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Borders, risk and belonging: Challenges for arts-based research in understanding the lives of women asylum seekers and migrants 'at the borders of humanity'

ABSTRACT

This article critically discusses the experiences of women who are seeking asylum in the North East of England and women who are mothers with no recourse to public funds living in London to address the questions posed by the special issue. It argues both epistemologically and methodologically for the benefits of undertaking participatory arts-based, ethno-mimetic, performative methods with women and communities to better understand women's lives, build local capacity in seeking policy

KEYWORDS

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PAR

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change, as well as contribute to theorizing necropolitics through praxis. Drawing upon artistic outcomes of research funded by the Leverhulme Trust on borders, risk and belonging, and collaborative research funded by the ESRC/NCRM using participatory theatre and walking methods, the article addresses the questions posed by the special issue: how is statelessness experienced by women seeking asylum and mothers with no recourse to public funds? To what extent are their lived experiences marked by precarity, social and civil death? What does it mean to be a woman and a mother in these precarious times, 'at the borders of humanity'? Where are the spaces for resistance and how might we as artists and researchers – across the arts, humanities and social sciences – contribute and activate?

Arts-based research: De-colonizing methods

The epistemological and methodological framework of our contribution to the special issue is embedded in scholarship that is participatory, biographical and arts-based, influenced by critical social and feminist theory and research methodologies from the Global South (Fals-Borda 1988: 89; Boal 1973, 1992; Ganguly 2010; Connell 2018; Phoenix 2017; Hill-Collins 1990; Mbembe 2003). We argue that interdisciplinary research is the best approach when conducting research with migrants, and in this case with women seeking asylum, refuge and citizenship in order to facilitate a space for their voices to be heard and to address the complexity involved in understanding how statelessness is experienced by women seeking asylum and/or with no recourse to public funds. As feminist researchers, we want to better understand women's lives as mothers and women 'at the borders of humanity', and for us this means conducting research and practice that is critical, performative, interventionist and policy oriented.

Our research, a combination of ethnographic, participatory and arts-based methods, can be defined through the concept of ethno-mimesis (O'Neill 2001a, 2001b, 2009). This is a theoretical construct, a process and a methodological practice that leads to sensuous knowing. The core principles underpinning our collaborative work include finding intertextual modes of doing research to know and understand the lives and lived cultures of women experiencing marginalization; valuing the knowledge, expertise and experiences of the women we work with using participatory and arts-based approaches; and collaborating with women and artists so that we might influence policy and practice. Our interpretive sociological work seeks to engage in sensory, phenomenological and performative ways with the complex issues of asylum, migration and belonging that can 'lead to the production of knowledge and a radical democratization of images and texts that could move us, pierce us, challenge identity thinking and bring us in touch with our feeling worlds in subjective, reflexive ways that might intervene in public scholarship' in praxis (O'Neill 2012). We are committed to working collaboratively with women on their migration journeys, for social change and towards social justice (as discursive, relational and reflective), which has the potential to escape being sexist and racist (Hudson 2006).

What does it mean to be at the borders of humanity? A plethora of research shows that there are multiple reasons for women's mobility (Crawley 2001; Erel 2013; Erel et al. 2018; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2007; O'Neill 2010; Reynolds and Erel 2016), and that forced migration is not the result of various 'crises' but an integral part of North/South relations (Castles 2003) and indeed the result of 'negative globalisation' (Bauman 2003; Pickering 2005). Whilst countries in

the North have developed entry restrictions to 'manage' migration, containment measures (i.e. camps) are being implemented in the South. Yet, the responsibility for the shifts and changes resulting from 'negative globalisation' is placed on the individuals on the move, who have to bear the full consequences of their 'choices'. Hence, in Bauman's words: 'the numbers of homeless and stateless victims of globalisation grow too fast for the planning, location and construction of camps to keep up with them' (Bauman 2003: 37). Increasingly, lives are lived at the 'borders of humanity', in liminal spaces, facing destitution and in the United Kingdom at the mercy of the politics and policy of the 'hostile environment' (Liberty 2018).[1] Yet the creative methods we use in our research highlight that despite this formative experience, people are resilient and inventive; they are not stripped entirely of their identities. In this article we focus our analysis less on the process of undertaking arts-based participatory research and more on the usefulness of artistic products emanating from this research.

