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2026

DOI (link to publisher)
10.5463/thesis.1755

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Holle, F. Y. (2026). *Research as Relation: Reimagining Scholarship through Queering, Art and Care with LGBTQIA+ Refugees*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. https://doi.org/10.5463/thesis.1755

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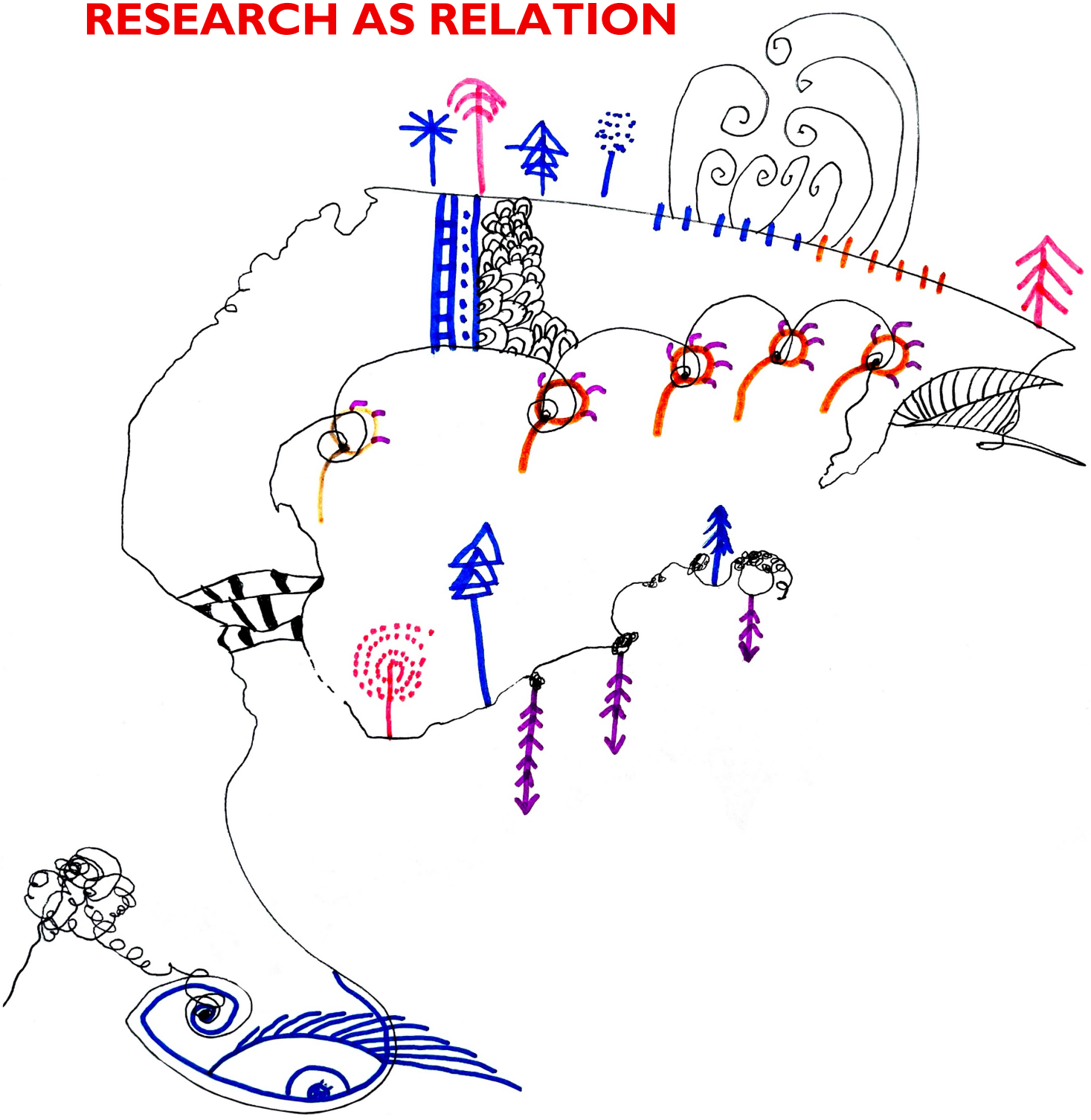
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RESEARCH AS RELATION



REIMAGINING SCHOLARSHIP THROUGH QUEERING, ART AND CARE WITH LGBTQIA+ REFUGEES

FABIAN HOLLE

Research as Relation

Reimagining Scholarship through Queering, Art and Care with LGBTQIA+ Refugees

Fabian Holle

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Front cover drawing: Alaaddin Ammar
Back cover drawing: anonymous
Interlude artworks between chapters: LIMBO members (anonymous)
Artworks in Chapter 2: Alaaddin Ammar
Photos Chapter 3: Maarten Nauw/ Framer Framed & Alaaddin Ammar
Printing: Print&Bind
Funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), The Hague, the Netherlands, [016.Vici.185.084].

Data for dissertation *Research as Relation: Reimagining Scholarship through Queering, Art, and Care with LGBTQIA Refugees*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.48338/vu01-r23f9u
This empirical dataset is closed due to confidentiality and safety concerns and is only accessible in exceptional cases for verification under controlled conditions.
The public documentation (metadata and selected non-sensitive project documents) can be accessed here: https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/4wnb9

Note on images used in this dissertation. The visual materials included between the chapters are not presented as object of formal analysis, nor are they referred to in the main text. Rather, they serve as situated examples of outcomes of Art for Change and LIMBO, and as reminders that creativity and art were at the core of this research. The images are included to acknowledge and honour the many contributions of our co-creators. They invite the reader to sense the atmosphere, experimentation and relational work that took place, rather than to interpret them for specific meanings. Any analytical claims in this dissertation are developed in the chapters, the figures accompanied there are meant to strengthen the written argumentation.

VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

Research as Relation

Reimagining Scholarship through Queering, Art and Care with LGBTQIA+ Refugees

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. J.J.G. Geurts,
volgens besluit van de decaan
van de Faculteit der Sociale en Geesteswetenschappen
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op vrijdag 4 september 2026 om 11.45 uur
in de universiteit

door

Fabian Yorick Holle

geboren te Enschede

promotor:	prof.dr. H. Ghorashi
copromotor:	dr. E. Ponzoni
promotiecommissie:	prof.dr. S. Does prof.dr. S. Bracke dr. A. Cairo dr. P. Kisubi-Mbasalaki dr. W.A.H. Modest

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SUMMARY

This PhD research examines how engaged, co-creative research can transform both knowledge production and the relations through which knowledge is made. Grounded in a long-term, arts-based collaboration with LGBTQIA+ refugees in the Netherlands, the dissertation highlights research primarily as a relational practice shaped by power, care, vulnerability, and imagination. Bringing together queer theory, feminist and decolonial scholarship, engaged research methodologies, and arts-based methods, the research develops key concepts such as liminality, rhizomatic knowledge, relational autonomy, and non-paternalistic care, showing how these unfold in practice through co-creation. Knowledge is approached as relational and emergent, produced through encounters and shared meaning-making rather than detached observation or one-way interviews.

At the heart of this research journey is the co-creative research project LIMBO, a multi-year collaboration between queer refugees (several of them being artists), an art institution, and academia. LIMBO functioned as a space for artistic expression, storytelling, and collective reflection, where all involved (queer refugee and/ or migrant workshop facilitators, queer refugee participants during their asylum procedure, and researchers) explored experiences of displacement, belonging, identity, healing and care, through poetry, visual art, performance, dialogue and co-authorship.

Each chapter is informed by different aspects of queer refugees' lived knowledges about survival, chosen family, community, and care. In contrast to research that approaches refugees primarily through lack – asking what they need (to do) to 'integrate properly' – also described as a deficit-approach – this dissertation works from a desire-based orientation. Rather than treating participants' integration as a problem to be solved, a desire-based approach attends to what people aspire to, imagine, actively create, even under conditions of exclusion or scrutiny. This research foregrounds queer refugees' knowledge, skills, creativity and critique, and asks what becomes possible when those capacities are taken seriously as sources of insight. It shows how generative such desire-based approach can be, producing alternative, thick, layered knowledges, as a well as academic and non-academic output (e.g., artworks, exhibitions, co-created booklets with stories and art[1]). Art functions as a mode of theorizing and world-making, enabling affective, embodied, and collective forms of insight that exceed conventional academic language. At the same time, the work resists idealized narratives of care and creative co-creation, by examining tensions, conflict, boundary-setting and failure, as part of ethical relational work. Care is understood as reciprocal, demanding, uneven, and continuously negotiated.

Finally, the dissertation situates the research within a wider political climate marked by the normalization of radical-right discourse, scapegoating of refugees and LGBTQIA+ communities, and pressures on democratic norms. Against this backdrop, it frames co-creative scholarship as an epistemic counter-practice which cultivates listening, collective imagination, and storytelling that challenges dehumanization and promote solidarity-based ways of knowing.

[1] You can view LIMBO's first co-created booklet here and the second one here.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Introduction: Research as Relation
Authored by Fabian Holle with several rounds of feedback from supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. The text was shared with co-authors of chapters 2, 5 and 6 (Alaaddin Ammar, Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, Sajad Salmanpour and Alexandra Greene) to ensure accurate representation of their work and contributions, and to invite their feedback and approval.

Chapter 1: Exilic (Art) Narratives of Queer Refugees Challenging Dominant Hegemonies
This chapter builds on Fabian Holle's master's thesis research project and includes the co-creative project *Art for Change*. The concept for *Art for Change* was proposed by Maria Rast, who suggested a collaborative curating of art works by queer refugee artists as part of the master's thesis. Fabian coordinated and executed the project in close collaboration with the participating artists, publishing on the website according to collaborators' wishes. Supervised by Maria Rast and Halleh Ghorashi, Fabian collected, organized and analysed the data, and drafted the initial text. Maria and Halleh engaged in multiple revision rounds, adding and refining written sections. Reviewer feedback from *Frontiers in Sociology* was incorporated by Fabian, Maria and Halleh.

Chapter 2: Safe Enough to Be Brave
This chapter is written by Fabian Holle and Alaaddin Ammar for *FOAM magazine* issue #62 *m/otherlands* with feedback from supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. Alaaddin produced all artworks and contributed to the conceptual framing. Fabian drafted the main text and both authors revised collaboratively.

Chapter 3: Enabling and Obstructing Flow through Creative Co-Creation
Authored by Fabian Holle with feedback from supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. Editors of *Errant Journal*, Irene de Craen and Ashley Maum, provided editorial feedback that informed subsequent revisions.

Chapter 4: Conditions for Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Co-Creation with Queer Refugees
This chapter is written by Fabian Holle, Elena Ponzoni and Halleh Ghorashi and published in the book *Transdisciplinarity for Transformation* edited by Barbara Regeer, Pim Klaassen and Jacqueline Broerse. Fabian drafted the first version, which was developed through multiple rounds of collaborative revision and writing. Reviewer comments were jointly incorporated.

Chapter 5: Through Art We Co-Create Care: Insights from a Rhizomatic Queer Community

This chapter is co-authored by Fabian Holle, Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz and Sajad Salmanpour, with feedback from Halleh Ghorashi, Elena Ponzoni and Phoebe Kisubi-Mbasalaki. The chapter emerged from a collective dialogue: Fabian prepared and transcribed a group conversation with co-authors, who also serve as facilitators and organizers of the LIMBO workshops. Fabian drafted an initial written narrative from this material, which was revised through several iterative rounds with co-authors and feedback from supervisors and editors. The chapter is published in the book *Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Migration: Toward a Co-creative, Caring, and Reflexive Migration Studies*, edited by Halleh Ghorashi, Tara Fiorito, Phoebe Kisubi-Mbasalaki and Elena Ponzoni.

Chapter 6: Boundaries of Care: Reflections on Inter/Dependencies in Engaged Research

This chapter is written by Fabian Holle and Alexandra Greene with feedback from supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. Fabian took the lead in collaboratively developing the conceptual framing and narrative. The chapter underwent additional review of Luisa Schneider (Alexandra's supervisor) and the *other* editors of the book *Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Migration: Toward a Co-creative, Caring, and Reflexive Migration Studies:* Tara Fiorito & Phoebe Kisubi-Mbasalaki.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The conclusion is written by Fabian Holle with feedback from supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. Shared with co-authors of chapters 2, 5 and 6 (Alaaddin Ammar, Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, Sajad Salmanpour and Alexandra Greene) to verify representation of their contributions and ensure accuracy.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Fabian Holle (they/he) is a PhD researcher in Sociology at VU Amsterdam and part of the research project *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change*. Rooted in critical sociology and queer, feminist and decolonial theory, Fabian works with qualitative, arts-based, and participatory methods across academic, artistic, and community contexts. Their PhD includes the co-created project LIMBO, a safer space for stories and art, for – and developed with – LGBTQIA+ people with refugee experiences. Fabian has a degree in acting/ theatre-making from the University of the Arts Utrecht (HKU) and worked as a performer from 2004 - 2020, co-founded theatre collective Ponies (2005–2015) and performed in drag. In 2020, they completed a Master's in Sociology (cum laude) at VU Amsterdam. At VU, Fabian teaches and supervises BSc/MSc sociology students. Alongside this, they co-organize queer safer spaces for trans, nonbinary, and queer communities, focusing on care, safety, and collective responsibility.

Dr. Maria Charlotte Rast (she/her) obtained a Master of Law (summa cum laude) from the University of Bern, Switzerland, in 2014 and a Master of Science in Sociology (cum laude) from VU Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in 2017. She worked at the Department of Sociology of VU Amsterdam from 2015 to 2025, first as a student fellow, then as a PhD candidate, and eventually as a researcher and lecturer. Her research was affiliated with the Refugee Academy and the research project *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change* and focused on challenges and opportunities for promoting refugees' social inclusion through co-creation in research and practice. Since 2026 she works as a researcher and advisor at RadarAdvies, a societal research and consultancy bureau. Maria co-authored Chapter 1.

Prof. dr. Halleh Ghorashi (she/her) is Full Professor of Diversity and Integration in the Department of Sociology at VU Amsterdam. She combines a multidisciplinary background in the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, gender studies, (political) philosophy, and organization studies) with a critical approach to diversity and refugee/migration studies, and narrative, co-creative methodology. In 2018, she received a prestigious NWO VICI grant for *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change*. In 2018, she was appointed Crown Member of the SER (Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands), and in 2020 she became a member of the KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences). Halleh co-authored Chapters 1 and 4.

Alaaddin Ammar (they/them) fled from Syria to the Netherlands in 2015. In Syria, Alaaddin obtained diplomas in psychology and communication. In 2014/2015, they worked on creative practices with refugees at the Syrian Red Crescent, where they completed multiple trainings. In the Netherlands, they studied at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and volunteered at Secret Garden, an organization for LGBTQI+ refugees. They are currently building community through a collaborative project involving techno dance, art, and performance. Within LIMBO,

their work focuses on connecting migrants and refugees through creative processes and jointly taking the first steps toward building new lives. Alaaddin co-authored Chapter 2.

Dr. Elena Ponzoni (she/her) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at VU Amsterdam. She is part of the Refugee Academy and the research project *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change*. Since 2023, she has been director of the *Co-Creation for Inclusive Knowledges Lab* at the Faculty of Social Sciences (VU Amsterdam). A red thread in her work is the question of how academic research can help make visible – and transform – implicit mechanisms of exclusion and inequality, through participatory methods of knowledge co-creation that centre the experiences of the communities at stake. Elena co-authored Chapter 4.

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz (she/her) is a creative artist working with writing, storytelling, and activism. Born and raised in the Philippines, she lives in the Netherlands. She founded the online Munabol Writing Sessions for BIPOC youngsters and has led workshops for the Other Futures Festival and Fiber. Her practice is influenced by adrienne maree brown, Édouard Glissant's work on relationality, Rolando Vázquez, and decolonial thinkers. Rochita works with collaborative and collective story-making across tools and media. She attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop in Seattle (2009), receiving the Octavia Butler Scholarship that year, and the Milford Bursary for non-white writers (2018). Her speculative work has appeared in online and print publications. In 2021, she released the chapbooks *Colonial Dreaming* and *A Small Assemblage* (Alternate Munabol Productions). More recently, she has begun writing in Dutch; her first Dutch short story appears in the anthology *De Komeet – speculatieve verhalen*, inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Comet" (1920). Rochita co-authored Chapter 5.

Lana Jelenjev (she/her) is a community alchemist and healing-centred facilitator working at the intersection of learning and community. She supports organizations in designing purpose-driven, healing-centred, and transformational communities. As a senior learning design strategist, she works with organizations committed to systems thinking, designing for change, and creating learning experiences grounded in practice and integration. Lana's work focuses on imagining and shaping new systems, and she promotes healing as a transformative pathway for societal change. She draws on decolonization, healing histories, and the cultivation of safer and brave spaces, grounded in *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* (Filipino concepts of shared humanity and relationality). "The communities I am part of are my places of refuge. As a Filipina in diaspora, I learned how to find 'my people,' nourish relationships, and be a space of refuge for others. What started as an inner exploration became a core practice." Lana co-authored Chapter 5.

Sajad Salmanpour (he/him) has a background in Sociology and a passion for qualitative research focusing on refugees, immigrants, LGBTQ+ rights, empowerment, inclusivity, and diversity. He worked as a junior researcher at VU Amsterdam, contributing to the LIMBO project, and as project coordinator for the Refugee Academy and the VICI project *Engaged*

Scholarship and Narratives of Change. In 2014, he started a research master's in Sociology, which he completed in 2016. His thesis examined social and cultural change in Iran through a semiotic approach to the films of Bahram Beizaie, drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. As a newcomer to the Netherlands, he quickly connected with various organizations, embracing opportunities to understand Dutch society through meaningful interactions. His goal is to combine knowledge and empathy to contribute to impactful research and support positive change in the lives of others. Sajad co-authored Chapter 5.

Alexandra Greene (she/they) has an interdisciplinary background informed by research-creation, intersectional feminist practices, and a humanities education. She is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the VU Amsterdam, where her research explores feminist epistemology, power-sensitive solidarities, and refugee advocacy. Alexandra co-authored Chapter 6.

PREFACE

It is Wednesday, April 29, 2026, roughly five years after the start of my PhD trajectory. I recently learned that my manuscript was approved and I am ready to defend. I just need to write this preface and acknowledgements, which made me reflect on the question why you, the reader, would, might, or should care.

Care has been central in this dissertation, it appeared as support, intimacy, attention and solidarity. In contrast, care also appeared as conflict, exhaustion, refusal, discomfort, responsibility and repair. Care had to be learned, negotiated and questioned in relation to specific people, spaces, histories and conditions, generating questions such as: Why care? Why do I care? What or who do I care for? What do I care about?

For me, the question "why care?" brings me first to GenderBendingCruiseParty. Last Saturday, I was holding space again at this party in Rotterdam, formerly known as GenderBendingQueerParty. That evening, I happily shared the news that my manuscript had been approved. The moment felt fitting, because this party has been foundational to my entire research practice. GenderBendingCruiseParty is designed as a safer space for trans, nonbinary and queer people, and for bodies, desires and forms of gender expression that are rarely accommodated, let alone centred in the night economy. Before visitors enter, we speak to everyone at the door. We share the intentions of the space: that queer sexuality is grounded in sexual integrity; that sexuality can be celebrated regardless of gender or sexual orientation; and that transgender people in particular feel safe with us. We talk about consent: ask before you act, know your boundaries. We ask visitors to be mindful of how space is distributed. If it is usually hard for someone to take up space, this is the night to claim the dance floor. We remind everyone that all bodies deserve equal attention. We encourage genderclowning, drag, crossdressing, kink and nakedness; we invite people to lose themselves a little, but not too much. Being too drunk or too high to remain aware of yourself and your surroundings is not okay. We ask to limit phone use and to not take photos. These collective intentions are practices of care. By following these intentions, we ask everyone to make the space safer to experiment with gender, sexuality, pleasure, intimacy and embodiment without abandoning responsibility for one another.

Every edition of the party has a theme. This time, the theme was *Rage – the Revolution is my Boyfriend*, because, as Fredt – one of the main organizers, creators, and space holders of this party – mentioned in their speech to our visitors: "There is much to be angry about in this world: genocide, rapists in power, ongoing wars, and the almost ordinary violences experienced by marginalized people from day to day. Yet rage is not always an easy emotion to channel, especially in queer communities of people who are often sweet, attentive, kind and sensitive, and who know what harm can do". That is why the aim of the night was to channel rage safely, collectively and without becoming destructive to those around us.

Around one in the morning, when most people had arrived, we gathered for a ritual. We do this in every edition: we turn down the music and take a seat on stage and Fredt asks everyone else to sit down too. The room shifted from dancing to listening. Fredt repeated the intentions of the space and afterward, BOMBSTRAP, a Rotterdam punk band, began to

play. Their music helped release rage about the state of the world. A moshpit formed: a friendly, high-energy way to violently dance, jump and slam into one another. It was sweaty. It was joyful. It was done with care.

This party taught me about care, it taught me how to care for larger groups, and who to care with: others that care. It thought me things I could not have learned from academic literature. I learned that care is not only comfort or kindness, or that "caring about" and "to care for" translates into preparation, boundary-setting, refusal, careful attention and collective responsibility. I learned that care could hold pleasure and rage. Perhaps most importantly, I learned that it's possible to inspire each other to care more.

In *The Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) it is argued that in neoliberal, highly individualized societies, carelessness reigns, something we briefly unpack in Chapter 5. Their argument is not simply that people have stopped caring, but that neoliberalism has narrowed, exhausted and redirected our caring capacities: care is privatized, pushed back into families and intimate circles, or turned into individual responsibility through vocabularies of resilience, wellness and self-improvement. As they argue, people are encouraged to restrict their care to "people like us," while the social, political and material infrastructures that would make more expansive forms of care possible are systematically dismantled (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

I know non-activist, 'regular' people in my surroundings who care about other people, and about, for instance, a genocide that is happening with impunity, international law, or climate change. However, truly caring about genocide, war, deportations, or climate catastrophe often feels too much to handle. This is where the manifesto's argument is helpful: disengagement does not necessarily mean an absence of care but can be read as a symptom of living in a world that makes sustained, collective and transnational care feel unbearable, impractical, or politically ineffective. In line with *The Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), I believe that many caring people disengage and focus on their smaller circles in which they have some level of influence and can make a difference: with their families, for instance, their children, loved ones, or work.

Questions around care followed into my PhD research, albeit in a very different context: LIMBO, a co-created workshop series with LGBTQIA+ refugees, centred around art practices and storytelling. Over the course of almost four years, LIMBO became a space of encounter, creativity, vulnerability, disagreement, recognition, disappointment, repair and renewed motivation. Together with participants, artists, activists and community organizers, we made stories, images, performances, conversations and public events. In LIMBO, care had to be made and remade. It appeared in small gestures, in shared meals, in translation, in waiting, in laughter, in silence, in staying in touch, in making room for someone's story, and in knowing when *not* to ask for more. It also appeared in more difficult moments: when expectations differed, when people were tired, when roles shifted, when responsibilities were unclear, when the violences of the world became too much, or when conflict required repair. Through LIMBO, I came to understand care as a dynamic and relational practice. Care was negotiated through changing circumstances, unequal positions, shifting capacities and different needs.

Which brings me to what I care for, namely, the creative and demanding spaces in which people try to build something together while living with consequences of exclusion,

displacement, racism, homophobia, transphobia, bureaucracy or institutional neglect. I care for the stories and artworks that emerged from LIMBO, but also for the relations that made them possible. I care for the people who trusted me, challenged me, taught me, refused me, collaborated with me and allowed this research to become something shared. To care for these relations as a researcher required attention to power, safety, consent, authorship, representation, fatigue and responsibility. It required asking what knowledge could be produced, but also how, with whom, for whom, and at what cost. I care about how people keep going. I care about the infrastructures, relations, rituals, methods and spaces that make collective care possible under conditions that often make it difficult to act. I care about how care is practiced when people are tired, angry, overwhelmed, hopeful, disappointed or in conflict. I care about care as a question that must be asked again and again.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation begins and ends with care. Care remains a question, a practice and a commitment. It is something I have studied, something I have received, something I have failed at, something I have tried to offer, and something I will continue to follow. After this PhD, I will continue to care, and to research care, in another context. I will start as a postdoctoral researcher in the Care2Act project, *Strategic Care in Activism: Mental Health Across Scales of Social Change*, led by Anna Zhelnina at Utrecht University. I like that this next step still has care at its centre. It makes the end of this dissertation feel less like a closing and more like a passage into another set of questions: How do people sustain themselves and each other while trying to change the worlds that harm them? How do activists, artists, organizers, researchers and community members keep going when the work they do matters deeply, but also asks much of them? How are boundaries set? How is care work distributed? What happens when care fails, becomes too much, or needs to be repaired? How can collective spaces support mental health and well-being without turning care into another demand placed on already overburdened people? I'm grateful to continue my academic journey in this context.

Gratitude is also a practice of care. It is a way of acknowledging that this dissertation was not written alone. It was made possible by people who read with me, thought with me, danced with me, organized with me, supervised me, challenged me, fed me, had fun with me, comforted me, distracted me, and reminded me to rest. Here, I want to express my gratitude to all those people that contributed to this journey in visible or less visible ways.

First, I am grateful to all co-creators of these research projects this dissertation is based on: *Art for Change, Trans-Clash & LIMBO*. Many I cannot name for confidentiality reasons, but I want to thank all workshop participants, artists, organizers, co-authors and collaborators, who trusted the process and shaped this research in ways that exceed what can be captured in academic texts. Thank you for your stories, artworks, questions, refusals, humour, patience, critique and generosity.

I would like to thank several people in particular: Ariya, your journey has been an inspiration. Amin, so much talent and heart. Mavi, a hotness and talent extravaganza. Hamza, one of the bravest warriors. Mama Kil, powerful and confidently vulnerable, something I am continuously aspire to. Grizolda, a multitalented fearless queen. Sorab, for your tireless activism and powerful words. Merych, for being a free and beautiful spirit and being my friend. Olave, my hero, I miss genderclowning with you. Sadiqa, your song still gives me goosebumps.

To all LIMBO team members: Genade, you contributed to LIMBO from beginning to end. It has been beautiful to witness how you stepped into your power. Lana, your workshops and presence nurtured my heart and soul. Mahyar, I love your contagious energy and confidence. Rochita, you have touched my heart since I first met you; you are so extremely talented and caring. Yohannes, gifted, smart, beautiful spirit, and sexy art. Alaaddin, my soul sibling, you stood beside me in my darkest hours and most joyful moments, and vice versa. You helped shape LIMBO in ways I could not have imagined. Thank you. Noa, my original partner and co-founder of LIMBO, for connecting Framer Framed and your master's thesis

with my work. Thank you for your patience, commitment and warm, inviting energy. Sajad, your humour, wit, knowledge and experience has been invaluable. Thank you for doing, and continuing, much needed and important work. Farouk, incredible talented and multi-faceted, thank you for your presence, energy and work in the foundational period, you were deeply missed in the period that followed.

I also want to thank Ilya for supporting Noa and the group, and everyone else in Framer Framed and Josien Pieterse in particular. Thank you for helping secure funding for LIMBO and your hospitality in an inspiring place where we felt safe. Thank you to funders NWO, Fonds Cultuurparticipatie and ILGA-Europe (Nadzeya Husakouskaya, you were great). Thank you to Foundation Makers Unite, Lola Lieven, Tjerk Feitsma and Neurodiversity Foundation, and all the other workshop facilitators: Maha Youssef, Sunni Lamin, Parisa Akbarzadehpoladi, Jerrold Saija, Rah Naqvi, Sarah Tazit, Razan Hassan, Yuki Kihara, Sahar Jamshidi, Aydeen Razbari, Pierre (Love Masisi), Marwa Mehzer, Nojan, Fardad, Maria Clara Jimenez Assmus, Lu Lin, Fay & Rafik Opti from Colored Qollective. You all inspire me. Thank you.

One workshop facilitator I would like to thank in particular is Aminata Cairo. Thank you for being such a huge inspiration. Your work has been deeply influential to the group and to many of us individually, including myself. I am honoured to have you as a member of the defense committee.

I am honoured and grateful to the other committee members too: Serena Does, Sarah Bracke, Phoebe Kisubi-Mbasalaki and Wayne Modest. Thank you for taking your time to engage with this work. It is truly appreciated.

I am forever grateful to my supervisors Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni. Thank you for giving me the support, belief, trust, freedom, and critiques that made this work possible. I have never felt more seen and appreciated doing this work, even during my entire career as a theatermaker and performer. It means the world.

Thank you Maria Rast, for recognizing me as an engaged student in the master course *Social Continuity and Change* and later becoming my incredibly engaged master's thesis supervisor. Without your excellent, and at times intense, supervision and collaboration, I would not have ended up as part of the VICI team. You have inspired me greatly.

Thank you Alex Greene, for the many great conversations over the years, for facilitating workshops together, and for our collaborative chapter on *Boundaries of Care*. I am very happy with it and I hope for many more collaborations to come. Mimi Ocadiz, I love your work and how you take community engagement to a next level. It is deeply inspiring. Phoebe Kisbubi-Mbasalaki, beyond being a committee member, I want to thank you for everything you brought to the VICI team and myself: amazing work and energy, fun and critique. I am so happy we connected. Tara Fiorito, I love our conversations, and you are an incredible scholar and teacher. I missed your presence in the department. Kay Mars, thank you for meticulous work, care and curiosity. With you, I knew the work was in good hands. Sajad Salmanpour, I cannot thank you enough in all your different roles: as part of the VICI team, the LIMBO team, co-author, and friend. You were one of my biggest supports.

I am grateful to my colleagues at the Department of Sociology and the IDI (Identity, Diversity and Inclusion) group. There are several people from the department I would like to

thank in particular for interesting conversations, teaching and/ or inspiring me in different ways: Lorraine Nencel, Kathy Davis, Sawitri Saharso, Saartje Tack, Lise Woensdrecht, Melisa Soto Lafontaine, Peer Smets, Marjolein Broese van Groenou, Ineke Nagel, Timo Korstenbroek, Ismintha Waldring, Elif Keskiner, Maurice Crul, Louise Wolff, Laurine Blonk, Nebil Kusmallah, Saba Hamzah, Nadira Omarjee, Stef Bouwhuis, Joram Pach, Tara de Smidt, Dimitris Pavlopolous, Ying Shen, Joukje Swinkels, Arjen de Wit, Younes Younes, Anja Robertus and Els Tettelaar.

I would also like to thank all the students, researchers, teachers and friends whom I fail to mention but who made this PhD intellectually and emotionally possible. Thank you to the VU@home group for the inspiring and caring lunch sessions organized by Serena Does and Joey Stofberg. Thank you for making academic life feel less lonely. Joey, as well as Saartje, Alex, Mimi and Melisa, thank you for helping me prepare through a mock defense.

I am also very grateful to the people that led me to an academic journey. Damian Rebgetz, without you I would have never chosen this path. You helped me immensely with gaining admission to the premaster (I will never forget those months of doing math with your help) and throughout my time as a master student. You were my first writing teacher and showed me that working in large institutions was actually possible for me. I would have never imagined that before I met you. I cherish our time together. You are one of the most talented people I know.

Thank you to Genderclowns Fredt, Dennis, Chris, Loes, Senna, Lu, Kim, Esther, Merano and the many others in our queer, trans and nonbinary communities that have taught me so much about consent, pleasure, safety, nightlife, embodiment and collective responsibility. GenderBendingQueerParty and Queer Rotterdam have shaped me, and they have shaped how I understand research, ethics and care.

I am grateful to those who cared for me throughout this PhD journey, especially in moments when care was absolutely necessary for this dissertation to exist. Thank you, Justin, it may sound cliché, but you bring meaning to my life. Meaning making in academia means nothing without you, I love everything about you. I am grateful to my parents Marten and Jacqueline, and to my sisters Yanaika and Denise. Thank you for being my home throughout this journey. Across different cities and stages of life, you have been a constant source of love, fun, support and care.



Figure 1. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 29 May 2022.

Introduction

On the 27th of March 2022, a surprisingly warm sunny afternoon at the Framer Framed art space in Amsterdam, a group of LGBTQIA+ refugees and I gathered to celebrate together with friends, colleagues and allies. Over the past seven weeks, we had been meeting in a creative workshop series we called LIMBO. What began as a relatively small, engaged research experiment evolved into a vibrant community. Participants who had been quiet at the start were now stepping forward to dance, share poetry and artworks they had created. In our public presentation, we curated performances by LGBTQIA+ (hereafter queer as an inclusive umbrella term) refugee artists, showcased paintings, drawings, photographs, poetry and a documentary film that stayed on display for two months. What struck me most was the transformation in people who, weeks earlier, were hesitant to speak at all. The event had been planned as the finale of the project, but it felt more like a beginning. The energy in the space was irresistible, and we collectively decided that LIMBO should continue. Later, case managers, guiding some LIMBO participants through their asylum procedure, and people working for *Vluchtelingenwerk* (the Dutch council for refugees) asked how LIMBO unlocked such courage and connection. This is one of the questions at the heart of this dissertation.

As a central part of my PhD research, LIMBO was developed as an engaged, arts-based research collaboration between queer refugee community organizers and artists, Framer Framed, and me as a researcher affiliated with Refugee Academy (an expertise lab at the Institute for Societal Resilience at VU Amsterdam). The research took shape through a series of creative workshops and public presentations, combining collective artmaking and storytelling with ongoing participatory observation, reflective conversations, and process documentation. This PhD project is part of the overarching research project *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change in Comparative Perspective*, a NWO (Dutch Research Council) funded VICI project, investigating and comparing engaged scholarship in three societal contexts: South Africa, the United States and the Netherlands. I came in last as one of four PhD and two Postdoc positions. Initially, the PhD positions were already filled with one for each context (Greene, 2025; Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025; Rast, 2024). However, because my master's thesis employed an arts-based methodology, an element that had initially been envisioned as part of this VICI project, I was able to further develop this aspect and complement the works of the other PhD researchers. Before I knew it, I became part of a team of inspiring, critically engaged scholars, which I learned so much from along the way.

My research was guided by this question: *What are the challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship with LGBTQIA+ refugees in the Dutch context?* Engaged scholarship is a type of research that goes beyond *describing* the world to actively help *shape* the conditions under which different futures become thinkable and doable (Kajner, 2013). In Chapter 4 (co-written with my supervisors Elena Ponzoni and Halleh Ghorashi), we describe transformative engaged scholarship as "critical forms of academic work with the aim of enabling more inclusive practices both in society and in academic institutions" (p. 94). It involves "critical reflection on power dynamics in knowledge production and creating spaces for mutual learning with different social actors, particularly from marginalized communities" (p. 94). This is important

because situated and community knowledge is recognized as meaningful, and conditions for social and epistemic justice can be built more sustainably (Fricker, 2007). My contribution to engaged scholarship has been to queer it, bringing a focus on creative, non-linear collaboration (through art and storytelling) with queer refugees. A form of co-creation that placed vulnerability, process, and affect at the centre.

Reflecting on challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship, opened new questions: how is engaged scholarship done, with whom, and under which conditions can it be sustainable? How might queer ways of being (disoriented, relational, affective) inform scholarly practice? What counts as knowledge? Who counts as a knower? And what does it mean to build something together in the context of precarity and care?

Methodologically, I approached these questions through an engaged, participatory research design. My primary field site was LIMBO, where I collaborated long-term with queer/ refugee/ migrant co-facilitators in designing workshops and events. Data consists of fieldnotes, biographical and/ or in depth-interviews, individual and group reflections during the workshops and the artistic output created in the process (e.g., poetry, drawings, photographs, performances) alongside continuous reflective and evaluative conversations with co-facilitators, workshop participants and supervisors. Co-facilitators became co-authors (of Chapters 2 and 5) and analysis happened iteratively, moving between observations, creative artefacts, reflexivity, and theory.

Besides the occasional public events like the one described above, LIMBO mainly consists of recurring[2] creative private workshops as a place for knowledge-making through art practices and storytelling. The series began with a consent workshop using rope play, followed by creative workshops such as poetry, collage, drawing, drag makeup, creative writing, world-building and more. Collectively and creatively, we explored ways of knowing that emerge from the intersection of refugeeness and queerness.

These workshops – and the questions this dissertation takes up – were shaped by and respond to, a Dutch context in which migration has become increasingly politicized, solidarity is contested, and queer and trans live are ever more frequently drawn into hardened culture-war debates (Mehra, 2025; Samaras, 2025; Segers, 2025). In such a climate, the conditions for speaking, gathering, and being seen safely cannot be taken for granted – nor can the conditions for doing engaged, relational research with people whose lives are affected by precarity and public scrutiny. I return to these dynamics at the start of the conclusion (Ch. 7, p. 146).

