics of belonging' manifested in feelings of citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 2006; see also Antonsich, 2010, Isakjee, 2016).

In his deconstruction of personal belonging, Antonsich (2010) argues that there is an economic dimension to processes of inclusion and exclusion. He states that it is not only about creating safe and stable material conditions, that individuals establish and maintain a sense of belonging within a place by feeling embedded in an economy and by perceiving themselves as having value to a society. Given the Dutch government's restrictions on refugees working or studying, all the respondents receive social security benefits (see also Bakker et al., 2016; Engbersen et al., 2015). Many feel uncomfortable with not participating in the labour market. Ayman illustrates this issue:

"*What are you doing? That is the first question or second question after your meet somebody. So, I have to tell them that I am originally from Syria and that I do nothing. And this is not a really nice feeling, because*

people are working and they pay taxes. As a refugee I take a part of it. That is a burden feeling." **(Ayman, 23)**

Many respondents share this feeling of being a burden, in fear of giving a negative impression to Dutch people, feel obstructed in engaging in conversations with them. In addition to the time geographies discussed in the section above, this amounts to another hurdle to connecting with people from the host society and learning the language. Abdul-Halim was concerned with securing his refugee status in the Netherlands as a Syrian refugee. His argument illustrates how micro-geographies of social encounters and interaction impact his feelings of legal uncertainty in the Netherlands:

"*I always have to look for a conversation. How can I learn Nederlands [Dutch]? How can I do it? I have very little time left to become a Nederlander [Dutch citizen]!*" **(Abdul-Halim, 28)**

Most of the respondents came to the Netherlands with high expectations and ambitions, but these have generally not been met. They worry about the progress they are making with the asylum procedures. After obtaining a temporary residence permit, refugees are given five years to complete their Dutch integration exam and, to many of our respondents, this is a concern. Antonsich (2010) argues "to be or not be a citizen or a subject entitled with rights clearly matters" (p. 648). Aside from all kinds of stress-related and safety issues, he highlights the negative correlation between uncertainty about one's legal status and the feeling of belonging to place. For our respondents, achieving a legal status is a precondition for actively engaging in and shaping the environment and for experiencing belonging.

6.3. "Honestly…you know…I feel my heart is in Syria."

The previous two subsections provided a critical analysis of third places and transitory zones in the Netherlands, in which we discussed how social encounters and interaction can help refugees to develop and maintain feelings of belonging within their neighbourhood (Kohlbacher et al., 2015). At the same time, we suggested that our respondents, although seeking belonging, may not be easily granted it by those in power. Even though the Syrian refugees were motivated to build a new home and, in doing so, were proactively seeking out opportunities to develop and demonstrate belonging, the neighbourhood was experienced as a space that offers both belonging and not belonging.

For our respondents, then, it was important to be able to retreat into familiar routines and places to practice their other belongings. The migration literature describes a wide variety of homemaking practices that establish and maintain connections to the country of origin (Duyvendak, 2011; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). In a refugee context, these emotional connections to 'there' often represent a notion of longing for places that are 'lost' (Antonsich, 2010; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006). It is through this ongoing negotiation between transnational ties and daily lives that respondents develop 'new places' of belonging in their neighbourhoods in the Netherlands in order to maintain their 'Syrianness'. In our research, these existed as places and practices related to the preparation and consumption of Syrian meals (see also Johnston and Longhurst, 2012; Meijering and van Hoven, 2003). Given that meals emerged as a particularly significant aspect for the respondents in their narratives of belonging in the Northern Netherlands, we now provide a more in-depth discussion of practices and places related to food. Qasim emphasises the role of food from "home" and illustrates how belonging can be experienced through the senses:

"*I don't know how to prepare Dutch food. I only know how to prepare Syrian food. Just as I did with my family before. I cannot cook anything else, because it is not the same. The taste and smell is different. Syrian food is more spicy and tasty than Dutch food. So I am always very happy when I eat Syrian food…it tastes very good*" **(Qasim, 32)**

Next to happiness and joy, this quote exemplifies how eating food from home can evoke emotions, memories and experiences from the past. For Qasim, eating and sharing food is embedded in Syrian culture He recalls how he and his family would often eat, talk and be together for many hours. Indeed, most of the respondents explained how meals in Syria are often shared with relatives, friends and neighbours. Preparations start well in advance so an abundance of different dishes can be laid out on large tables. There are often specific traditions such as the etiquette around gender- and age-differentiated roles and religious rituals such as Halal slaughter. Coming to the Netherlands, many respondents mentioned having experienced difficulties at first, not only with Dutch food and its ingredients, but with its traditions and conventions as well. Guided by family and friends who have been in the Netherlands for a longer period, most have found access to Middle-Eastern ingredients and now cook more familiar food.