A hostile environment for women's lives

What has come to be known as 'the hostile environment' is both the medium and the outcome of 'brutal policies' (Liberty 2018: 4). These policies were implemented by the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, but are rooted in earlier political responses to immigration and forced migration, including by the Blair government. Indeed, UK asylum and immigration legislation has evolved through three distinct phases: 'control of mainly Jewish immigration from 1905 to the second world war; control of the new (black) Commonwealth immigration from 1960 onwards; and 'managed migration' from 2000 to 2013' (O'Neill 2010: 7; cf. Sales 2007). In 2013 we see the emergence of a fourth phase, when the Coalition's 'hostile environment working party' was formed, supported by Theresa May, the then Home Secretary.

> The hostile environment is a sprawling web of immigration controls embedded in the heart of our public services and communities. The Government requires employers, landlords, private sector workers, NHS staff and other public servants to check a person's immigration status before they can offer them a job, housing, healthcare or other support. Landlords and employers can face fines and even criminal sanctions if they fail to do so.
>
> (Liberty 2018: 5)

Liberty are very clear that these policies amount to state-sanctioned discrimination and flout human rights laws (2018: 50). Anti-migration discourses, indelibly connected to a rise in racist attacks, especially since the Brexit referendum, mean that all migrants are constructed as 'potentially illegal' (Phillimore and Sigona 2018). Many feel 'precarious', face an ever-present risk of 'criminalization', and ultimately, as we have witnessed, many of the 'Windrush Generation' who are Commonwealth citizens, face the threat of deportation, despite having resided in Britain for decades.[2]

Arendt (1998) viewed statelessness, meaning the loss of citizenship and the right to have rights, as one of the most daunting problems of the twentieth century. The right to have rights is built upon membership of 'civil society such that we can be entitled to juridico-civil rights' (Benhabib 2004: 57). In a 'territorially bound state centric order' (despite supra-national bodies such as

1. Sajid Javid has renamed it the 'compliant environment' in June 2018, yet it is questionable to what extent that indicates a policy change to move away from and indeed divert attention from the hostile policies experienced by Windrush families who are Commonwealth citizens.
2. A collection of articles on the so-called 'Windrush Generation Scandal' in the UK can be found at https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/windrush-scandal (accessed 8 October 2018).

the UN) there is a contradiction between universal human rights and nation state protection reinforced at the borders. The challenge ahead is to 'develop an international regime which decouples the right to have rights from one's nationality' (Benhabib 2004: 68). Despite the right to seek asylum being a human right, the 'obligation to grant asylum is jealously guarded by states as a sovereign principle' (Benhabib 2004: 215). Being *sans papiers* is a form of social death (Benhabib 2004).[3]

Mbembe's (2003) articulation of 'necropolitics' extends Foucault's concept of biopower: the use of political, social power to determine who might live or die, or to impose social or civil death on people. He examines the notion of sovereignty in relation to the social death experienced by those in the 'state of exception', 'outside the normal state of law' (Mbembe 2003: 13).[4] Supported by his reading of Foucault and Arendt, Mbembe argues that racism is a 'technology' of 'biopower'. As part of biopower, racism works to regulate the distribution of life and death:

> The ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty. […] To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power.
>
> (Mbembe 2003: 11–12).

Before discussing our examples, chosen to reflect the range of ways in which necropolitics affects everyday lives and how participatory arts-based research can contribute an understanding of this process, we reflect on our methodology and epistemology.

De-colonizing methods: Working together to create change

First, we articulate our methodological and epistemological positions, emphasizing collaboration, working collectively with community members as co-researchers, what Fals-Borda (1999) calls 'symmetrical reciprocity'. We place great importance on ways of feeling as well as talking and thinking, using multi-sensory, embodied, dialogic and visual/performative methods. In the examples that follow we share our ethno-mimetic research through a critical recovery of women's lives and biographies, by working *with* and facilitating shared ownership of the development and outcomes of the research. Here, head and heart are working together using a more holistic epistemology, by taking a personal moral stand and by adopting a balance between the ideal and the possible, through 'praxis inspired commitment' (Fals-Borda 1999: 9). Academic knowledge and popular knowledge, i.e. the expertise of and in communities, are experienced as potentially congruent. So, the values underpinning our research bridge the relationship between theory and practice, and the knowledge that is produced *with*, not 'on' or 'for', is purposeful, combining theorizing with experience, ethnographic research, as praxis. We consider the research as process where 'thinking, feeling persons (sentipensantes), whose views on the research experience could jointly be taken into account' (Fals-Borda 1999: 13).