It was from within this tension – between the possibility we felt during the celebration described above and the pressure outside of it – that we began to explore how deviating from the 'straight' paths of conventional academia can open new ways of knowing and being together.

i. Queer Orientations and Straight Lines

To queer is to deviate, not just from sexual norms, but from paths that govern social life. Paths that structure family, citizenship, belonging, and even the proper way to do research (Ahmed, 2006). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), I began to understand

[2] LIMBO began as a weekly workshop series (eight consecutive sessions) and later continued twice a month, and later moved to monthly gatherings, depending on capacity and funding.

orientation as both spatial and historical. Straight lines promise direction, progress, closure; queer lines bend, pause, circle back and sometimes refuse to arrive (Ahmed, 2006). In this PhD research, I ask what it means to think, feel, and practice scholarship *queerly*. To approach scholarship in ways that bend or blur straight lines, and to do so in alliance with those most marginalized by dominant cultural, bureaucratic, and academic structures. Rather than progressing *straight*forwardly, this collaborative research unfolded through an entanglement of different positionalities, practices, developing relationships, shifting power dynamics, tensions, and ethics in the context of 'doing' engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees. It required me to stay with discomfort at times, let go of a fixed methodological framework, and remain responsive to the affective dynamics of collaboration, care, and creative co-creation. From the outset, I attempted to balance co-producing knowledge with tracing how it emerges in relation; through collaboration, through care, and through practices that do not always follow linear trajectories.

One premise became especially generative: that queerness is not a fixed identity, but a spatial, historical and affective orientation (Ahmed, 2006). Orientation shapes how people move through social and physical environments – who feels at home, and who is marked as out of place. It traces the lines of family, tradition, and cultural heritage that define what counts as a proper life. Who is in line, who is out of line, and what kinds of futures are made possible or impossible? I use Ahmed's work here conceptually, to name queer refugees' (dis)orientation within Dutch institutional, social, and cultural spaces, but also methodologically in thinking of disorientation as potential sites of knowledge-making/ meaning-making. Ahmed (2006) writes that "orientations are effects of what we tend toward" (p. 554), and that heteronormativity functions as a "straightening device" (p. 562), aligning bodies, desires, and futures. Hence, orientation informs how bodies are organized around particular 'objects' of desire, and how institutions arrange those objects to reproduce familial, racialized, and national norms (Ahmed, 2006). For example, consider the expected paths of familial inheritance (who is next in line), or the linear climb of achievement (the career ladder), or the assimilation narrative for immigrants (from newcomer to proper productive citizen).

To make this argument, Ahmed draws together several critical thinkers to show how these lines are not neutral but historically made, and how they are secured through the influence of colonial power. From a Fanonian perspective, the 'white world' is built to support white movement along these lines – lines of property, recognition, and law (Fanon 2021 [1952] as cited in Ahmed, 2006). He speaks of the Black body in a white world as an ontological wound – trapped under the weight of the white gaze that injures at the level of being. This captures how the very conditions of 'moving freely' in the world are unevenly distributed – how some bodies are made to pass along established routes, while others are stopped, exposed or made hyper visible. Ahmed then extends this by turning to Edward Said's concept of orientalism to show how worlds are organized through a complementary mechanism of othering: 'the West' constructs 'the Orient' as its opposite: a fixed, objectified Other, to secure Western superiority and coherence (Said, 1977 as cited in Ahmed, 2006). Read together, Fanon and Said help Ahmed demonstrate that orientation is not simply about personal direction or individual feeling, but about how space, norms, and histories are arranged so that some bodies are 'in place' while others appear as perpetually 'out of place'.

For racialized or queer subjects, then, to be in the world is often to feel out of place, out of line, disoriented, never quite fitting within the contours of what is considered 'normal'.

Guided by thinkers like Sara Ahmed and Edward Said (among others), I learned through the process of doing this research, that being off-track, disoriented or not-knowing, can be powerful strategies for reflection, critique, and creativity. Disorientation, then, is not something to be perceived as negative or obstructive to development, but rather a generative condition for reflection, critique and creativity. It forces a pause to question. Ahmed's (2006) notion of being in and out of line offered a queer lens on both the content and the form of my research practice: creative co-creation with queer refugees navigating the straight lines and pathways of Dutch cultural norms, asylum procedures, integration policies, and labour market expectations. These structures do not follow a simple linear logic: they are complex, layered and sometimes contradictory. Yet they remain straight in the sense that they reproduce heteronormative pathways in life; they are aligned with straight norms of family, productivity and citizenship. They are not developed with queer ways of being in mind. Recognizing the tension between the complexity of lived queer experience and the straightening force of institutions made me ask: how can the research itself be queered by resisting assimilation into a single orderly track?

Particularly in quantitative, but also in conventional qualitative research, progress is often imagined as linear: one begins with a research question, then designs, collects, analyses and concludes. What would it mean then to queer research? The sequence promises clarity and order, but it can also function as a straightening device of its own, narrowing what counts as knowledge and foreclosing the detours, loops, and sideway connections through which queer life is often lived. Rather than attempting to realize a pre-given plan, queering might mean experimenting in response to what emerges, allowing inquiry to spread sideways, more like mycelium than a straight line, branching in different directions and sprouting where conditions allow. Perhaps, more like following encounters that generate new connections without needing to justify them in advance. A single encounter can branch off in multiple directions. For instance, a conversation might point us toward the work of a specific author, (say, Aminata Cairo), while the same moment sparks a workshop idea which we would then pursue together. Each branch generates new lines of thought and action, sometimes converging, sometimes diverging, often looping back in unexpected ways. In this sense, the research grows through proliferating connections that emerge in the moment.

In neoliberal contexts where "innovate or die" becomes common sense, creativity is often treated as compulsory productivity – measured through outputs, novelty, and value, and easily commodified (Jeanes, 2006, p. 127). Through the lens of Deleuze, Jeanes (2006) shows us how this imperative can make us paradoxically *less* creative: 'ideas for the sake of ideas' becomes another conformity. Against this, queering research aligns with a Deleuzian sense that creation is a refusal of the ready-made pathways that decide in advance what counts as knowledge, as method, and what a 'successful' outcome should look like. For me, queering research asks what becomes possible when we make room for detours, for unfinishedness, and forms of knowing that emerge through relation, improvisation and collective experimentation.

This is where a desire-based orientation becomes relevant for what queering research might look like in practice. Against deficit-approaches in refugee studies that repeatedly frame refugees through lack, or need (Malkki, 1992; Ghorashi, 2023), I describe our work as desire-based (Tuck, 2009): attentive to what people long for and imagine, even under conditions of exclusion or scrutiny. In this sense, queering research is also a commitment to methods that can hold and amplify desire – its creativity, its relationality, and its capacity to imagine other futures. Put differently, desire shifts the question from *what is missing?* to *what is being made possible here, and under what conditions?*

If desire is taken seriously, it must stay responsive to what emerges, and to the people to whom it emerges. This required vulnerability, closeness, and a willingness to risk failure, along with mutual care in the co-creation of knowledge. It felt necessary to better accommodate the queer ways of those I was collaborating with, and to make space for forms of knowledge, presence, and connection that might otherwise be excluded, dismissed or feel misplaced within conventional academic frameworks. I feel grateful that I had the privilege and institutional support to experiment in this way.

Methodologically, this responsiveness took the form of practicing attentiveness in the field: listening closely to needs and desires as they arose and picking up on signals rather than sticking rigidly to a plan. Before starting my master in sociology, I worked as a theatre performer, and that training became an unexpected asset in this research trajectory. As an actor, I was trained to remain present and to let meaning arise in the live encounter. A performer's task is to be 'attractive', not in a superficial sense, but in the sense of attracting attention, resonance and response. Instead of chasing the audience, the performer should create conditions that invite the audience to lean in and come toward them. I adopted a similar stance in my research. Rather than 'recruiting subjects' in the usual way (posting a call on social media; using snowball sampling by asking if those I spoke to could refer me to others), we focused on creating an attractive project that would draw people in. A project that participants want to join and shape with their knowledge, skills, and creativity. It is here that Toni Cade Bambara's statement "the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible" resonates for me (as cited in brown, 2019, p. 1). In research terms, making a project attractive is about making a space that others want to join, where revolutionary ways of knowing, belonging, and imagining futures become possible and compelling.

As transdisciplinary scholar Ruha Benjamin (2024) argues, imagination is a political practice; by designing settings that invite people to practice more just futures, desire becomes method and co-creation a tool for positive change-making. Desire, however, is not abstract. It is shaped by what we have lived through, and by how we have learned how to orientate ourselves in the world. To be transparent about what I brought into this research, I now turn to my personal and methodological positioning, reflecting on the experiences that informed the sensibilities and commitments guiding this research. The following experiences laid the groundwork for how I approached my PhD. I tried to resist 'straightening' experience into fixed lines, boxes, or categories. Instead, I deliberately stayed close to the peripheral, the in-between, the creative, and the critical – because it was in queer spaces that I had learned the most in the years leading up to this research.

ii. Personal and Methodological Positioning

My own experiences of loss, migration, disorientation and adaptation, shaped how I entered this research and what I found myself drawn to notice and explore. My own disorientation began long before I had language to name it. It began not with a clear sense of being different, but with the absence of awareness that I was racialized at all. Growing up pluricultural – a term I borrow from Mounir Samuel (2023) – in the Netherlands, I unconsciously tried to align myself with whiteness, absorbing it as the norm, the default.

My mother died when I was young. My father, officially categorized as a 'repatriate' from Indonesia – born during the War of Independence in 1946 – also disappeared from my life early on. Although framed by the Dutch state as a return 'home', repatriation in this case essentially meant fleeing genocidal, colonial violence, much like contemporary refugees fleeing conflict (Raben, 2012). Like many others, he was displaced and cast into a narrative that obscured the trauma of forced migration. After my biological parents were gone, I spent my teenage years with several (white) foster families, switching homes, norms, and codes. I became skilled at adapting, at reading the room and sensing which 'orientation' was expected of me. I took up theatre instead of ballet, trying to be more boyish than girlish, tougher instead of tender, conformed to norms I couldn't name yet, even as some parts of me quietly resisted.

Only later I realized how deeply I had internalized the straight line: whiteness as coherence, as invisibility, as safety, as heteronormative. I longed to fit in and pass as 'normal' without questioning how 'normal' is defined and at whose expense. I realized later that 'trying to be normal' or 'trying to fit in' makes it harder to critically reflect on taken for granted assumptions that may very well be exclusionary or harmful. It wasn't so much a desire to be white as it was a not-knowing, a disorientation that only revealed itself over time, as I began to reflect on my life, choices, position, privileges, and desires.

This reflection really took off when I started developing my drag persona around 2015. First in the context of a large German Theatre institution and later by myself (*WUSS*, concept: Rebgetz et al., n.d.). Today, drag has entered the mainstream, popularized by reality TV competition *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Brennan & Gudelunas, 2017). But not long ago, drag was largely an underground art form. I remember how many people, even within the LGBTQIA+ community, looked down upon drag. Now, nearly all queer people I know watch *Drag Race* (RuPaul's Drag Race, n.d.). For me, drag was more than entertainment. It connected me to queer activist communities. Around 2017, I was searching to be part of queer community. At first, I only found volunteer positions for Rotterdam Pride, but it felt too commercial and uncritical. Eventually, I joined a group *We Reclaim Our Pride* (n.d.) which protested the commercialization of Rotterdam Pride and the inclusion of an Islamophobic and transphobic group – an inclusion justified by the organization's claim to be "non-political" (Engberts, 2017).

Later, I joined some of the same people to help co-organize queer safer clubbing spaces. Through organizing these clubbing events and participating in demonstrations, I learned more about gender fluidity, inequality, and community care. Yet these experiences also intensified my confusion and disorientation. During the protest at the Rotterdam Pride walk, our group of trans, non-binary people, many of colour, which I had come to know as very kind and sensitive, was framed as rioters and treated violently by the Rotterdam police (van Driel, 2017; Engberts, 2017). It was jarring and upsetting and shattered some of my

naïveté about safety, legitimacy, and who is allowed to take up space – even in places that are meant to celebrate queer life. Eventually, this chain of events led me to academia – first through a premaster, then a master's in Sociology at VU Amsterdam – where I began to find language for what I had felt but couldn't articulate, and where I developed more questions.

Looking back now, I see that this disorientation shaped the research. It sensitized me to the affective labour involved in community care. It taught me to listen more deeply and reflect on things I had taken for granted (and still need to keep questioning, since it's a never-ending process). In queer communities I learned that failure to live up to societal norms can be embraced and even celebrated. Later, I read *The Queer Art of Failure* by Jack Halberstam (2011), which gave theoretical depth to this notion of queer failure.

This openness to disorientation and failure was something I had also developed in my background in theatre. I graduated as a performer and theatre-maker back in 2004. Entering academia years later, I brought with me habits of collaborative creation and improvisation, which made the idea of doing 'conventional research' feel almost impossible. In performing arts research, making meaning happens collaboratively – through scenes, fragments, images, movement, and sound. I was used to navigating the chaotic and collaborative composition process of a collage performance, twisting, circling back, branching out, not following a predetermined plan. In theatre we collectively and continually negotiate the world we're creating on stage, and the 'rules' or 'laws' that come with it. Those experiences trained me to be (somewhat) comfortable with uncertainty, and to see disorientation as part of the process, and to trust that meaning can emerge from fragments, detours and provisional arrangements.

Furthermore, when I was working on my master's thesis, I experienced a kind of shock moving from body to brain. I went from working with choreographers, directors, dancers and actors, figuring things out in the studio, to spending most of my time alone behind my laptop. Even when occasionally making a solo work in the studio, it was always a collaborative process with others present: an outside eye, a director, designer, technician and so on. The shift was hard at first, isolating. Especially because it coincided with physical distancing measures due to Covid-19, and the breakup of a long-term loving relationship. The creative and collaborative element of my research made the work not only more manageable, but also more meaningful and worthwhile. It allowed me to carry something of the studio into the study: a sense of togetherness, intuition, and shared process, even within academic constraints.

These experiences did not provide answers, but deepened the questions that run through this dissertation: How can disorientation be (part of the) method? What forms of knowledge, care, and resistance become possible when creativity and co-creation are treated as ways of knowing (epistemology) rather than embellishment?

iii. Mapping the Dissertation

Engaged research, as I came to understand it, rarely unfolds in a single straight line. The lines are multiple and winding. Engaged research layers experiences, weaves together diverse contributions, and accumulates through detours and returns. One might imagine each line as a layer of knowledge, with layers converging into one or more thicker strands (De la Bellacasa, 2012). This thickness arises not only from layering but also from lines looping back and forth,

since progress never only moves purely upwards. As Beckett famously put it: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett, as cited in Marshall, 2017).

At a certain point, I began connecting with the philosophical idea of the rhizome. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari outline five principles of the rhizome: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The latter, decalcomania, is described as a figure of imagery that spreads across a surface, such as the ornamental patterns on a vase or a bowl, without a point of origin or termination. The design proliferates across folds and contours in the surface, just as rhizomatic thought proliferates across contexts and attaches itself to specific, local circumstances (historical, material, social, personal) that give the pattern its shape in that moment. Decalcomania is not about reproducing an original model; rather, it figures a process of emergence, an extensive spread of forms and connections that exceed linear causality.

It is in this sense that I take up, in this introduction, the metaphor of refusing straight lines. This refusal addresses the linear stories through which history, identity and belonging are so often narrated. The rhizome offers an alternative orientation: one that grows and forms in the folds of the context. It proliferates in multiple directions at once, forming entangled networks that cannot be reduced to a singular narrative. And yet, for the sake of the reader, I will describe the journey of this PhD project roughly in chronological order. What follows is a mapping of how each phase of research added a new layer of understanding, with each chapter building on the one before it. Step by step, the project gradually evolved to more engaged forms of co-creation and community building. Chronology should, however, not be confused with linearity.

Chronology here functions less as a path to be followed and more as one thread among many in the collective story of this research. A rhizome can move through time without being bound by it, since its logic is one of proliferation and connection, rather than linear causation. In recounting events along a timeline, I do not suggest that they determine one another in a closed chain. Instead, I aim to show how they intersect and coexist with other lines: the conceptual lines of academic thinkers that shaped this PhD trajectory, the lines of personal histories that cut across generations and geographies, and the lines of current political events that continually affect how our lives unfold. These intersections may also open toward imagined futures. In this sense, the chronological form becomes a surface on which rhizomatic patterns can emerge, allowing fragments of personal and historical experience to spread, attach, and reconfigure themselves in multiple directions. Such lines do not converge into a single path. Instead, they intersect, diverge, and proliferate in ways that resist closure and generate new possibilities of relation.

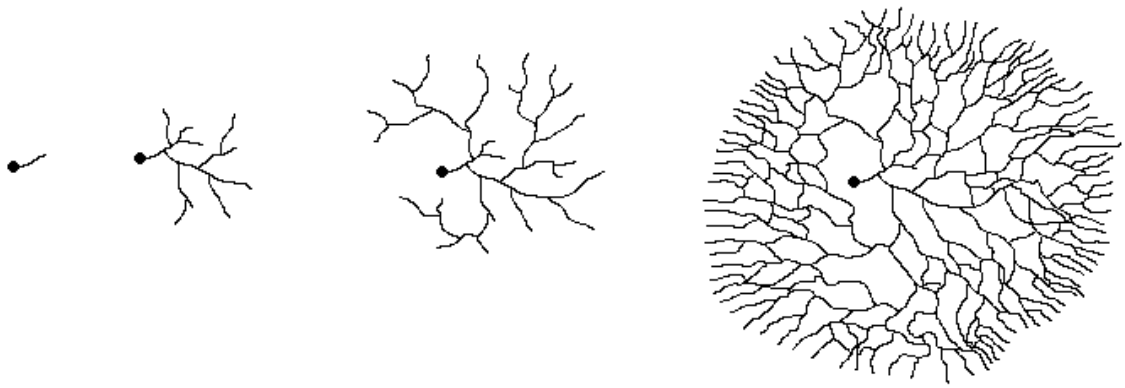


Figure 2. ***Mycelium growth and hyphal network.***
Note. Image from "Mycelium" page by Australian National Botanic Gardens, n.d., *Fungi* section, https://www.anbg.gov.au/fungi/mycelium.html. Copyright n.d. by Australian National Botanic Gardens.

It's worth noting that I sometimes use different concepts to refer to similar processes across chapters. This is partly because all chapters, except Chapter 3, are co-authored with different collaborators (academic, as well as non-academic collaborators from the queer/ refugee/ migrant community). Writing together meant our language shifted depending on who was contributing; I learned new terms from my co-authors, and some terminology developed over time. While this might introduce some inconsistencies, each concept earned its place by helping us imagine or understand something important in the process at that moment. If a term proved less useful, we let it go in later chapters.

What follows is a journey of circling back in my path as an emerging engaged scholar. Each phase of this research added a new layer of understanding to what was unfolding. Every step, reflected in the different chapters, thickened the knowledge that emerged. The mapping that follows traces these accumulations chapter by chapter, showing how questions deepened and shifted along the way. My attempt here is not so much to summarize, but to share the (back)stories that come with each chapter, a bit like a peak into the backstage or behind the scenes.

iv. Chapter 1: Exilic (Art) Narratives of Queer Refugees Challenging Dominant Hegemonies

The first chapter marks the beginning of my PhD research. The article was based on my master's thesis, which, at the time, I was unaware that it would later become the foundation for further research. The article was co-authored with Maria Rast – first my lecturer, later thesis supervisor, and eventually PhD colleague, friend, and fellow teacher – and Halleh Ghorashi, who began as my supervisor and later became my promotor, friend and fellow teacher.

In this chapter we set out to ask how queer refugees in the Netherlands use art or creativity to express their in-between positioning and to unsettle dominant discourses that render them either as victims or threats to "Dutch national culture" (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2016). Inspired by concepts of resistance, creative agency (Bjorkdähl & Selimovic, 2015) and liminality (Turner, 1969), we drew on biographical interviews and artmaking practices to explore how such tensions take shape. We noticed recurring paradoxes: the increase but lack of nuance in representation; the simultaneous fear and fetishization of otherness; the

experience of not fully belonging to any community when identities intersect in ways deemed contradictory (for example, queer and Muslim); and the expectation to participate and contribute to a society that simultaneously erects hidden and blatant barriers. These paradoxes raised questions that would continue to reverberate throughout the dissertation.

We also became attentive to how such tensions extend beyond state and cultural framings into LGBTQIA+ communities themselves. Inclusion often comes with expectations of conforming to dominant cultural ideals of whiteness, domesticity, and respectability. This dynamic is captured by Lisa Duggan's (2002) concept of homonormativity, which describes the assimilation of LGBTQIA+ politics into neoliberal, heteronormative culture (Duggan, 2002). Rather than contesting dominant institutions like marriage or military service, homonormativity upholds and sustains them while promising "the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2002, p. 50). In other words, as falling in line.

Building on Duggan's theorization of the domestication of queer life under neoliberalism, Jasbir Puar develops the concept of homonationalism – a national project that aligns queer visibility with exclusionary nationalism (Puar, 2007, 2015). Although I had not yet encountered Puar's work when writing this chapter, I drew on other scholars, such as Sarah Bracke (2012) and Gloria Wekker (2009), to theorize homonationalism within the Dutch context. Because Puar coined the term and has been central to its development, I want to explicitly acknowledge and honour her contribution here. As Puar explains:

> Homonationalism is fundamentally a critique of how lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to cultural and legal forms of citizenship at the expense of the partial and full expulsion from those rights of other populations (Puar, 2015, p. 320).

Hence, narratives of sexual progress are deployed to justify exclusion. In effect, only certain queer subjects that are in line with the (straight, white, cisgender[3]) norms of the nation, receive full inclusion.

We tried to understand how creative practices challenge such dominant narratives. We asked how queer refugees resist harmful framings and carve out agency through art. Their creative practices were deeply personal and political. They created images, symbols, music, and movement to express what could not easily be spoken, to inhabit spaces of liminality, and to resist the forces of homonormativity and homonationalism.

Yet, while the chapter centred on queer refugees' artistic expression, the research design itself was not co-created. Our initial plan was to conduct in-person biographical interviews and observe cultural and activist events – like poetry nights or demonstrations. But with the arrival of Covid-19 and the resulting physical distancing measures, we were forced to adapt. We pivoted to an online format, launching *Art for Change*, a digital exposition that

[3] This list is not exhaustive. Other axes (e.g., able-bodiedness, neurotypicality, class) also matter, but given the dissertations' focus on queer refugees, I foreground the norms most directly shaping their positioning in the Dutch context.

showcases artworks and interview excerpts. This format allowed for visibility and connection during isolation, but it also raised further questions: What does participation mean when limited to contribution, without involvement in design, authorship, or care? Could research be more than representation? Could it become relationship? Additionally, one could argue that *Art for Change* still resembled linear, result-oriented research, because queer refugee artists were invited to produce artworks (finished results) complemented by a more conventional method of biographical interviews as the primary data source, which were then analysed to produce the thesis.

As a response to these reflections, the idea for a different kind of space emerged: one where research itself could be co-created, where collaboration was not added afterwards but build in from the start. Inspired in part by Ghorashi's concept of interspace (2014), this desire laid the groundwork for what would later become *LIMBO queer exilic narratives*: a collaborative, creative and ongoing research space grounded in queerness, mutual care and transformation. In which we moved away from outcome-driven frameworks toward process-oriented co-creation of knowledge, where care, failure and vulnerability could become part of the method. Rather than conceiving research as a sequence of predetermined steps, dictated by single leadership or fixed design, we began to cultivate a responsive, intuitive, collaborative, and relational practice, with creativity at its core. This methodological reorientation foregrounded the ongoing dynamics of working together, in terms of ways in which knowledge, art, and community could be generated during experimentation, uncertainty and affective exchange.

v. Chapter 2: Safe Enough to Be Brave

The first chapter introduced me to queer refugee narratives; LIMBO then immersed me in them. Launched in January 2022, the LIMBO workshop series was born from a desire to create a space where queer refugees could reflect, have fun, and create together on their own terms. It was conceived as a space of in-betweenness, deliberately named for its evocation of liminality without pathologizing it (Ch. 4, p. 97). For me this was a shift from collecting, analysing and sharing queer refugee narratives to co-creating with them. The line between researcher and participant quickly blurred. All of us were both teacher and student, storyteller and listener. This was also disorienting at times. I was no longer just documenting exilic (art) narratives; I was entangled in them. It forced me to relinquish control and welcome the unplanned. It was queer not just in content, but also in form.

In LIMBO, we acknowledged that being in a liminal state (waiting for decisions, between cultures, between nationalities) was challenging, but we tried to focus on its creative and critical potential (Said, 1994; Turner, 1969). This positive potential is inherent to liminality because the in-between state demands constant reflexivity about taken-for-granted norms (from daily routines to bureaucracy), and this 'outsider-within' positioning can spark original ideas and relevant critique. Whereas those that are fully immersed in their context might have trouble opening to different perspectives. That is why thinkers like Said and Bauman argue that "one has to be *in* but not *of* the place" (Bauman cited in Ch. 3, p 85). In between arrival, belonging, different languages and understandings, in between man and woman, past and future, something new could take shape. It was meant to be a hybrid zone: part creative practice, part collective care, part methodological experiment. An experiment in holding space

for queer refugees whose lives were shaped by waiting, waiting for documents, decisions, housing, work, recognition, belonging, and reasons to stay hopeful.

Together with Noa Bawits, who I supervised in writing her master's thesis, we came up with the idea for LIMBO. Noa worked at art institute Framer Framed in Amsterdam while studying Sociology at VU Amsterdam at the time. I had heard good things about Framer Framed from a participant in *Art for Change* who applied for a function there. I provided some feedback on their motivation letter and they got the job. I learned that it was an art space rooted in critical feminist and decolonial theory, hosting several marginalized communities to work on creative practices.

Tania Kajner (2013) writes that engaged scholarship should be mutually beneficial in terms of knowledge and resources. Facilitating the LIMBO workshops was meant to do exactly that. The ideas for the workshops, and facilitators thereof, came from participants in *Art for Change*. Facilitators, mostly queer refugee artists, would be paid for their work. Together with facilitators and participants, Noa and I could reflect on the (art) narratives produced during the workshops, as well as on the organization and development of the workshop-series itself. We tried to adapt accordingly, aligning as much as possible with the communities' needs and desires, attempting to mutually benefit all parties involved.

Most participants were in their asylum procedure, or waiting to get back into this procedure, after being rejected a first or second time for not being believed by the IND (Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service) that they were gay or lesbian. Others had already received status and had settled in the Netherlands for several years. Many were participants from *Art for Change*, which consisted mostly of artists or creative people with a refugee experience, who oftentimes brought friends to the workshops with similar backgrounds.

One important contributor in this foundational period was Alaaddin Ammar[4], co-author of Chapter 2: *Safe Enough to Be Brave*. I met Alaaddin just a few weeks before the first workshop would start. They joined the workshops from the start and our relationship developed from being a friend and workshop participant at first, then co-facilitator offering peer support and psychological first aid, to co-author, and later also LIMBO event organizer. Their background working with refugee children in camps for the Syrian Red Crescent (like what we know as the Red Cross), their deep involvement in Amsterdam queer and underground rave communities, and artistic work brought meaningful and layered insights to LIMBO. Our collaboration was more than simply academic; we developed a deep relationship of mutual trust. It felt like (chosen) family. By working together, we realized that co-creating and co-facilitating was not just a research method, but an embodiment of relational ethics: sharing authority, learning with and from community members, and focusing on reciprocal community care.

In May 2022, we received an email from Henri Badaröh, assistant editor at Foam Magazine (an international photography magazine), inviting us to contribute to their transnational issue. They explained that: "The upcoming issue (#62) will focus on European nationalism, exploring the ways in which identity intersects and conflicts with nationalism and

[4] Note that Alaaddin, like many others within this research, has changed their name after we co-authored this chapter, signifying the fluid approach to queer identity formations.

the idea of nation state. We ask ourselves how does photography and visual culture informs and reimagines the concept of identity? What does it mean to belong? What happens in the liminal space between belonging and having access to?" (May 11, 2022). We gladly accepted this invitation, because it resonated deeply with what we were trying to do in LIMBO. Reflecting on the process of the eight weeks of the workshop series, Alaaddin and I co-wrote this chapter *Safe Enough to Be Brave*, presenting Alaaddin's portrait series of LIMBO members intertwined with our text. It is thus not written for an academic audience, nor has it been peer-reviewed by other scholars, but I wanted to include it in my dissertation, because I value co-authorship as well as going beyond the scope of an academic audience.

Alaaddin and me first encountered the phrase "safe enough to be brave" in a reflection written by Halleh Ghorashi for our first co-created LIMBO booklet, a booklet showcasing art works, stories and the content and progress of the LIMBO workshops (Holle et al., 2022). Later, we also found this phrase in Aminata Cairo's *Holding Space* (2021), a book that made a huge impact on the LIMBO project, on myself, and most of all on Alaaddin. Alaaddin studied the book rigorously and often quotes sections of the book. Much later in November 2024, Cairo herself, came to LIMBO as a workshop facilitator, where we practiced together what it means to hold space. Alaaddin would later even contribute to Cairo's new book: *Me, Myselves and Us* (2025), with a one-and-a-half-page reflection at the start on how *Holding Space* had impacted their life.

This short chapter is about how we came together as queer artists, community organizers, and LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers to develop a workshop series that was intended to be a safer space in which we could be brave enough to express ourselves whichever way felt intuitively right. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) conceptualizes safe spaces (without our added 'r') as collective sites where marginalized people can generate and share knowledge free from dominant surveillance, enabling practices of self-definition and communal care. In our co-created second LIMBO booklet we explain that:

> calling it a "safer space" (not safe space without the 'r') we acknowledge that total safety cannot be guaranteed – but we're committed to making the space feel as safe as possible for everyone, as best as we can in that moment. The intention is for everyone to be aware of their role in creating that safety and to be open to learning, so no one feels like they have to be perfect, just have good intentions and try your best (Holle et al., 2025).

We focused on allowing and embracing awkwardness and joyfulness, without shying away from discomfort. Moments could get somewhat uncomfortable when differences in world views came to the fore, for instance in expressions and discussions around sexual practices or religion. Some participants were Christian or Muslim, while others had negative connotations with religion due to their sexuality. We made room for both and let it be. Participants came from Syria, Nigeria, Uganda, Iran, Ukraine, Russia and many other places. Everyone was different in age, education levels, professional backgrounds, gender expression and activist stances. Some have lived in asylum centres for years, others newly arrived. Most had experienced multiple forms of trauma: from familial rejections, state violence and perilous journeys by foot or boat trying to reach safety. We stressed the importance of consent as an

ongoing practice, checking in with oneself and others, whether to speak or choose to stay silent, come and go when they please, create works or just be. Most carried grief, and yet, in LIMBO, we always found ways to express joy, to dance, to joke, to share food, stories and creative works. The workshops were messy, unpredictable, often emotionally intense, but perhaps more meaningful because of that.

There were no expectations to perform or explain oneself. The only guideline was that embodied, emotional, or creative presence mattered more than productivity or results. We made and shared things with our hands, voices, and sometimes with silence. We combined gentle invitations with creative challenges: imagining futures, telling difficult stories. Safe enough to be brave, and brave enough to allow failure. Inspired by Halberstam (2011), we began to see failure as a queer method: refusing mastery, valuing the off-beat, interrupting teleology (which is the idea that life or research should move to clear results), embracing refusal as a queer feminist tactic to norms that marginalize (Halberstam, 2011). We didn't always know what we were doing, and that indeterminacy was part of the method. There were moments in workshops, and later also in events, that were out of my, or anyone's, control. I had to learn to let go, and instead of trying to control, to simply stay with it, or express what I saw or felt was happening without judgement. It was not about abandoning responsibility, but about trusting the process. We let disorientation speak. We allowed ourselves to be wrong, to be bad (at art or storytelling for instance), to fail, and then to pause and start again. Letting go of control, linear progress, and result-oriented mind-sets, became central in how we took up space in the art institution. We made the space queer: fluid, ever-changing and charged with our oftentimes highly emotional stories. It allowed participants and facilitators to try different orientations, to rest from institutional pressure, and to express without justification.

Gradually, participants who had been very silent began to speak up. And after seven Sundays of workshops, we celebrated our work in a public presentation in Framer Framed (described at the beginning of this introduction), where we danced, curated performances by other queer refugee artists, recited poetry and shared art works. The positive transformation I had witnessed in individual members was far beyond my expectation. As mentioned, the celebration was supposed to be the finalizing of this project, because we never intended LIMBO to be permanent. However, because of the positive energy it generated, we collectively decided to continue because it felt necessary.

In hindsight, we were already growing organically through multiple winding lines branching sideways and looping back, forming networks through lateral, iterative moves full of tries and returns. Around this time, I started hearing some of my queer friends (including Alaaddin), mention the idea of the rhizome. That's when I started reading Deleuze and Guattari (1987) who developed this term. We found (more) language for what we have been doing. In this chapter, Alaaddin and I describe LIMBO's growth as 'function mushroom'. A rhizomatic form of development which is lateral, non-hierarchical, always in motion, fluid and unpredictable. It mirrored the structure of the LIMBO community I became immersed in. A rhizome has no clear beginning or end, and is therefore always in between (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Unlike the verticality of a (family) tree, a rhizome grows sideways, like fungal

mycelium. There is no centre, no hierarchy, no fixed order, but forms hidden networks of nourishment for trees (Sheldrake, 2021).

vi. Chapter 3: Enabling and Obstructing Flow through Creative Co-creation

Only one month after *Foam Magazine* reached out to us, Irene de Craen from *Errant Journal* also invited us to contribute to their upcoming issue. In her message she explained that the issue (#4, States of Statelessness) departs from the understanding that the nation-state is built on an imperial and harmful fiction, in which the limitations and dangers became particularly evident in the so-called 'migration crisis'. For this edition, they sought contributions that explore alternative forms of solidarity, community, and connectedness beyond the framework of the nation-state. Where migrant or other marginalized positions are not framed as lacking, but as positions of power and resistance. In this light, she emphasized that including something on the LIMBO project felt especially relevant. Given that Framer Framed is *Errant's* primary partner, the journal always includes content drawn from their programming.

This is the only chapter I wrote by myself, always with feedback and guidance from my supervisors of course. I wrote it alone because the time of writing during summer months July and August of 2022, made it more difficult to co-author because both LIMBO as well as academia were on break. I had just collaborated with Alaaddin on the Foam piece and decided to do this writing solo. It went well, but I also learned that I prefer co-authoring. I like bouncing ideas off one another and trying to weave together different perspectives or contributions into a coherent work.

In this chapter, I continued examining LIMBO as a co-creative rhizomatic network. I had read some works on creativity by researcher and psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which led me to his conception of a flow state (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). They describe a flow state as a moment of effortless concentration and heightened creativity, an optimal state of consciousness in which a person (an athlete or artist for example) is fully absorbed in an activity, losing the sense of time and self-doubt, while experiencing deep enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. I wanted to understand why, in LIMBO, some moments seemed to flow effortlessly, generating a lot of energy and enthusiasm, while other moments felt more heavy, stuck or frustrating. I became curious about what conditions allowed things to 'flow' in the group: when did creativity, trust and energy flow more freely, and why wasn't flow always accessible, and for whom?

These questions led me (back) to Sara Ahmed, albeit a different work of hers: *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012). Ahmed unpacked flow from a very different and much more critical perspective. She argues that 'flow' itself is not neutral. Institutions are designed to accommodate some bodies more than others. For those with privilege, life often moves smoothly, because the structures were built with them in mind, like her argument of straight orientations (Ahmed, 2006). But for those who deviate from the norm, such as queer refugees facing racism and exclusion, the already strong current of institutional life becomes filled with obstacles. The more privilege one has, the less obstacles they face. Crucially, if someone with less privilege points out an obstacle, they are seen as the one disrupting the flow for everyone else. They become the one 'in the way'. The obstacles are not noticed or experienced by those with privilege, so they perceive the act of pointing it

out as the real problem, obstructing the flow of the status quo. Ahmed (2012) describes this paradox as those trying to make spaces more inclusive end up being perceived as obstructive, as killjoys or troublemakers (Ahmed, 2012).

We saw echoes of this in the Dutch context. For example, the cultural norm of keeping things 'gezellig' (Cairo, 2021). Gezellig is a typical Dutch word that doesn't have a proper translation, but its meaning comes close to cozy, but it has a relational aspect to it: pleasant togetherness. Aminata Cairo wrote about 'gezelligheid' in *Holding Space* (2021). She argues that raising issues of racism and injustice is labelled as "not gezellig" in the Dutch context and is thus frowned upon (or worse). I see similarities with homonormativity (Duggan, 2002). In the Netherlands, many people in the mainstream are not against gay people, in fact, if they are perceived as 'gezellig' (e.g., Dutch celebrities like Gordon, Paul de Leeuw, or Gerard Joling), they are likely to be celebrated. Activists, however, whether queer, anti-racist, climate, vegan, or feminist, are often seen as ruining the atmosphere, as if *they* are the problem rather than the injustice they point out. The years-long fierce resistance in the Netherlands to acknowledging the racist caricature of *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete, the Dutch holiday figure) can partly be understood by this dynamic: The Saint Nicholas and Black Pete celebration is defended as 'gezelligheid', and anyone criticizing it is accused of attacking Dutch cultural values and spoiling the fun.

Inspired by Ahmed (2012), I wrote about how mainstream life can feel like a strong overwhelming current at times for marginalized people trying to stay afloat. People with many privileges oftentimes glide through life without noticing the barriers that others face. Life seems to flow for them – not because they have no struggles, but the structures support them. When marginalize people point out obstacles or injustice, they are often approached with scepticism and perceived as the problem for 'complaining' about something they don't experience. I tried to articulate that our goal in LIMBO was to create safe havens to pause in that current. Literal and metaphorical spaces where LIMBO members could "catch a breath, enjoy the water, in an attempt to find relief in the present by focusing on finding our *own* (creative) flow" (p. 90).