To find ingredients that produce the specific taste and smell of home, respondents go to Islamic or Turkish supermarkets. Islamic supermarkets in the Netherlands are often referred to as Turkish supermarkets since Turkish immigrants were one of the first large immigrant groups in the Netherlands in contemporary history (Engbersen et al., 2015). Over time, many Turkish supermarkets have extended their range of products and clientele to also cater to migrants from the Middle East. Meat is slaughtered following Halal requirements and there is a rich supply of specific ingredients such as herbs, spices and vegetables. Wang and Lo (2007) suggested that ethnic affinity influences migrant shopping behaviour more than economically rational behaviour, which is also reflected in the comment below by Mahmoud. He and his friends have to travel half an hour by bus to get to the nearest Turkish supermarket, so they have made arrangements:

"*We only want Halal meat. We go to the butcher mostly in [name of place]. But, the bus is expensive. That's a big problem for us here. So when I go to [name of place], I buy ten kilos of meat. This is not only for me. I give two kilos to Azwer, maybe two kilos for my other friends and the rest I put in the freezer. When we run out of meat, then my friend goes to the butcher. Then he also buys meat for me. This is how we do it.*" **(Mahmoud, 30)**

The friends that Mahmoud is referring to are part of a group that consists mainly of male refugees. According to Bakker et al. (2016), social ties are often established with other refugees during their period of isolation in asylum seekers' centres and, since initially mostly men arrived in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2017), these contacts are often with other males. Our data suggest these networks between refugees are important for developing and maintaining a sense of belonging. Although, as discussed above, respondents desire intercultural exchange, at the same time they appreciate being around those who understand their own culture and their way of doing things. They can support each other and share experiences, stories and memories. As observed by Meijering and Van Hoven (2003) in a study about highly-skilled Indian IT specialists in Germany, preparing and sharing Indian meals together contributed to their efforts to feel at home in Germany. In our study, the ritual of eating together represents a symbolic connection to Syrian culture that helps to construct a sense of home in an unfamiliar environment. For example, Ferhat became emotional when his life in Syria arose during the interview with [name of author]:

"*Actually I quite miss this habit from Syria. I am used to eating with my whole family. We were always eating together…every day. But then, I was living alone and I was eating alone. Eating alone is not really a problem for me, but I also want to eat with other people. There are now two guys from Syria that I know here in [name of village]. We cook for each other now […] You know, my heart is in Syria. By eating together, I kind of get a feeling of home.*" **(Ferhat, 24)**

Furthermore, Ferhat's experiences emphasise that preparing and sharing meals is a social act and illustrate the limitations of 'eating alone'. This relationship in effect extends the home environment as Turkish supermarkets appear to be much more meaningful than just

being a shop; they seem to function as an Islamic hub. Interestingly, unlike third places, which respondents experience as exclusionary, Turkish supermarkets seem to meet the conditions of third places as established by Oldenburg (1989) and Gardner (2011), but from a Syrian perspective. They are more neutral, welcoming and accessible places because of their familiar Arabic appearance and wares, and the greater likelihood that people speak Arabic.

The walking interviews proved very insightful for the researcher involved in that [name of author] became familiar with such places. When Aziz, one of the respondents, took [name of author] to the supermarket on their walk, they saw people sitting outside the supermarket chatting and drinking tea. As soon as they spotted Aziz, the men stood up to greet him and asked about his wellbeing. Aziz and [name of author] were offered tea and chairs to sit on, and they stayed for some time before moving on. When walking back to Aziz's house, Aziz laughed and commented:

> "*The supermarket is always very busy. Many people from different places. People are inside and outside. They are talking, sometimes about war, sometimes about family. If I say hello, they say hello back to me. They ask 'Hello Aziz, how are you?' and then I say 'Fine… thank you, how are you? We talk about many things and after that I buy the ingredients.*" **(Aziz, 25)**

Aziz' experiences are also shared by other respondents. Hevdem explains:

> "*Syrian refugees try to look for Syrian or Islamic communities just to share opinions about specific Arabic topics. The Turkish shop is a way to meet the people. Sometimes for refugees it is difficult to talk to Dutch people about this. When he or she goes to the Turkish supermarket this is no problem" […] "Have you ever been to a Turkish supermarket? Sometimes it takes a really long time to buy things, because people are talking and talking, about a lot of different things.*" **(Hevdem, 30)**

In our research, we saw that Turkish supermarkets amounted to gateway places where memories, stories and experiences from Syria, or 'home', intersect with daily refugee life in the Netherlands. Ehrkamp (2005) similarly discussed how new neighbourhood places of identity and belonging were shaped by Turkish migrants in Germany. Besides offering safety, comfort and security, she argues that these 'new' places stimulate refugees to socially engage with the receiving society on their own terms.