Second, we place great importance on collective research as a way of generating a critical recovery of history and working through the past. This can reveal how things might be otherwise. In the examples below from our

3. It is important to note that 'statelessness' is a legal category (not being considered the national of any country), 'asylum seeking' is a legal-bureaucratic and social category (having sought refuge outside one's country of origin/nationality) and 'sans papiers' is a sociological category (being without documentation/not regularized). Here, we refer to statelessness as encompassing all these aspects and their complex interrelations.

4. See also Agamben's (1998) critique of Carl Schmitt in relation to the notion of sovereign power and the 'force of the law'.

research, this critical theoretical research practice is committed to social critique, social justice and democratization through two core orientations identified by Fals-Borda (1988): (1) empathy, life experience gained through immersion in fieldwork with groups and communities, and (2) critical analysis, committed to research as an animator of social change.

Our third tenet is the possibility of generating sensuous understanding of lived experience and society through creative, visual, poetic and performance texts. This sensuous understanding emerges from our commitment to arts-based research, to collaborating with artists in ways that are rigorous and ethical. Here, the sensory, relational processes highlight researchers as embodied 'knowing body' (Merleau-Ponty 1965) as well as 'thinking-feeling persons' (Fals-Borda 1999: 17). Fals-Borda (1999: 9) suggests that reflexive, committed research might lead to the development of praxis (purposeful knowledge). This calls for attention to 'trust' in our work as researchers for social justice as a counter and resistance to the hostile environment and necropolitics.

What does trust look like in feminist participatory research?

Misztal (1996: 26) defines trust in sociology and the social sciences as that which holds societies together; it is about the relationship between individual and society. Trust for Barbalet (2009) is an 'emotional facility or modality of action', and Luhmann (1979) maintains that without trust only the simplest forms of human cooperation are possible: trust is indispensable for the social system. For us the relational aspects of trust are important in our research with women (and as feminists). We are committed to taking an active listening approach, fostering subject–subject relations by working collaboratively *with* others, since 'human beings become increasingly trustworthy once they feel at a deep level that their subjective experience is both respected and progressively understood' (Thorne 1992: 26). In the examples we share here, trust emerges as a disposition and an orientation. It is always emergent and emerging through the way that the workshop space/place is facilitated, and in the process of the participatory theatre in practice.[5] In the walking-based research, the walk is performative, opening a relational space (walking side by side) as a dialogic holding space. The space between the walker and co-walker becomes an embodied space where a 'shared viewpoint' can enable empathic witnessing, listening, understanding and collaborative knowledge production (O'Neill and Roberts 2019). In our experience the emergent properties of trust are listening, attunement, recognition, respect and reflexivity leading to understanding.

Archer (2015) makes a case for the relational subject and unpacks the relationship between 'I' and 'We' thinking that is very relevant for arts-based research with marginalized groups. Trust is a relational good emerging from participatory approaches, so in walking together and acting together, we orient ourselves and our actions to emergent relational goods without collapsing the Other into a totalizing 'we' (O'Neill 2008). In conducting participatory arts and performative research, researchers always run the risk of what Salverson (2001) calls an 'aesthetics of injury', meaning 'when suffering is consumed something of its horror is removed' (O'Neill 2008: n.pag.). In sharing encounters of walking and performative research methods trust can emerge as a relational good without collapsing the differences between us; we create a togetherness in difference.

5. A more detailed discussion of participatory theatre, playback and forum theatre can be found at: http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/4120/1/2.%20Toolkit%20PASAR%20Final%2030%20Jan%2018.pdf (accessed 8 October 2018).