In writing that chapter, I continued using the Deleuzian concept of the rhizome as a theoretical tool, trying to make sense of LIMBO's creative process. Like rhizomes, creative co-creation also sprawled in unpredictable directions: each workshop branched into new ideas and connections. In how our co-creation flowed, stories, whether they be profound or mundane, became the connecting tissue. I was inspired by Donna Haraway (2016) to capture this: "'[i]t is time to turn to sympoietic [i.e., co-produced or co-created] worldings, [...] where ordinary stories, ordinary becoming "involved in each other's lives", propose ways to stay with the trouble in order to nurture well-being on a damaged planet" (Haraway, 2016, p. 76). In practical terms, an exercise might begin as simple as drawing a map and by the end turn into a collage or assemblage of different maps reflecting shared migration stories. It reflects the 'function mushroom' (as described in Chapter 2), where each map can be seen as a 'mushroom' popping up visibly from beneath the surface 'functioning' due to the invisible connective tissue supporting one another.

This chapter became another way of documenting LIMBO not just as a project but as a method: one that is messy, relational, improvisational, and political. Sometimes we followed

the flow of creativity; other times we interrupted the flow, by not being 'gezellig' and holding space for conflict(ing ideas). Because that too is a form of community care, which we will unpack more in Chapter 5. What emerged was not a clean trajectory, but a rhizomatic unfolding of shared learning, of queer solidarity and care.

vii. Chapter 4: Conditions for Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Co-Creation with Queer Refugees

I wish I could say that LIMBO grew smoothly, but that would be untrue and beside the point. As the project and community expanded in scope and visibility, so did its demands. New institutions and individuals reached out to collaborate. Several LIMBO members began organizing on their own under the LIMBO banner. Conflicts emerged; enthusiasm surged and ebbed; responsibilities multiplied. I found myself at the centre of something in which I imagined myself decentred on the side. I was co-facilitating workshops, organizing and planning upcoming workshops and events, managing conflicts in the group, holding space for LIMBO members' trauma (which was continuously triggered by world events), teaching at the university, writing academically, all the while dealing with my own personal grief, trauma and exhaustion. Eventually, I burned out. My body forced me to stop. I experienced psychosomatic symptoms: fatigue, emotional dysregulation, insomnia. And because we had not built a truly sustainable structure, when I had to pause, LIMBO had to pause as well. I felt worried and ashamed. Like I had failed not only myself, but also the community I cared so deeply about.

Chapter 4 (co-written with Elena Ponzoni and Halleh Ghorashi) lays out our framework for transformative engaged scholarship by distinguishing three enabling conditions for this kind of work. Yet writing that chapter required me to sit with the consequences of my stepping back, which initially felt like failure before I could accept it as an opening. When I stepped back, others stepped forward. Lana Jelenjev and Rochita Loenen-Ruiz joined the facilitation team, and together with Sajad Salmanpour, we later co-authored Chapter 5, which focuses on co-creating care through art. Building on these experiences, Chapter 6, (co-written with fellow PhD colleague and friend Alexandra Greene) reflects more deeply on boundaries of care, and the consequences when those boundaries are crossed.

We wrote this chapter for the edited volume *Transdisciplinarity for Transformation*, edited by Barbara Regeer, Pim Klaassen and Jacqueline Broerse from the Athena Institute at VU Amsterdam. The book brings together insights into transdisciplinary research from a variety of fields and offers practical tools and guidance applicable across a range of empirical settings. It highlights different (virtual and physical) spaces in which transdisciplinary processes unfolded (Regeer, Klaassen, & Broerse, 2024). We identified three core conditions, drawn from our experience in LIMBO, which we argued were necessary for our transdisciplinary research transforming this community. These conditions are creativity, holding space and de-/ recentring.

Building on the theorization of creativity developed in the first chapter, creativity was the first condition. Creativity is the core of this research, the driving force. It functioned as epistemology: a way of knowing that surpasses verbal or written language, opened space for emotional and intuitive expression, and made room for silenced or marginalized knowledge. Creative practices like poetry, painting, movement, clowning, and storytelling enabled participants to express themselves beyond the constraints of language or linear narratives.

For queer refugees navigating linguistic, cultural, and systemic barriers, art offered an intuitive and liberating mode of (self-)discovery. In line with Turner (1969), we argue that creativity supports transformation on three levels. Individually, through self-reflection, participants explored their identities without the pressure to perform of conform. Collectively, it cultivated a sense of kinship. LIMBO became a space of mutual recognition, often referred to by members as 'family'. And publicly, through exhibitions and public presentations, creativity became a way of expressing resistance and making their knowledge and experiences visible to larger audiences, unsettling dominant perceptions of (queer) refugees as passive or victims. LIMBO's focus on creativity allowed participants to dwell in the liminal: to play, to imagine, to discover, to fail, and in doing so, to transform.

Holding space in LIMBO was not primarily about kindness or comfort, but more about collectively cultivating a safer environment where vulnerability, experimentation and transformation could take place. Strongly influenced by Cairo (2021) and Plett (2020), holding space meant witnessing participants going through liminal states of not yet and no longer without judgement or rushing toward solutions. It involves a strong focus on autonomy, allowing one to share (or withhold) stories, to speak or remain silent, and to move at one's own pace. Central was also the notion of safety to fail. Again, shifting the focus away from 'good' results or outcomes, but instead encouraging creativity as process without pressure or judgement. We tried to embrace 'mistakes' as part of learning and growth. At the same time, we recognize holding space as emotionally demanding and complex. Even though we focused on embracing 'mistakes', mistakes in holding space can damage trust that has been built. It requires constant attention to boundaries, consent, and care, especially given the trauma many participants and facilitators carried. While the collective offered strength in solidarity and a sense of belonging, my burnout also exposed the limits of capacity and the need for shared responsibility.

That is one of the reasons why the addition of Lana Jelenjev to the team was so valuable. She is an expert in neurodiversity, holding space and guiding groups towards positive transformation. While she did not explicitly train the group in holding space, simply knowing that there is someone to rely on in case its needed, was immensely grounding. It created a subtle but essential layer of support, for both facilitators and participants, allowing us to navigate emotional complexity with more confidence. I believe it helped distribute the emotional labour more evenly, reminding us that care must also be held collectively. For me personally, a weight was lifted of my shoulders. Despite the challenges, holding space was essential for knowledge co-creation, making LIMBO a queer, liminal space of refuge and transformation.

De-/ recentring was LIMBO's third condition for transformative co-creation, highlighting the shifting and balancing of leadership and decision-making in the group. We argue that for this kind of scholarship, a strong focus on power dynamics, including a rigorous and strong reflexivity of one's own position as a researcher, is essential. The key is knowing when to step in or outside of the centre. Not just for the researcher, but for everyone in leadership roles. For researchers, it is also about decentring academic knowledge and creating space for experiential, indigenous and other forms of knowledge present within communities,

to create epistemic justice and multiplicity, "which means recognizing and valuing the simultaneous presence of different forms and sources of knowledge" (p. 97).

Through these three conditions we tried to articulate a form of scholarship that goes beyond documenting and giving voice to marginalized communities but instead valuing agency and creativity by sharing leadership positions in the process. We believe that this was impactful on individual members, who shared that their lives had transformed significantly after collaborating. It also had a positive impact on the group dynamics due to feelings of ownership and belonging to this vibrant community, and I hope it can inspire academia to transform into valuing, and doing more of, this kind of scholarship.

Encouragingly, we see signs of such a shift at our own university. VU Amsterdam recently established a *Co-creation for Inclusive Knowledges Lab* (led by Elena Ponzoni). The lab grew out of earlier co-creative trajectories such as Refugee Academy that were later deepened by our work in the VICI project (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, n.d.; Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, n.d.). Co-creation Lab's mission is to promote co-creative methodologies that centre the experiences of people who are usually treated only as research subjects, and to foster equitable exchanges between experiential, professional, and academic knowledge. As their statement puts it, we cannot design research or policy for a more just society "without a stronger connection with the lives and contexts of those experiencing unjust structures and without taking their knowledge as a serious point of departure" (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, n.d.). This lab is an institutional step toward the kind of interdependent knowledge-making that we aspired to in LIMBO.

viii. Chapter 5: Through Art We Co-create Care - Insights from a Rhizomatic Queer Community

Originally, I had hoped Chapter 5 of this dissertation would be co-authored with specific LIMBO members who had taken on active roles in facilitating and shaping the project. However, during a period of heightened tension and interpersonal conflict – which, for me personally, became the final drop that triggered the onset of burnout symptoms – those plans for co-authors shifted. Some of them chose to step away from LIMBO, some temporarily, others more permanently. While I have maintained good relationships with everyone involved, certain lines were crossed among members, and it became necessary to pause and reflect on how to move forward with greater care, clarity and stability.

This moment of rupture triggered a reconfiguration of LIMBO. Until then, the workshops had been facilitated by continuously new (queer, refugee) artists working across different media. It brought lots of new energy, fresh perspectives and a constant expanding of the network. Yet, during the break of healing and reflection, it became clear that such continual change placed a too heavy demand on coordination and organization. That is why we transitioned to a more stable model, opting for a recurring team of facilitators to prioritize stability, continuity and a supportive safety net, so that when team members needed to step back (temporarily or otherwise), the structure could still hold and continue. What emerged was a new constellation of collaborators, each bringing their own professional expertise, lived experience, care practices and community-based knowledge. This chapter is now co-authored with Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz and Sajad Salmanpour, whose contributions were pivotal in reshaping LIMBO in its next phase.

Sajad had joined much earlier, when we decided to continue LIMBO. This was in the period when Noa took more distance from the group, while remaining gently connected from afar. Sajad came to support and became an anchor for me personally, and for the group. His involvement was meaningful in part because he was bridging between the academic world and the community. With a background of studying sociology in Iran, he helped translate between institutional demands and community desires, with emotional and analytical sensitivity, and a great sense of humour. Later, inspired in part by his work in LIMBO, Sajad co-founded *Queer Work*, an organization that supports queer refugees transitioning into the labour market, a topic that surfaced often in, and around, our workshops. Though he eventually stepped away from LIMBO to focus on *Queer Work* and other things, his role during this phase of co-creation was invaluable.

Lana and Rochita's arrival marked the shift toward a more stable and sustainable care structure. Both brought with them practices rooted in decolonial, healing-centred, and community-based approaches, inspired by *kapwa*, the Filipino concept of shared self (De Guia, 2005). Lana, a self-proclaimed community alchemist, neurodiversity expert and advocate, and decolonial activist, offered workshops such as '*What's Strong With You?*', a word play on '*What's Wrong With You?*', to shift the focus from deficits toward strengths and skills. Which aligns perfectly with the kind of scholarship we were undertaking; a desire-based approach (Tuck, 2009) centring skills, creativity, desire and full humanity, rather than attempting to 'help' refugees by focusing on what they supposedly lack or need to improve to integrate (Malkki, 1992; Ghorashi, 2023). Rochita, a writer, musician, and creative facilitator, drew from speculative fiction and her own queer migrant experience to create spaces of imaginative reflection and narratives of hope and joy. Together, they helped guide LIMBO toward a more stable form.

This chapter is a reflection on our entangled processes of unlearning, co-creating, and reorientating toward shared notions of care. We argue for a desire-based research approach in which research co-creators are excited about collaborating (Tuck, 2009). And although, we haven't theorized it explicitly, I am convinced that departing research from desire has generated lots of opportunities (e.g., in terms of funding, and being approached to write for journals, and other resources). The snowball-effect was working and not only did the number of participants in the workshops grew from around five or six people in the first workshop, to a group of more than twenty after seven weeks, to over a hundred different people having participated in workshops three-and-a half years later. Also, other people, professionals, institutions and organizations started contributing in different ways. Josien Pieterse, co-director of Framer Framed co-wrote the funding application for *Through Art We Care*, a grant for both LIMBO and *Open Atelier*, another community combining art and community care. *De School Club* (located in what is now known as *TILLATEC*), hosted our *Queer Safer Celebration* event. *Makers Unite*, *Lola Lieven* and *VU Amsterdam* generously offered their space for free or with large discounts, after we moved away from Framer Framed. The list goes on.

This growing web of support reflected the relational nature of the project itself. Its growth and expansion were not through isolated effort, but through networks of solidarity that were mutually benefitting one another. As the community expanded, so did our understanding of what care could look like in practice. Stories about LIMBO, and stories

within LIMBO were resonating with others. In the chapter, we explore how storytelling can be healing, particularly in group setting where the weaving together of personal and collective narratives generates insight into shared struggles and systemic injustices (Georgis, 2013). Although LIMBO consciously avoided positioning itself as therapy, many participants have described the process as deeply therapeutic. Building on earlier chapters, we also continued using the rhizome as a theoretical lens, analysing how our rhizomatic conception of care, which is non-paternalistic, reciprocal, and multi-directional, was experienced as healing. Lastly, we analyse how co-creation of knowledge unfolds rhizomatically and reciprocally, contributing to a shared sense of ownership, connection and agency (Cormier, 2008).

ix. Chapter 6: Boundaries of Care: Reflections on Inter/Dependencies in Engaged Research

Reflections I shared here in the introduction, lay the groundwork for the final empirical chapter of the dissertation. Titled *Boundaries of Care*, and co-authored with Alexandra Greene, this chapter brings together our conversations on the tensions, intimacies, and ethical dilemmas that arose in our community-based, relational research in different contexts. While earlier chapters focused strongly on the generative aspects of co-creation, this chapter pauses to ask: what happens when those research relations become strained? When care becomes too heavy? When feelings are hurt? Can the boundary between researcher and participant, friend and collaborator, dissolve too far?

Alexandra and I each entered our fields from different places, Alex' research was in San Diego in the US, but we resonated in our shared questions around power, vulnerability, and responsibility. Rather than speaking from a 'singular' we, we chose to write alongside each other, holding space for friction, for the messiness and uniqueness of relational work, for our own forms of disorientation. In this chapter, we explore how boundaries are no straight lines drawn, but practices enacted repeatedly, fluidly, imperfectly and in conversation with others. If the rest of the dissertation is about what can emerge when we lean into connection and build relations, *Boundaries of Care* is stressing that we should avoid romanticizing this kind of scholarship, so that we are better prepared when boundaries are (bound to be) crossed.

Drawing on the concept of "relational autonomy" (Mackenzie, 2014), we explore how boundaries are never fixed or neutral. Instead, they are negotiated over time, reshaped by trust (or the breaking of trust), conflict, institutional constraint, and personal limits. We see how relational autonomy is a meaningful concept to understand that our decisions are never made in isolation, but in relation with others (Mackenzie, 2014). At the same time, we experienced the reality in which those relations are strained, complicating the process of mutual decision-making. It reveals how boundary-setting is both an individual and collective responsibility, which can get complicated in the context of conflict or hurt. Relational autonomy, in this sense, stretches the singular: it unsettles the idea of a fully self-contained subject and redefines autonomy as something that emerges through connection rather than apart from it.

To hold space ethically, then, means allowing the self to be affected and reshaped by others, to remain open even when relations become difficult. In this way, we emphasize "staying with the trouble", as Donna Haraway (2016) urges, which also means staying with the tension between the self and the collective, the singular and the relational. We ask what

it means to hold space ethically when care, vulnerability, and power dynamics move in multiple directions – between researchers and participants, between peers, between institutions and individuals. Through our stories, we show how boundaries are often only recognized when they've already been crossed, and how difficult it can be to respond when the lines between care and control blur. We reflect on the moments we did not know how to respond, when we stumbled, when care became too heavy.

It is a closing chapter that circles back to the heart of this work, relational ethics, not as a neat conclusion, but as a continued and open question. Rather than offering closure, we argue that relational ethics are an ongoing process. We ask how we might stay accountable not only to others but to ourselves, how we navigate our own vulnerabilities within institutional structures, and how we resist the temptation to frame engaged scholarship as inherently redemptive. In doing so, *Boundaries of Care* returns to the question that has run throughout this dissertation: how do we care (for, about, and with) without losing ourselves?

x. Concluding the Introduction

This dissertation resists a linear path. Like the stories, art and collaborations it emerges from, it branches, returns, pauses, and converges. If Charles Darwin argues evolution as the *diverging* of species and the survival of the fittest, this work aligns more with the thinking of Lynn Margulis, who emphasized *converging* of species and symbiosis as a generative force (Margulis, 1998). Margulis argued that evolution does not only proceed through competition and separation, but also through convergence, through mutually nurturing relationships between different species that make new life possible. Although her publication presenting these ideas was initially rejected by fifteen scientific journals in 1968, they have since reshaped our understanding of biology (Margulis, 1998). We now know that no individual exists in isolation: the human body itself is a multispecies ecosystem, reliant on microbial life like gut bacteria to survive and thrive. In this sense, individuality is already relational (Gilbert et al., 2012). This insight holds true beyond biology, in the sense that a diversity of perspectives, backgrounds, ways of being and knowing, brings out higher levels of creativity and innovation, and enhances the collective ability to solve problems, to name just two of many benefits (Millem, 2003).

This dissertation follows that logic of interdependence. It is not about producing knowledge in isolation, but about collaborations, entangling knowledges, people, places and practices. It is not a final word but an ongoing conversation. As I have moved through interviews, workshops, essays and reflections, I have become aware that doing engaged scholarship with queer refugees is a matter of relations. Relations that shaped each chapter in this rhizomatic journey: from stories and testimonies to collective artmaking, from conditions for co-creation to the boundaries of care. Along the way, I have tried to remain attuned to the tensions between intimacy and distance, between activism and academia, between following a structure and improvising. Rather than finding clear-cut answers to these tensions, I had to learn to 'stay with the trouble' they produce.

I have attempted to queering scholarship, not merely by co-creating knowledge with and about queer lives, but by queering how knowledge is made, shared, and valued. For me this means centring relational ethics, embracing failure, and be willing to be disoriented. It means believing that art, care, and research can be entangled in ways that matter. In this sense,

this dissertation, is a mapping of entangled knowledges. A map of becoming. An invitation to do research otherwise.



Figure 3. Artwork and song translation by Sadiqa for *Art for Change* (published 6 July 2020)

CHAPTER 1

Exilic (Art) Narratives of Queer Refugees Challenging Dominant Hegemonies[5]

Fabian Holle, Maria Charlotte Rast and Halleh Ghorashi

ABSTRACT

Within the Dutch hegemonic discourse, the "migrant other" is portrayed as almost incompatible with "national culture" while it is simultaneously pressured to assimilate. This creates paradoxes for the queer refugee participants in this study. When these refugees assimilate, they risk reinforcing the dominant discourse considering their group as the "backward other". When they do not assimilate, they are considered not "properly" Dutch. This paper explores how queer refugee artists can unsettle such dominant exclusionary discourses through exilic (art) narratives. Their experiences of exilic positioning (being neither there nor here) and queer liminality (e.g., nonbinary gender identifications) and their intersectional positionalities situate these artists in various "states of in-betweenness". Although these states may be challenging, this paper shows how they can also stimulate agency. Inspired by a feminist approach, this study aimed to co-create knowledge *with* rather than *about* participants, focusing on creativity and resilience. Methods included biographical interviews and an arts-informed component in which participants were invited to create artistic works concerning their experiences during Covid-19 for an online platform. This study shows how the research participants challenge hegemonic discourses at various levels, using multiple modes of reflection and creation while engaging with their in-between situatedness. At the individual level, they challenge discourses by exploring (or performing) their non-conforming queer positioning through their art practices. At the communal level, plural reflexivity is triggered via art shared within and outside the community. At the societal level, queer refugees exercise activism creatively through images, songs or performances.

Keywords: queer, refugees, art practices, agency, paradox, liminality, hegemony, reflection

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, there are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals who are forced to flee their countries. This may be due to either their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) or contextual circumstances such as war. Queer refugees often report a range of traumatic events from their origin countries, including

[5] Originally published as: Holle, F., Rast, M. C., & Ghorashi, H. (2021). Exilic (Art) narratives of queer refugees challenging dominant hegemonies. *Frontiers in sociology*, *6*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.641630. The publication included the following sections: data availability statement, ethics statement, author contributions and acknowledgments, which have been removed here.

physical, emotional, and sexual assault; work and housing discrimination; forced prostitution; and forced heterosexual marriage (Shidlo and Ahola, 2013).

Queer refugees then face additional challenges in their host countries. They often must contend with the possible continuation of harassment by their ethnic community due to their SOGI (Hopkinson et al., 2017). Moreover, this group of migrants often does not access social support from the wider host LGBTQ+ community due to feelings of shame and trauma resulting from experiences of violence, as well as cultural differences (Shidlo and Ahola, 2013). Consequently, queer refugees are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and subsequent isolation (Elferink and Emmen, 2017). The inability to talk openly about experiences before and after arrival in the host country may increase anxiety, insomnia, stress and depression (Elferink and Emmen, 2017).

While some studies focus on accumulating the challenges faced by queer refugees, others show that victimizing refugees is problematic because it reproduces social hierarchies and ways of "othering" (Ghorashi, 2018). In other words, victimizing, or focusing on vulnerabilities, reproduces and reinforces hegemonic perceptions of refugees as, for instance, "dependent," "unimaginative," "deviant" and "deficient". The current study is situated within the Netherlands, which is often considered a progressive and tolerant country. However, in Dutch hegemonic discourses, migrants, and particularly Muslims, are often portrayed as incompatible with Dutch culture (Mepschen et al., 2010). Due to the Netherlands' (assumed) pioneering role regarding women's and gay emancipation, a dominant and nostalgic perception developed that prior to the arrival of Muslims, women's and gay emancipation was almost complete (Wekker, 2009). Islam is therefore often portrayed as a threat to these emancipatory developments due to its alleged incompatibility with "emancipated liberal values" (Mepschen et al., 2010). This has partly contributed to a shift within the Dutch migration discourse from multiculturalism toward assimilation (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016). For queer refugees, this pressure to assimilate presents a paradox (El-Tayeb, 2012). When queer Muslims assimilate into "Dutch national culture," they risk reproducing an emancipation discourse of being "saved" by an "advanced society". However, when they resist assimilating and reproducing this discourse, they are perceived as "backward" and thus incompatible with "Dutch national culture" (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016).

This study examines the resisting and unsettling potential of art-practicing queer refugees in relation to hegemonic ways of othering they encounter. McGregor and Ragab (2016) argue for the transformative capacity of a variety of art practices on an individual level, "providing a creative space for exploration and expression of identities" (pp. 7–8). Art thus provides refugees the opportunity to express and transform their experiences of there and here into artistic expressions (McGregor and Ragab, 2016) as well as the opportunity to reconstruct one's identity (Beech, 2011). We claim that such reconstructive potential is particularly relevant to queer refugees because of their specific exilic (in-between) positioning. At a community level, a sense of communal learning and reflexivity can be encouraged via symbols, music, dance, and visual arts (Turner, 1979). At a societal level (queer, refugee), activists can use pictures, songs and other means to communicate outside of conventional language, to unsettle hegemonic discourses in playful non-discursive ways (Young, 2001).

Despite the reconstructive potential of art practices at different levels, the role of art in the social inclusion of refugees, especially queer refugees, remains understudied (McGregor and Ragab, 2016). This study therefore explores how art-practicing queer refugees challenge and unsettle various hegemonies at individual, communal and societal levels. Our aim is to fill this gap by, first, identifying the specific hegemonies in relation to and including their impacts on the lives of queer refugees, and second, exploring the ways in which queer refugees can unsettle these hegemonies based on empirical examples.

In this study, we concentrate on queer refugees' narratives of strength and resilience (instead of solely focusing on their vulnerability) that challenge hegemonic perceptions, while still acknowledging their struggles. We chose an intersectional and feminist approach that focuses on knowledge co-creation *with,* rather than *about,* queer refugees. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we used online/digital methods, combining biographical interviews with an arts-informed (Lenette, 2019) participatory component. Eleven queer refugees were interviewed via the web application Zoom and invited to participate in an artistic knowledge co-creation: *Art for Change* (AFC). Ten of those interviewed participated in AFC and created remunerated artistic works concerning their experiences during the pandemic that were then published on our website. Both the interviews and artistic works were considered as data. The leading question of this research was: *(How) can art-practicing queer refugees unsettle hegemonies in the Netherlands?* To answer this question, we first discuss power and agency and then zoom in on the specific impact of Dutch hegemonies on queer refugees. We then elaborate on differentiated forms of agency practiced by art-practicing queer refugees and the ways their agency challenges and unsettles Dutch hegemonies on micro, meso and macro levels.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hegemony and Normalizing Power

Coercive domination is a form of "hard power" that entails forcing others to act in a particular way (Wade, 2002, p. 203). Hard power tends to be overt and self-explanatory. For instance, laws criminalizing homosexuality can be considered an overt form of hard power. In contrast, control via "intellectual and moral leadership" was coined by Antonio Gramsci as hegemony (Gramsci, 1971, in Wade, 2002). Wade (2002) describes hegemony as soft power or "the ability to make others want the same thing as yourself, as distinct from hard power, the ability to force others to give you what you want" (p. 203). Hence, hegemony entails the ability to create a belief that the system of rule is fair and beneficial for both the dominant and the subordinate group (Wade, 2002). This belief makes it harder to envision alternatives or to think critically because it is taken for granted.

Michel Foucault conceptualizes power differently. Foucault argues that power is not about domination but rather about routinization and normalization (Foucault, 1978). One is not with or without power, but power is produced, transformed, weakened or strengthened in every relation by dominant and subordinate groups and individuals alike (Foucault, 1978). Thus, Foucault (1978) explanation of normalizing power differs from Gramsci (1971) conceptualization of hegemony, which understands hegemony in its relation between a

dominant and subordinate group. However, normalizing power and hegemony share similarities in the sense that both are subtle and covert and cannot be pinpointed to a single source. Both concern internalizing processes about beliefs in the system and what is considered "fair and appropriate" (Wade, 2002, p. 201).

Despite this differentiation, most authors use a combination of hegemony and discourse to emphasize two interconnected aspects of power: a certain form of dominance and acceptance of the status quo and the aspect of normalization. Young (2001) uses the term hegemonic discourses as "a system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through the society, which convey the widely accepted generalizations about how society operates that are theorized in these terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions" (Young, 2001, p. 685). An example of a hegemonic discourse is the othering of members of non-privileged groups (Ghorashi, 2018). These othering processes are situated within historically shaped context-specific discourses that normalize hierarchical categorizations of the self (as superior) and others (as inferior) (Ghorashi, 2018).

Hegemonic Discourses Regarding Queer Refugees in the Netherlands

To begin, we introduce a dominant Dutch discourse regarding (forced) migrants without the additional intersection of a queer identity. This discourse concerns the hierarchical differentiation of (voluntary and forced) migrants in the Netherlands. Around 1960, the need for inexpensive labour in the Netherlands led to the temporary invitation of low educated migrant workers, particularly from traditional parts of Turkey and Morocco (Ghorashi, 2018). Refugees who arrived in the 1980s were seen as being in need of temporary humanitarian help and were thus also not expected to settle permanently (Ghorashi, 2018). Until the late 1980s, Dutch policies were therefore aimed at migrant communities maintaining the culture and language of their country of origin in anticipation of their expected return, and policies were aimed at facilitating that return (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016). Toward the end of the century, however, it became evident that most migrants were settling permanently in the Netherlands (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016). Even though policies had never intended integration, sentiments emerged that "the 'integration' of immigrants failed" (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016, p. 56) because migrants had never adopted the Dutch culture and language. Therefore, since the 2000s, policies have increasingly shifted toward pressuring migrants to assimilate (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016). This then added another layer to the already existing hierarchical differentiation between the Dutch self and the migrant other, namely, the assumption that migrants were unwilling to integrate. Consequently, the language in such discourses harshened and policies forced migrants and refugees to assimilate. At the same time, a sense of non-recognition and non-belonging in different generations of migrants and refugees grew (Ghorashi, 2018).

In the case of queer refugees, additional components exist within the hegemonic Dutch discourses. Bracke (2012) identifies homonationalist, homonostalgic and homonormative othering discourses. The first component, homonationalism, concerns the idea that gay rights and sexual freedom are incompatible with Islam. This narrative became prominent after the

murders of two outspoken public figures, Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, who both argued that sexual freedom in the Netherlands was "under attack" (Mepschen et al., 2010).

The second component of the othering discourse is "homonostalgia" (Wekker, 2009), which is the dominant idea that western acceptance of homosexuality corresponds with having achieved an advanced stage of modernity. Muslims, among others, are then depicted in opposition to such "modernity" as homophobic and "behind" in terms of emancipation (Wekker, 2009). This dominant way of othering frames "a modern self" vs. "a traditional other," resulting in a kind of nostalgic longing for an imagined time in which gay liberation was not "threatened" by the arrival of Muslims. Furthermore, "nostalgia" frames racist inequality narratives and feelings of superiority as innocent, not fitting the Dutch progressive self-image (Wekker, 2009, in Bracke,2012).

The third component is the "new homonormativity," a term coined by Duggan (2012). Duggan argues that homonormativity can be defined in terms of neoliberal politics that aim for assimilation into heteronormative values and practices in order to depoliticize gay culture through consumerism and a focus on domestic normative life (Duggan, 2012). For instance, heteronormative values such as marriage and monogamy are privileged and replicated by cisgender homosexuals (Halperin, 2012, p. 441). As a result, "gay culture" is depoliticized and "Dutch gay identity does not threaten heteronormativity, but in fact helps shape and reinforce the contours of 'tolerant' and 'liberal' Dutch national culture" (Mepschen et al., 2010, p. 971). Hence, homonormativity concerns a western dominant view on how homosexuals are considered "properly gay" by not being "too political" or critical of heterosexual norms (Mepschen et al., 2010).

Consequently, there are at least two main meanings of the term "queer". One is a depoliticized definition in which queer is used as an umbrella term for non-heterosexual identities (Jagose, 1996). The other is a "political" definition of queer as an (ideological) non-conformity to stereotypes concerning gender and sexuality, thus resisting both heteronormativity and homonormativity (Vijlbrief et al., 2020). Accordingly, there is a tension within the LGBTQ+ community in which sexuality and gender norms exist in a "sex hierarchy" (Rubin, 1984/1999). In Gayle Rubin's concept, individuals who do not assimilate into homonormativity, such as "transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, [and] sex workers" (Rubin, 1984/1999, p. 151), are considered to be at the bottom of the sex hierarchy. Discourses on migrants/refugees, as well as homonationalist, homonostalgic, and homonormative othering discourses, therefore, have a common concern of creating a self-other hierarchy. Within this hierarchy, an additional differentiation is made (an othering within an othering) in which queer refugees are perceived as (almost) incompatible (so at the bottom of otherness), while they are simultaneously pressured to assimilate. This creates a paradox for queer refugees: when they assimilate in a "proper Dutch way" by internalizing "the Dutch national culture" (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016), they risk reinforcing the dominant narrative that western modern values liberated the "victim backward other". However, when they do not assimilate and they express identities that are not considered "authentic" according to dominant standards (e.g., Islamic queers or "politically" queer), they are accused of being neither "properly Dutch" nor "properly Muslim" nor "properly gay" (El-Tayeb, 2012).

Hence, the question we engage with in this article is whether and how art-practicing queer refugees can unsettle such hegemonies in the Netherlands.

Liminality

To answer this question, we start by exploring the importance of the concept of liminality to understand the in-between position of queer refugees in our study. Liminality is described as an ambiguous transition state, usually to a higher personal or societal level, in which individuals or groups "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Liminality is characterized by uncertainty due to the temporal suspension of norms and behaviours (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 2019).

In the case of queer refugees, we conceive liminality in two main aspects: their migration background and their SOGI. First, migration procedures are liminal due to their transitory character in which one is between one's former and new country (Manjikian, 2014; Ghorashi et al., 2018). Second, in terms of SOGI, liminality can be used to explore the challenges due to the specificity of their intersected identity positionings. Beech (2011) explains identity construction as a process in which "[t]he co- construction is enacted in the interplay between an individual's "self-identity" (their own notion of who they are) and their "social identity" (the notion of that person in external discourses, institutions and culture)" (Beech, 2011, p. 1). He argues that "liminality can be defined as a reconstruction of identity, in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted, in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community" (Beech, 2011, p. 3). Monro (2005), then, considers transsexuality as a liminal space outside the gender binary. We propose that liminality is not limited to transsexual people alone but applies to queer and gender-nonconforming people more generally. In this article, we thus acknowledge queerness and refugeeness as liminal spaces in which there is potentially room to (re-)construct queer refugees' multiple identity markers in a personalized way, as opposed to forcing them to assimilate into societal norms.

Agency in Liminality

Although Beech (2011) stresses the psychological burden that may accompany states of liminality, such states may also be "full of experiment and play" (Turner, 1979, p. 466). Victor Turner argues that liminality encourages reflection, which can be considered a form of agency (Turner, 1979). Agency refers to the human capacity to act: a capacity shaped by (non)available possibilities and resources within the social world and its discourses and practices (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015).

Turner (1979) considers reflection as a source of agency that corresponds to what Judith Butler calls "discursive agency," the ability to name one's subjection to soft hegemonic power (Butler, 1997, p. 127). Discursive agency means practicing a deconstruction of social hegemonies via acts of public misappropriation in order to counter conventional meanings (Youdell, 2006). Thus, discursive agency concerns the ability to deconstruct fixed categories of oneself and another and to unravel contextual specificities (Ghorashi, 2017).

There is also a creative form of agency that entails "a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of metaphors" (Turner, 1979, p. 466). This non-discursive and creative liminality corresponds to Björkdahl and Selimovic's (2015) feminist approach to agency. These authors deconstruct traditional approaches to agency, and in addition to promoting discursive agency, they stress the creative aspect of agency that is often neglected in other approaches (Björkdahl and Selimovic's, 2015). Creative agency has transformative qualities because it challenges and resists existing oppressive structures in a creative and (sometimes) even unintentional way (Björkdahl and Selimovic's, 2015).

Art Practices' Potential in Unsettling Hegemonies

Having conceptualized agency as both discursive and creative, we now turn to art practices as potential ways of expressing agency in relation to hegemonies. In addition to art as an aesthetic practice, it can also have more political implications that manifest themselves on all societal levels (Malik et al., 2020). Studies have shown that art practices can have therapeutic properties: promoting self-esteem, facilitating emotional self-expression, aiding the processing of traumatic events and helping express multiple identity markers concomitantly (McGregor and Ragab, 2016). We argue that such therapeutic potential can be seen in light of Beech (2011) liminality as identity construction. In fact, queerness, migration, and art practices can all be considered liminal (Turner, 1979). Thus, on the individual level, practicing art may allow the reconstructing of multiple identity markers and facilitate transforming queer refugees' paradoxical experiences into an integrated, personalized, unconventional identity.

In addition, Turner (1979) argues that performative arts affect audiences as forms of "plural reflexivity" (p. 465), which he describes as ways in which communities think about, see and present themselves through signs, symbols, music, dance and visual arts, thereby strengthening a sense of community. In the context of queer refugees, plural reflexivity can be understood as sharing and negotiating one's paradoxical experiences and queer identities through art within, and outside, the (queer, refugee, artist) community.

On a societal level, Turner argued that *public* liminality has often been regarded as threatening by powers representing the dominant established group because "[t]he powers of the weak – to curse and criticize – set limits on the power of the strong – to coerce and ordain" (Turner, 1979, p. 465). He claims that public liminality cannot be considered solely as an emotional outlet but rather as subversive proposals. We suggest that such subversive demonstrations can be considered as a form of activism.

Due to the subtle and masked nature of hegemonic power, the activist is often sceptical of deliberative approaches with those in power (Young, 2001). Deliberation forces one to speak within the language of the present hegemonic discourse. The problem is that the hegemonic discourse masks unjust power relations and is on the side of the dominant group (Young, 2001). So, rather than arguing in a deliberative manner, "the activist's goal is to make us wonder about what we are doing, to rupture a stream of thought" (Young, 2001, p. 687). Activists, according to Young (2001), do this by using "non-discursive means" such as "pictures, song, poetic imagery, and expressions of mockery and longing performed in rowdy and even playful ways aimed not at commanding assent but disturbing complacency" (p. 687).

In this section, we have elaborated on theoretical notions related to power and agency. We first presented the layered aspect of the hegemonic Dutch discourse concerning queer refugees. Then, by using the frame of liminality, we argued for a broader approach to agency, including not only discursive but also creative forms of agency. We also discussed various ways that hegemonies can be unsettled on individual, communal and societal levels. In the empirical section that follows, we show the multi-level and layered forms of agency performed by the art-practicing queer refugees who participated in this study.

METHODOLOGY

To study how queer refugee artists can unsettle exclusionary hegemonies, we chose a feminist intersectional approach. An intersectional approach focuses on understanding and describing power dynamics in social inequality via multiple intersecting levels in the human experience that influence one another, such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity (Gray and Cooke, 2018). For unsettling dominant hegemonies, we suggest that the most suitable research approach is a qualitative emic inductive approach: that is, a context-specific bottom-up understanding from the participants' perspectives (Tracy, 2013). We collaborated solely with queer refugees in order to give more space for their voices, as opposed to including voices of "experts in the field" who do not identify as queer refugees. In addition, we aimed to create a space to acknowledge and establish a (societal and academic) platform for the various ways in which participants express agency (discursively and creatively). We argue that such an approach is salient, not only for increasing our understanding of participants' perspectives, but also for adopting societally engaged and relevant research practices.