7. Rethinking belonging through the ordinary

To understand how belonging is experienced by Syrian male refugees outside the more highly diverse areas of the Netherlands, we investigated on what grounds, and through which everyday practices and experiences, encounters with others enable or constrain a sense of belonging to both home and host countries. By engaging with the ordinary, this paper presents fresh empirical insights that shine light on the complex and relational nature of belonging, contributing to conceptualising the geographies of encounters, as well as to the wider debate on refugee spatial dispersal. Here, we want to focus on four key concerns regarding the everyday geographies of belonging of Syrian refugees in the Northern Netherlands.

First, we believe that by framing belonging as a product of encounters with others in a local context, this paper offers much to the debates on encounters. The Syrian refugees in this study were in a specific timeframe of their integration process, which had consequences for how and where they sought and found belonging. Also, financial and legal restrictions prevented access to places where, according to the literature, refugees might find repetitive or sustained contact (Amin, 2002; Gardner, 2011; Neal et al., 2015). Consequently, refugees engaged in social interaction or contact in transitory zones within their neighbourhoods. Although 'fleeting' and 'momentary', these forms of social encounter, or not experiencing encounters, emphasise their refugee status. The findings illustrate how these differences in everyday life 'scaled up' to feelings of not belonging within the Netherlands as a country, because of accumulated experiences, unrealised expectations and losing hope. We therefore agree with Wilson (2017) that encounters are events of relation, and we should reconsider current social and spatial structures in which a sense of belonging is expected to emerge and felt.

Second, by prioritising everyday life experiences of refugees, our qualitative approach involved the people whose lives are being discussed in this paper (see also Askins and Pain, 2011; van Liempt, 2011), something that often seems to be forgotten by policy makers. Through refugee dispersal policy, Darling (2014) argues that the government treats refugees as individuals that need to be 'managed' by imposing restrictions on housing, mobility and migration. With the data in this study, we illustrate a rich collection of daily routines and lived experiences of Syrian male refugees, and emphasise their acts of resilience and agency in finding belonging. However, within this context, we want to emphasise that this study focused on ten Syrian men that were living alone. In the light of family reunification procedures, and to do justice to the lives of different groups of refugees, it is essential to compare the situations of young Syrian men to experiences of belonging by women, older adults or families. Given the vital role of place and time as we discussed throughout this paper, they might very well find belonging in other places. Refugees with children might experience primary schools, sport centres or playgrounds as places for sustained contact through shared activities of their children. Also, community centres often host events exclusively for women, where female refugees share activities with other women.

Third, we should pursue a more constructive understanding of the social ties that are maintained within migrant communities and of the development of places where 'other' traditions, norms and values are practiced. At a time when citizenship and immigration are subject to academic and public debate, we argue for room for multiple spaces of migrant transnationalism and belonging (see also Ehrkamp, 2005; Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006; Duyvendak, 2011). The respondents in this study saw Turkish supermarkets and Halal butcheries as places of belonging, where a part of their Syrian identity could be maintained. At the same time, they put effort into not only becoming Dutch citizens, but also into really belonging in their new host society. As Ehrkamp (2005) argues, such places can offer a stepping-stone towards a sense of belonging that extends beyond the host society territory while also representing a safe haven from which an unfamiliar host society can be explored.

Lastly, we would like to return to our opening statement that the Dutch government currently underemphasises the interaction between refugees and *place* in the context of refugee spatial dispersal policy. Places are not fixed and homogeneous. We suggest a more careful consideration of the unpredictable and risky nature of local encounters as described in this study, opposed to assuming encounters of difference to be a linear process towards a change in attitudes, values and beliefs. Indeed, there can be no "quick fix for integration" (Askins and Pain, 2011, pp.803), but the findings demonstrate how small gestures between refugees and existing residents might lead to change. We therefore suggest that questions around meaning, power and temporality should be addressed in the local context. As stressed by Darling (2016), in order to redefine local identities and local social networks, information campaigns should address the common challenges that both existing residents and refugees face in finding belonging in their local neighbourhoods.

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