Bodies in and out of place: The hostile environment as an exemplar of necropolitics and necropower

Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are often represented in the mainstream media as nameless and usually by others, never themselves, and this creates a space for 'othering' and the withdrawal of humanizing practice. The lack of a space for self-representation can be filled by racism, mis-recognition, and unbelonging. In Agamben's (1998) terms, 'bare life' for the asylum seeker, the migrant, those who are stateless, is lived in the margins of the margins (Erel et al. 2017; O'Neill 2017). In marked contrast to these ways of knowing, ethnomimetic methods connect the sensuousness of ethnography with ways of valuing the knowledge, expertise and experience of participants. Moreover, in the spirit of participatory action research (Fals-Borda 1999), theatre-based research (Kaptani and Yuval Davis 2008), and walking methodologies (O'Neill 2017) when collaborating with migrant women and artists we might both influence policy and practice, and enhance women's lives through convivial research processes and practices that claim a space for dialogue, to think and feel as well as to act. The following two examples focus on the potential of artistic products emanating from participatory research with women, showcase how arts-based work can: (1) contribute to a critical recovery of women's lives, (2) open a space for stories and experiences to be shared and (3) make visible their experiences by sharing the research findings with the widest possible audiences. While we have reflected elsewhere on the processes (Erel et al. 2017; O'Neill 2008, 2010, 2011; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Pearce and O'Neill 2011) here we focus on what can be learned from analysing and exploring the potential of the artistic products emanating from this research. To do so, we present firstly, a participatory film by Janice Haaken (2012) and women migrants about a walking project in Teesside, and secondly some artistic outcomes from a project in London: a short forum theatre play shown at policy day, a poem by Erene Kaptani and a film by Marcia Chandra (2018) that documents the participatory process and practice with women with no recourse to public funds.

'Women, Well-being and Community'

In Teesside, 'Women, Well-being and Community',[6] a small project working with the Regional Refugee Forum and a women's group called Purple Rose Stockton, used biographical walking interviews, photography and participatory arts-based workshops, that led to the development of a film and exhibition in order to tell and share women's lived experiences of arriving and living in Teesside. Using multimodal research (mapping, walking biographies, film and photography) a collective story emerged of the safe zones and danger zones that women negotiate in their daily lives in their search for sanctuary and belonging (Haaken and O'Neill 2014; O'Neill et al. 2017; O'Neill 2017). In the visual- and walking-based methods we open a space for dialogue and understanding to be shared and 'a picture emerges of liveable lives made out in the margins' of the city with some newly arrived and others waiting years for a final decision on their application for asylum (O'Neill 2017: 93). One of the products of this research is Janice Haaken's short participatory film *Searching for Asylum* and the following analysis is closely based on a reading of this film and how it contributes to a critical recovery of participants' lives through storytelling and enables sharing their experiences and knowledge with a wide audience. The walking research and the film made in participation with the women map the world of ten women seeking asylum, documenting oppositional discourses, lives at the borders of humanity, and resistance and resilience in the face of necropolitics and necropower.

6. See the film at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&reload=9&v=SjT5lENga_M (accessed 16 February 2019). The women were community co-researchers on the project and anonymity was required by them. Only one woman's face is seen and she speaks to camera. The participatory arts and participatory action research project was developed with the women and focused upon walking, well-being and community – what it feels like to live in Teesside.



Figure 1: Women walking. (Photograph credit: 'Women, Well-being and Community' project).

During the course of the project one of the women was detained at the police station when signing in. This regular signing in at a police station is part of the reporting requirements in the asylum process. She was sent to a detention centre and deported. The humiliation and fear associated with signing at the police station is brought home in one of the women's narratives in the film and is a good example of the necropolitics as biopower affecting women seeking asylum:

> Every asylum seeker relates to the police station. Most of us have never been to a police station in our home country, so for me to go to the police station I could not believe it on top of everything else you are going through, you have to go to the police station to sign. […] It does not make sense, I do not like to go there, I really dislike it, but we comply, it does not make any sense, I hate and dislike it but then I have no choice.

Other women in the film say:

> I hate this place it's the worst place in town. It is the police station. Any asylum seeker will not like this anytime, you go every two weeks, I don't sleep if I go to sign, this stress I have is too much for me, it is 50/50 they may detain you.
> I signed today and all night I did not sleep all night, I feel sick, I did not know what would happen to me.