Feminist Approach

Feminist research critiques the epistemological and ontological claims of objectivity and rationality, while arguing that all knowledge is situated and socially constructed and therefore subjective and partial (Undurraga, 2012). Feminists have traditionally intended to empower women by centring them in their analysis (Kingston, 2020) as well as to give voice to members of other marginalized groups (Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, feminist approaches expect that the produced knowledge should have (practical) use and they aim for societal change as opposed to knowing in its own right (Tracy, 2013).

A feminist approach suits our research design best for three reasons. Firstly, we share the epistemological and ontological position of reality and knowledge being socially constructed (Undurraga, 2012). Secondly, in the process of knowledge production, we aim to shift power toward a more horizontal way of collaboration *with* participants as opposed to a more hierarchical research design in which the research is *about* participants. A feminist approach, with its attention to power relations, has the potential to unsettle more conventional research methods in which discourses about the "marginalized" are being reproduced (Lenette, 2019). Thirdly, considering our aim of acknowledging and establishing a (societal and academic) platform for the various ways in which participants express agency,

we follow a tradition of knowledge production that strives for practical use and societal change (Tracy, 2013).

In addition, feminist scholars argue that researchers should be reflexive about their position and power to ensure the validity and qualitative rigor of their research (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Gioia et al., 2013). Reflexivity entails awareness and transparency regarding the way in which one's position and interactions as a researcher influence the process and the produced knowledge (Caretta and Riaño, 2016).

The first author's positionality in relation to our research is shaped primarily by their queer identity, second-generation migration background, experiences growing up in different foster families and professional background in acting and theatre; they had an appointment as a student assistant at the time of the research. The second author is a cisgender, heterosexual woman with a migration background, a partially completed professional education in classical ballet and two masters; she is currently a PhD candidate. The third author, who is a full professor, is a cisgender, heterosexual woman with a refugee background. During the research process, we, as authors, not only engaged with the data but also reflected on our specific positionalities in relation to each other and to the data and its interpretation. In particular, the first authors' partial insider position enabled them to gain access to, and built trust with, participants much more easily. In fact, many participants talked to them very openly about sensitive issues.

Research Methods and Sampling During Covid-19

In January 2020, prior to Covid-19 physical distancing measures, we intended to use participant observation, biographical interviews and discourse analyses as research methods. However, once physical distancing measures were put in place in March 2020, physically meeting with participants became impossible. We then shifted toward online/digital research methods, namely, biographical interviewing (via Zoom) and an arts-informed (Lenette, 2019) participatory research component in which participants were asked to create a remunerated artistic work about their experiences with Covid-19 for an online platform: *Art for Change* (AFC). The objective behind this shift was to continue the research while also using it to help mitigate the socioeconomic and emotional impacts of the pandemic by supporting queer refugees (emotionally and financially) in overcoming some of the challenges they faced. These challenges entailed losses of income due to the cancellation of events, grief due to the sudden lack of physical connection with members of their community, and distress regarding the refugee crises around the globe. AFC also aimed to challenge dominant images of refugees as victims, unimaginative and dependent, by creating a platform for refugees' stories and art about their challenges and resilience during Covid-19.

Asking potential participants to share their experiences of Covid-19 in conversations, and to take part in a remunerated artistic knowledge co-creation via AFC, seemed to make them more interested and inspired to engage in this collaboration. Nonetheless, we still had to gain trust and build relationships. Offline meetings were replaced by online meetings via chats in social media, followed by audio or video calls, during which potential participants decided whether they would agree to collaborate. Before Covid-19 measures were put in place, we had interviewed four participants. Three of these interviews were conducted offline

in the participant's house, and one was conducted online. After Covid-19 measures, we conducted eight additional interviews online via a licensed secured connection in the web application Zoom. Most interviews took between 90 and 120 min.

We used purposeful sampling (Tracy, 2013) and aimed for participants who fit within the following parameters: identifying as queer, having a forced migration background, practicing art in the broadest sense and living in the Netherlands. Each different parameter significantly narrowed down the number of potential participants. However, due to the first author's experience in art and co-organizing safer space events for queer and trans people of colour, we felt confident to find enough participants. Fortunately, the first author had already visited several events in which art- practicing queer refugees were participating before Covid-19 measures were put in place. Through those events, we were able to recruit eight research participants (who either participated in the events themselves or were connected to us by other participants/organizers). The first author personally knew three additional participants from the queer community. Eventually, ten of the eleven interviewees participated in AFC.

Participants had diverse cultural backgrounds and origins (i.e., Morocco, Iran, Afghanistan, Brazil, Belarus, Congo and Burundi) and their ages ranged from 28 to 42 years old. They were also diverse in gender identity and expression: five participants identified as male, four as gender non-binary (using they/them pronouns), one as female, and one as non-binary femme. Although we consider this a diverse gender variety, only two participants were assigned female at birth. Of those two, one was male and one was non-binary. Thus, seven participants were transgender (two binary, five non-binary). The overrepresentation of some identity markers was due to the fact that these were more visible to the first author. Given that one cannot or should not assume someone's SOGI or migration background (or even art practices), asking about such personal issues is sensitive and can be problematic, particularly, before having established trust.

Biographical Interviews

We chose biographical interviewing because of its storytelling capacity, which is similar to art practices in the sense that both concern telling stories about (one's) life. Biographical interviewing created space for participants to tell their stories in ways they saw fit. All interviews were conducted by the first author, who is themselves a queer artist (using they/them pronouns) with a second-generation migration background. To establish trust, rapport, reciprocity and conversation flow, the first author would begin by explaining the context of the interview and sharing parts of their own biography (Undurraga, 2012), knowing that "[i]nsider/outsiders also have to be open and expose themselves, their histories, and stories if they are asking others to critically reflect upon sometimes painful individual and familial histories" (Schensul et al., 2008, p. 132). They then asked an open question about how the participant became the person they are right now and what led them to their art practices. If the conversation did not flow organically or cover all the Research Topics, the first author would ask prepared questions. The interview topics concerned the following: country of origin (growing up); migration story; early perceptions of the Netherlands and whether those had changed over time; feelings and experiences regarding the Dutch LGBTQ+ community;

development of their art practice(s); challenges, strategies and dreams concerning their art practice(s); messages in art; activism; and queerness.

Art for Change, an Artistic Knowledge Co-creation

In addition to the interviews, the artistic works created by AFC participants were considered data for this research. The artistic works consisted of a song, written texts, a "decolonizing" deejay set, Grindr poetry, video poetry, performance, drag and graphic design (see Table 1). Adopting an arts-informed participatory approach was important for several reasons. Involving participants as creative knowledge co-producers potentially enables critical reflection on and unsettlement of power (im)balances in a more democratic research process (Lenette, 2019). Such an approach is emancipatory in the sense that self-determination is central, objectification of forced migrants is reduced, and situated knowledge based on lived experience is valued (Mahn et al., 2019). By asking the artists to create remunerated artistic works, we aimed to shift more power toward the participants and convey that we took participants (and their perspectives, knowledge and works) seriously as partners and artists, thereby validating their knowledge, creativity and experience.

In addition, the output of arts-based projects can be communicated to and inform wider communities as well as the academic world (O'Neill et al., 2002). More importantly, art practices offer a means of imagining beyond the limits of language (or playing creatively with language) via more sensorial, visual or emotional levels (O'Neill et al., 2002). Participants may feel more at ease communicating beyond the level of language, especially in cases where speaking in a second, third or fourth language is a challenge in itself (Karimi, 2020).

Finally, in line with Oliveira (2019), we argue that collaboratively producing knowledge allows for a fuller understanding of complex issues in a process where critical awareness can be developed. Co-creative research methods largely deal with reflexive processes, affecting both the participants and the researcher (Oliveira, 2019). These reflexive processes are similar to those in art practices, particularly art practices concerning social justice that are process based rather than focused on an end result. The process of critically developing an idea, choosing material and deciding whether and how to share it with the world is in itself salient (Dewhurst, 2010).

As researchers, we engaged reflexively with issues related to the research and the presentation of the data. After having thoughtful discussions, we decided to reimburse research participants for their art works because of their income losses due to Covid-19. This decision may have influenced their choice to participate, considering that some were initially unresponsive regarding whether to collaborate. An unintended consequence of our decision was an enlarging of the power distance between the participants and us as researchers. Even though we tried to shift power to the research participants, several asked for advice and approval of their artistic works, as if we were "in charge". We tried to balance these requests by stressing that participants had full freedom and co-ownership, while also trying to help take away their uncertainties by giving some suggestions.

A second consideration was the issue of anonymity. Most participants wanted to use this opportunity to showcase their works with their own (artist) name on a platform (the research website) to reach outside their communities. Due to the university's ethical

requirements, recognizability can be problematic and is thus prohibited. With the aim of acknowledging participants as artists, while also protecting their anonymity, privacy, confidentiality and vulnerability, we chose to split the project into two parts: (1) the artistic works in which participants could choose to use their own (artist) name, a pseudonym, or no name at all (the risks and possibilities of each choice were thoroughly discussed with each participant individually) and (2) the biographical interviews in which all participants were pseudonymized. For reasons of anonymity, we decided not to link the specific works and cultural backgrounds to the artists. In addition, in this article, we sometimes refrain from using participants' pseudonyms after quotations in cases in which their quotes could be traced back to their artistic contributions.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, while pseudonymizing all names of people (work), places and projects. Exceptions are the countries of origin and the residing Dutch cities. All data was stored in a secured online repository protected by a password and accessible solely to the research team. The interviews, as well as the artistic works, were analysed iteratively, alternating "between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories" (Tracy, 2013, p. 184). We first created a code tree related to the research questions, theoretical framework, and interview questionnaire. We then tried to be extra attentive and open when approaching the data. The artistic works were coded similar to the interviews, with eight out of ten works partially consisting of written or spoken texts. After the second round of coding, we visually organized codes, checked co-occurrences and added connections between codes and written memos. In organizing and visually mapping the data, we noticed many contradictions. At first, we considered that participants may differ too much in individually faced hegemonic challenges to analyse them as a group. Then, we organized the contradictions thematically and discovered that they could actually be distinguished into four main paradoxes, namely, the paradoxes of "representation," "desirability," "belonging" and "participation". Subsequently, we discussed and identified several forms of agency and distinguished three overarching themes for how participants express agency: queerness, collectivity and art practices.

Artistic work	**Title**
Song	The Voice of the Queer
DJ Set and text	Mamakil's (decolonizing) DJ set
Performance	Labyeeka Ya Hussein
Visual poetry	Corindr
Audio play	De Wortels (The Roots)
Vodcast (2 episodes)	TrannyCast

Video poetry	Venusus/Lockdown My Spine
Video/drag	Grizolda Storm
Text	Jouw Taal Is De Mijne Niet (Your Language Is Not Mine)
Graphic design (6 designs)	Listen To My Eyes

Table 1. Artistic works published in Art for Change[6].

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This article focuses on Dutch hegemonic challenges as narrated by the participants in our project and the ways they engaged with those challenges. The data shows that hegemonic challenges pose a variety of paradoxes for queer refugees. We will show how participants resist these paradoxes and how they position their art practices and queerness in relation to them. Finally, we will discuss the findings in light of participants' agency.

Hegemonic Challenges

Hegemonic challenges are more insidious than overt challenges because they are forms of "soft power" (Wade, 2002). We identified three themes regarding how hegemonic challenges manifest themselves on three different levels: hegemonic discourses (macro), institutional dominance (meso), and interpersonal experiences of violence (micro).

At the macro discursive level, some participants described how Dutch natives were sometimes shocked when their expectation of "poor queer refugees in need" was disrupted by, for instance, beautiful clothes participants brought from their countries of origin. Moreover, some of their Dutch native contacts expressed feelings of unfairness.

> I lost my, like, two, three relationships just because they came to my house and they said, you are just the refugee, you get uitkering [social benefits] and your house is much nicer than my house. My house is empty and you live in a social house. (Arash).

Narratives related to the meso level address issues at an institutional level. This theme relates to art, media, educational and governmental institutions that have controlling power in terms of including or excluding people. Such institutions control what and who is represented, according to what they believe to be "right" or "fair and appropriate" treatment, artistic works or behaviour. Examples range from bureaucratic procedures regarding access to arts funding to exclusive structures in cultural events, such as gay pride, and media representation.

[6] The artistic works can be found here: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/scholarship-for-change/art-for-change.

Finally, micro level narratives of exclusion relate to individual interpersonal experiences of violence based on homophobia, transphobia or racism. For instance, participants mention being judged or labelled and encountering (verbal, physical, online) harassment or assault due to their SOGI or migration background.

In analysing various hegemonic challenges, we discovered four paradoxes: the paradoxes of (1) representation, (2) desirability, (3) belonging, and (4) participation (see Fig. 4). Although separating these paradoxes implies a certain strict or definitive order, in reality, the paradoxes are intertwined and multilayered. However, presenting these paradoxes separately helps us expose the complex situations participants find themselves in due to their different intersecting identity markers.

Paradox of Representation

Participants mentioned a lack of representation of marginalized identities in the media and in society at large. For them, representation is predominantly one-sided and stereotypical, as opposed to multifaceted and well-rounded. In other words, participants argue that marginalized identities are often depicted as either "very good" or "very bad".

> When I used to watch the late-night news, I saw people that I could identify with as either celebrities or bad people. So, racism is basically handed on a platter. (Calvin) [Translated from Dutch]

Even though participants reported an increase in certain kinds of representation of marginalized identities in society, according to them, this does not necessarily result in increased societal inclusion or equality.

> So, I see a huge change in art and in classifications where a certain image of society needs to be portrayed. We all know that there are also many commercial purposes and that there is now also a kind of collective consciousness. *Now*, if you don't do it, you will be pointed out. But a lot of people do not understand the essence of what you do. And the fact that you can watch a Prada show of 46 models, and 18 are Black, does not mean that Black women in [...] the more normal, ordinary layer of society are more accepted. (Calvin) [Translated from Dutch].

Calvin, who is Black, is a professional dancer and model. When asked whether he could imagine a career outside of art, he responded negatively. His ambition has always been to become "the Black greatness". His statements suggest that despite increased representation, characterizing marginalized people as being either very good or very bad is still very present in societal discourses. This seems to leave little room for individuals to construct their own (and more nuanced) identities.

Some participants argued that achieving excellence is not only based on one's self-image but also forced from outside, as people of colour are judged more harshly in comparison to White people. This is in line with the concept of "tokenism" as used by Ghorashi and Sabelis (2013). Tokens are individuals who are perceived as representatives of

minority groups, specifically in places (e.g., work) where there are few other members of the same minority group. Tokens are often subsequently burdened by the pressure of representing a "good example". In similar fashion, participants in this research described a fear of the burden of having to represent a larger community.

> I'm only representing myself. I'm not representing anyone. I'm not. [...] OK, don't put it on me. And I don't want to [be a] leader. Like, you know, yeah, so this was also a struggle I was facing in my life. (Shif)

In summary, although some participants saw an increase in the representation of marginalized identities in the media and in societally respected positions, they argued that such representation still remains stereotypical and lacks nuance. Additionally, some participants felt that minorities are being judged harsher than majorities. Differentiations of marginalized identities as either very good or very bad thus seemed to leave little room for nuanced and more realistic representations. This dichotomy not only limits individuals from developing more nuanced identities but also keeps societies from becoming more inclusive of difference.

Paradox of Desirability

Similar to the paradox of representation is the paradox of desirability. Due to specific "looks" or "behaviours" related to ethnicity and gender expression, queer refugees experience being simultaneously desired and undesired. Some participants are fetishized (as Muslim or Black, for instance) by some, while feared or simply rejected by others (for being Muslim or Black). Some participants experience being feared because they "look Muslim" (Shif). Others are rejected because they wear makeup or are perceived as being too feminine. Participants are affected by these forms of othering in their daily interactions, particularly on gay dating apps.

> The biggest problems are in the community. [...] We have racists there. You have, just if you check the apps, that's a good example. Like, if you are Asian, if you're Black, if you're this, don't text me. If you're feminine, if you wear makeup, don't text me. So why do you have to mention that actually? And then it does send you a message, "Hey, oh, you look beautiful. But are you feminine or manly?" You know, I hate this kind of conversation. (Arash)

Furthermore, some participants are regularly asked if they are sex workers on gay dating apps. This can be considered a form of objectification and commodification (Constable, 2009), which further reproduces the narrative of "the ethnic other" as being different or inferior. Yet, rather than being discriminated against or excluded, other participants feel that they are desired or to some extent even fetishized by the host LGBT community.

> No, I'm Persian, we don't experience that [exclusion or discrimination within the LGBT community]. [laughs] Don't take it as a point of ego, but this is just what I've experienced. People are, people tend to, Europeans tend to or westerners tend to be more interested after they hear that I'm Iranian. (Maheen)

Thus, the paradox of desirability concerns queer refugees being considered as the other and being simultaneously feared (or rejected) and fetishized (objectified and desired). Hence, the perception of the other as being fundamentally different and inferior is further reproduced. This is not so different from the paradox of representation and its stereotypical and polarized representations of very good and very bad.

Paradox of Belonging

The paradox of belonging is complex due to the many overlapping intersecting elements of participants' identities. This paradox concerns participants' feelings of non-belonging, or lack of acceptance, in any of their respective communities. For instance, participants are considered not Black enough for one community but too Black for the other.

> So, at certain moments, it's confusing, like in high school. There I experienced that even Congolese people [in Belgium] said you don't belong with us. You're not one of us. Because, first, they had doubts about my sexuality, and I wasn't raised with the culture. So, you're not Black enough. But then at the same time, you're too Black. (Calvin was adopted at birth by a White Belgian family) [Translated from Dutch].

Calvin thus experienced exclusion due to the intersecting combination of his sexuality, his "White" upbringing and his Blackness.

Another example involves being queer and being Muslim. The following text is an excerpt of a voiceover from a performance by one of the participants in AFC. The text exemplifies the paradoxical feelings of being queer, feminist, and Muslim at the same time. This corresponds with El-Tayeb (2012) concept of queer Muslims in Europe, which argues that queer Muslims are perceived as neither "proper queers" nor "true Muslims".

> People have always insisted on asking me, no shame, are you really Muslim and at the same time you're a man? Are you really Muslim while wearing those clothes? Don't you think you are contradicting yourself? Are you really Muslim and practicing feminism? Are you really Muslim and queer? How can you be Muslim wearing those faggoty feminine clothes? [...] You contradict yourself being queer and Muslim. Same as Islam and feminism. Did you really read the Quran well? (Participant)

In addition, despite the hegemonic claim that Islam is incompatible with the perceived advanced, emancipated (Dutch) society, many participants considered themselves *more* emancipated than members of the Dutch LGBT community. Ghano, for instance, feels that they (personal pronoun) do not belong to "White gays" because the more normative, White gay and lesbian individuals are "not as political" as Ghano perceives themselves. In the end, participants spoke of their experiences (or feelings of) triple marginalization.

> Because it adds the racism into it, with the intersectionality of the struggles, becoming a refugee, becoming like a minority within the minority within the minority. (Ghano)

Triple marginalization in this example refers to *a minority* (a refugee of colour in the host society) *within the minority* (a refugee of colour in the host LGBT community) *within the minority* (a queer refugee of colour as opposed to a homonormative member of the host LGBT community).

The intersection of (some) queer refugees' identifications thus reinforces exclusion in multiple aspects. This results in participants experiencing not belonging to any community due to a combination of characteristics that are perceived as conflicting by different communities. Central to this paradox is a perceived "liberated, emancipated Dutch culture" in conflict with the perceived "unemancipated other," even though (some) queer refugees perceive themselves as more emancipated than host (cisgender) gay community members.

Paradox of Participation

Our interviews have shown that on the one hand, participants have an intrinsic desire, and experience societal pressure, to participate in society. Participants were often eager to work or study, and they expressed the wish to integrate and follow their ambitions. They also anticipated feelings of freedom after the overt coercive oppression experienced in their countries of origin. On the other hand, participants' societal participation is highly dependent on, and in fact often inhibited by, specific expectations, requirements or paradigms of societal (art, educational, medical, governmental, and funding) institutions. They are thus often not free to participate in the way they would like to.

> So, and I am still linked to the municipality. They choose for me. And even things I dream of, it cannot be your dreams. It's going to be the bureaucratic dreams. [...] I don't think the institutions is for artists like me. I was just trying to find my way to get integrated into society, but the society don't want me to get integrated. (Amina)

Such (unspoken) expectations of societal participation are exemplified by the situation in which a participant was rejected by an art school for not being "neutral enough". The participant in question is non-binary trans, queer, activist and Muslim. There thus seems to be an expectation that art school applicants should be "neutral," and apparently, people assumed that the applicant in question could not be neutral. Additionally, there seem to be assumptions about what is appropriate to be presented in art or what kinds of topics minorities should focus on. Participants spoke of funding bodies not supporting certain projects concerning taboo topics such as non-normative sex practices. Moreover, participants argued that they only get remunerated when they write within a narrow range of (queer, migrant) topics.

> And I also think that the precariousness of a lot of young writers, especially of colour, the precariousness in which they live, which also forces us to just write or respond, just to get that 250 or 300, just to get your rent paid. [...]

> I then see other more established white male writers who have just been working on a book or a project for 5 years. [...] I have a lot more to offer than my pain, you know? [...] Tell me about your pain, you know? Your gender pain, your racist pain, your domestic violence pain. Pain pain pain, you know? And then you will be paid. (Participant) [Translated from Dutch]

It thus seems that refugees are often expected to represent themselves as the vulnerable, victimized, stereotypical other, while avoiding topics that are considered taboo or too political. They thus have to stay more neutral.

To conclude, the paradox of participation concerns queer refugees being expected (or even pressured) to participate in society, while the manner of participation is determined by host society institutions' (sometimes unspoken or contradicting) expectations, requirements or paradigms.

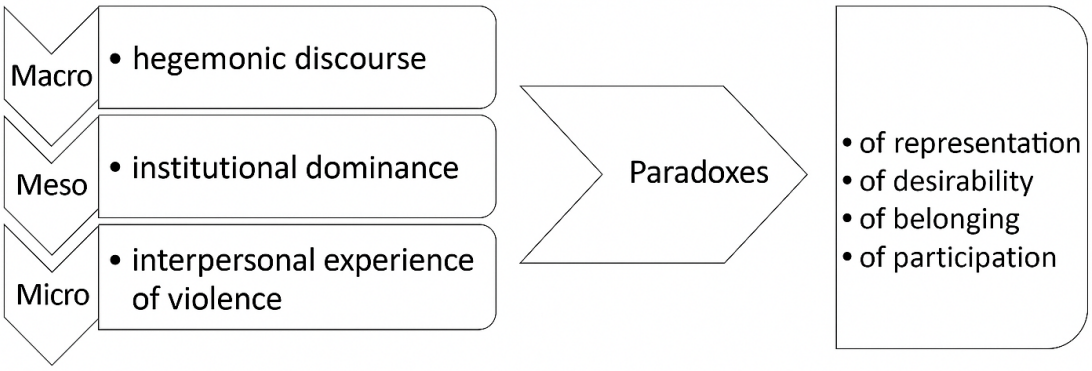


Figure 4. Three themes regarding how hegemonic challenges manifest themselves on all societal levels, including the paradoxes they create for queer refugees.

Queer Refugees' Resistance

We now turn to how participants deal with, and position themselves in relation to, the hegemonic challenges described above. Although there are various ways in which participants do this, we focus on the three most salient themes for this article: namely, resistance via queerness, collectivity and art practices.

Queerness

The term *queer* was often used by participants both as an umbrella term to capture identifications outside of heterosexuality and cisgender identities (Jagose, 1996) and politically to resist hetero- and homonormativity in general (Vijlbrief et al., 2020). Some participants reasoned that queer as an umbrella term simplifies the complexities and fluid nature of identifications. The political meaning of queer, however, has far more relevance to most participants.

> Oh, queer means a lot of things for me. [...] Like being revolutionary. Revolutionary on the society, not accepting shit that society wants to put on you, [...] [J]ust not responding to any norms at all regarding sexuality,

> regarding love, regarding family things, regarding anything, like, regarding religion. I think anyone, for me, like, anyone who does not accept this, how do you call it? Like pre-made thoughts, like question them, and creating their own revolution as a queer person as long as they are not discriminating others. (Shif)

Identifying as queer thus implies (actively) resisting various cultural norms. Queerness then becomes equivalent to activism; participants considered themselves activists due to their queerness. We argue that participants' collectivity and art practices are both embedded in queerness, as an important expression of agency and as a form of resistance.

Collectivity

Another important aspect of participants identifying as queer is that this identification implies feeling or being part of the queer community. In general, distinguishing oneself from more normative lesbian, gay, bisexual identifications seemed to be important for most transgender, queer participants. There seems to be a divide between homonormative LGB and non-normative TQ+ identities. In addition to distinguishing oneself from LGB identities generally, building or strengthening one's own specific (queer, migrant, refugee) communities was considered very important. Some explained it as having a more "relational" sense of identity as opposed to "a more individualistic identification".

Giving and receiving community support was considered crucial after having to start over in a new country. Without such support, dealing with the many challenges in the Netherlands would have been almost impossible.

> No, it was not mentally possible to cope, to do things alone. [...] I like to meet people, to meet people, to talk to people and from there creating a personal connection and make the work happen. (Travequinha Safada)

Financial support provided by members of the community was also mentioned by participants.

> Yes. It's like first, first community here who helped me. And trust me. And accept me. Yes, it's true. [...] Yes. JH [mother of a drag family] helped me being creative. (Yakiv)

On an individual level, the collective thus provides key emotional, practical and financial support.

Additionally, according to several participants, also provides safer non-mixed spaces in which artistic and self-expression is encouraged. Examples of non-mixed spaces may be queer- refugees-only spaces or trans-only spaces. In such spaces, participants may no longer feel the burden of, for example, potential misgendering, harassment and other forms of violence. They may be more free from the pressure to explain themselves in terms of their gender or ethnic identity and more able to share and negotiate (similar) experiences and develop critiques, techniques and approaches.

> So, I think that is why for me, non-mixed spaces or performing those specific things with a specific group that intersects with my struggles is important and makes it just safe for me to do. (Shif)

However, there are also critical reflections on the notion of safer non-mixed spaces.

> I recently organized an event around the idea of Black liberation. I invited all Black people [...] there was one person I also invited who was not Black. [...] [A] two-hour conversation was planned, of which at least half an hour was spent by people who complained, [...] [that] we are not safe to speak [...] [W]hat you need is a safe space. But [...] I'm the only trans person in this event. So, am I safe to talk to you guys about Black liberation? Are you safe for me? [...] I'm also one of the most highly educated of them all. [...] Is that a safe space for them? I come from a family that is very rich, super-rich compared to what these kids grew up with. [...] Most of the people in the group have all kinds of gender studies or sociology [...] Is that safe? You know, what are we talking about? (Osa) [Translated from Dutch].

Osa prefers the term negotiated spaces to that of safe spaces and eloquently and critically reflects, via an intersectional lens, on the question: What is safe for whom?

Lastly, queer communities also organize activism, such as demonstrations. Such demonstrations involve collective and independent (from institutions) organization in which initiative and decision-making lie only within the queer migrant community. Further, some participants express the benefits of becoming more engaged and taking initiative as well as the importance of having resources circulating within the community to make collective actions possible. For example, the community organizes other benefits and events in order to raise funds for demonstrations, and it may use those funds to pay for train tickets for people from other cities.

To summarize, collectivity entails emotional, practical and financial community support, organized negotiated spaces (mixed or non-mixed) where people can feel free and relatively safe to express themselves (mundanely or artistically), and collective action (activism).

Art Practices

In this research, we identified five ways in which participants express agency through their art practices. First, participants said their art does not necessarily have to be connected to experiences of exclusion; it may also explore notions of beauty, humour or mundane topics. For instance, one participant explained their art was mostly about love, spirituality, spells for witchcraft and their cat. Although these seemingly banal expressions of art may not unsettle hegemonies intentionally, making art concerning topics other than ones' pain and struggles can be considered an expression of creative agency. Such practices are not reactive; instead, they take initiative and create something new (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015).

Second, most participants talked about their art practices in terms of how working on art gives life meaning and makes it "bearable".

> Yeah, because I think life is fucking shitty. And I ask myself a lot of times, like, why do I have to accept this shit? Like, why do I have [...] to accept that I see my sisters being beat up and killed for being who they are? Like, why do I have to accept myself getting, like, living through all this violence and shit? [...] But when I am writing, when I am doing something, it just makes everything worth it. It just makes everything have a reason. (Shif)

Third, and in relation to such meaning-making properties, participants explained the potential of art in allowing them the freedom to use other kinds of expression than (conventional) language. This creates possibilities to express oneself and to counter experiences of being silenced. We interpret this potential of art practices as enhancing feelings of independence.

Mundane artistic expressions, as well as the meaning-making and counter-silencing potential of art practices, can be considered expressions of agency on the micro level. However, some expressions of agency reach outside the personal realm to different communities, which bring us to the fourth form of agency. Most participants considered their art practices as a way of increasing the (very limited) representation of queer people in general and queer refugees in particular in public spaces.

> And people would know about it [their writings] and people would feel connected to it. And because I wrote it in, like, a Moroccan dialect, in Darija, and people – it was like the first time they see someone writes in their own dialect about these kinds of things. So, they felt some kind of connection with a person that they didn't know about. (Ghano)

Some participants also described the inspiring and educational properties of art as a relational form of agency that stimulates reflection through increased representation.

Finally, in several instances, participants perceived their art as activism, a fifth way in which participants express agency through their art. While the above expressions can be considered hybrid forms of discursive and creative agency through which dominant hegemonies are challenged both intentionally and unintentionally, those that consider their works more explicitly activist have a clear intention of unsettling dominant norms. Some create political performances to create awareness about societal inequalities at the meso and macro levels. One participant, for instance, uses deejaying to decolonize spaces, to remove western dominant influences.

> My, my art, my music, my painting, my writing is my way of activism, is my way of fighting. And I am actually painting to heal or to be therapeutic as a way of resistance against everything that is going wrong in my life and with the system and also with the music. I've already told you, like decolonizing the spaces, bringing back cultures and creating community building. And with the writing is the same. It's vocalizing. The things, the struggles, sharing and connecting. To experience it. (Participant)

In sum, participants challenge and unsettle hegemonies through their art in various ways. While some ways are reactional, intentional or explicitly activist, others might be less intentionally aimed at unsettling hegemonies, but they nonetheless take initiative, create something, and therefore still show transformative potential.

Queer Refugees' Reflexivity

The section above showed how queerness, collectivity and art practices all play an important role in how artistic queer refugees express agency that can potentially unsettle hegemonies and the paradoxes that result from such paradoxes.

However, these different ways of expressing agency are not independent from each other. In fact, queerness, collectivity and art practices are all interwoven and revolve around reflexivity, or "people's ability to reflect on, and understand themselves" (Monro, 2005, p. 18).

> I think for most writers, first-time writers, you realize that you also get agency on shaping what the story actually is as you are writing. You make choices about what is important, what is not important. You make choices about the correct order, and you get agency in realizing "oh and this is what that meant." [...] I hate it. But I also love it. And I think that the thing it does for me is that it brings a certain depth to my life, but also a very deep social, emotional, cultural, political depth that I'm very grateful for. And that keeps bringing me back to the writing table. Because it's addictive, it's addictive to be deep. To think deep. To put things at risk, to doubt deeply, to hope deeply. (Osa) [Translated from Dutch].

To understand reflexivity as a mechanism, we propose viewing it through Beech (2011) lens of identity construction within liminality. We thus suggest that being queer, engaging in community and practicing art are all forms of reflexive identity construction. The previously mentioned performance concerning one participant's queer Muslim identity (see section Paradox of Belonging) is an act of knowing and understanding oneself while concomitantly presenting and explaining oneself to an audience. This performance is a strong act of agency involving individual self-reflection in the context of identity construction and the assumption that the combination of queerness, feminism and Islam is highly contradictory. Through their art practice, the participant negotiates these assumed paradoxes, which enables the participant to integrate them into a personalized identity. Moreover, the performance encourages plural and public reflexivity (Turner, 1979).

These reflexive identity constructions seem to be crucial and inevitable. They seem inevitable because it seems highly unlikely, or rather impossible, to not reflect on and construct one's identity within the various paradoxes (as perceived by society) that participants contend with. Thus, participants must position and explain themselves, especially when an identity is perceived as paradoxical or ambiguous. Furthermore, we suggest that reflecting on one's position in society and becoming aware of exclusionary hegemonies as an internal process may lead to external action (activism). Thus, altogether, such acts of identity

construction challenge and unsettle hegemonies on all societal levels (micro, meso and macro).

However, we would like to comment on one downside, dare we say, paradox, of reflexivity. Until this point, we have shown that reflecting on one's life or works in society results in a higher sense of agency and power. However, our research has shown that becoming more aware of inequalities and injustices can also make life harder. Most participants expressed being initially naive about pride celebrations for instance.

> It was my very first pride, [...] it was a life changing experience. To see all the taboos, that... You think they were wrong, are out in the open! And everybody is expressing themselves and other people are rooting for them. [...] I didn't know it's like a capitalism thing. And people go drink and the hetero is taking the piss out of gays. [...] But at that time, for naive, I mean 22 years old me, it was a big deal. (Aram)

For most, pride was once a liberating and joyful experience. However, after realizing the subtle forms of exclusion, particularly due to homonormativity, participants would now rather protest against it. Moreover, in migrating to the Netherlands, most participants brought with them hopes of being free to express themselves. However, it turned out to be far more challenging than they expected due to the subtle nature of hegemonies.

> I also experience a lot of shit here with some people. Coming from a south country where you always hear about these great stories, and conditioned to just admire the European experience. And then you come to a place where you see a lot of things actually don't match what you thought it would be. (Shif)

Some participants, thus, said that they no longer maintained long-term goals because the feelings of disappointment were becoming harder to deal with.

> I stopped doing the big goals, because when something shifts, I get lost and I get so down that I just don't want to do it anymore. [...] Because when I was in Morocco, I had this huge goal, big goal. That along with the community I wanted to decriminalize homosexuality, which is ridiculous to think about because we needed more to work on community building. (Ghano)

Becoming more reflective about inequalities and injustices, thus, might cause participants to lose their non-reflective pleasure in hegemonic festivities, and become disappointed or frustrated while losing hope for big societal transformations.

In conclusion, participants find that identifying as queer challenges forms of normativity and in turn creates a sense of belonging to the (or a) queer community. This sense of collectivity provides mental, emotional, practical and financial support as well as collective action (activism). Participants also express agency via art practices, which involve sharing

works within and outside these communities and contain the potential to negotiate and communicate ideas of queerness. These art practices may be mundane, meaning-making, counter-silencing, representational, inspirational, educational or explicitly activist. Furthermore, engaging in community, expressing queerness and practicing art all revolve around, and feed, reflexivity. Reflexivity is important in participants' identity construction, in organizing created spaces and in activism. Finally, reflexivity is paradoxical in itself. The more reflective one is the more one may be burdened by the awareness of subtle forms of exclusion and inequality.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this article, we answer the question of whether and how art- practicing queer refugees can unsettle hegemonies. The answer to our first research question – *Can* art-practicing queer refugees unsettle hegemonies? – is simple. As this paper has illustrated in a very elaborate manner, the answer is "yes, they can". *How* queer refugees can unsettle hegemonies needs more elaboration about Dutch hegemonies regarding queer refugees and about how art-practicing queer refugees resist such hegemonies at micro, meso and macro levels.

Dutch Hegemonies Regarding Queer Refugees and How These Affect Queer Refugees

The hegemonies we identified operate on macro, meso and micro levels via discourses, institutional dominance and interpersonal experiences of violence, respectively. In line with earlier studies, those hegemonies are aimed at (1) expecting queer refugees to assimilate into the "Dutch national culture of perceived tolerance and advanced women's and gay emancipation" and (2) differentiating queer refugees as (nearly) incompatible with Dutch culture (Slootman and Duyvendak, 2016). Due to these hegemonies of assimilation and hierarchical differentiation, queer refugees are "caught" in several paradoxes.

One paradox involves representation. Participants see themselves as underrepresented in the media and society at large. What media attention occurs is either one-sided and polarized (i.e., represented as either very good or very bad, but little in-between) or tokenized (highly visible with ongoing pressure to perform perfectly) (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013).

Another paradoxical affect concerns the commodification of participants, particularly on gay dating apps. We suggest that this commodification can be explained in light of the politics of homonormativity (Duggan, 2012) in combination with Rubin (1984/1999) concept of sex hierarchy. We propose that native Dutch people may perceive themselves superior in Rubin (1984/1999) hierarchy to the ethnic other. Further, considering that transsexuals and sex workers are perceived as being on the lowest ranks of the sex hierarchy (Rubin, 1984/1999), notions that it is appropriate, as a "consumer," to objectify and commodify the other may be reinforced. This mode of othering results in the ethnic other being fetishized (objectified and commodified), while simultaneously being feared (rejected).