While the women make their voices and views heard in the film and the participatory, inclusive research practice, they are painfully aware of their vulnerable position, and the film allows them anonymity (only one woman speaks to and is seen on camera), while sharing their stories. Walking in the city, the

important landmarks were solicitor firms (vital to progressing asylum claims), a charitable organization that also acts as a meeting place, social space, café and food bank, the library (where a warm welcome, books and access to computers were readily available) and the public green space outside the library (a space where women describe feeling free, sitting by the water fountain and/or in front of the library). Places where they felt afraid and not safe included the police station and for some the accommodation they had been given. Here, the hard edges of the borders reinforced their liminality, lack of citizenship and unfreedom. In these places, stories and experiences were shared as well as their inter-subjective inter-corporeality (Dolezal 2015) and their 'enactments' of cultural citizenship in the new situation. By cultural citizenship (Pakulski 1997) we mean the right to presence and visibility, not marginalization; the right to dignity, not assimilation to the dominant culture; and the right to dignifying representation, not stigmatization (O'Neill 2017: 2). The research illustrates how women contest or challenge hegemonic and racialized 'practices of subjection and exclusion' (Erel et al. 2018; see also Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008) in both their experiences of living in Teesside and their contribution to the research. One woman, a poet, did not want to be seen directly on film but wrote poems that she spoke as part of the development and production of the film.

'Participatory Arts and Social Action Research'

In London, 'Participatory Arts and Social Action Research'[7] was a project funded by the ESRC and NCRM[8] in order to understand the lives, experiences and sense of belonging and place-making involved in enacting citizenship at the borders of humanity. We worked in partnership with the migrant and refugee arts organization Counterpoints Arts, the race equality organization the Runnymede Trust, the filmmaker Marcia Chandra, and two migrant support organizations, Praxis and RENAISI. The project sought to co-produce knowledge that would impact on policy and practice and crucially better understand and share the issues experienced by migrant families. One case study, which we reflect upon here, worked with mothers affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy. The NRPF policy means that migrants subject to immigration control are not allowed to access many benefits, tax credits or housing assistance. This affects both migrants who have the legal right to remain in the United Kingdom and those who are undocumented. Migrants and their families targeted by this policy are pushed to the margins of society as a result of poverty and racism. Many of these migrant families include highly vulnerable young children. In this sense this policy is an instrument of necropolitics (Erel et al. 2017: n.pag.).

As a counter to the necropower and necropolitics that was viscerally apparent in the women's daily lives, the workshops became a place where the mothers with NRPF came together as a group and trust was fostered. The mothers had been at the receiving end of racist, sexist and anti-migrant rhetoric and practices, often from the very services which were supposed to support women and their families. Against this backdrop of being vilified which created a strong sense of social isolation, the participatory arts became important in creating a 'holding space' where the women were able to share, listen to, process and challenge the de-humanizing effects of these policies. Through theatre, walking, photography and film, the project facilitated the women affected by these policies 'to make their collective voice heard' (Erel et al. 2017: n.pag.) at a Policy Day that we organized for practitioners, and at an event hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Migration at the House of Commons and subsequently in community based events and performances, co-organized with the women.

7. For more information and video clips please see the project website: http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar (accessed 16 February 2019).

8. The research team were as follows: Umut Erel (Principal Investigator), Erene Kaptani, (Research Fellow), Maggie O'Neill and Tracey Reynolds (Co-Investigators).



Figure 2: Forum theatre scene. (Photograph credit: Marcia Chandra).

The example of one of the women we worked with, Theresa,[9] a mother of three children aged 5–19, shows the pernicious effects of this policy in marginalizing and stigmatizing migrant families, while pushing them into unacceptable living conditions. Theresa learnt that she had NRPF following a trip abroad and after applying to her local council for help to find accommodation. The circumstances of this discovery were that her landlord increased her rent to an 'unaffordable sum' and the letter informing her arrived while she was away. On arriving home, she could not pay the increase, was evicted and made homeless. Her local council told her that because of her migration status she was in fact subject to the NRPF policy. Theresa's experience was that council staff were unwilling to take responsibility or offer help, sending her to a voluntary sector organization, a common experience of council staff 'gatekeeping', i.e. obstructing migrants from accessing services they are entitled to (NELMA 2017). She was eventually given emergency shelter because the local authority has a responsibility to prevent children becoming destitute under section 17 of the Children's Act. The accommodation was dire: a one bedroom flat (where the children slept, and she slept in the kitchen) infested with rats, damp and cold. Theresa also faced a two-hour journey to ensure her children were able to stay at the same school, and despite allowing plenty of travel time they were often late for school. This led to interventions in her life from the school and teachers who reprimanded her and then used surveillance practices to both monitor and regulate her parenting practices. Theresa would then travel on to work in another London Borough (using the bus as the tube is more expensive) where she is employed on a 'zero hours contract' in precarious working conditions as a care assistant. When Theresa called in sick for work she was not paid because of her zero hours contract; she was also reprimanded for being sick. During the course of the project, Theresa's next door neighbours' house burnt down and despite the noxious fumes, she had to wait several weeks to be re-housed. The deeply embodied and distressing nature

9. All names have been anonymized. Theresa was born in the Caribbean.

of these circumstances was felt by Tracey, who undertook a walking interview with Theresa. During this walk, Theresa had to gather several documents, and prepare forms for being re-housed, as well as pick up her child from school. All of this, while traversing long distances from one London Borough to another, leaving both Tracey and Theresa exhausted. Yet, Theresa had to go on coping with this distressing everyday life at the boundaries of humanity.