A further example of how hegemonies affect queer refugees concerns the intersection of various characteristics of participants' identity making it harder to belong in any particular

community. Refugees' queerness, as a form of resisting heteronormativity, homonormativity (Duggan, 2012; Vijlbrief et al., 2020), homonationalism and homonostalgia (Mepschen et al., 2010), is considered neither properly Muslim, nor properly Black, nor properly native White Dutch, nor properly gay, according to dominant hegemonic discourses.

The final paradox of participation concerns queer refugees being expected (or even pressured) to participate in society, while the manner of participation and representation is determined by the often-contradictory expectations, requirements or paradigms of the host society's institutions. Hence, queer refugees are considered neither neutral enough nor other enough. Moreover, participants claim they are often only asked, and remunerated, to work on topics specific to their SOGI, ethnicity and migration story, to share their experiences of pain or loss or to perform the "good example of otherness" (El-Tayeb, 2012). Paradoxically and simultaneously, critics and audiences often wish to experience works by queer refugees "beyond their assumed topics" (i.e., works that are uncritical of issues concerning SOGI, ethnicity or migration background, hence, more neutral).

Art-Practicing Queer Refugees Unsettling Dutch Hegemonies on Micro, Meso and Macro Levels

We argue that the very existence of queer refugees unsettles Dutch hegemonies. The societally perceived paradoxical identifications (e.g., one cannot be queer and feminist and Muslim at the same time) are challenged by exposing that this societal perception is false. The silencing and invisibility of queer refugees is thus arguably the biggest challenge to overcome. This silencing is countered by constructing and expressing one's identity (via queerness, collectivity and art practices in liminality) and establishing a strong sense of self and community, making it possible to counter such silencing and thus resist and unsettle hegemonies.

We also argue that liminality can be found in (1) queerness, due to notions of betweenness in gender and sexuality (Monro, 2005); (2) forced migration, due to the transitory character of migration and asylum procedures (Ghorashi and Sabelis, 2013; Manjikian, 2014) and (3) art practices, due to the reflexive processes and betweenness of the creation process (Turner, 1979). We propose that this reflexivity can be both discursive – intentional and reactive to hegemonies (Butler, 1999) – and creative – playful and unintentionally unsettling hegemonies (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015).

On the micro level, being queer, engaging in community and practicing art are all forms of reflexive identity (re)construction (Beech, 2011). Sharing one's art practices with others can be considered a form of individual self-reflection and identity construction in which one – via art practices – discursively negotiates perceived paradoxical identity markers with specific audiences and integrates these into a personalized identity. Art can be about mundane topics but still be considered expressions of creative agency (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015). Such expressions are not reactive, but they still resist societal expectations regarding appropriate topics for queer refugees (i.e., pain, struggle and trauma). Furthermore, there are meaning- making and counter-silencing properties of art practices that, in our view, can be considered as both discursive (Butler, 1997) and creative agency (Björkdahl and Selimovic, 2015).

This brings us to the meso potential of unsettling hegemonies. We found that practicing queerness establishes a notion of belonging to the queer (refugee, migrant, artist) community, which unsettles the paradox of belonging. This sense of community creates mental, emotional, practical and financial support and unsettles western norms concerning individuality. Moreover, within the community, participants do not have the burden of having to explain oneself to others. Community then offers further encouragement for identity construction to be negotiated in a relatively safe way. Furthermore, because they have less fear of being misunderstood within these communities, participants feel safe to share art practices, further reconstructing identities and ideas of queerness. Turner (1979) argues that arts are a form of "plural reflexivity," affecting and informing the viewer (p. 465). In the context of the participants in this research, we interpret plural reflexivity as sharing, negotiating and communicating one's experiences via art practices, creating representational, inspirational and educational properties for members within and outside their communities. These representations are more nuanced, layered, multi-faceted and realistic, and therefore challenge the paradox of representation. Hence, engaging in community, expressing queerness and practicing art are all reflexive, and playful, elements in identity construction, for both individual and group identities.

On a macro level, community creates the opportunity for collective action (activism) that can trigger public reflexivity (Turner, 1979). Most participants regard their art, and their queerness, as activism. Such activism challenges the paradox of participation because participants create and demand their own terms of societal engagement, as opposed to participating in society in ways they are expected to. We found that participants challenge and unsettle several hegemonic norms (i.e., gender norms, relationship norms, sexual norms, religious norms, societal participation norms, norms regarding individuality, and norms of what is considered art). Through their art, they make political activist performances with the direct intention of creating awareness about societal inequalities. Through their queerness, participants (collectively) demonstrate against different forms of exclusion or injustices. Both performative art and demonstrations address issues such as hegemonic gender norms, homonormativity, racism, islamophobia and sexism. We suggest that these are forms of public liminality that can counter hegemonies by publicly suggesting new social propositions (Turner, 1979).

Art practices thus have the potential to entice or provoke individual, plural and public modes of reflection within and outside the community (Turner, 1979). Engaging in community, negotiating ideas on queerness and practicing art reinforce and encourage reflexivity and playfulness. Queerness, collectivity and art practices offer individual opportunities, as well as communal, or even societal, opportunities to reflect and unsettle hegemonies. We therefore consider reflexivity as a central mechanism in each of these three practices. Further, reflexivity serves as a starting point to concrete actions such as organizing created spaces or activism. We suggest that agency can be both discursive (intentional) and creative (less intentional). Thus, despite the challenges, their use of reflection and playfulness (in liminality) results in queer refugees acting upon their own situations and resisting hegemonic power by unsettling normalized ways of othering.

We thus suggest that queerness (forced), migration and art practices withstand and challenge Dutch hegemonies by enabling a liminal space in which queer refugees' societally perceived paradoxical identities can be reconstructed (Beech, 2011) as multilayered, personalized and unconventional identities, as opposed to assimilated, normative ones. Turning then toward Butler (1999) concept in which identity is argued as performance, we propose the following: when trying to establish a more inclusive society, the potential of personalized, unconventional and multilayered interpretations of societal roles that unsettle hegemonies should be acknowledged.

Limitations of This Study and Future Ambitions

One of the limitations is that we, the researchers, designed and initiated this project. Currently, we are continuing the project and are doing so in collaboration with the artist-participants. Another limitation has been the contrast between intensive collaboration and the limited possibilities, in terms of time and space, to continue in a same intensive manner. Lastly, by focusing on participants' art practices and making them part of the research, we could use academic resources to make participants' art and struggles more visible. This could, however, be done more durable and consistent; creating and claiming space within academia to co-create, co-curate and co-produce knowledge and art by situating it within sustainable platforms that connect academia and society, which is a continuous challenge and aim of our research team.[7]

[7] In the following chapters you see how we addressed these limitations.

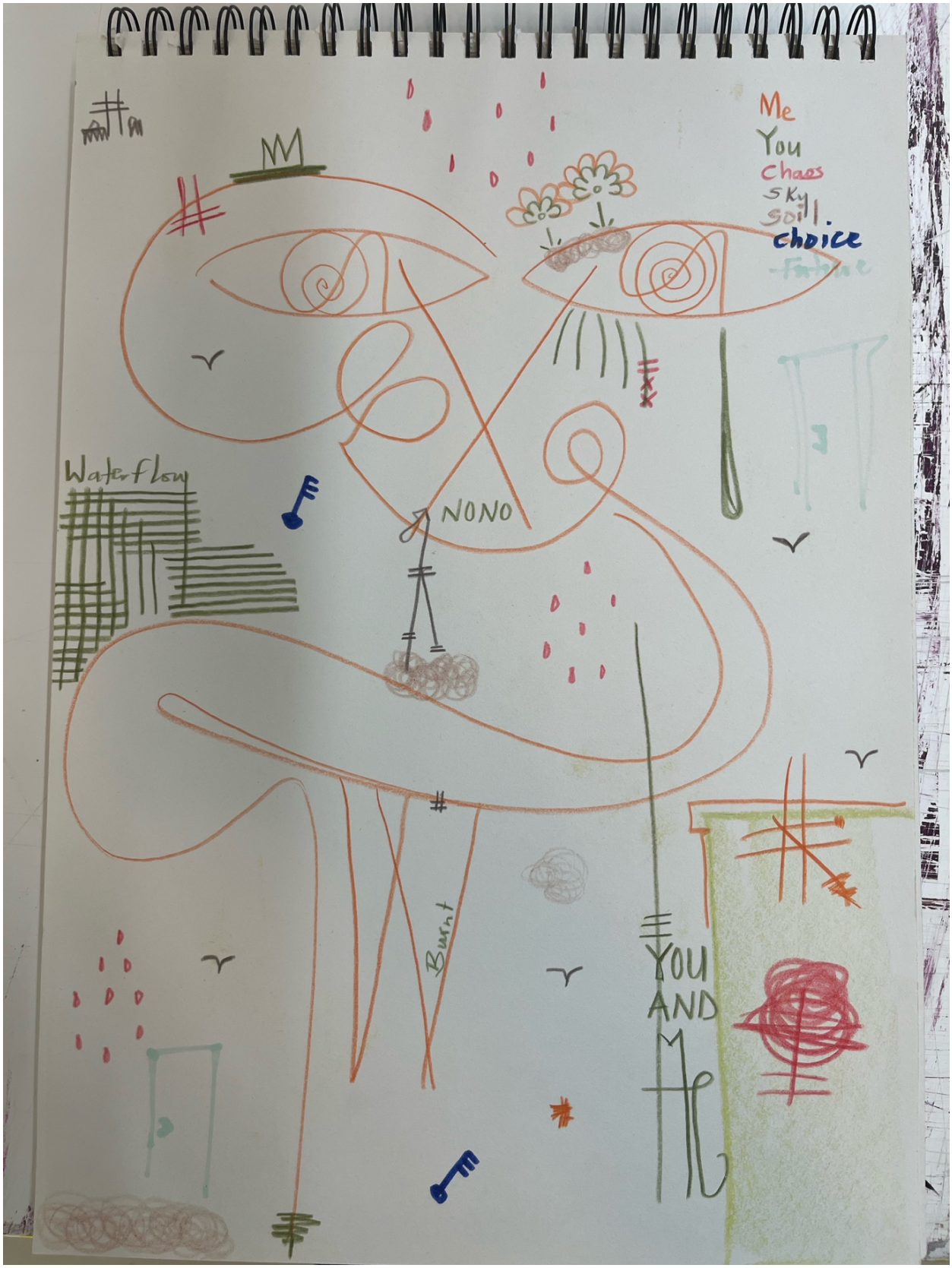


Figure 5. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 26 June 2022.

CHAPTER 2

Safe Enough to Be Brave[8]

Fabian Holle & Alaaddin Ammar



Figure 6. Portrait of Ariya by Alaaddin Ammar for the series *Queer Function Mushroom*.
"Making art together helped us look for a safe space not in the outer world anymore, but within ourselves" (Ariya)

We, Alaaddin and Fabian, first read the phrase 'safe enough to be brave' in a piece written by Fabian's supervisor professor Halleh Ghorashi for the LIMBO booklet (2022). We were moved by this reflection on her journey with engaged scholarship, and particularly by this phrase, because it perfectly captured what we've been working on in the LIMBO workshop series. We felt that we were seen and recognised. The workshop series culminated in a public presentation opened with performances, co-organised by Sehaq Queer Refugees Group, on 27 March 2022 at Framer Framed in Amsterdam. After the opening, we read the 2021 book *Holding Space* by Aminata Cairo, which has a chapter with the same title: 'Safe Enough to Be

[8] Originally published as Holle, F., & Ammar, A. (2022). Safe Enough To Be Brave. FOAM Magazine#62- The Transnational Issue. (pp. 161–168). The publication included author bios, which I have removed here. All authors' bios can be found on p. 10. In the original publication Rah Naqvi, Hamza Badi and Alaaddin Ammar used different names. I have changed them here to their current names.

Brave'. The book was lent to Fabian by their colleague Kay Mars after a research team meeting. Alaaddin first started reading *Holding Space* and was immediately inspired by Cairo's stories about care, courage, and connection.

LIMBO

The LIMBO workshop series was, and is currently still, situated in the art institution Framer Framed and organized by PhD researcher Fabian Holle (representing Refugee Academy, VU Amsterdam) and co-researcher Noa Bawits, who works at Framer Framed and studies a Master in Sociology at the VU. LIMBO consisted of eight consecutive Sundays, facilitated by LGBTQI+ community organizers and community members with a refugee or migrant background. In this relatively short period of time, our goal was to build community by creating an environment of care. A space that is safe, welcoming and meaningful for LGBTQI+ people with a refugee background (from now on referred to as 'queer refugees'). A space to experiment, be awkward or fail without pressure to perform. The idea was to facilitate workshops given *by* the (queer refugee) community *for* the (queer refugee) community. The workshops entailed: rope play, consent and boundaries by Maha Youssef; story creation by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz; poetry by Sunni Lamin; biographical drawing by Parisa Akbarzadehpoladi; fimo clay by Jerrold Saija; clowning by Hamza Badi; and making dolls or objects with fabric and stitching by Rah Naqvi. Our main focus was creating an in-between space in which queer refugees would feel brave enough to share their stories and creativity. A space of mutual support in which they could feel relatively safe and comfortable with the uncomfortable. In line with Cairo, we argue that '[a]lternative spaces to the larger, dominant narrative give credence to one's value and humanity. These spaces where existence is resistance, are created out of needs, an answer to an inner calling to be affirmed in this world'. LIMBO is a place for queer exilic narratives. Queer for us is not about sexuality. Queer means to be in touch with your inner feminine and masculine energy as a whole, regardless of gender norms imposed by society. Being queer is being yourself unapologetically in all colours, shapes, ways and forms. Being queer means taking steps to dismantle heteronormativity.

We, the authors, met in December 2021, a bit more than a month before LIMBO started. Initially unrelated to the research, we became close friends. Alaaddin then became a participant in LIMBO and later a collaborator providing psychological first aid to other participants. Alaaddin has worked with refugees and creative practices in the Syrian Red Cross around 2014/2015. Their personal refugee background, Red Cross training, Gerrit Rietveld Academy training, and experience in community building through (techno) dance and art made their contribution very meaningful.

The workshop series was developed during November/December 2021, when the Netherlands was still in lockdown due to Covid-19 measurements. With corona measures in full effect, everything was uncertain: Would the art institution be allowed to open? Could we be in a space together with more than four people? Would participants and workshop facilitators be anxious to meet in groups? Would we spread the virus amongst ourselves, forcing those infected into isolation? Considering such uncertainties, Fabian started pitching ideas to people in their network that had experiences with art, queerness and the refugee community, to come up with something in co-creation that would be mutually beneficial for

everyone involved. After several conversations, we outlined eight weeks of workshops, open for participants to join at any moment. They did not have to commit to the entirety of the project, giving a lot of freedom to choose, (hopefully) lowering the threshold to join. Eight weeks seemed to give plenty of opportunity for participants themselves to start bringing their connections.

FUNCTION MUSHROOM

To our surprise, nothing was cancelled, people kept on coming back and started to invite others. However, in thinking of care, the unpredictability and inconsistency of the group formation was challenging. One week there was a specific formation of people, the next week the formation was completely different. How do we then build an environment of care? We agree with Cairo that '[y]ou must consciously choose to come from a place of care and compassion when trying to hold space'. The changing formations reminded us of how Deleuze and Guattari describe a rhizome. A rhizome is a specific kind of root system different from a tree. A tree has a stem and a core or central root system. A rhizome has no central root system nor stem. It's all connected and grows in different directions, like ginger, crabgrass, or mushrooms. Also, ant colonies, flocks of birds, schools of fish, can be considered rhizomatic, as well as the internet, or social movements such as Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter. They are multiplicities without a central system branching out in all directions. Everything is multiple, in-between, liminal, and relational, never fixed, always in flux, ever-changing and developing.

LIMBO is a rhizome in the sense that participants, like mushrooms, pop up unexpectedly, invisibly connected to one another, in ever-changing formations and constantly branching out in different directions. At the same time, each person brings their own connections, in terms of participants, and in terms of ideas, skills, desires and visions. It also works the other way around. The connections, ideas and skills in LIMBO are shared by individuals to other contexts and groups. Alaaddin refers to this as function mushroom. We combine the words function and mushroom, because each word represents something specific. The term 'mushroom' represents the visible outcome people can see or experience. Like a literal mushroom popping up in a forest. That is to say, every tangible outcome such as art works, texts, stories and performances. The images in this article are examples of mushrooms popping up in Foam Magazine. In nature, mushrooms are connected through an ever-expanding underground web of relations. The word 'function', then, represents the process of the growing invisible underground connections and how mushrooms (e.g., the images) start functioning. It represents the invisible layers hidden behind the image, the stories, the people, and the creation processes. Function mushroom is both the process and outcome of these powerful rhizomatic connections in all directions influencing different spaces and people.



Figures 7 and 8. Portrait of mAmin and accompanying artwork by Alaaddin Ammar for the series *Queer Function Mushroom*.

"After I attend the first LIMBO workshop, and practice the constant consent, checking in with myself and others to make sure each decision is based on what I really want in the moment... and sharing what we shared, your openness gave me a strength that only the community can give and I felt the community power" (mAmin)

QUEER EXILIC NARRATIVES

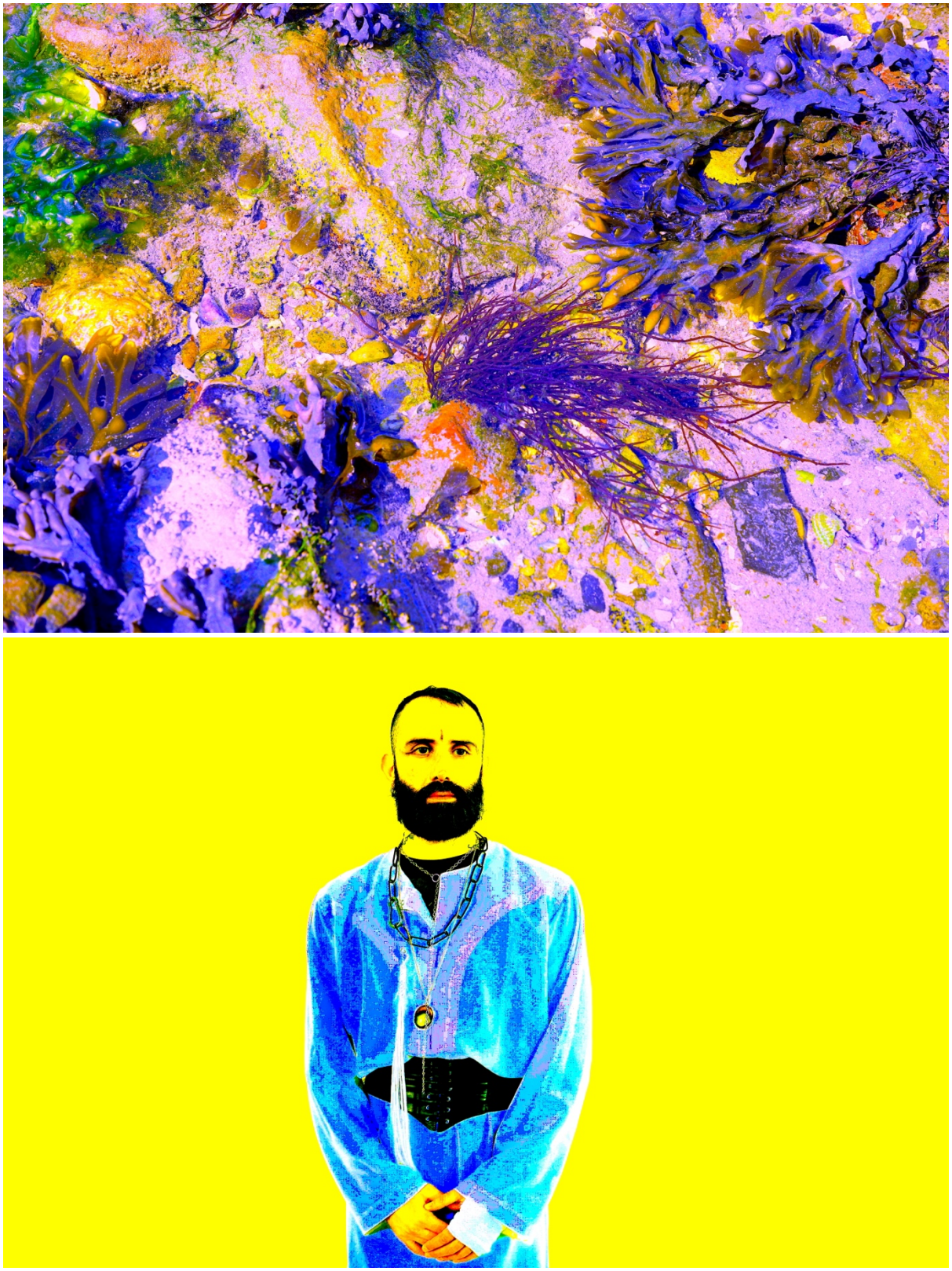
Even though insecurity in a rhizome is challenging, LIMBO created a sense of care and connectedness. Coming together on our own terms, in our own time, whenever we felt ready. Ultimately, LIMBO is about enabling connections by sharing stories. Stories can have many different forms: text, poetry, photography, drawings, or collage, for instance. Stories have the potential to connect people through empathy and recognition, because they resonate or are relatable. Before sharing stories, it is necessary (for some) to first practice and develop in a private and safer environment. Most queer refugees share experiences of not being seen, recognised, valued, or even believed by society. Nationalist tendencies have rendered most refugees unwelcome because they are seen as threats for Dutch national culture, making it more challenging to construct and share one's story. In LIMBO we work on constructing and sharing stories amongst ourselves first, because 'one has to be comfortable and confident in one's own story. One has to understand and holding the space for the story of the other does not take away from one's own story. Our stories can co-exist. They do co-exist, whether we see or hear them or not. Ultimately, every story is an opportunity to be reminded that we are connected by our stories' (Cairo, p. 229).

Queer refugees have their stories rejected in multiple ways. Sometimes their own families reject their gender or sexuality, other times, the IND (Immigration and Naturalization Service of the Netherlands) does not believe their claim for asylum based on sexuality. In addition, within the Dutch context, many people do not want to listen to, or believe, stories about racism. The struggles around the Black Pete discussion have made clear how difficult it is to address this theme in Dutch society. Considering all these rejections, it is challenging to share stories of who you are or how you feel to a potential hostile other, because 'failing to hold the space for each other's stories and immediately asking clarifying questions or making defensive statements [...], results in the sending party cutting off and checking out' (Cairo, p. 228).

LIMBO is thus an urgent and necessary safer space to practice together in constructing one's story. Sensing what works, being inspired by other stories, and allowing our stories to be told in all kinds of ways, created a sense of togetherness as we didn't have to deal with such vulnerable issues alone. Also, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz reminded us in one of the workshops, there is no 'right way' of telling a story, because we are the authors and directors of our own stories. There are no mistakes, we don't have to do everything correct, we can fail or be awkward or stupid or strange. Step by step, LIMBO provided safety which enabled the courage to start sharing. After building up the courage, stories and art works could be shared with other spaces, institutions and/or networks to activate the function mushroom.

GOING PUBLIC

After being together and practicing in private, sharing content amongst ourselves, we opened up to a public audience at our event on 27 March. A moment of truth. Were we ready to share? Was the audience ready to receive? While the event progressed, our nerves faded away and we could confidently answer: 'yes, we were ready'. It was a warm and sunny day



Figures 9 and 10. Accompanying artwork and self-portrait by Alaaddin Ammar for the series *Queer Function Mushroom*.

"Queer is a mindset representing my personality and thoughts, my Arabic roots, Dutch nationality, Amsterdam, refugee background, love for nature, veganism, pride, love for techno, the underground community, revolution for climate change and human rights. Queer is what is inside me and how I express these choices freely" (Alaaddin Ammar)

and over 200 people came to visit and share the space with us. We celebrated with multiple performances, food and drinks. We saw participants of LIMBO claiming their space, dancing and taking the microphone to share their stories. People in the audience noticed and commented on how safe the space felt. One of the highlights was when some participants shared a poem. Sunni Lamin, a participant as well as a facilitator of the workshop on poetry in LIMBO, organized and presented an open mic. Lamin is twenty-three years old and just recently came from the Gambia to the Netherlands. He asked for asylum and received his residential permit only a few weeks prior to the start of LIMBO. He asked participants to share the poem they had composed in the workshop. It was moving for us to see participants opening up in front of a full crowd. Not long ago, they were quiet and timid, hardly taking up any space. At times speaking so softly that it was challenging to understand. In the week prior to the opening, Lamin offered coaching sessions which we were not aware of during the process. It came as a surprise when we saw them in front of the microphone. One participant shared that this was the first time, at age fifty, she could speak about her sexuality and how much she loved LIMBO. Another participant, Jackie, shared the following poem:

> The sun's rays are melting
> Into orange, red and purple
> Here we will stand
> With dreams and faith
> As darkness creeps in
>
> The sun's rays are waking
> Into orange, red and purple
> Here we still stand
> With hope and promise
> As darkness fades away

It was heartwarming to see care, connection and courage coming together. We were impressed by the poems, Lamin's way of moderating the entire event and the courage portrayed. Participants felt safe enough to be brave, even in such a large public event. This moment reminded us of Cairo's words about courage: 'Courage can be big, and courage can be small. If one has been conditioned and grown used to being silent, it takes courage to speak up. Just opening one's mouth and speaking can be a courageous act. Sometimes it takes a lot of work to come to that first effort to break the silence. For those who are always quiet even a whisper can make a statement. Perhaps we should start by understanding courage as making a statement'.



Figures 11 and 12. Portrait of Rah Naqvi and accompanying artwork by Alaaddin Ammar for the series *Queer Function Mushroom*.

"You can't really take home out of people. Even if you're forced to move, or if you move by choice, it really is something that you carry within you. It's like blood running through your veins" (Rah Naqvi)

IMAGE STATEMENT

The image series is called *Queer Function Mushroom*. All images are digitally edited photographs. In this series, Alaaddin Ammar shows artists participating in LIMBO. This image series is connected to Alaaddin's documentary portraying the function mushroom. The film shows members in the LIMBO workshops as well as their connections to other communities and contexts. The first picture shows Ariya (he/him) from Iran. Ariya is an artist and graphic designer who has been in the Netherlands for five years. Ariya makes digital art works that represent healing journeys into the unconsciousness. They are borderless manifestations of introspection about life, society, the past, the now, and carefully dreaming intentions for the future. The second portrait shows Alaaddin (they/them) from Syria. Alaaddin is a visual artist, activist and art director of underground events. They provide psychological first aid within LIMBO and have been in the Netherlands for six years. They use film, photography and performance while frequently collaborating with (mostly queer) artists from various disciplines. The third portrait shows mAmin (they/them) from Iran. mAmin is an artivist, conceptual artist, currently practicing at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. mAmin has been in the Netherlands for eight years. Their multidisciplinary practice revolves around storytelling, photography, design and placemaking as a means of constructing radical togetherness through the celebration of difference. The last portrait shows Rah Naqvi (they/ them) from India. Rah is an Indian contemporary artist. Their work has been described as subversive, and covers topics such as gender, sexuality, race and religion. They advocate for various social and feminist causes including that of body positivity. Rah has been situated in the Netherlands as well as in India for two years.

All images from the series *Queer Function Mushroom* © Alaaddin Ammar



Figure 13. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 27 February 2022.

CHAPTER 3

Enabling and Obstructing Flow through Creative Co-Creation

Fabian Holle



Figure 14. Overview of LIMBO space at Framer Framed, 2022. Photo by Maarten Nauw/ Framer Framed

A Personal Journey of Transformation

The moment that most significantly triggered my journey of critical self-reflection was when I started to do drag and engage with the (activist) queer community. Before this, I always felt a bit out of place while I was trying to fit in as much as I could. I was a soft-spoken, nerdy child and secretly wanted to do ballet like my sister. I never told my parents, because my father wanted to make me into a 'real man' by sending me to judo classes. He was born in Indonesia during the War of Independence in 1946. In 1962, he came to the Netherlands to seek refuge from the violence of that time, which has been described as 'having genocidal overtones' (Raben, 2012). Indo-Dutch people are known for their assimilation into mainstream Dutch society, which feels like something I inherited generationally. Assimilation implies that 'newcomers are seen and see themselves first and foremost as members of the indigenous society' (Pattynama, 2000). My Indonesian heritage was never really talked about. I always considered myself to be Dutch, even though it was quite normal to be called 'pinda'; a racist

slur that translates to peanut, which everyone, including myself, simply accepted (see also Hulster, 2020).

When I was nine years old, I started doing theatre instead of ballet because I was scared that my father, as well as the rest of the world, would think of me as girlish. I thus conformed to more societally accepted gender norms. A year later, my mother passed away; my father was out of the picture, so I grew up in several foster families separated from my sisters. As a foster child, I then tried to adapt to the norms and values of each new family. This was evident in simple things: having to adapt my sense of (being on) time, because for some families being two minutes late was a problem while for others it was not; having to change showering habits; adapting to different types of humour; different habits of watching TV, having dinner, types of food, and so on.

Reflecting on it now, I realize how different contexts hold a lot of power and influence over the way one engages with the world. As a teenager, I was not aware of this impact, I just felt very different and simply tried to fit in. When I was seventeen, I went to theatre school hoping to find similarly spirited people. After graduating, I made a living as an actor but still felt out of place. I then felt more comfortable working with choreographers, a bit closer to my childhood wish of doing ballet. Eventually, I felt the most sense of belonging with people who also somehow struggled to fit into mainstream society when I started engaging with the Rotterdam queer community. My process of rethinking and relearning was fully activated when I met and learned from queer activists, thinkers and community organizers. I became more aware of, and started to critically question, some of my taken- for-granted assumptions. I learned more about (gender) nonconformity, accepted my own gender fluidity, and learned about the importance of safer spaces. I wanted to contribute in a way that suited me and decided to study sociology. Eventually my journey led me to being part of a research project on engaged scholarship and refugee inclusion as a PhD candidate. Currently, within this research on co-creation through art practices, my life has been transformed through learning together with queer, trans, lesbian, gay and gender nonconforming people with refugee experiences.

Engaged Scholarship

Oftentimes, social science is purposefully distant from the communities they research. This is due to dominant norms in academia of objectivity and neutrality. In such research, participants are not considered as partners or friends. Some forms of such conventional research could be experienced by research participants as exploitative or extractive, because they are asked to share their (oftentimes painful, traumatic) stories as data for the research without it being reciprocal. This may lead to research fatigue and disengagement because within 'research that does not yield tangible benefits, members of marginalized communities may even grow resentful of researchers and [often reasonably] perceive them as self-interested outsiders who only care to benefit their career' (Ashley, 2021). Engaged scholarship challenges these research norms by focusing on co-creation with participants emphasizing reciprocity and relationality. In LIMBO we collaborate and find ways together that are mutually beneficial in terms of knowledge and resources. We aim to connect different situated knowledges and

lived experiences with academic knowledges in inclusive ways, which is one way of defining engaged scholarship.

LIMBO is a creative research collaboration between Refugee Academy (expertise lab within the Institute for Societal Resilience at VU Amsterdam), the art institution Framer Framed, and queer refugee community organizers and artists[9]. LIMBO is a weekly workshop series for and by queer/refugee/migrant community organizers and artists with the aim of creating a safer space for queer people with a refugee background to share stories and create content. The workshops up until the time of writing included: rope play & consent with Maha Youssef; story-creation with Rochita Loenen-Ruiz; poetry with Lamin Barrow; biographical drawing with Parisa Akbarzadehpoladi; fimo clay with Jerrold Saija; clowning with Hamza Badi; defiance dolls with Rah Naqvi; safer space ritual making with Sarah Tazit; and collage, photovoice, food & stories with Alaaddin Ammar.

I sometimes (co-)facilitate workshops and oftentimes provide the 'warm up' which includes a conversation about consent and listing our intentions for a safer space. This list of intentions was developed by the group in past workshops, and during the warmups we ask whether intentions need to be changed or added. After several weeks of private workshops, we opened and exhibited the creative content publicly, celebrating with music, food and performances. The opening event was co-organized by Mama Kil and Sehaq Queer Refugees Group and took place on March 27, 2022. LIMBO is co-organized by Noa Bawits and Sajad Salmanpour, and part of my research on (community) engaged scholarship. This PhD research is part of a larger comparative study led by Professor Halleh Ghorashi in which refugee inclusion through engaged scholarship is examined and compared in the contexts of South Africa, the United States and the Netherlands (Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, n.d.).

LIMBO

The approximately thirty current members of LIMBO vary in age, cultural background, citizenship status, spiritual/religious beliefs, gender identity and sexual orientation. Due to academic rules concerning anonymity we cannot name everyone participating, which feels counterintuitive because LIMBO is co-created by everyone involved. The creative works connected to this text are made by LIMBO co-creators. A few participants are studying at art institutions, some w ork in the arts, and for some LIMBO was their first experience with art (practices), and an institution such as Framer Framed. The workshop series as well as the opening event were considered meaningful and important by participants. On multiple occasions participants expressed that there are no safer spaces for queer people with a refugee background to express themselves through creativity and stories outside of LIMBO.

Because this specific group faces multiple challenges due to their gender, sexuality and refugee background, LIMBO is an urgent and necessary space to practice sharing (parts of their) stories in ways they see fit. This is, among other issues, to avoid tokenization and to counter dominant societal tendencies of perceiving refugees as victims (Holle et al., 2021).

[9] For more information on the Institute for Societal Resilience, see https://www.resilience-institute.nl/; I use the term 'queer refugees' as an umbrella term to include people that identify as LGBTQIA+ and have a refugee or forced migration experience.

Therefore, we focus on forming relations based on trust, emphasizing consent, communication and democratic decision-making. Besides collaborators, we also became friends. We start workshops eating soup together, spend time drawing, writing or other creative activities proposed in the workshops. Meanwhile, we share stories that are connected to these creative practices. Stories that are oftentimes intimate, vulnerable and emotional.

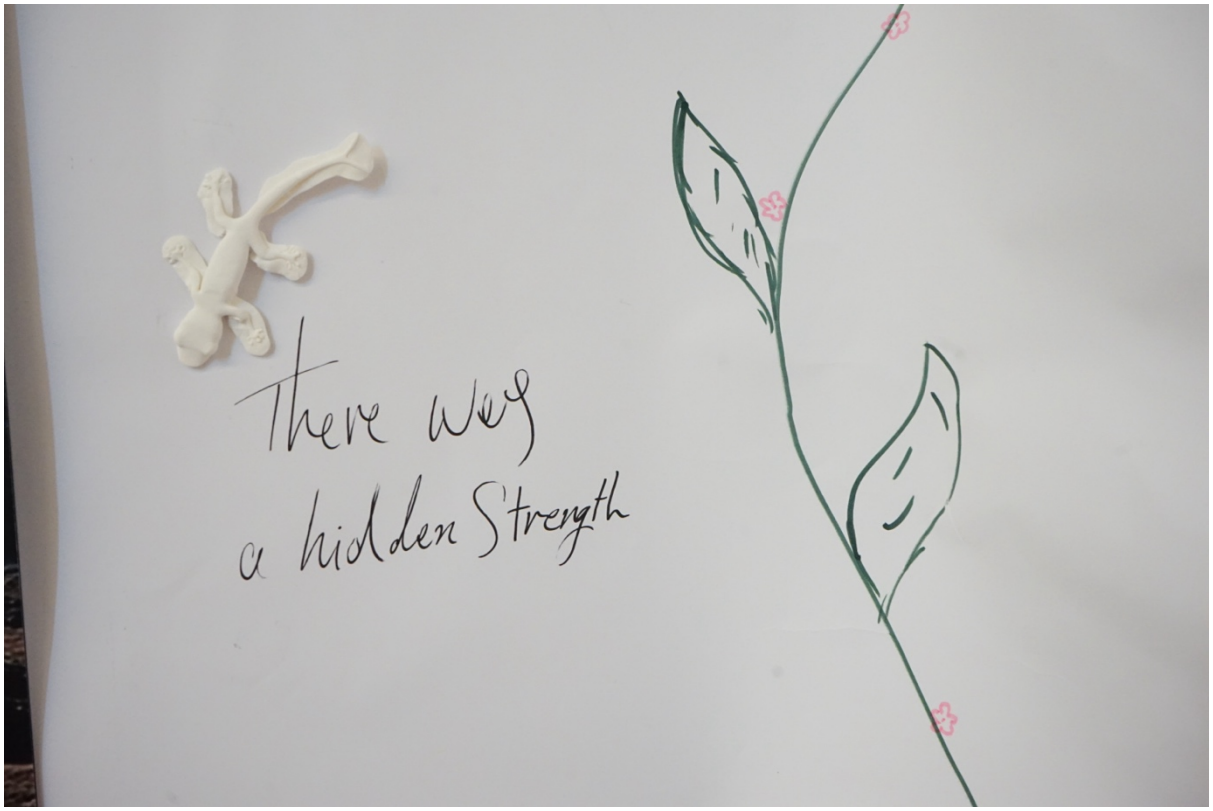


Figure 15. Detail of work by LIMBO, 2022. Photo by Alaaddin Ammar

LIMBO refers to in-betweenness, to liminality, a place of (sometimes permanent) transition (Turner, 1969). Refugees embody a liminal (sometimes permanent) transitional state due to being in between their former and current context (Manjikian, 2018). One is no longer from the origin country and, considering the Dutch context, also never really embodying 'Dutchness'. In a new context one cannot take anything for granted and is somewhat forced to be reflexive because social norms, values, rules and laws are, or might be, different. This may apply to simple things, such as how to do the dishes, as well as to complex bureaucratic processes. Due to this forced reflexivity, Edward Said, as well as Zygmunt Bauman, have argued that being in-between is a place of creativity and originality. In fact, they argue that intellectuals have to think in exile: 'technically an exile – one that is *in*, but not *of* the place' (Bauman, 2000, p. 207).

The assumption is that full immersion in one's context goes hand in hand with blind spots, making it difficult to be critically reflexive. Similar to refugeeness, queerness can also be considered liminal. Queerness is fluid and in-between, or outside, gender and sexual binaries. Queerness is questioning, challenging and resisting elements of the status quo. It aims for social justice and is thus future-oriented with a focus on becoming (which is more active),

as opposed to an identity with a focus on being (which is more passive) (Muñoz, 2009). Queerness is perhaps most obvious in the bending or blurring of gender norms in what Judith Butler calls the heterosexual matrix, to which I would add 'cisgender' (Butler, 1990). Queer people are creative in blurring, blending or bending social norms to a certain extent. Gloria Anzaldúa argues that queers are 'supreme crossers of cultures' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 84). Considering liminality in queerness and refugeeness, I thus see huge potential for creativity and critical reflexivity.

However, within this in-betweenness, not fully fitting within a dominant category, deviating from multiple societal norms like heteronormativity or Dutchness, queer refugees experience many challenges. Being in limbo also means experiencing feelings of being stuck and hitting metaphorical walls. As an engaged scholar, I can write and reflect about such experiences. However, solutions and/or societal changes are outside my direct influence and always in the future. In terms of aiming to be mutually beneficial, one of the questions in LIMBO is, what can we do now? How can we make the present more bearable? How can we create a kind of relief from this daily reality of running into barriers?

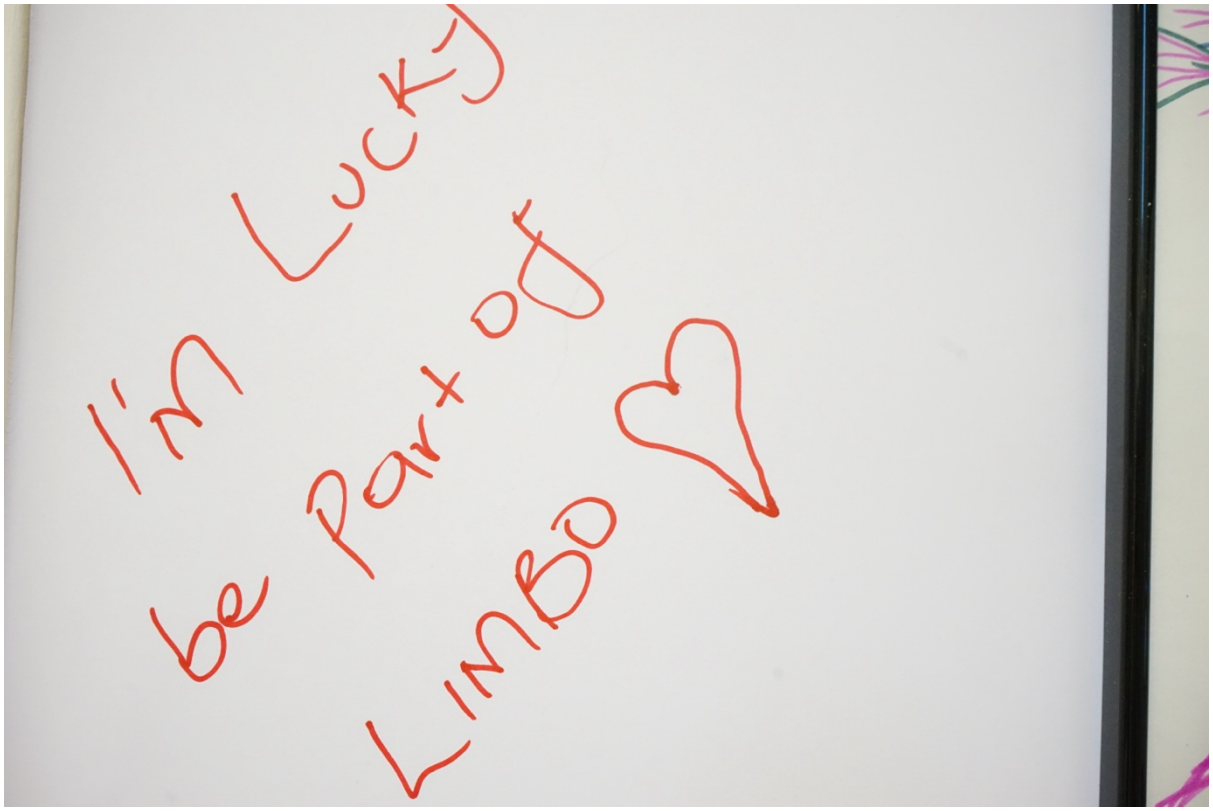


Figure 16. Detail of work by LIMBO, 2022. Photo by Alaaddin Ammar

Creative Co-Creation

Through a variety of creative workshops, we aim to find moments of relief while approaching and presenting one's experiences in their complexity. Creative works are playful, sensuous, more sensorial forms of knowing. Art practices can take the form of internal reflections that make experiences, hopes and ideas visible (or audible) to the outside world. One can see art as an intuitive kind of language in contrast to, let's say, Dutch or English. For people with a

refugee experience, for whom Dutch or English is oftentimes a third or fourth language, art can be liberating because it has the potential of crossing language barriers. In LIMBO we cross language barriers in various forms, from drawing and clowning to photography. Even though, there is a lot of diversity and varying degrees of engagement within the group, the stories participants share are different yet interconnected because certain challenges are experienced collectively. I also participate in the workshops with my own personal background and share stories and complexities of my own queerness and migration heritage.

Working together from such different levels of engagement can be argued as a form of symbiotic co-creation. Symbiotic co-creation, or '[s]ympoiesis, is a simple word; it means 'making-with'. Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing' (Haraway, 2016, p. 58). Taking a sidestep to the biological sciences, in the book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway reflects on an article *'A Symbiotic View Of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals'* (Gilbert et al., 2012). The article describes how no organism can be defined as individual, outside of perhaps one specific bacteria, because all organisms, including humans, are symbiotic mergers of at least two different species, which include fungi and algae. The article concludes with 'We are all lichens' (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 336). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) writes that '[w]e are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others [...] Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option' (p. 27). Everybody is thus a multiplicity, quite literally a symbiosis of a wide range of interdependent bacteria, cells and organisms. Multiplicities are ongoingly assembled and transformed by encounters along the way, not only on the biological level, but I would argue, in line with Deleuze and Guattari, also on the level of thought (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Contaminated by actions, surroundings, ideas, people are transformed in conversations and encounters with others. In thinking symbiotically, I see creative co-creation as not being hierarchical, but rather sideways, as relational and horizontal, interdependent, contaminated and transformed by (unlikely, unexpected, unexplored) encounters.

Micro Emancipation

LIMBO is a symbiosis and amalgamation of different influences, and partially inspired by the work of Maggie O'Neill, a scholar in the UK, who combines art and biographical research. She refers to her work as critical theory in practice: '[k]nowledge [...] produced forcing us to abandon instrumental rationality and reach towards a more sensuous understanding that incorporates feeling involvement as well as cognitive reflection' (O'Neill, 2008, p. 9). O'Neill thus claims that it is important to not only focus on understanding through the mind and intellect, but to also include knowing on different levels, knowing through feeling, through experiencing, through sensing. O'Neill further claims that her work 'involves creating a "potential space", a reflective/relatively safe space for dialogue, images and narratives to emerge that approach the world and research in a different way, facilitating understanding' (O'Neill, 2008, p. 9).

That is what we do in LIMBO. We come together in a creative surrounding, to reflect, create, and share stories amongst ourselves first, and if, or when, we feel ready, we open up and share stories in different forms of creative media to a larger audience. The underlying

assumption is that through such encounters, while staying reflexive, there is potential for micro emancipation which may lead to (societal) transformation.

Micro emancipation entails a reflective capacity to become aware of taken-for-granted assumptions and critically question them. I realized its transformative potential when I engaged with the Rotterdam queer community and co-organized safer spaces for queer and trans people in which the status quo, and all dominant (often internalized) norms are questioned and challenged. These encounters transformed my understanding because I could safely and quietly reflect on my own blind spots. In academia, I learned that this was referred to as micro emancipation. Ghorashi describes certain conditions of doing so (Ghorashi, 2014). For instance, creating a reflective space, such as the example of O'Neill, to slow down and encounter 'the Other' from the perspective of the Other, while momentarily pausing one's preconceptions. Micro emancipation involves what Ghorashi explains as 'relational autonomy', 'the constant balancing act [between private as well as collective concerns] of individuals who take their role as democratic citizens to heart' (Ghorashi, 2014, p. 55).

Private concerns increasingly influence our lives because we live in constant states of precarity caused by e.g. climate change, wars and forced migration. The promise of stable and comfortable futures is disappearing, or already has disappeared (Tsing, 2015). It's becoming more difficult to trust that one will find, for instance, a regular job and affordable housing. In effect, this makes it more challenging to balance private concerns with the collective good, because constant precarity fuels fears and nationalist tendencies of not getting or having enough, while thinking that 'others' might take from the metaphorical pie. Citizens are thus increasingly individualized, and the focus shifted to one's own private concerns, fears and anxieties. However, instead of solely focusing on oneself, it is important to focus on relations with other humans (and non-humans) in order for democracy to function well.

The Changed Nature of Critical Theory

In the transition from early to late modernity, the nature of emancipation had to change because the nature of power had changed. Earlier, critical theory was about liberation from oppressive macro structures, which could take the form of religion, the bourgeoisie, aristocracy, traditional institutions or dictators telling us how to live or who to marry. Using metaphors of solid versus liquid in his book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman refers to early modernity as 'solid modernity', when the role of critical theory was to liberate and emancipate ourselves from visible forms of dominating powers and be free to make our own decisions (Bauman, 2000).



Figure 17. Detail of work by LIMBO, 2022. Photo by Alaaddin Ammar

For Bauman, emancipation was a form of resistance against solid traditional institutions. In late modernity, or liquid modernity, Bauman argues that there are no longer solid (heavy, stable, immobile) institutions because everything liquified and became fluid. Fluidity as a metaphor emphasizes constant (social) change, movement and mobility: 'the fast speeds of late capitalism, the precarious conditions of labour, the loosening of social ties' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 185). Bauman further argues that the newfound freedoms we gained leave individuals responsible for all their own choices. We are free to choose how to live, we don't have to follow in our parents' footsteps, but we also carry the burden of the responsibility ourselves. He calls this 'mixed blessings of freedom' (Bauman, 2000). 'This freedom has also decreased the sense of connectedness among individuals, making it difficult to deal with increasingly complex issues of our time while drawing exaggerated attention to perceived risks' (Ghorashi, 2014, p. 50).

In terms of institutions nowadays, it is thus no longer the reality in Western societies, such as the Netherlands, to emancipate from dictators or oppressive traditions. Instead, the power that is now influencing our lives and actions has become invisible, and thus harder to pinpoint. It has taken the form of taken-for-granted assumptions and dominant discourses in society about, for example, migrants, refugees, queer people or activists. Dominant discourses influence peoples' minds insidiously, making it challenging to become aware of this kind of power. Moreover, individuals who are not reflexive about such taken-for-granted assumptions make these discourses more powerful through daily repetitions. Ideas or practices that exclude people in several ways become almost common sense, unquestioned, or 'just the way we do it here'.

In the Dutch context, besides blatant hostility toward refugees, apparent in demonstrations against asylum-seeker-centres, a large part of society has good intentions when it comes to refugee inclusion. However, good intentions are not enough for actual inclusion. One dominant Dutch assumption is the idea that its citizens are tolerant and open-minded. 'Doe maar normaal, dan doe je al gek genoeg' is a Dutch expression which translates to: 'Just act normal, that's already crazy enough.' This might seem innocent, but what is normal and who decides what's normal?

In the Netherlands, it is often argued that everyone is included on the condition that one should not challenge the 'way things are done'. It has to stay gezellig. Gezelligheid is a typical Dutch word that does not have a proper translation, but its meaning is close to coziness and is used for situations that require social interaction. Aminata Cairo explains how Dutch down-to-earth-earnestness is combined with the concept of gezelligheid (Cairo, 2021). There's nothing wrong with gezelligheid. On the contrary, it can be very valuable. However, it may stand in the way of societal change because when situations should always be gezellig, it is difficult to be critical. For example, in the Black Pete discussion, activists have struggled to address racism or discrimination because of the insistence that the figure of Black Pete has nothing to do with racism, because it's part of a children's celebration that is all about gezelligheid[10]. The assumption is that the Netherlands is not racist, but liberal, open-minded and down-to-earth. 'We don't see colour', and 'gender is not an issue' are regular arguments because 'everybody has equal opportunities and should be able to achieve anything when they just work hard.' Not being gezellig and thus obstructing the 'flow of how things are done', silences critique and makes addressing such societal issues very challenging.

In the context of diversity work within institutions, Sara Ahmed uses the metaphor of 'flow' in a response to Bauman's metaphor for late modernity as liquid or fluid. Like a river, when you (have the privilege to) go with the flow, everything runs smoothly. Ahmed argues that '[f]eminist and race theorists over generations have taught us that to inhabit a category of privilege is not to come up against the category' (Ahmed, 2012, p. 176). However, when you bump into barriers while going down the stream, due to queerness and refugeeness for instance, you are not only almost forced to go with the flow, but you also become the problem. You become the one perceived as obstructing the flow.

Enabling and Obstructing Flow

Our current context is marked by precarity and trying to stay afloat in a reality of constant change and insecurity. For those who do not have the privilege of going with the flow of daily reality, it may feel like a strong, overwhelming, exhausting force, almost impossible to change. In LIMBO, we try to create havens to pause and meet one another, catch a breath, enjoy the water, in an attempt to find relief in the present by focusing on finding our own (creative) flow. We form relations by sharing stories and creativity, because '[i]t is time to turn to sympoietic worldings, [...] where ordinary stories, ordinary becoming "involved in each other's lives", propose ways to stay with the trouble in order to nurture well-being on a damaged

[10] There is an ongoing discussion about the figure of Black Pete being racist because of the blackface makeup and stereotypical behaviors attributed to this character. Black Pete is a servant of Saint Nicholas in the Dutch holiday tradition Sinterklaas, which is similar to Santa Claus.

planet' (Haraway, 2016, p. 76). We are contaminated by thoughts and stories and (potentially) transformed through these unexpected encounters, knowing that 'all of the players are symbionts to each other, in diverse kinds of relationalities and with varying degrees of openness to attachments and assemblages' (Haraway, 2016, p. 60). In the process, we look at the river, we question and challenge its course to see where there is room for change.

We reflect on conventions in research and challenge dominant assumptions about refugees who are oftentimes perceived as victims. However, as Ahmed argues, when one points out the barriers in the river that others do not seem to notice, one becomes a barrier. Then again, sometimes we need to obstruct the flow in order to change it. Eventually the river may become wider or flow more gently in the margins. Perhaps, through interconnected efforts, the river will slowly and slightly change its course in order to include everyone.



Figure 18. Detail of work by LIMBO, 2022. Photo by Alaaddin Ammar

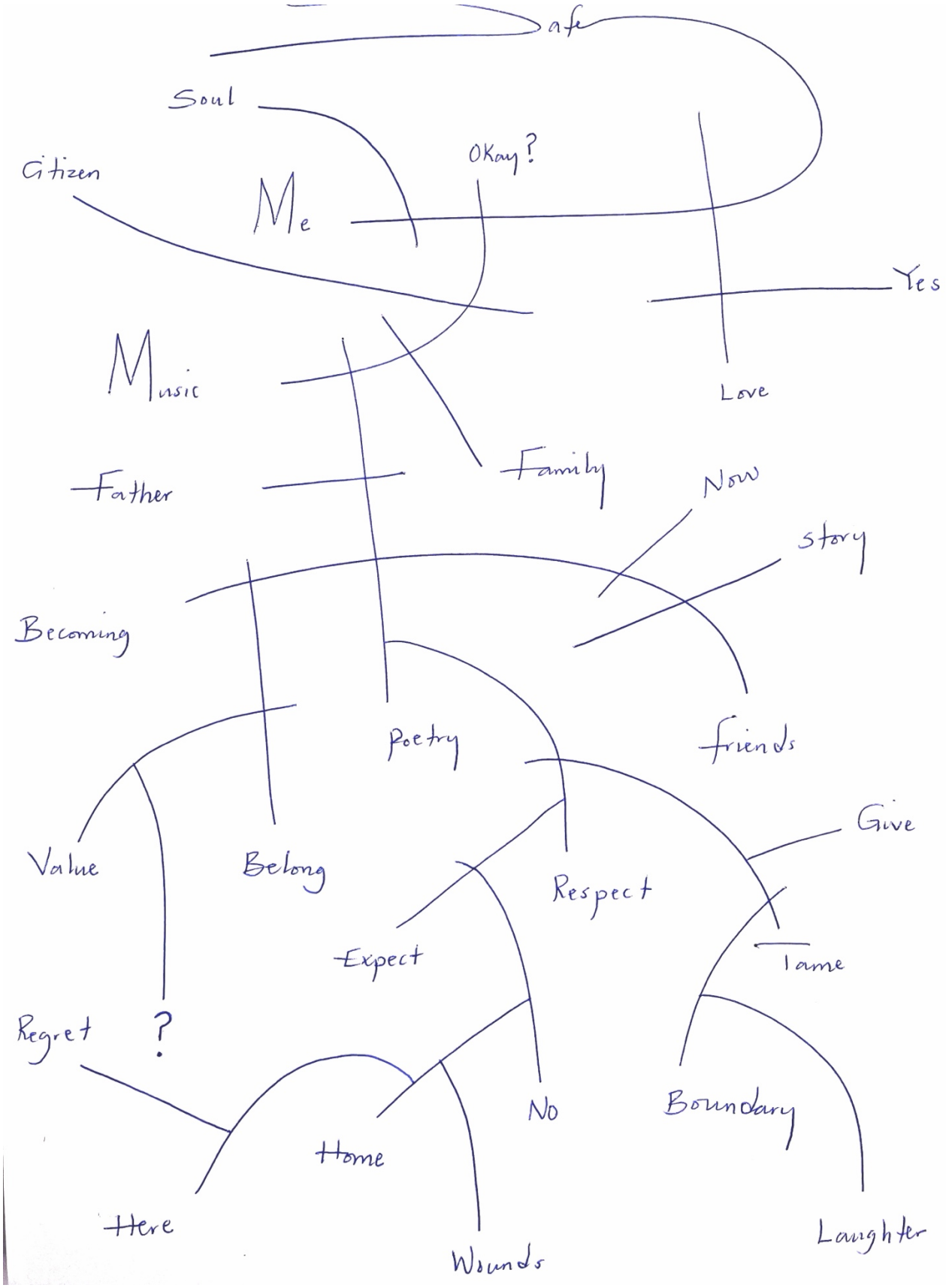


Figure 19. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 20 February 2022.

CHAPTER 4

Conditions for Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Co-Creation with Queer Refugees

Fabian Holle, Elena Ponzoni & Halleh Ghorashi

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the conditions that enable transformative engaged scholarship through co-creative research with queer refugees. Drawing on LIMBO, a collaborative initiative involving queer refugees, researchers, artists, and community organizations in the Netherlands, the authors explore how knowledge production can challenge exclusionary structures and promote epistemic and social justice. LIMBO was designed as a creative, participant-led space where queer refugees could share experiences through artistic practices such as poetry, drawing, photography, and creative writing. Through a reflective analysis of the project, three key conditions for transformative co-creation emerged: creativity, holding space, and the dynamic practice of de/recentring. Creativity functioned as a method for expression beyond the constraints of language, enabling participants to explore identity, belonging, and agency through playful and liminal practices. Holding space provided a non-judgmental environment where participants could safely navigate complex emotions and experiences focusing on autonomy, mutual care, and belonging. The third condition, de/recentring, refers to researchers' ability to move between stepping back to privilege community voices and stepping in when guidance, expertise, or conflict resolution is required. The chapter highlights both the transformative potential and the practical challenges of such approaches, including emotional labour, boundary management, and sustaining collaborative projects over time. The findings suggest that transformative engaged scholarship requires flexible forms of leadership, recognition of diverse knowledges, and careful attention to relational dynamics. By creating conditions for marginalized communities to shape knowledge production on their own terms, co-creative research can contribute to more inclusive academic practices and broader social transformation.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on conditions for co-creative research with regard to experiences and diverse forms of knowledge that are silenced by stigmatizing, negative labelling and (subtle) kinds of exclusion that must be countered. We reflect on three core conditions that emerged

in LIMBO: a creative research collaboration between queer refugee[11] community organizers and artists, the Amsterdam art institute Framer Framed and the Refugee Academy (expertise lab based at the Institute for Societal Resilience at VU Amsterdam). LIMBO is part of the *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change* project, which investigates specific forms of transdisciplinary cooperation between academic institutions and society, which we refer to here as transformative engaged scholarship. Transformative engaged scholarship refers to critical forms of academic work with the aim of enabling more inclusive practices both in society and in academic institutions. It is grounded in the belief that academia has an important role to play in expanding the collective imagination and facilitating the inclusion of marginalized groups. Other than understandings of engaged scholarship that hinge on researchers' advisory and consulting roles in existing policy or professional frames, which are familiar in Science and Technology Studies (Zuiderent-Jerak, 2015), this form of engaged scholarship involves critical reflection on power dynamics in knowledge production and creating spaces for mutual learning with different social actors, particularly those from marginalized communities (Meekosha et al., 2013). Transdisciplinary work from this perspective involves investing in challenging normalized structures of exclusion by incorporating diverse forms of knowledge, making power structures more visible and promoting shared responsibility for change (Medina, 2013), through processes of knowledge co-creation.

In the Dutch welfare context, one instance of a normalized form of exclusion is the image of refugees as deviating from the norm. These images are informed by hegemonic discourses based on gendered, racialized and cultural hierarchies of difference that reproduce structures of inequality in everyday practices (Young, 2007). In these normalized structures, members of non-privileged groups – such as refugees – are depicted as both completely different and 'lacking' and also, increasingly, as dangerous and unwanted (Ghorashi, 2020). Transformative engaged scholarship, seen as transdisciplinary work, addresses this normalized form of power and recognizes the agency and voices of marginalized individuals and communities, but also goes beyond merely documenting such issues. In our view, enabling change starts with scholars acknowledging power relationships (including their own position) and making efforts to establish sustainable conditions for both epistemic and social justice, recognizing and valuing experiential and community knowledge as meaningful ways of existing and understanding in the world. This chapter describes such conditions that are relevant to co-creative research in the context of LIMBO, a collaboratively designed community to enable non-academic participants to co-own the process of knowledge production.

LIMBO: Co-creative Engagement in the Margins

LIMBO is an alternative space for knowledge creation outside dominant structures for people who experience the intersection of queerness and refugeeness. It facilitates twice-monthly creative workshops by and for those identifying as queer refugees, and who face intersecting dimensions of (blatant and/or subtle) exclusion in the Dutch context. LIMBO has aimed to create space for sharing stories and content through art, such as poetry, drawing, creative

[11] We use the term 'queer refugees' as an umbrella term to include people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual plus other sexual identities) (Jagose, 1996) and who are refugees or have experienced forced migration.

writing, collage and photography. Reflecting on this project, which was initiated and co facilitated by the first author (hereafter Fabian), enables us to highlight the transformative potential of co-creative spaces and to investigate the premises and conditions that can lead to creating these. We have reconstructed the methodological opportunities and challenges through reflective dialogues among ourselves, thinking through the skills, aptitudes, choices, processes and relations that led the organizers of LIMBO to navigate the complexity of this creative and collaborative journey. In addition to seeing the transformative value of engaged scholarship, the experience of LIMBO made us more aware of academics' vulnerability when engaging with communities. Hence, our chapter is guided by the following questions: What is the role of academia when community-engaged research decentres the hierarchical position of academic knowledge to enable epistemic justice and multiplicity? What are the challenges and opportunities?

Decentring involves researchers stepping back from their (personal, academic) perspectives in their leadership and researcher roles to allow the group's desires, needs, stories and practices to remain central, in order to become part of the group and let others take the lead (Braidotti, 2018). This means that, like most participatory research, the researcher shares power over the research process with the group (Caretta & Riaño, 2016). For instance, the researcher does not depart from a fixed research frame when approaching the research participants but approaches the group with a flexible framework with the aim of adjusting it throughout the process of co-creation. It thus involves researchers being open to different perspectives and values within the group and being willing to set aside their own preconceived notions and opinions, allowing for epistemic justice through a multiplicity of knowledges (Caretta & Riaño, 2016). Recentring is stepping in when needed, moving towards a productive direction by including academic insights. De/recentring can be seen as acts of situational humility (Edmondson, 2018), which are at the core of our approach.

In an earlier co-creation project led by Fabian (Trans-Clash in Fig. 20), it became evident that decentring presents specific challenges and opportunities. We learned that it is important to find a balance between decentring and recentring. In Trans-Clash, the group of participants[12] was in control of designing the project and the researcher was almost entirely decentred. However, this process led to a somewhat limited outcome in Fabian's perception. The relatively small group of six members wanted to create a performance event and co-author an application to fund a small tour. Fabian took the lead in co-writing this funding application, which served as an opportunity to learn what was important to this group and why. However, Fabian aimed to reach and include the larger queer refugee community as part of their PhD research. They[13] wanted to create a project that was meaningful to many/most queer refugees in the hope of attracting more (diverse) queer refugees by using the snowball technique (Tracy, 2013). Fabian also deemed specific elements based on theory and experience to be important, such as holding space and abstaining from pressure to work towards creative results. Because most members of the Trans-Clash group did not give priority to these values and since Fabian had almost completely decentred themselves, they could only follow the direction of the group. After one co-organized performance event that

[12] The Trans-Clash group and the LIMBO group are distinct.
[13] Fabian uses they/them pronouns.

was warmly received by the audience, the funding body rejected the application. LIMBO was then co-created in order to navigate democratic decision-making while at the same time including insights and knowledge based on theory and the researcher's experience.

The dynamic interplay of decentring and recentring is relevant not just in the project's design but throughout the entire process. The following sections critically unpack this as one of three conditions that appeared in LIMBO as crucial avenues in working towards transformative impact. The first condition concerns the use of creativity, more specifically using art practices as a research method. The second condition concerns the notion of 'holding space' for all kinds of intimate and often uncomfortable feelings and conversations. The third is the ability of decision-makers to decentre and recentre.

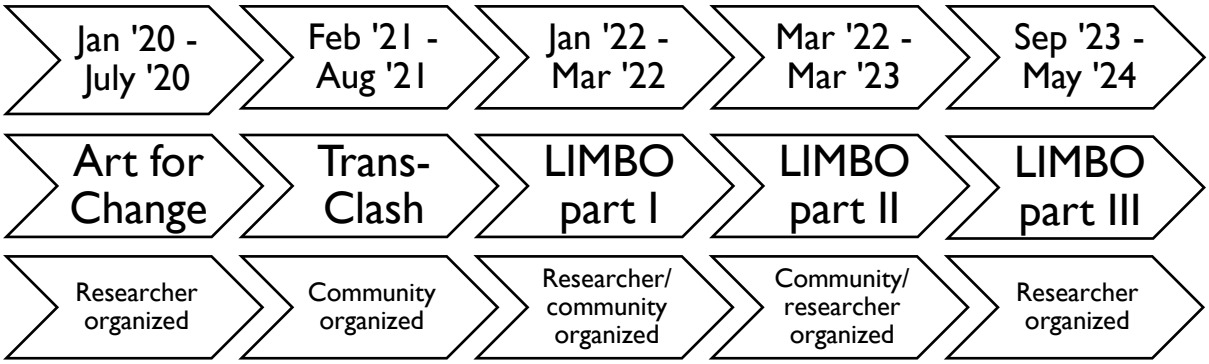


Figure 20. Fabian's co-creation timeline about decentring-recentring in the project's design

CREATIVITY

During the first co-creation project Art for Change (Fig. 20), the potential of creativity to cross language barriers became evident. Fabian was researching the role of art in the lives of queer refugees in the context of the social distancing and lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic. The entire research team was suddenly forced to reflect on what community engagement means in times of social isolation. What role can academics play? An online platform was created with the intention of continuing meaningful and mutually beneficial academic community engagement with queer refugee artists (Holle et al., 2021). There, we found that art practices are experienced as liberating because they are not restricted to verbal language (Karimi, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2002). For people with a refugee experience, for whom Dutch or English is often a third or fourth language, art offers a 'means of imagining beyond the limits of language (or playing creatively with language) via more sensorial, visual or emotional levels' (O'Neill et al., 2002 in Holle et al., 2021).

> I think poetry, it surpasses just words, I think they're more like illustrations and they're like colours. They are stories. I was quite impressed with what a lot of people came with. […] It was very mind opening to me to learn

> about new cultures, new people, their ways of life, how they got to the Netherlands. (Musa)[14]

Art practices are playful, more embodied, forms of sharing and expression and for that reason might be easier to understand, feel or relate to, than (academic) texts (Dewhurst, 2010; Oliveira, 2019). For this reason, creative expression can be an important way to increase epistemic multiplicity, which means recognizing and valuing the simultaneous presence of different forms and sources of knowledge. This project significantly deepened our understanding of creativity (a broader frame for art practices) as a valuable methodological approach. Despite this importance, creativity in the neoliberal context is commonly defined interchangeably with innovation – referring mainly to bigger, better, higher, faster or more (Jeanes, 2006). This is a rather hierarchical perception as it focuses on linear growth. As an alternative to this understanding, we embrace the horizontal value of liminality inherent to creativity and creative practices (Turner, 1979). When the focus is on the process and not on the final results, it removes the pressure to perform, making the experience more liberating. Creativity through the lens of liminality enables tuning into oneself in playful ways and encourages (self-)discovery and (self-)expression.

A focus on liminality is relevant because (queer) refugees often find themselves in a liminal state arising from displacement and exclusion (Manjikian, 2014). In the context of (forced) migration, liminality refers to the state of transition, which can be experienced as temporary or permanent, depending on both individual and social perceptions: when does a person 'belong' in their new society? Being in a liminal state can be challenging for refugees, as it can involve a loss of identity, culture and community (Turner, 1969, 1979). In many cases, refugees cannot return to their own country and must navigate the challenges of building a new life in a foreign land. This liminal state can also have an impact on mental health and well-being, as refugees may experience feelings of isolation, marginalization, loss, uncertainty and feeling cut off from social structures (Elferink & Emmen, 2017).

Despite its difficulties, liminality also involves specific sources of situated knowledge. Edward Said (1994) argued that those living in exile occupy a position of in-betweenness, which makes it impossible to fully assimilate into specific social structures. It involves both a sense of permanent non-belonging and having the potential for creativity and originality. Said uses the metaphor of exile (or, in contemporary terms, refugees), to show that juxtaposing the old and new cultural and structural contexts enables reflexivity. This 'forced reflexivity' allows exiles to hold an insider–outsider position that challenges assumed positions in either context (Ghorashi, 2018). In a similar way, queerness can also be seen as a liminal condition that fosters reflexivity, particularly when 'queer' refers to activism on challenging dominant binary social norms (Jagose, 1996). Hence, both queerness and refugeeness involve a potential for the critical thinking necessary to stretch the boundaries of what is considered the norm. The question is how engaged scholars can highlight this other side of liminality, which is in contrast to dominant perceptions of those in liminal positions as 'lacking' (Ghorashi, 2020). To broaden this singular perspective of lack, the name LIMBO – referring to liminality – aims to boost this positive source of creativity and originality.

[14] Pseudonyms used for all the quotes from LIMBO members.

Liminality has been described as having transformative potential at the individual, group and public levels (Turner, 1979). At an individual level, liminality is described as 'a rite of passage', which refers to a state or a journey in which one lets go (or is forced to let go) of one identity while transitioning to another (Turner, 1979; Van Gennep [1909] 2019). Examples are adolescence, when one is no longer a child but not yet fully adult; migration, where one is no longer part of the former society, but not yet fully settled in the new one; or being in the process of losing a loved one, where one is transitioning to an identity without that other person. These are all forms of identity (re/de)construction (Beech, 2011). Creativity in the form of art practices can enable such identity (re/de)construction (Holle et al., 2021).

At a group level, liminality in creativity triggers 'plural reflexivity' (Turner, 1979, p. 465). In contrast to making art in solitude, plural reflexivity is a form of sharing reflections and art in a group – strengthening not only one's own but also the group's identity. It can enable a sense of belonging because plural reflexivity refers to 'ways in which communities think about, see and present themselves through signs, symbols, music, dance and visual arts, thereby strengthening a sense of community' (Holle et al., 2021, p. 4). At a public level, artists and activists use creativity and reflexivity to enable social change. This is what Turner refers to as 'public liminality' or 'public reflexivity' (Turner, 1979). Activists use art or creative expression to 'make us wonder about what we are doing, to rupture a stream of thought' by using 'non-discursive means' such as 'pictures, song, poetic imagery, and expressions of mockery and longing performed in rowdy and even playful ways aimed not at commanding assent but disturbing complacency' (Young, 2001, p. 687). This is in line with what Toni Cade Bambara says: 'The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible' (cited in brown, 2019).

Playfully Unsettling Normalized Positioning

Essentially, creativity in LIMBO concerns the possibility of unsettling and liberating oneself from normalized or conditioned positioning. With this in mind, we realized the importance of icebreakers, games and/or movement when Hamza[15] Badi gave a workshop about clowning. Clowning is another way of playfully questioning and resisting normalized positioning. Badi's workshop was mentioned by several members as one of the highlights:

> It was very funny to me, because for you to be able to do this kind of weird things, it really, really, really, really relieved a lot of stress for me. Because sometimes you don't need to feel that I'm too big to do this, this is for small kids, but when you try to be weird like a baby or all those things you see that stress is still relieved. (Faadin)

Badi's workshop idea relates to adrienne maree brown's understanding of pleasure activism, which she defines as 'the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy' (brown, 2019, p. 13).

[15] In the orginal publication Hamza Badi went by another name. I have changed it here to their current name.

In LIMBO, there was only one clowning workshop, but elements of playfully unsettling remained. Over time it became evident that moving, dancing and playing games should become part of the LIMBO routine. We borrowed several games from other contexts and developed some that focus on collectivity. Such games have the potential of learning to leave one's comfort zone in a relatively safe setting. By constantly switching games, creative practices, workshop facilitators and the changing environment of the LIMBO homebase, participants essentially practise being comfortable with change. The group is continuously invited to practise something unknown, and in effect, never have the opportunity to rely on stability or reproduction of any kind. The only constant is the practice of sharing reflections. One thing that we learned in LIMBO is to avoid typical introduction rounds: 'My name is …, I was born in …, I studied …, I am working as, etcetera'. Such routines can produce a pressure to 'properly' introduce oneself. Instead, in LIMBO the members get to know each other through (name) games and (reflections on) creative practices.

Liminal Space

In addition, liminality is also described in the literature in terms of space, which refers to 'transitory in-between spaces' through which people pass, such as hallways, airports or streets (Shortt, 2015). They are situated between 'dominant' spaces that have clearer social codes on how to behave, even though those codes are often internalized and taken for granted. Think, for example, of classrooms, dining rooms or conference halls. Ways to behave in spaces with such clear purposes are culturally shaped and conditioned, because 'the practices within them are interwoven with social expectation, routines and norms' (Shortt, 2015, p. 634). Whereas dwelling in liminal spaces, as opposed to passing through them, may allow for new possibilities and a sense of freedom on how to behave. We might think of dwelling with colleagues around office areas that are not designed for hanging out. For instance, running into somebody in a hallway and spontaneously staying there, or smokers gathering around an exit. These experiences may open up different types of conversations and allow a freedom to act outside one's conditioned behaviour according to social codes (Shortt, 2015).

LIMBO is situated in a creative surrounding that can be seen as a liminal space (Shortt, 2015). Its homebase is an art institution that holds changing exhibitions and periods of in-betweenness when new exhibitions are constructed. The experience of some members in LIMBO is one of being temporarily outside their routine of going to spaces that are goal-oriented and filled with expectations, such as taking Dutch classes or meetings with case managers. Meetings with case managers, lawyers or the IND (Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service) are examples of obligations that are paired with social codes that are culturally conditioned.

Many queer refugees in LIMBO were conditioned to behave 'properly' in their former contexts because of the risk of violence or prosecution. In their new context, when undergoing the asylum process, some are at risk of the IND not believing their claim for asylum based on gender or sexuality (Renkens, 2018; Spijkerboer, 2013). Many LIMBO members were denied their asylum claim because the IND did not believe them. In most cases, this was due to not giving enough detail. While in their former life they were forced to hide or suppress their sexuality, they now have to be open and somehow prove they are

queer. Fabian heard many life story details in private conversations, which are often extremely violent and traumatic, full of examples of torture and other brutalities. These stories are difficult to share, particularly with institutions that approach them with scepticism. In LIMBO almost all participants mentioned feeling relief during the workshops.