Theresa's case is but one example of the operation of biopower and necropower permeating the embodied experience of everyday life as described by the mothers; others include social services monitoring and surveillance of children's clothes (if they look expensive or are new, staff ask the mother how she paid for them) and mobile phone possession (staff ask how and why, given the below the poverty line benefits offered due to section 17, the mother has a phone); and having 'to sign' at the Home Office reporting centre at London Bridge and the utter humiliation and incivility that accompanies this process. One of the mothers in our group was told by an officer monitoring the queue to sign, in response to her complaint that she was tired, had aching feet and was heavily pregnant, that 'her feet were not pregnant'. Further examples include immigration officers raiding women's homes in the early hours of the morning and what a frightening, shameful, de-humanizing experience this was; with officers going through their belongings, and for some the experience of being removed and detained. Some of the mothers also spoke about having to produce papers (i.e. passport; record of immigration status; children's birth certificates) to enrol children in school or transfer them between schools (now a policy of local



Figure 3: Walking biographies. (Photograph credit: Maggie O'Neill/PASAR project).

authorities for school admissions); and a passport is needed to register with GP services.

Methodologically, women's lives and these experiences were shared through walking interviews and theatre-based workshops; they were acted out through participatory theatre, forum theatre and playback.

In the walks with women we learnt about their attachment to place and space and their resilience and humanity in the face of the surveillance and borders (both material and psychic) that marked and ordered their lives, actions and practices. In one walk with Ellen and her 2-year-old son she told Maggie how, the previous year, she had baked a cake and organized a tea party on a grassy bank at the Olympic Park, close to where she was living. She had held the tea party with a friend, her friend's children, and her own daughter and 1 year old son. This was now a special place for her and she walked with her children in the park to feel a sense of freedom and be close to her children. Ellen was working at a supermarket, but her wages did not stretch to cover rent in London as well as childcare. Ellen had been refused housing support by the local authority because of her immigration status, despite having two children aged 1 and 8. As she had nowhere else to go she stayed with her mother, who was British. Yet, her mother had on several occasions thrown Ellen and her children out of the house, one night leaving them out in the cold in their pyjamas. The police officer who was called to this scene did not offer Ellen any alternative accommodation but instead persuaded the mother to take Ellen and her children back in. In these circumstances, it was clear to Ellen that she could not take people back to her accommodation, where she shared a mattress with her 8-year-old daughter and baby, much less have a birthday tea there. Sharing the walk with Ellen therefore showed at once the de-humanizing circumstances into which she was forced as a result of the NRPF policy, but also how Ellen strove to carve out a space of normality for her children, and dignity for herself by being able to hold a party for her son's first birthday.

Elaine's story was acted out in a theatre scene at a Policy Day we held for policy-makers and practitioners (in collaboration with the Runnymede Trust) and subsequently at the House of Commons hosted by the All Parliamentary Group on Migration. We wanted to generate better understanding and policy-oriented responses to the arts-based research.

At the Policy Day and the House of Commons event, Elaine's experience of subjugation, racism and necropower was shared in the following theatre scene:

> Elaine had been working for many years for a large supermarket. When the Home Office required her to sign into the Immigration Reporting Centre, she needed to take time off every two weeks to do so. Her manager used his knowledge of her vulnerability to bully her and change her onto an unfavourable shift work pattern: from midnight to four o'clock in the morning, even though she had just had a baby. Her union representative's response was that as an immigrant she should be glad to have a job! She also experienced stigmatisation by fellow workers who saw her as an 'illegal' immigrant. Eventually she lost her job because of her irregular immigration status. Unable to pay rent, Elaine, her husband and six year old son have been living in houses of friends and acquaintances, surviving on their monetary support for four years now.