> I was feeling relieved and started opening up freely, because LIMBO is a safe place and family that makes me feel myself. (Elea)

> Before it was so difficult to say I'm gay, but now I feel confident to share I'm gay. I'm feeling relief through these kinds of workshops. (Dex)

Participants mention this feeling of relief in connection to feeling safe with people who have similar experiences as well as the playful and fun character of the workshops, whose main goal is to hold space for whatever they want to share. However, participants also mentioned that if LIMBO had been situated in a more institutional setting, like a classroom, it could have been more anxiety-inducing because they would have felt more out of place. Hence, in line with Shortt (2015), we argue that dwelling in a creative liminal space makes it easier to shake off internalized expectations of how to behave, which adds to momentarily feeling liberated from such dominant norms and expectations. This relief then creates space to tune into oneself, which is a form of (re/de)conditioning when practised and repeated over the longer term.

Transformative Potential of Creativity

The focus on epistemic multiplicity and justice brought us to strive for three levels of transformation: individual, group and public, as described by Turner (1979). At the individual level, the aim is to encourage tuning into oneself without feeling any pressure to arrive somewhere or produce something. Rather than trying to make something that others may or may not believe as true, categorize as good or bad, valid or invalid, our focus is on safely tuning into oneself, fostering reflexivity. Reflections by LIMBO members are often profound and reveal relationships with their own and other's ideas, values, histories and dreams. Over time, in sharing and reflecting about their creative works, we have witnessed changes.

> I get to learn every day. Every time I come, I learned something new. Yeah, the other time I learned how to write a poem. In the other day, maybe to train my mind […] I also wanted to say thank you for having us have this opportunity and make my handwriting, my painting on that wall. I left Uganda. And now to enjoy this whole experience, it helps me with my mind. I am struggling to put my mind to keep fighting. I don't know why I'm fighting but it has helped me to know more about myself. It's like I can talk, I can just use my mind and your paper, without even speaking what's actually going through my mind. I'm actually a very quiet person, but it has helped me to open up. I actually love you guys. Yeah, it has been an amazing experience for me. (Jenny)

Jenny refers to constantly learning something different, apparently safely stepping outside her comfort zone. She mentions not knowing why she is fighting but learning more about herself in LIMBO. She appreciates 'talking' without speaking, referring to art being an intuitive and liberating language, because creative practices make it safer and easier to express and construct notions about oneself in relation to the other and to their experiences in the new society.

At a group level, the mutual learning experience is central to LIMBO. By sharing stories and art in a group setting, participants recognize the similarities and differences, which creates bonds. Everyone shares a refugee experience; some are currently going through the asylum procedure, while others did so up to eight years ago. With regard to queerness, experiences are often more implicitly shared and negotiated. For example, how a person does not adhere to gender norms in the way they dress. Although the workshop facilitators almost never explicitly work with themes of gender or sexuality, queerness is negotiated simply through sharing a space with various queer displaced bodies. It fuels feelings of kinship, which became evident in the fact that most participants refer to LIMBO as family.

> LIMBO is a family, we all come together, there are no insecurities when I'm in LIMBO. I know that I'm surrounded by people who love me, who have the same sexuality with me. (Mira)

Over time, we observed members expressing themselves more comfortably and confidently, which is also recognized and acknowledged by others in the group and further encouraged, strengthening the sense of collectivity and kinship.

The transformative potential at the public level is enabled through LIMBOs public presentations, events, co-created booklets and articles. These outings all serve as a platform to share their stories and art and are forms of public reflexivity (Turner, 1979). Outside audiences are invited to engage and reflect on the creative output presented. Queerness plays a role because it is often seen by LIMBO members as being inherently activist in terms of breaking or blurring dominant social (gender, sexual, relationship) norms (Jagose, 1996).

> I am a queer from Uganda and it's my first time to open up for everyone [tearing up]. My first time and I'm very happy in LIMBO. LIMBO has helped me to get confidence, and it has helped me find a family which is the same as me. I'm happy, I'm very, very grateful for LIMBO. I will live with all of it in my life, thank you. (Elea)

Elea stated this at a public LIMBO event in which she found confidence to speak in front of more than 200 people. Public reflexivity took place because visitors referred to this moment as 'powerful in its vulnerability'. Elea experienced that her voice matters for others and for herself. She also refers to 'family which is the same as me', referring to the developed kinship in LIMBO, feeling connected by recognizing similarities in difference.

HOLDING SPACE

Aminata Cairo (2021) argues that it is important to hold space for one's full range of human emotion and experience, without immediately trying to (re)solve them. As discussed above, we argue that creative practices are a useful tool to hold space for the full spectrum of experiences without striving for, or arriving at, results. In the context of facilitating groups, Heather Plett defines holding space as 'what we do when we walk alongside a person or group on a journey through liminal space. We do this without making them feel inadequate, without trying to fix them, and without trying to impact the outcome. We open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control' (Plett, 2020, p. 18). For Plett (2020), holding space is about transformation to witness and guide from a place of humility, for which a safer environment needs to be created. One metaphor for a liminal journey is transforming from being a caterpillar into becoming a butterfly, letting go of one identity to become another (Plett, 2020). She goes on to say that the journey often feels like a labyrinth, 'moving you close to the destination and then, with a simple turn, taking you far away from where you think you're meant to be' (Plett, 2020, p. 29). The journey is thus never linear but rather complex, messy, layered and challenging, including a full range of emotions from shock and grief to joy and relief.

In LIMBO, we hold space for queer refugee narratives through creative practices. Plett (2020) metaphorically describes those on a liminal journey as crystals with sharp edges. Because of the sharp edges and variety of shapes and sizes, she suggests the idea of a bowl or container with a soft protective inside layer, a safer space for exploration. There needs to be a sense of comfort and protection so that our sharp edges do not hurt ourselves or others along the way. In LIMBO, we co-create this safer space by constantly practising consent, and listing intentions for how we want to be together that specific day. The safer space is based on three principles: autonomy, safety to fail and simple instructions (Plett, 2020). Plett describes additional principles in depth, but in the context of co-creation with queer refugees, these three are the most relevant.

Autonomy

The first principle is autonomy, which is defined as 'the quality or state of being self-governing; self-directing freedom and especially moral independence' (Plett, 2020, p. 52). We encourage everyone to trust their own intuition and wisdom and do so by focusing on consent. In addition to an information and consent letter, we practise consent continuously. At the start of each workshop, we remind everyone to check in with themselves and others to feel whether it feels good to do something together or share one's story. We encourage everyone to make their own decisions, whether to share a story, whether to keep it light and easy, heavy and deeply personal or anything in between. In this way we embrace diversity by making different decisions and sharing different experiences.

The first LIMBO workshop was about consent as an ongoing practice, checking in with oneself and the others, that everyone (enthusiastically) commits to whatever they are consenting to. We imagined that a consent workshop would contribute to feelings of safety and autonomy. However, there are university ethics and guidelines regarding consent forms

that research participants are obligated to sign. Such forms usually include content, activities such as interviews, agreements on using pseudonyms, authorship and potential risks. Although this can have an important function in protecting participants' rights, this way of obtaining consent is not always appropriate for all research contexts. In LIMBO, which is an ongoing journey where participants learn to hold space for each other as part of collective research, signing consent forms gradually seemed to be out of context. Often the issues cited in those documents are rather abstract, and people may change their mind when experiences become concrete. How can someone consent to something when they don't yet know what they are consenting to? Moreover, we learned that signing formal documents triggered anxiety, memories of bad experiences and difficulty understanding Dutch bureaucracy. Signing documents can thus be scary or complicated for refugees, especially for undocumented migrants. We hoped that, through a playful workshop, we would make a conversation about consent more meaningful and fun.

Workshop facilitator Maha Youssef addressed issues of consent by practising with rope. One person would tie another person's wrists or ankles so that they would physically and emotionally feel constraint. This constraint became a measuring tool for the person to check internally and read their levels of (dis)comfort. It was stressed that consent can be evoked for no apparent reason, or for reasons one is unwilling to share. In this way, the responsibility is shared for deciding whether something feels (mutually) good. Youssef borrowed rope play exercises from the Bondage, Discipline (or Domination), Sadism (or Submission), Masochism (BDSM) community, where there is extensive knowledge about consent in practice (see, for instance Bennett, 2018; Fanghanel, 2020).

While consent in LIMBO seldom concerns physical touch, it is mainly directed to decisions about sharing stories and creative works. These (art) narratives are shared inside the safer space among ourselves and sometimes in public events. For some, this step from private to public depends on the time and space whether they choose to share stories and different layers of meaning connected to the work. As part of how we approach consent as an ongoing practice, as opposed to completing a single consent form at the start, we continuously emphasize that everyone should share if, where, or when, they are ready. All choices are encouraged, although the authors believe there is power in sharing, because it may be inspiring, helpful or courageous. It might connect people, trigger reflection, introspection or bring clarity for the person and/or the receiver.

Safety to Fail

The second principle concerns a focus on learning and growing. In LIMBO this translates into a continuous effort to support everyone to feel safe enough to fail. We encourage taking risks and learn from 'mistakes' without fear, judgement or shame. In terms of art practices, the term 'mistakes' does not really apply. Any drawing or text can be silly or serious, technically 'good' or 'bad'. One does not have to be good at art or sharing stories. It's about learning and discovering together and finding ways to tell our stories. In this sense, group members are all researchers because they engage in some form of internal, external or relational inquiry. This relates to what we discussed about creativity; through playfulness and dwelling in between, as opposed to striving for results, implies that making mistakes, failing, or stumbling is fine or

even encouraged. Because LIMBO members' daily challenges are often intense and overwhelming, we remind ourselves in the workshops to laugh, act in silly ways, dance and enjoy. In 'The Queer Art of Failure' (Halberstam, 2011), it is argued that living up to social norms is overrated and that failure should be celebrated because it points out taken-for-granted forms of exclusion. If the idea is to make the revolution irresistible, queer people, particularly those who are displaced and/or of colour, must (re)learn to joyously embrace failure of living up to social (gender, beauty, relationship, heterosexual, institutional) norms.

In practising being safe to fail, we work with the term 'intentions' for how we choose to be together in that moment. In contrast to terms as rules or guidelines, the term 'intentions' is more active as something for which to strive. Rules are more static because they can be broken or bent. Guidelines may limit one's freedom to act because they suggest certain forms of behaviour. Using intentions is thus both more liberating and also makes it safer to fail. For example, one might unintentionally 'break the rule' of addressing someone with their proper pronouns. Rules that are established together, and unintentionally breaking them, may then trigger feelings of shame, or feelings of (sometimes constant) failure. In using intentions, 'mistakes' are less likely to be seen as problematic, and one can move on more quickly without feeling shame or failure. Moreover, queer activists are often actively breaking rules in terms of dominant norms or standards. Collectively creating intentions is thus a more liberating and inclusive practice because it does not suggest behaviour.

In LIMBO, intentions are co-created and constantly developed and revisited in every meeting. They are collectively listed on a large piece of paper and placed in a prominent spot. In every gathering the list is checked and revised in case anyone wants to add or change something. This is particularly salient when current affairs affect (individuals in) the group. For example, when something occurs in their country of origin – such as war, revolution, natural disaster – they might feel worried about friends and families, feel vulnerable, overwhelmed or easily triggered. The collective remembering, revisiting and listing of intentions becomes an appropriate moment to tune in with oneself and share specific desires or needs – for example, 'don't ask me anything today', 'I just want to sit in a corner' or 'hugs are welcome'.

Simple Instructions

The third principle does not require much clarification. It concerns keeping it simple in terms of tasks and information. A liminal journey can be overwhelming, given that norms, values and ways of being in the world no longer apply. In addition, most participants struggle with stress, depressive thoughts or other mental health issues. Therefore, we have experienced the importance of keeping information to a minimum to create space for a mutual learning experience and limit feelings of being overwhelmed. This is another reason why the focus is not on learning artistic techniques or skills, but rather on reflecting on one's context through creativity.

Belonging

Holding space is important in the context of LIMBO because the aim is to provide a safer, supportive and non-judgemental environment for refugees, who are often approached as a weak group in need of help. This dominant image of refugees as lacking inhibits their chances

of participating and belonging in society, despite various policies aimed at improving their integration (Ghorashi, 2020). According to Brené Brown (2017), belonging is the opposite of fitting in. Therefore, LIMBO offers an alternative approach, rather focusing on belonging in enabling refugees to express themselves freely.

> And when I found you [Fabian] and found LIMBO, I start giving my heart, I start giving my energy, sharing myself, being vulnerable. I open myself in the exhibition to show them how SAFE I fucking feel. […] I found people who also I feel comfortable with to speak up and to be safe to express myself. Maybe my ideas about it [are] very big for some people, but I don't want you to understand. I want to be able to talk. I want to be able to express. I want to be! And if I cannot speak it, I can draw it, I can dance it and create it for you. Just give me the space, give me the time [laughs]. (Neo)

Neo's quote highlights the transformative impact of LIMBO in providing a space where they feel comfortable and safe to share their thoughts and ideas. In this space, they can be vulnerable and express themself without judgement or the need for others to fully understand them. LIMBO gives them the opportunity to be heard, whether through words, art or dance. This sense of freedom is crucial for Neo, as it allows them to break free from the limiting perspective of being seen as lacking and instead to embrace their own agency and creativity.

The significance of creating a safer space for queer refugees became more evident during a specific workshop focused on holding space in the context of clubbing. The workshop took place at the start of a semi-public clubbing LIMBO event that was organized by queer refugee artists for approximately 300 invited guests. To ensure the safety of all attendees, 25 volunteers, mostly LIMBO members, were asked to hold space in short shifts. This preparation included a workshop led by two experienced individuals in organizing queer safer clubbing events (for more context on these events, listen to an interview with one of the organizers here: Van Driel, 2020). The participants were asked to share memories of when they felt truly safe. It was remarkable that a majority of LIMBO members expressed only feeling safe within LIMBO, highlighting the importance of the space in providing a sense of belonging and safety for queer refugees.

Challenges of Holding Space

Holding space for guests at semi-public events is of different nature to doing so in the LIMBO workshops. This is because in public events it is not entirely possible to work 'without trying to impact the outcome […] and let[ting] go of judgment and control' (Plett, 2020, p. 18). The reason is that events are end results in which safety needs to be organized for both the public and the hosts. This makes it important to have clear judgement while trying to control a situation into an outcome that is positive and safe.

In contrast to events, during the workshops it is possible to dwell in between and let go of controlling an outcome. In an ideal situation, the responsibilities of holding space are shared within the group. LIMBO members' shared queer refugee experience and similar challenges faced in the Dutch context, potentially make the group members themselves ideal to hold space for each other's humanity in all its complexities, ambiguities and challenges.

When done successfully, diversity and inclusion are practised by recognizing and supporting similarity and difference at the same time. It has the potential to counter victimizing narratives (Ghorashi, 2018), which is an important aim of research collaborations and co-creation with refugees generally.

However, holding space is intense emotional labour. It becomes increasingly difficult when the narratives are complex, painful, full of trauma and triggers. There are constant challenges refugees face in asylum centres, shelters and their inability to be with their family, finding suitable jobs or places where they feel safe. Under such conditions of ongoing crises, mistakes in holding space are bound to be made even if they're done with the best intentions. In contrast to creativity where mistakes are encouraged, mistakes in holding space can break trust from (individuals in) the group that has been built over time. In view of this, space holders should have proper training, time and resources. Unfortunately, LIMBO does not have the capacity, skills or budget to provide such training, time or resources.

Moreover, if one is holding space for queer refugee narratives, the sharers' needs, emotions and transformation need to be prioritized. This implies that, in addition to proper training, the space holders' needs have to be met elsewhere (Plett, 2020). In the case of LIMBO members as space holders, they often have no support system outside LIMBO – so many members see LIMBO as their family and sometimes jokingly call the organizers 'mom'. The concept of chosen family is not uncommon in queer culture. Particularly in queer ballroom culture, there are 'houses' in which the 'legendary children' are led by the 'mother' of that house (Bailey, 2011). In research methodologies where care is central, especially in the context of queer culture, it is important to remember to care, while keeping a healthy distance and not taking on a 'mother role'. Excessive intimacy can hinder the ability to properly hold space. Plett (2020) argues that holding space is not recommended 'when close is too close', simply because the greater attachment makes it harder 'to let go of the outcome – because the outcome has a direct impact on us' (p. 103). This is why healthy personal, as well as structural (space and time), boundaries are important, because one needs to protect oneself and the group while holding space – particularly because '[m]any people, especially those in crisis mode, are unaware of how much emotional labour they ask of others' (Plett, 2020, p. 87).

DE/RECENTRING

Both decentring and recentring appeared in LIMBO as important conditions for co-creation, as they involve leadership in terms of democratic decision-making and sharing responsibilities. Co-creation entails the ability of those leading the research process (who are generally the researchers but also applies to collaborators or co-creators leading parts of the process) to move in and outside the centre. Decentring involves temporarily letting go of the leading position to become part of the group (Braidotti, 2018). Recentring involves making critical decisions when clear direction is needed. For example, in case of conflicting desires or needs when there are too many captains trying to steer the ship in different directions. By decentring

and recentring, the researcher can actively navigate diverse values and expectations in co-creation projects, which may differ greatly within a group as well as between institutions and communities.

Decentring is described in the literature as essential to 'intimate scholarship'. Transformative engaged scholarship can be seen as a form of intimate scholarship, when the researcher is part of the study and therefore also being researched (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014). The 'researcher being researched' does not necessarily mean by someone else but could also be in the form of rigorous self-reflexivity (Caretta & Riaño, 2016). By allowing the group to take the lead, the researcher can enable the co-creation process to be truly collaborative. Overall, decentring enables the group to take ownership of their own stories and experiences and ensures that the co-creation process is respectful, inclusive and reflective of the group's needs and desires. It allows for a more open and transformative co-creation process that can lead to deeper understanding of and support for the research itself.

In contrast, recentring is important because it involves stepping in as a leader and making decisions when necessary. Additionally, recentring helps make academic knowledge and experience more visible when embracing epistemic multiplicity. While decentring is about stepping back and allowing the group to lead, the notion of recentring recognizes there are times when the researcher's expertise and perspective are valuable in guiding the co-creation process. While the researcher should prioritize the voices and experiences of the participating co-creators, they must also ensure that the general direction and main purpose of the project stays on track. Furthermore, recentring allows the researcher to address potential risky situations or conflicts that arise. The researcher may have to intervene in conflict and guide the group towards resolutions that align with the project's overall goals. Rather than maintaining the complete control over the co-creative research, decentring-recentring is a balanced and dynamic process that requires the researcher to recognize when their expertise and leading role are needed. It is a delicate balance between stepping back and stepping in order to support and facilitate a collaborative and transformative co-creation experience.

What Are the Challenges of Decentring-Recentring?

In the context of LIMBO, this careful navigation of decentring-recentring proved to be challenging. In the first period (LIMBO part I in Fig. 20), Fabian drove the organizing with input from community members with whom they had previously worked. The experience of Trans-Clash was still fresh, which made balancing community needs and theory and former research insights relatively easy. Seven community-led workshops were organized, and the project was supposed to finish with a final presentation in the form of an exhibition at the art institution. The project generated a lot of enthusiasm. Also, the snowball effect worked because the group had grown from six participants in the first workshop to a group of 20 at the public presentation that attracted more than 200 visitors. Given the group's enthusiasm and the feelings of hope, safety and joy it generated, we felt that we needed to continue.

> I felt safe enough to share this with this group and I felt there was the sense of hope being built, and from the conversation that I had with a lot of people

> they really did want this initiative to continue because it represents hope for them. (Musa)

Almost all members asked for LIMBO to continue and expressed concern that it might end. We also received an abundance of positive reactions from the visitors at the public event and saw how LIMBO had a positive transformative influence. As researchers and the art institution, we were equally excited and therefore decided to continue. In terms of research, it meant that we could see what is entailed in making such a project durational and sustainable.

However, in continuing LIMBO (part II in Fig. 20), challenges concerning time and responsibilities arose along the way that needed immediate solutions. Fabian spent many hours co-organizing and co-facilitating workshops, which proved too much alongside other academic commitments. Given the emotional labour of holding space, we sought to shift this responsibility to people in the group. The idea was that the researcher would progressively fully decentre, so that LIMBO members could step in and take on these responsibilities.

However, as LIMBO continued to expand to more than 50 participants and started to be recognized by the wider Dutch LGBTQIA+ community and refugee organizations, the requests for collaborations and responsibilities grew. This was received with enthusiasm by the organizers and group members. It fostered feelings of finally belonging in the Dutch context in ways that suit them. For some, the hope that LIMBO represented became a goal of making it into a permanent job – especially for those who had been struggling for many years to find work in the Netherlands and longed to move out of the uncertainty and challenges of living in their continuous liminal state. In LIMBO, they felt that their expertise of in-betweenness was finally recognized and that they could use this knowledge and creativity to reach a more stable situation, both financially and emotionally. While Fabian tried to manage expectations, they also didn't want to kill or put brakes on hopes and dreams.

In reality, Fabian failed to decentre. From their perspective, the initial focus had shifted from holding space for workshop participants to now also guiding and accommodating the needs and desires of organizers and workshop leaders. This was not only more work, but the work itself was also of a different nature. Holding space is not controlling the outcome (Plett, 2020), which is more in line with a task of a researcher, to observe and analyse without intervening. In contrast, organizing is meant to control an outcome in terms of content, scheduling, safety measures and so forth. We communicated boundaries in what we as organizers could do and what was beyond our capacity. However, in trying to keep up with the growing enthusiasm and requests for more events, the boundaries became blurred. We were spending increasingly more time listening to ideas for new initiatives and collaborations with other organizations.

Although we kept explaining that we could not support 'outside LIMBO projects', we were continuing to give support in terms of listening and sometimes advising. This was a gradual process, which made it difficult to start establishing clear boundaries. Given the pressure of growth expectations within the group, the organizers and Fabian in particular were slowly but steadily becoming overwhelmed with all this growth and enthusiasm. The stakes for the organizers also became higher and conflicting desires among LIMBO members affected our core task of holding space together as a team. This meant that in situations of

conflict between LIMBO members, Fabian needed to be involved in resolution or mediation. The increase in communication and guidance, while trying to hold space for everyone's ideas and dreams, became too much and Fabian was forced to temporarily step back due to symptoms of burnout.

During the necessary break for healing and reflection, a few things became evident. For LIMBO part III (Fig. 20), Fabian had to recentre and establish clear boundaries, particularly in terms of time and space. We realized that for the project to be sustainable, we could only hold space during contained meetings. We had to shift back to the original idea of simply holding space for queer refugee narratives, without trying to guide the growth of community organizers. In addition, rather than different people organizing different workshops, which was the case in the first two periods, we found two experienced people with more 'relational distance' to facilitate all the workshops for the entire last period. These facilitators have a (forced) migration background but are not relationally entangled with the group. Our aim thus shifted from co-organizing and co-holding space, to more 'experienced outsiders' holding space. We believe that this is better because of the greater emotional distance, which makes it easier to 'let go of controlling an outcome' (Plett, 2020), in an attempt to remove (result-oriented) stress.

Because Fabian was forced to decide on this re-evaluation and new direction and was thus not co-created with the group, it posed the question of horizontal versus hierarchical decision-making. If decisions are made in a top-down fashion, does it still align with a democratic approach where the group's input and voices are considered? The answer to this question relates to the context and general aim of the project. If its aim exceeds holding space for narratives to co-organizing a long-term project, then the necessary resources and support need to be in place. In fact, LIMBO is inspired by Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki's research in South Africa as part of the Global Grace project (GlobalGRACE, 2018), where there was extensive support in terms of therapists, conflict mediators and so on. In LIMBO, we realized later the need to keep it smaller and simpler because we had been seduced by the enthusiasm and growth. Fortunately, the group expressed a lot of care and understanding of this decision to go back to the core essence, as most members desired first and foremost a space to express their narratives safely and creatively.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has delved into the potential of transformative engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees through the lens of the LIMBO project. Our exploration was guided by the principles of transformative and critical academic work, which seek to challenge established power dynamics, biases and discriminatory practices while fostering inclusivity and equity. We have shown how this requires an act of decentring to create the necessary space for co-creation in knowledges that are often excluded in the process of academic knowledge production. Even when voices of disadvantaged communities are included in research there is often a lack of meaningful engagement with such perspectives as integral part of knowledge production. This means that a selective inclusion of those voices does not challenge the

normalized assumptions inherent in much research. This is partly to do with the fact that acts of decentring make scholars vulnerable in the process of knowledge production. We also aimed to show how such vulnerability can become a strength when this form of scholarship contributes to transformation at the level of individual co-creators and of the group as a whole. Transformative academic engagement goes beyond mere description and documentation in recognizing agency and creativity, while following the perspectives of marginalized communities as leaders in the process. Within the context of this co-creative project, three pivotal conditions emerged that underpinned this transformative process: creativity, holding space and the dynamic interplay of de/recentring.

Creativity in LIMBO is seen as the possibility of unsettling and liberating oneself from normalized positioning. The liminal space of LIMBO allows individuals to temporarily suspend social expectations and explore their identities within the new (Dutch) context. The playful and creative atmosphere of LIMBO provides a sense of relief from daily stress and struggles, promoting joy and tuning into what feels good. Creativity allows individuals to move away from the pressure to fit into social norms, in reference to queerness and refugeeness. The transformative potential of LIMBO is evident at the individual, group and public levels. At the individual level, LIMBO encourages tuning into oneself without the pressure to produce specific outcomes. At a group level, the mutual learning experience fosters bonds and a sense of collectivity and kinship among the participants. At the public level, LIMBO's public presentations and co-created publications serve as platforms to share stories and art, enabling public reflexivity.

Holding space is a crucial element in the context of LIMBO as it provides a safer and supportive environment for queer refugees. This non-judgemental space allows them to freely express themselves without feeling inadequate. However, holding space also involves intense emotional labour, especially when narratives are complex and traumatic. It is essential to prioritize the needs and emotions of the sharers and provide proper training and/or support for the space holders.

Decentring and recentring are other important aspects in the co-creation process, involving stepping in and back as leaders when needed and making the value of academic knowledge more visible. While holding space is aligned with decentring as it encourages autonomy and decision-making, recentring requires making critical decisions that may challenge certain values or may not fully align with the ideas of (everyone in) the group. The challenges of recentring and decentring in LIMBO are thus multifaceted and require careful navigation. In LIMBO, we were seduced by the enthusiasm, growth and visible transformations that occurred, but realized that we had to keep it simple and go back to the essential core of holding space for queer refugee narratives.

Overall, transformative engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees in LIMBO offers a space for the agency of queer refugees, enabling them to challenge social norms and create their own narratives on their own terms. At the same time, it is important to recognize the challenges and complexities in maintaining these conditions and to continuously adapt and evolve the co-creation process to best serve the needs and desires of the participants, while honouring the organizers' emotional, practical and structural capacity and boundaries.



Figure 21. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 20 February 2022.

CHAPTER 5

Through Art We Co-Create Care: Insights from a Rhizomatic Queer Community

Fabian Holle, Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz & Sajad Salmanpour

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we show how care, healing, and belonging can emerge through art-based, community-engaged research with LGBTQIA+ refugees in the Netherlands in the context of the LIMBO project: a collaborative workshop series centred on storytelling and creative practice. Drawing on participants' and our own experiences as facilitators of the workshops and authors of this chapter, we show how LIMBO was co-created as a flexible, non-compulsory space where queer refugees could share reflections through writing, drawing, sculpting, and other artistic forms while collectively shaping the project itself. Against deficit-oriented approaches in refugee studies, we focused on a desire-based methodology that foregrounds participants' full humanity, creativity, agency, and aspirations rather than framing them primarily through need, trauma, or lack. Situating LIMBO within a broader Dutch context marked by neoliberal individualism, exclusion, and rising hostility, we argue for reciprocal, non-paternalistic research approaches that centre solidarity and agency, enabling positive transformation on personal and group levels. Drawing on feminist care ethics, the Filipino concept of kapwa (shared self), and the theory of the rhizome, we conceptualize LIMBO as a rhizomatic queer community: decentralized, relational, and sustained through fluid, interconnected forms of knowledge-making and mutual support. Healing emerged not as a predetermined goal, but through artistic expression, emotional openness, and reciprocal care. At the same time, we acknowledge the challenges of sustaining such spaces, including the shifting, and unevenness, of care practices.

INTRODUCTION

> It is Monday the 25th of September 2023. Today is the first LIMBO workshop after a break of nearly six months. We are sitting around the table in anticipation of what is to come. It is the first time Lana and Rochita facilitate the workshop. It is one of few times we meet on Monday instead of the usual Sunday afternoon. Sajad is in the other room preparing soup. We decide to slowly start. Rochita suggests doing a round and instead of introducing ourselves, share something that made us happy this week. Everyone gives it a try although we see some questioning faces. Some expressed that they can't think of anything happy because of a difficult day

or week. Fabian, having taken a step back during a challenging period, expressed gratitude for the new team that had formed. The room resonated with stories of personal struggles, with one participant sharing the emotional impact of LIMBO's break on her life. She can't hold back her tears. Fabian then also tears up. She takes a moment to compose herself. The soup is ready. We eat and Fabian addresses the question of how to make queer flexible caring spaces like LIMBO sustainable: "Hopefully, now after a time of healing and reflecting, LIMBO is organized in such a way that the workshops can continue, regardless of what happens." Tears flowed freely, vulnerability was embraced and understood. The group acknowledged the importance of sustainability, recognizing that the burden couldn't rest solely on few individuals. Fabian highlighted the need for a collective effort. Lana encouraged emotional openness, emphasizing that tears were as welcome as any other emotions.

We move upstairs and Lana starts with three prompts around care: (1) Care for me is, (2) How I show care, and (3) How I want to be cared for. Everyone writes their reflections on small notes and sticks them to the wall (see Fig. 23). Like this, we collectively develop and establish the concept of care. We acknowledge that both members and facilitators need care. All group members offer their perspectives, emphasizing aspects like feeling seen and listened to, providing emotional support, and creating space for others.

In this chapter, we unpack community care with and for uprooted LGBTQIA+ individuals facing challenges of exclusion and non-belonging in the Netherlands. Specifically, we draw insights from experiences of LGBTQIA+ forced migrants (hereafter referred to as queer refugees[16]), that are part of the collaborative and creative research project LIMBO. LIMBO, referring to liminality or in-betweenness, is a workshop series in which queer refugees are invited to share stories and reflections via a range of artistic practices, such as writing, drawing, and sculpting. We chose the name LIMBO to acknowledge the challenges of those experiencing liminality while at the same time (re)claiming it as having potential for creativity and critical reflexivity (Turner, 1969; Said, 1994). Much like how the term "queer" was originally a slur and then reclaimed by the LGBTQIA+ community as a pride reclamation, highlighting its potential for unsettling normativity (Jeshion, 2020).

Fabian Holle, the first author of this chapter, initiated LIMBO in close collaboration with queer refugee community members and the art institution Framer Framed based on

[16] "Queer" or "refugees" are contested labels and need to be used with care and in accordance with what participants themselves prefer. Many LIMBO members use the term queer to describe themselves while referring to the political meaning of challenging imposed societal norms (Jagose, 1996). Some do not use "queer" to refer to themselves or others identifying as LGBTQIA+, but rather terms as lesbian or gay. Here, we use "queer" as both umbrella term and activist position. The term "refugee" often carries negative and essentialist connotations. By highlighting positive aspects of displaced positionalities as noted by Malkki (1992), we aim to counter such essentialism.

previous academic community engagement.[17] LIMBO is part of their[18] PhD research examining the opportunities and challenges of engaged scholarship with queer refugees. Fabian coordinates the project and co-authors Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, and Sajad Salmanpour facilitate the workshops. We, as authors of this chapter, facilitators and organizers of the LIMBO workshops, are entangled with the group as partial insider-outsiders (Karimi, 2020). We each contribute in different capacities and from different backgrounds. We will share personal narratives throughout, to create a better understanding of the collaboration and how our specific knowledges and views became entangled and mutually influenced. Over the course of this long-term project,[19] which is ongoing and, as we write this in September 2024, has included 40 workshop days and 13 (semi-)public events in two-and-a-half years, LIMBO has provided a unique opportunity to observe and experience its impact on individual members and the collective.

LIMBO members are diverse in terms of religion, age (ranging between 19 and 51 years old), gender identity, sexuality, educational, professional, cultural and national background (Ugandan, Nigerian, Congolese, Iranian, Syrian, and Lebanese to name a few). The majority that actively engages within the workshops are in the asylum procedure. Many members travel for hours from asylum centres in, for instance, Heerlen or Dronten to reach Amsterdam, all while managing numerous responsibilities and oftentimes grappling with mental health. Pinpointing the number of LIMBO members is challenging, but at the time of writing in September 2024, the WhatsApp group has 61 members, with some having already left this medium and others no longer active. At this moment, 79 queer refugees have participated in at least one, oftentimes multiple, workshops.[20] Some members come back after months of not participating. Others have only participated or volunteered at semi-public LIMBO events, while few others have engaged without having a refugee background, such as friends, allies, creative professionals, or (student) researchers, usually LGBTQIA+ and often with a migration experience.

Before Lana and Rochita joined the team, the workshops were facilitated by different (queer, refugee) artists practicing different media. Twenty-four artists and organizers have co-facilitated at least one LIMBO workshop, with almost all of them being LGBTQIA+ and all having a migration background. Although this constantly switching up generated lots of energy because of newness in facilitators, ideas, perspectives, and styles, we decided to focus on creating more stability and consistency by sticking with recurring facilitators. It was simply too much to continuously find, instruct, and host new workshop facilitators. Over time, we collectively developed certain practices and ways of facilitation, which had to be shared

[17] Before LIMBO, there were two other co-creative projects initiated by Fabian Holle: Art for Change and Trans-Clash. Insights from both collaborations led to the co-creation of LIMBO.
[18] Fabian uses they/them pronouns.
[19] LIMBO started in January 2022 and is ongoing. The first eight weeks were organized and funded as part of the NWO VICI project Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, led by Prof. Halleh Ghorashi. After deciding to continue, we received funding from the Amsterdam Fund for "Cultuurparticipatie" [translates to participation in culture] for two years for the overarching project Through Art We Care, which LIMBO and one other project are part of. The title of this chapter is derived from this project's title. We received another year of funding for the period June 2024 until June 2025 from ILGA-Europe, which is an initiative supported by the European Union.
[20] Update September 2025: At the time of final edits, LIMBO had organized 49 workshops and 16 (semi-)public events, with over 100 different workshop participants attending at least one session (often multiple).

beforehand so that workshops could be prepared accordingly. Such practices include holding space for a range of stories and emotions while allowing it to be uncomfortable at times (Cairo, 2021; Plett, 2020), creating intentions for the day, moments of moving and dancing, games, check-ins and -outs, sharing reflections on creative assignments, and starting each session with preparing and eating soup and snacks (see also Holle et al., 2024).

Yet despite this richness of perspectives, the group was structurally lacking the capacity to address mental health issues within the community until Lana and Rochita joined. We worked and collaborated on creating a caring support network, but in an extended period of accumulated stress, the burden of caring-about, caring-for, and caring-with lay too much on Fabian. This eventually led Fabian to develop psychosomatic symptoms of burnout. Therefore, they had to stop working for a period to reflect and heal. Unfortunately, this meant that the LIMBO workshops were also paused for six months. The network of care was not (yet) strong enough to support and continue without Fabian present. Sajad and other LIMBO members stayed connected with the group via WhatsApp and suggested different queer events to go to instead of the workshops. Even though the period of forced distance was challenging, it brought clarity on how to make LIMBO sustainable. That is when and why Lana and Rochita joined the team, focusing on developing practices of care collectively.

From Deficit to Desire

Through creative workshops, members engage in a co-creative process of knowledge-making through story creation. This narrative approach, rooted in critical theory in praxis (O'Neill, 2008), is a type of research methodology that addresses and unsettles research that start from a "deficit-approach" in refugee studies (Ghorashi, 2023; Malkki, 1992). In such research, images of refugees as lacking and in need of help (e.g., to improve language skills, networking, volunteering, Dutch norms and values, etc.) are being reproduced because the starting point is that refugees lack certain skills (or liberal western values) for "proper" integration/assimilation. Such a deficit-approach can be detrimental because it strengthens and reproduces already dominant images of refugees as "victims in need of saving," reinforcing a dichotomy of the "other" as inferior because they need help, and the "us" as superior because "we" (supposedly know how to) help. Hence, a deficit-approach focuses on *parts* that are lacking and need improvement instead of focusing on one's *full* humanity which includes all of one's experiences, skills, and challenges.

In health science, such a fullness perspective is called a salutogenic approach, a term coined by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1996), which contrasts with a pathogenic approach focusing on parts causing disease. Lana endorses this salutogenic perspective, focusing on fullness and wholeness in addressing trauma. "At its core, salutogenesis looks at health as a continuum, where the goal is not merely the absence of disease but the presence of vibrant health and well-being" (Jelenjev, 2024a).