Kaptani (2018) represents the women's experience in a letter to the Home Office, based upon a performance by the women of their lived embodied experience of queuing for an appointment at the Home Office reporting centre:

> 'If only you could listen': no recourse to public funds – migrant women's letter to the UK Home Office
> 'Ticket Number 123, go to counter 2… Ticket Number 124, go to counter 3… Ticket Number 125, go to counter 4.'
> If only you could listen to how ashamed I feel every time I have to queue at London Bridge Reporting Centre being shouted at: 'Stand in the queue, you are not pregnant, on your feet […].'
> If only you could listen how difficult it is to tell my son 'we can't have a house' when he stands in front of the estate agent's window asking me to pick one. If only you could listen to how much my son suffered sleeping on the church floor for months on end but he now feels like a king in his new room!
> […]
> Dear Home Office, Can an Immigrant, a Woman, a Black Body ever be a British citizen?
> I have to declare any private intimate parts of my life to any case worker good or bad; I have to leave depots at 4 o'clock in the morning in the outskirts of London […] still I proved all these years, that everyday I get my children to school as you citizens do, I work as you citizens do, I meet with other parents as you citizens do, I go to the park as you citizens do, I go to the church as you citizens do, I pay taxes as you citizens do. Even more, I do ALL THESE despite your decisions making it IMPOSSIBLE for me to do.
> […]
> I have survived the most arduous and inhumane practices of citizenship. Can't you see how this policy made me a virtuoso of the art and craft of citizenship you try to deny me?
> I am an Immigrant, I am a Black, I am a Mother, I made you a citizen by forcibly allowing you the riches and privileges you enjoy through the centuries. And I'm sure we will be staying HERE to do this Citizenship HERE around this table!
> Snap out of your careless denial! See me, I am a citizen in my own right, I'm a citizen in my own right.
> 'Ticket number 232, go to counter 2… Ticket Number 124, go to counter 3… …'

Both projects illustrate the conditions for and operation of necropower in contemporary Britain. At the same time, through participatory arts-based research we have also experienced and documented the resilience and courage women show in the face of extreme hardship, racism and sexual and social inequalities, as illustrated in the above letter. The women we worked with counter necropower with grace and humanity, with the hope and fortitude that their applications for asylum may yet be granted and access to citizenship and belonging can be facilitated. For many women, living without papers (in the words of one of the women's young child, 'the English book' or passport) and experiencing the power of the state operationalized in policy, legislation, rules reinforced by state officials and racism, makes possible necropower as 'the murderous functions of the state' (Mbembe 2003: 11).

In a short film about the project by filmmaker and research collaborator Marcia Chandra (2018), *Black Women Act!*,[10] we asked some of the participants to reflect on their involvement in the research. Evelyn said 'the research was about how do we manage in London with children having no recourse to public funds'. The walking and theatre-based methods elicited the following reflections. Evelyn's son had asked 'mummy why why why why do we have to move all the time, he is cranky […] in 2 months I have moved 5 different times, it is very challenging'. To cope with this and remain strong for the children, she said: 'we have to build a wall around us to protect ourselves and I thought I was the only one going through it until I met these ladies and at least we can identify' with each other. She valued not only sharing with other participants, but also with the research team, for example walking with Umut, showing her everyday life, where she lived was really important: 'we mapped out our day to day activities and how we work around it with limited funds. […] Showing Umut really made me feel that I was accepted'. She felt that showing her everyday life through drama 'was exhilarating' because she 'had never seen your life story being acted out that way'. Moreover, the project gave an opportunity to raise awareness of how 'we are classed as having no part of the welfare system and that is drastically wrong when our parents and ancestors really worked hard in this country'.

At the event in the House of Commons Ellen opened the presentation by saying 'I would like you to put us in your imagination and consider yourself to be us'. The mothers were also realistic that 'to change policies is a difficult thing but we are at least working on it, it may take a long time, but at least we are doing something'. Evelyn acknowledged that the experience was very good for her personally. She also raised the importance and power of storytelling when reflecting on the policy events:

> As migrants we still have the potential to tell our stories despite all the pain and suffering and we can tell it to them [policy makers and practitioners] so that they can realise that we are still human beings and we have children who need us, and they need the help of the system in order to progress.
>
> (Evelyn)

The participatory, arts-based methods using theatre and walking 'allowed women to be actors, directors, story tellers, who can imagine and try out social interventions, rather than simply showcasing their vulnerabilities as a result of this dehumanizing policy' (Erel et al. 2017: n.pag.). Such methodologies and arts-based outcomes are of vital importance in challenging necropower, in pushing back at the borders of humanity, in refusing to be defined through the lens of labels that categorize and Other women and reinforce their liminal status, as stateless and beyond citizenship and the right to have rights. It is vital to work together, to foster links and partnerships and conduct participatory research to challenge the very terms of the 'hostile environment'. Involvement in the research for the women led to changes in how they felt about themselves and their situation, in how they reflected upon having to sign on, the racism and incivilities they experienced by creating a space for their stories to be told, shared and understood. This sense of togetherness and solidarity that emerged in the group improved their view of their lived experience. It was vital that the research project worked closely with PRAXIS, a migrant support organization which was able to support women through advice giving and advocacy. Yet, realistically, we also acknowledge and discussed in detail with

10. http://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar/publications-and-resources (accessed 16 February 2019).

participants that the research project in itself is not able to either alter individual circumstances or change the policy. Our hope is that the practitioners we worked with were moved by being involved in the research as audience members and discussants, and inspired to think reflexively about their practice in the context of what we mapped out in the first section of the paper: the power of the state, necropower and necropolitics. We feel that the artistic products emanating from this work can play an important role in creating a space for researchers, participants, readers and audiences to become 'thinking, feeling persons (sentipensantes)' (Fals-Borda 1999: 13) who can reflect and challenge dehumanizing necropolitics.

There is both potential and possibilities for researchers, scholars and activists in the arts and humanities and social sciences to take up these methods and participatory approaches, to work together, not in an instrumental way, but rather, to use Fals Borda's terms, as a philosophy of life. An example of this is the Policy Day we planned with the mothers with NRPF, who performed their stories and led dialogue groups on issues of policy and practice with a range of practitioners and policy-makers. It gave an opportunity to reflect on how to challenge the NRPF policy, creating a dialogue between those directly affected by the policy and those working in support organizations or as activists and policy-makers in the areas of families, migration, refugees and the arts. These participatory methods gave an opportunity for a more equal conversation to take place. We have since gone on to show this scene to other migrant groups and support organizations. The theatre methods provide an opportunity to share the difficult and humiliating effects of the policy with others experiencing NRPF. In these situations, the participatory methods allowed the migrant women to share and reflect on experiences to make links between different groups and develop strategies as well as solidarity with each other.



Figure 4: Policy Day. (Photograph credit: Marcia Chandra).

Conclusion

What is clear from our research and from policy and practice documents produced by support organizations such as NELMA, Migrants Rights, PRAXIS, Project 17 and the Runnymede Trust, is that since 2012 NRPF is applicable to most migrants, but due to the racist economic marginalization of black people in the United Kingdom, they are disproportionately affected by poverty and destitution created by this policy. The NRPF policy affects black people who came to the United Kingdom from former British colonies. NELMA has observed that '[t]he white supremacy of the colonial past is reproduced by contemporary policies that force (overwhelmingly black) people into almost impossible economic situations; people who live and who have often had children in the UK'. Our research supports NELMA's point that '[i]t is usually black women, and often single mothers, who bear the brunt of this economic violence' (NELMA 2017: n.pag.). Marginalization and destitution, beyond citizenship and the right to have rights, further reinforces the risks of sexual and racist violence and state violence. The NRPF conditions 'make it more difficult for people to live' (NELMA 2017: n.pag.) and are an example of state-sanctioned necropower.

As researchers, scholars and artists, we cannot stand by, we must contribute and challenge through rigorous social research and a commitment to social justice. Our response as critical feminist scholars is to contribute to a wider project of de-colonizing social research by our commitment to using methodologies associated with the Global South – participatory theatre and participatory action research – and working in partnership and collaboration with the usual 'subjects' of research as co-researchers. Artistic products, as we have shown in this article, can play an important role here in making available different modes of knowledge through 'thinking feeling', creating visceral understanding and solidarities. They disrupt an idea of knowledge gained from research as an authoritative source of truth. For us participatory arts-based methods guided by the need to address oppression, inequality and domination in pursuit of social justice will contribute to changing the conditions in which we produce and circulate knowledge. This in turn contributes to justice policies and practice that challenge existing discourses which marginalize migrant families. Participatory research is a philosophy of life that is critical, performative, interventionist and policy-oriented.

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