By focusing on art practices co-developed with, by, and for the community we aim to counter a deficit- into a desire-based approach. "[D]esire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). For us, a desire-based approach departs from consent as an ongoing practice. This means that ways of engagement are optional and based on feeling good,

preferably enthusiastic, about it (see also Holle et al., 2024). Therefore, we aim to create a non-compulsory and adaptable space in which members are excited about engaging. We do so by tailoring to both individual and collective desires, aiming to mutually benefit everyone involved (Kajner, 2013). Instead of studies focusing on what refugees need in order to integrate, we acknowledge everyone's full humanity by foregrounding the narratives, experiences, and aspirations of queer uprooted individuals on their own terms. We start by thinking together about content and form of knowledge co-creation and stay reflexive on power dynamics while sharing responsibility in co-creation, co-facilitation, co-organizing, and sometimes co-curation. In doing so, the knowledge co-produced departs from individual and collective skills and creativity instead of deficiencies. Without brushing over the many challenges queer refugees face, we believe that "[d]esire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (Tuck, 2009, p. 417). We shared moments of grief and despair due to loss of loved ones. Few participants shared losing their mother during the perilous journey over sea, while fleeing danger and violence in their countries of origin. Other times, we share joy and laughter, through silly dancing, jokes, or relatable reflections on certain topics.

Authored by facilitators of the LIMBO project, this chapter highlights a desire-based narrative approach, which we observe and experience as healing. We perceive LIMBO as a rhizomatic queer community, that mitigates the persistent challenges this community faces within a neoliberal context fuelling individualization, hostility, and carelessness. First, we briefly zoom out to the societal context to explain why many queer refugees struggle with belonging in the Dutch context. Then, we will highlight one workshop as an example of how we co-create care within our narrative approach. We then follow with stories' healing potential, to then conceptualize LIMBO as a rhizomatic queer community.

Context of Carelessness

Neoliberalism's pervasive influence, as articulated in *The Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), relegates care practices that are not profit-oriented to the periphery. Market-mediated and commoditized forms of care and well-being take precedence, while communal care and broader forms of social solidarity are marginalized (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). The ideal citizen in this paradigm is resilient and autonomous, cultivating a culture of self-sufficiency, self-care, and promoting a mentality of caring for "one's own" at the expense of solidarity amongst differences (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Safety and protection of "one's own" are prioritized, and practices of surveillance and policing increase as opposed to forms of solidarity and investing in social provisions (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Hence, communal care and solidarity are undermined by a careless context of profit-driven imperatives, individualism, and protection of "one's own."

Furthermore, the neoliberal emphasis on individual autonomy and care encompasses both self-care and wellness (Baker, 2022; LeClerc, 2022) as well as caring for one's own. In her book *Doppelganger*, Naomi Klein (2023), unpacks the alliance between wellness and self-care cultures and far-right populism, showing how practices often framed as liberatory or apolitical can slide into conspiratorial and exclusionary ideologies. She highlights how discourses of bodily autonomy and purity can be weaponized to reinforce exclusionary politics

and cultivate suspicion toward public institutions. This dynamic was particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, when parts of the wellness and self-care milieu aligned with anti-vaccination movements, rejecting vaccination as a matter of individual choice and refusing solidarity with communities most at risk, such as the elderly, immunocompromised, and other vulnerable groups. Such emphases on self-reliance and caring only for one's own can enable far-right populism, in which uncaring communities emerge and groups pit "one's own" against "the other," forming identities rooted in exclusion and animosity. In such environments, hostility toward marginalized groups, such as immigrants or LGBTQIA+ communities, gains traction (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

The Netherlands is a good example. Its current political climate is marked by the previous electoral success of the PVV, which translates to Party for Freedom, an extreme right-wing populist party led by Geert Wilders. The PVV advocates for a vision of freedom that is distinctly exclusive. Freedom for Wilders is tethered to a particular demographic: the primarily white, working-class native Dutch citizens. His rhetoric delineates a distinction between "ordinary" Dutch people and those perceived as outsiders, particularly targeting Muslim communities and advocating policies that echo Islamophobia (Betz, 2021). Besides Wilders' claim that Islam is a dangerous and extreme ideology as opposed to a religion or spiritual practice, he also criticizes what he calls "gender madness," framing queer and trans activism as harmful gender ideology. Unsurprisingly, discrimination rises in such hostile environment:

> Last year, the police and anti-discrimination agencies received an increasing number of reports of discrimination, particularly concerning antisemitism and discrimination against Muslims. There was also a rise in reports from transgender individuals. This marks the fourth consecutive year of increasing reports. (NOS, 2024, translated from Dutch)

This reflects what LIMBO members share. In different stages of life, in or outside the asylum procedure, they mention hardly ever feeling safe to be oneself in the Netherlands. Which is paradoxical because besides fleeing from war or local conflict, being safe to be queer is oftentimes the reason to seek refuge elsewhere. Exclusion in the Dutch context can be subtle or blatant, which is why many queer refugees feel unsafe or unwelcome in work or study environments, clubbing, or asylum centres. Subtle forms of exclusion include dominant discourses portraying refugees as victims or incompatible with so-called Dutch national culture (Mepschen et al., 2010). In terms of blatant violence, LIMBO members regularly share stories of queer and transgender refugees being harassed or attacked in asylum centres or in the night economy. Most keep their head down to avoid (negative) attention or harassment. Those who choose to dress and act extravagantly risk confrontation in the public domain.

Additionally, LIMBO members mention that it is hard to stay hopeful in what feels like a never-ending cycle of global violence, ranging from light worry to feelings of desperation and powerlessness about families' and (former) communities' safety and well-being due to continuous and ongoing conflict in other parts of the world. For instance, the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the Iranian Women, Life, Freedom movement, and earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. Some have lost loved ones and are not able to be with family in times of grief and

mourning. They express that there is hardly ever an extended period of peace and quiet to focus on healing, mourning, or recovery due to the ongoing worry and pain. Considering these ongoing and oftentimes accumulating challenges, LIMBO becomes a vital moment of communal care and healing.

These moments of communal care have also positively impacted co-author Sajad. Sajad obtained a master's degree in Sociology from the University of Tehran, Iran. Currently, he works as a research assistant in the project, bridging queer refugee communities and academia. Sajad's journey as a refugee from Iran is marked by challenges and resilience, serving as an exemplar of the complexities faced by queer refugees in navigating both personal and cultural landscapes. Sharing personal stories with peers, particularly within the queer community and among refugees, became a source of inspiration. He realized the power of collective sharing and listening to others' stories as a means of finding inspiration and strength. Through these exchanges, Sajad gained insights into the shared challenges of their community and recognizes the importance of solidarity. He has committed himself to giving back to their community by using his own experiences to inspire and support others facing similar difficulties. Moreover, LIMBO inspired him professionally to co-found a separate queer organization focusing on transitioning to the labour market. His multifaceted identity is shaped by contrasting cultural backgrounds, family dynamics, and academic pursuits. Sajad navigates the intricacies of self-discovery, migration, academic challenges, and personal loss, enriching our understanding of the complexities inherent in identity, resilience, and process of transformation.

Care

When we authors share our personal stories about care, community, and transformation, we recognize the risk of romanticizing these concepts. The word "care" itself often carries idealized or sentimental associations. Therefore, it's important to critically explore and unpack the question: What do we mean by "care"? Care refers to a wide array of concepts and actions. It encompasses notions of nurturing, attentiveness, safeguarding, maintenance, empathy, mindfulness, caution, precision, accountability, affection, and even desire (e.g., "Care for some tea?"). Whether we're discussing caring for someone or something, being careful in our actions, or simply expressing concern, "care" touches upon a multitude of sentiments and responsibilities. In *The Care Manifesto*, care is explained as

> a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. Above all, to put care centre stage means recognizing and embracing our interdependencies. (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 5)

Embracing interdependencies, in the sense of establishing mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and caring relationships has been and remains a central tenet of our research collaboration. In *Matters of Care* (2017), Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa unpacks care in a variety of research contexts. She critically (re)considers works of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway and refers to the following similar definition of care by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer:

> [Care] includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fischer & Tronto, 1990, as cited in De la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 198)

Even though De la Bellacasa acknowledges the generic nature of this definition, she probes further into its different elements, expanding beyond the traditional understanding of care as merely care work to encompass a broader range of agencies and actions. De la Bellacasa emphasizes that care is more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and practical agencies with tangible and material consequences. This conception of care highlights life's interconnectedness and interdependency, recognizing the intrinsic bonds that tie individuals and communities together emphasizing collective well-being over mere individual autonomy and resilience.

For us, these definitions are excellent starting points because they align with our salutogenic, more holistic perception of healing. Lana and Rochita, both originally from the Philippines, explain care through the Filipino concept of "kapwa." Kapwa reflects interconnectedness, shared identity, and communal support across diverse backgrounds and experiences (De Guia, 2005, 2013; Jelenjev, 2024b).

> The core of Filipino personhood is kapwa. This notion of a "shared Self" extends the I to include the Other. It bridges the deepest individual recess of a person with anyone outside him or herself, even total strangers. (De Guia, 2005, p. 28)

In contrast to neoliberal highly individualized societies fuelling a general aversion to embracing dependency (De la Bellacasa, 2017), for kapwa-inspired individuals, community care is second nature. Kapwa inspires a relational, people-centred orientation, committed to community care through everyday actions, from volunteering to sharing resources, skills, and knowledge (De Guia, 2013). In LIMBO, we engage with such forms of relationality and community care in relying on each other for emotional, psychological, and sometimes practical support.

> Mutual support, underpinned by Kapwa, manifests in various forms of bayanihan, or communal unity and cooperation. From physical acts of helping neighbours move their house to pooling resources for a community project, Kapwa is the driving force behind these collective efforts. It also finds expression in emotional and psychological support, where the joys and sorrows of one are felt by all. This sense of shared responsibility and mutual care is a testament to the power of Kapwa in fostering resilient communities that thrive on empathy, understanding, and a profound connection to one another. (Jelenjev, 2024b)

The vignette at the beginning of this chapter describes a workshop that specifically centred on care. In this session, we collectively described care as a multifaceted concept that involves

feeling seen, listened to, and understood. The group emphasized the importance of sensing each other's feelings and needs, supporting one another, and paying attention to what someone may be going through (see Fig. 23). Feeling safe and valued, where one's existence matters to someone else, was highlighted as an essential aspect of care. Participants noted that care includes making space for others, listening, and acknowledging their needs. The group stressed the importance of being there for each other, whether through helping, offering a smile, or providing a hug. Effective care, in the group's view, involves understanding, clear communication, and mutual respect. Many emphasized the importance of truly being present, whether by checking in about how someone is feeling or by actively listening without judgment. Some participants shared that they express care by reaching out through calls or conversations, offering advice when appropriate, and being available to help when needed. Others mentioned showing love and support by being present in the moment, making time for others, and engaging in fun activities together. They noted the value of being sensitive to the emotions of themselves and others and respecting others' thoughts and ideas. Being respected, particularly in terms of boundaries and personal space, was highlighted as crucial. Others noted the importance of feeling at home and receiving comforting gestures like offering soup or spending time together. Sensitivity to emotions and the environment was valued, with participants appreciating when others carefully sense their needs and check in with them. Overall, being listened to, understood, and loved, especially during difficult times, was a recurring theme.

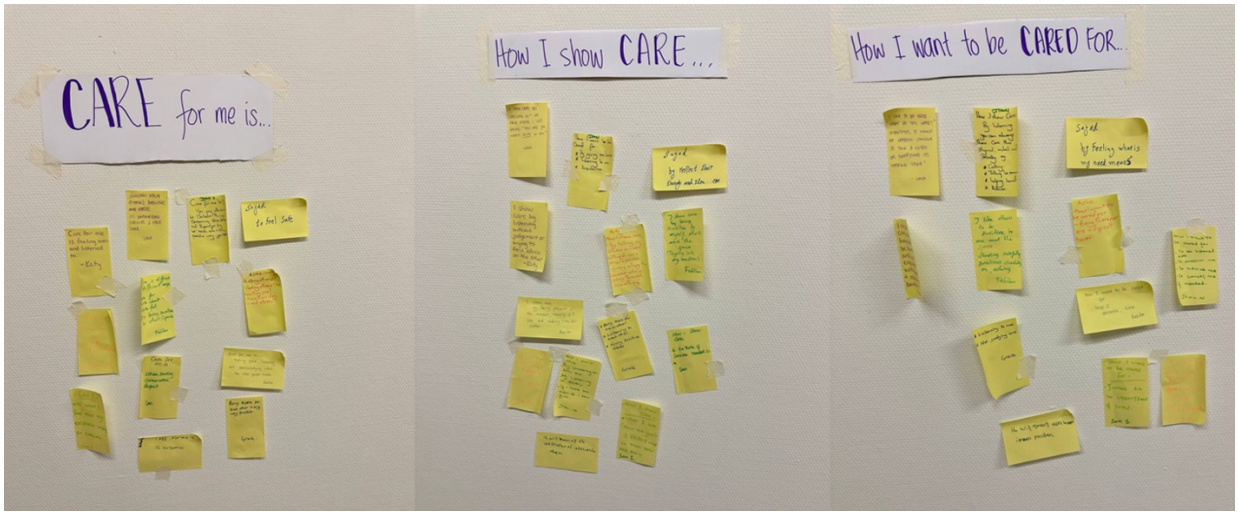


Figure 22. All contributions in Lana's three prompts around care[5] during LIMBO workshop, 25 September 2023.

Healing Through Stories

After thinking collectively about care, the workshop transitioned into a creative session led by Rochita. Rochita facilitates LIMBO workshops as an artist with a focus on creative writing. Her journey is a tapestry of self-discovery and navigating societal norms as a queer individual growing up in a conservative environment in Banaue, Ifugao, the Philippines. Through her experience of uprootment, perpetual feelings of being in limbo, dealing with different languages

[5] All photos in this chapter were taken by Sajad Salmanpour on September 25, 2023.

and related challenges of fitting in, she learned the responsibilities that come with being a writer for underrepresented voices. One pivotal moment is receiving the Octavia Butler scholarship, a significant breakthrough for a Filipino writer entering predominantly white spaces. Rochita mostly writes Science Fiction and advocates for the equal value of imaginative storytelling, irrespective of cultural roots or personal pain. She engages with decolonization practices in this field, underscoring the ongoing struggle against stereotypes, defying expectations tied to cultural backgrounds, while emphasizing the universal value of diverse stories that transcend cultural or personal boundaries. Her engagement with the queer migrant community becomes platforms for exploring and expressing queer narratives, to explore concepts not openly addressed in the Philippines, outside of the toxicity of exclusionary attitudes.

Through clay, LIMBO members crafted their visions of alternative universes (see Fig. 24). Each piece represented an artifact from a unique world, such as "tunnel of hope"; a Pokémon-inspired creation; a pizza table by someone who simply wants to eat pizza while going through chemo therapy treatment; a time clock device which heals all wounds; a growing forest of fruits and plants that would always harvest anything; a family of little shape-shifting aliens that can transform into humans; a shape-shifting artifact on a planet that is constantly transforming; rings symbolizing connection; two separately made cradles of healing; a magical heart that by touching it, one's broken or heavy heart would be healed; and an ancient Persian artifact of a gender-neutral person with wings. Side note, the maker of the latter confessed they peed behind the actual one located in a deserted spot in Iran, sparking a burst of laughter.

The objects and accompanying stories are about love, healing, and connection. After a short break, the final part of the workshop focused on collectively displaying the creations on a large paper. Rochita encouraged to add colours and text, turning the individual pieces into a collective artwork.



Figure 23. Clay creations made during a LIMBO workshop, 25 September 2023.

In our check-out, we briefly shared how we felt. Nearly everyone shared leaving happier and more hopeful. There was a sense of connection through shared vulnerability, and a collective commitment to building a caring community. The workshop was marked by tears, laughter, and imaginative clay creations, shared experiences, and support for one another. While each workshop centres on different creative practices, we've chosen to highlight this one as an example of our desire-based salutogenic approach. Over the following sessions, it became evident that our commitment to listening to and starting from the community's desires from the project's outset helped build a foundation of trust. This trust was essential in reconnecting the group after the hiatus.

Dina Georgis (2013) emphasizes the role of stories in shaping collective histories, identities, and political imaginaries in her book *The Better Story, Queer Affects from the Middle East*. She suggests that stories are emotional resources that help us navigate trauma, loss, and difficulty. By examining stories psychoanalytically or metonymically, we see they are not merely accounts of events but also symbolic elaborations of human experiences, offering narrative coherence and understanding. In essence, every story is invented to enable us to continue living, representing our strategies for coping with suffering and difficulty (Georgis, 2013).

Healing, for us, is not about brokenness but more a natural progression in life. It's synonymous with transformation and growth, and we believe the workshops facilitate these processes both individually and collectively. In LIMBO, members explore their feelings,

thoughts, and experiences. Through creative processes, they may uncover hidden emotions, gain insight into their struggles, and find catharsis in creative expression (O'Neill, 2008; Holle et al., 2024). Members imagine alternative realities and construct narratives that offer solace and hope. Art practices can be tools for navigating pain and difficulty, leading to deeper self-understanding. Creative activities like writing, drawing, or shaping clay can cultivate a sense of agency and meaningful symbols of hope. For instance, the clay sculptures (Fig. 24) represent members' emotional responses to their experiences, such as the pizza table symbolizing a desire for comfort and normalcy during the challenging process of chemotherapy, while the magical heart represents the universal longing for healing and wholeness.

In line with Georgis (2013), we believe stories shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world. Sharing stories and experiences also contributes to a collective narrative of solidarity. Creating and supporting one another cultivates strong bonding enhancing a healing process. Members build empathy and understanding. They can lean on one another for encouragement and inspiration, recognizing that healing is not solitary but a collective endeavour. This aligns with adrienne maree brown reflecting on her experience with "Generative Somatics" and the way

> it feels into how, in a collective or group, patterns of pain can indicate the mass, or intergenerational, trauma people are surviving. And how each of us has the power to help each other feel more, heal, and move toward our longings for liberation and justice together. (brown, 2019, p. 275)

Indeed, healing for us is connected to social and historical contexts. By sharing stories, we acknowledge the interconnectedness of personal and collective narratives and reflect on systemic injustices and a desire for social change. The workshops provide opportunities to explore and address social issues such as trauma, marginalization, and illness, contributing to a collective narrative of transformation and hope. Storytelling, whether through clay or otherwise, is central to all workshops. It becomes a method for social inquiry, contributing to a shared understanding of personal challenges in relation to the societal context. Even though the workshops were not designed for healing, it emerges through creative expression, emotional exploration, and community care.

Lana, a self-proclaimed community alchemist, guides and facilitates positive transformation in the context of groups or businesses. Lana argues for a reconnection to the innate salutogenic understanding of healing, drawing inspiration from ancestral practices. Drawing from Dr. Shawn Ginwright's (2018) healing-centred engagement approach, Lana came to understand that we are more than our adversities and trauma. She co-founded the Neurodiversity foundation and works with the concept of "settled bodies," emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals in a regulated state and their potential to radiate positivity and healing to others. She writes among many things on nervous system regulation and the possibilities of relearning social responses. As a decolonization activist, Lana acknowledges the impact of colonized histories on personal narratives. She shares a narrative of uprootment and being perceived as the "black sheep" in familial relationships, largely due to her activism and life choices. After leaving the Philippines, Lana has resided in the Netherlands for over 15 years, encountering challenges in forging a sense of home and belonging. Lana resonates with

the concept of re-rooting or rather rerouting (Ghorashi, 2014). Her connections are rooted in people rather than a specific place, aligning with a more interconnected and flexible approach to identity. This fluid, networked understanding of identity echoes the concept of a queer rhizomatic community, where connections grow in multiple, non-linear directions, challenging traditional, fixed notions of belonging and selfhood.

Queer Rhizomatic Community

> The Latin root of the word "extravagant" means "to wander outside or beyond." It is a good word for mycelium, which ceaselessly wanders outside and beyond its limits, none of which are pre-set, as they are in most animal bodies. Mycelium is a body without a body plan. (Sheldrake, 2021, p. 55)

Many LIMBO members have no, or a very limited, caring or supportive network outside of LIMBO, because they were forced to leave their families and communities behind in their countries of origin. In many instances, their own families and former communities are the reasons for seeking refuge elsewhere, making a sense of belonging crucial for those who have been ostracized from their families and communities of origin. Many members regard LIMBO as more than a community, they refer to it as family, a source of profound support and belonging in a country where they are marginalized and excluded.

The LIMBO community can be understood as rhizomatic because it embraces fluidity and flexibility, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The term "rhizomatic" refers to a mode of growth or organization characterized by multiple, interconnected nodes rather than a centralized structure. In this case, it suggests that the bonds within LIMBO are fluid and interconnected, resembling the spread of mycelium, the underground network of fungi. In LIMBO, the rhizomatic model applies to (1) the fluctuating composition of the group, (2) knowledge co-creation, and (3) co-creating communal care.

Rhizomatic Group Composition

The non-obligatory character leads to a constantly changing composition of the group. Workshop attendance fluctuates, with some attending sporadically and others more consistently, ranging from as few as three to as many as twenty-two members each time. Although navigating this level of (un)commitment presents challenges, we argue that a flexible queer space is important because even those who aren't actively engaging in LIMBO's activities feel a sense of belonging to the group, thanks to its non-obligatory, yet always welcoming character.

Rhizomatically Co-creating Knowledge

In the rhizomatic model, knowledge construction takes on a decentralized and community-centric approach (Cormier, 2008). Knowledge produced in the process informs and shapes practices within LIMBO, creating a dynamic exchange where mutual learning is at the core of the collective journey. The community itself becomes the curriculum, cultivating real-time negotiation and construction of knowledge in an entangled web of relations. This enables a

non-hierarchical, and reciprocal way of co-creation, which in turn contributes to a sense of connection, ownership, and agency (Cormier, 2008).

We observed that ownership and agency in the community-centric approach activates members in thinking about content and form within the workshops. The knowledge produced is not merely about members' experiences in the Dutch context, former contexts or migration, it also entails knowledge about content and form of the workshop itself. Some ask for better time-management because it is chaotic or messy at times, others ask for salsa-dancing breaks, and one person began to sing for the group during a check-out in which we did a round of sharing how we feel. There are many other examples, but the point is that such active engagement is encouraged and – sometimes literally – applauded by the group, inspiring others to reflect about what they like to say, do, or see happen.

Therefore, we facilitators, avoid overly controlling and instead try to hold space for everyone's input (Plett, 2020). That is why it can feel chaotic at times. For us, there is not one way or form that is correct or higher, all forms of knowledge are salient, necessary, and equally valuable. It is more about nourishing the relations between knowledges. De la Bellacasa (2017) explains that

> knowledge is situated [which] means that knowing and thinking are unconceivable without the multitude of relations that make possible the worlds we think with [...]. Relations of knowing and thinking require care and affect how we care. (p. 69)

This chapter is part of Fabian's PhD dissertation and LIMBO emerged from their PhD research. Co-authoring texts like this one is another facet of our effort to think together with care, because "[w]riting-with is a practical technology that reveals itself as both descriptive (it inscribes) and speculative (it connects). It builds relation and community, that is: possibility" (De la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 77). Fabian's research draws from their experience of prior engagement with a Rotterdam-based queer community dedicated to organizing safer clubbing spaces for queer, trans, and non-binary people. These experiences profoundly influenced Fabian's perspectives on inclusivity, (gender) fluidity, levels of privilege, and the significance of safer caring environments. Raised in different (foster) families after losing their mother at a young age, Fabian grappled personally with feelings of being othered and the challenges of belonging and conforming to societal norms due to familial uprootment and queerness. As a teenager, Fabian's foster father metaphorically likened them to a transplanted tree, struggling to establish firm roots in a new environment, symbolizing a quest for stability amidst the complexities of identity, trauma, and societal expectations. This image resonated for a long time, even though they never really felt rooted in one place ever since. Nowadays, for a large part due to conversations with LIMBO members about mushrooms and mycelial networks, Fabian resonates with the philosophy of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), representing a more fluid form of rootedness, connection, and belonging. Which is an example of how knowledge is co-created and mutually influenced. It also signifies that there are no "pure" distinctions or clear boundaries between different types of knowledges.

Rhizomatic Care

Imagine reciprocal caring relations as an entangled network of grassroots, resembling the strong supporting structure beneath cows preventing them from sinking into typical Dutch wet soil (Kaulingfreks, 2021). A network of interdependencies emerges that is strong enough to support the heaviness of, in this example, cows. Ideally, care is co-created and emerges as a network, supporting one another in moments of heaviness. Heaviness shifts because cows move, making it sometimes heavier here, other times heavier there. Moreover, the network of grassroots itself is changing and growing, meaning that one cannot expect the support to be constant and/or equally divided and carried. In practice this means that for LIMBO to be sustainable, it should be a space where all are cared for and being cared about. As facilitators, we deal with several personal challenges ourselves.

For Rochita, healing in the context of LIMBO is also a personal journey. After facilitating a workshop in the very beginning of the project, she was diagnosed with cancer. The journey of healing and treatment is ongoing, but after one-and-a-half years, she has returned because of LIMBO's sense of care and connectedness. For Lana, cultivating deep friendships and building a sense of community continues to be important, particularly in the face of microaggressions and her battle with breast cancer, underscoring the vital role of a supportive community during moments of crisis. Fabian recovered from burnout as mentioned before. They continue trying to balance academic obligations with building and maintaining close relations with the community. Similar to the other authors, Sajad also grew up feeling like the "black sheep" within traditional family structures. He faced exclusion for his appearance and struggled to fit into the Iranian LGBTQIA+ community due to beauty standards of skinny and toned bodies in the LGBTQIA+ community and beyond. Sajad struggled academically in Iran as a Sociology student researching LGBTQIA+ issues. When Sajad decided to leave Iran, he embarked on a perilous journey to seek asylum in the Netherlands. He describes this journey as stripping him of identity, making him feel like "nothing" as he travels through various airports. Upon seeking asylum in the Netherlands in 2019, he experienced a significant transformation, both physically and emotionally. Sajad experienced the ongoing limbo of the asylum process and the struggle with isolation and non-belonging.

Hence, both participants and facilitators require care, even though it is not evenly distributed, because it fluctuates and evolves. The reason why we, as workshop facilitators, actively engage in the workshops, is to become integral members of the group, creating non-hierarchical reciprocal relationships based on trust, care, and the collaborative construction of knowledge. For instance, when we collectively established caring principles, we contributed like everyone else. The exchange of diverse perspectives around care – whether experiential, professional, or academic – encompasses a rhizomatic structure, contrasting with hierarchical and one-directional paternalistic care. Paternalistic care typically entails one party possessing greater authority and knowledge about how to care for others perceived as more dependent or vulnerable (Mackenzie, 2014). We avoid this by valuing contributions equally as opposed to promoting a singular "correct" approach to care.

In short, LIMBO represents a rhizomatic queer community that forms fluid connections based on shared challenges and mutual support, much like mushrooms that

emerge in different places and times yet remain interconnected. It is a collaborative and continuously transforming learning experience promoting fluidity, where members and facilitators are shaped by a plethora of relations, actions, conversations, surroundings, ideas, and shared experiences. A network of support and solidarity for those facing displacement and marginalization, which many experience as healing.

CONCLUSION

Within this chapter, we interweaved a vignette, literature on care, community, and healing, and authors' narratives to illustrate how a desire-based narrative research approach can facilitate healing on both personal and group levels. Through our writing, we echoed our narrative methodology of knowledge co-creation, intertwining stories from LIMBO members and facilitators with academic insights, highlighting LIMBO as a project of shared storytelling and collective reflection through which diverse forms of knowledge (experiential, academic, professional, creative, and artistic) intertwine rhizomatically.

We challenge deficit-oriented refugee studies by adopting a desire-based approach that embraces everyone's full humanity (Tuck, 2009). This method foregrounds participants' narratives, experiences, and aspirations, prioritizing their input in the co-creation of workshop content and form. As a result, a sense of ownership and agency is cultivated among LIMBO members. By focusing on the richness of individual experiences rather than perceived deficiencies, participants tap into their creativity and agency.

LIMBO became a vital space for its members, exploring communal care and positive transformation. This is crucial because queer refugees face multiple forms of exclusion in the Dutch context, characterized by neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing populism. Neoliberalism prioritizes individualism at the expense of social solidarity, while right-wing populism enables hostile environments, making supportive, non-paternalistic caring communities all the more essential (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). In doing so, LIMBO offers a counter-narrative to neoliberalism's extreme individualism.

We aimed to make concrete the methods employed, such as utilizing art practices and reflections to co-create knowledge on care. We acknowledge the complexities involved in creating and maintaining a supportive network, including the risk of burden unintentionally falling on few individuals. It is vital to fluidly adapt to the situation and embrace change in collectively making the collaboration mutually supportive. We argue for acknowledging our interdependencies and reflecting together to navigate those non-hierarchically. Unlike paternalistic care, LIMBO prioritizes reciprocity, valuing diverse perspectives and contributions equally. Workshop sessions often revolve around discussions and activities centred on care, empathy, and emotional support, emphasizing the importance of listening and creating space for vulnerability. By collectively sharing creations and reflections, we believe the experience to be both informative and transformative. Particularly due to staying reflexive on hierarchical power dynamics and caring about mutuality and relationality.

Without intentionally designing a project with the purpose of healing, we believe that our approach emerged as healing, particularly due to decentralization and reciprocity

(Cormier, 2008). We consider healing from a salutogenic perspective of fullness and wholeness (Antonovsky, 1997). To paraphrase Fischer and Tronto (1990), we embrace vulnerability and recognize the importance of all kinds of knowledge, including emotion, to sustain our network. Individual stories, art, and reflections were enriched through dialogue and engagement, enabling collectivity and relationality. By engaging in diverse artistic expressions, LIMBO members navigate social issues such as trauma and marginalization. Some found personal healing and together we envision personal and social change and contribute to a collective narrative of hope.

Members express a strong emotional attachment to LIMBO, describing it as a caring family. Reflecting on such relationality, we drew inspiration from the Filipino concept of "kapwa" and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of the rhizome (De Guia, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Kapwa inspires a relational, people-centred way that is dedicated to community building through everyday actions (De Guia, 2005). Rhizomatically co-creating art, knowledge, and care within a diversity of encounters contributes to the community's vibrancy and sustainability. LIMBO embraces a non-linear, ever-expanding environment where ideas, practices, and support are co-created, informing and transforming both individuals and the group. Our diverse backgrounds and perspectives enrich this process, mitigating feelings of isolation and exclusion, enabling a sense of belonging.

By elucidating the healing potential that emerged in LIMBO and advocating for a desire-based narrative approach and rhizomatically co-creating knowledge and care, we hope to inspire scholars and community organizers to adopt similar methodologies. Moving away from expert-centred models toward reciprocal approaches can facilitate a sense of belonging and agency among participants, leading to transformative experiences for all involved.



Figure 24. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 20 February 2022.

CHAPTER 6

Boundaries of Care: Reflections on Inter/Dependencies in Engaged Research

Fabian Holle & Alexandra Greene

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the complexities of care, intimacy, and boundary-setting in engaged research through two situated narratives drawn from collaborative work with refugee communities in the Netherlands and the United States. Reflecting on experiences of burnout, emotional boundary transgressions, conflict, and rupture, the authors argue that research relationships are both shaped by trust, reciprocity, and mutual care, but also by discord, ambiguity, and the possibility of harm. Rather than romanticizing engaged scholarship, the chapter foregrounds the emotional and embodied labour involved in co-creative research and explores how challenging dynamics influence knowledge production, collaboration, and ethical decision-making. Bringing their experiences into critical juxtaposition, the authors show how boundaries in engaged research are relational, porous, and constantly negotiated across shifting personal, professional, and institutional roles. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, vulnerability, and relational autonomy, the chapter conceptualizes boundaries as forms of care: for oneself, for collaborators, for communities, and for the sustainability of research itself. It highlights how loosened or transgressed boundaries can compromise the ability to offer and receive care. Ultimately, it is a call for a non-idealized understanding of care in engaged scholarship: one that acknowledges conflict, emotional risk, and interdependency as integral to ethical and sustainable engaged research practices.

INTRODUCTION

> I got jealous
> I got mad
> I got worried
> I got curious
> That's only because I *care*
> (Nakimera Jackie[21])

In August 2023, during a PhD writing week somewhere in a rural green area in the centre of the Netherlands, we, the authors, reflect on how to approach the content of this chapter.

[21] Nakimera Jackie is a research collaborator and member of the co-creative research project LIMBO and has consented in using her name here.

This week marks our initial return to writing after a particularly intense period. Fatigued of dealing with the many complexities within and around our research, we are casually perched on a wooden bench, watching goats, chickens, and a donkey go about their day in a large field. The sun shines and the chickens flock together and move around picking in the grass. The continuously chewing goats are on top of a wooden table structure in the centre of the field. They have their gaze locked on us. We laugh because they seem to judge us for making life too complex. While we are discussing the feasibility of addressing our fieldwork experiences without romanticizing or rebuking our research collaborations, they seem to think that it is not that complicated.

About Our Research

Our fieldwork is situated in two contexts: one in the Netherlands and one in the US. Although our projects are different, they are both embedded within a broader comparative study exploring engaged scholarship and refugee inclusion in South Africa, the Netherlands, and the United States.[22] Within this study, engaged scholarship encompasses academic contributions to social change through knowledge creation and relationship-building. In our projects, we both work closely with people who have refugee experiences, focusing on co-creating knowledge relevant to each context. In the Netherlands, Fabian Holle co-created LIMBO, a safer space for mutual learning where stories and reflections are shared through art practices by, for, and with LGBTQI+ refugees. In the United States, Alexandra Greene collaborated with refugee-led collectives to document their practices and processes of knowledge-creation and coalition-building. We each co-authored texts with our research collaborators, designed research approaches, and engaged in forms of co-creation and co-organizing, while sharing many moments of intimacy and friendship. Throughout this, ongoing dialogue, sensitivity to power dynamics, and the building and maintaining of trust have been essential. Together with our research collaborators, we have laughed, cried, and dreamed; some of our collaborators have become close friends or even chosen family.

Indeed, relationships profoundly shape a research process. Collaboration, community-building, and emotional engagement are not just vital – they transform how we understand and approach knowledge. Yet, while we recognize the ways in which intimacies have enriched our research, intimacy also carries the "ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune" (Fineman, 2010, p. 267). Given this, rather than exclusively focusing on positive emotions and experiences, in this chapter, we also engage research relations involving negative emotions, conflict, and discord as deserving of attention (Schneider, 2023). In the context of engaged scholarship, we believe that it is vital to explore how challenging dynamics are navigated, as well as how these challenges influence our research, analysis, and conclusions. Doing so invites us to rethink how we frame research relationships, considering not only their positive aspects but also the frictions and tensions that shape them – sometimes we do not know the extent that we are entangled with others until the relationship has been disturbed. Engaged research thus requires courage[23] and practicing heart-centred science (Kimmerer,

[22] The Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change project is led by Halleh Ghorashi and funded by NWO-VICI [016.Vici.185.084]: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/

[23] The root of the word courage is "cor," the Latin word for heart.

2013), particularly when there are conflicts and/or personal and professional boundaries that must be (re)set.

Our exploration of this topic began in 2020 – in one of our earliest conversations – and it has remained a central focus throughout our PhD journeys. Over the years, we have reflected on relationships, conflict resolution, guilt, and burnout in the context of academia. We have discussed the consequences of the choices we made – both positive and negative – and expressed gratitude, relief, anger, and regret. Our ongoing dialogue has prompted deep reflection, challenged our perspectives on boundaries in research, and provided a foundation for this chapter's reflections on the complexities of care. For us, engaged research encompasses more than fieldwork or data collection, but entails how we build and maintain relationships, how we create and communicate knowledge, and how we write, cite, and share. We hope this text will resonate with (aspiring) engaged scholars, particularly junior researchers or those in a PhD trajectory who, like us, have struggled to navigate, negotiate, and feel their way around personal and professional boundaries.

Our Approach to Co-writing

Taking inspiration from Lugones and Spelman's (1983) collaborative text, in this chapter, we speak as an *I,* as a *we*, and sometimes as (vulnerable) *observers* (Behar, 1996). This is a way of demonstrating that unity and plurality can co-exist. Like with Lugones and Spelman (1983),

> [t]he use of two voices is both central to the process of constructing this paper and to the substance of it. We are both the authors of this paper and not just sections of it but we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience. So, when we speak in unison it means just that – there are two voices and not just one. (p. 573)

For us, co-authorship is not about collapsing differences into one unified voice. Instead, it is about recognizing and honouring non-dominant differences (Lorde, 1984) in experience, reflection, and expression. While Fabian's narrative seeks to describe a collective process involving many actors – research participants, supervisors, an art institution, and an academic institution – Alexandra's narrative reflects a personal process focusing on her emotions and embodied experience. This differing approach is intentional: it reflects our writing styles, but it also reflects the differing constraints under which we work. Whereas Fabian's case involved community discussions around boundaries, the confidential nature of Alexandra's case precluded community involvement. Out of respect for the privacy of Alexandra's collaborator, she did not involve community members in their process. Even when someone has crossed our boundaries, it does not give us permission to cross theirs.

Recognizing and respecting the trust of our research collaborators, as well as those discussed in the narratives we present (such as our supervisors), in this chapter, we unpack boundaries on caring research relationships *without* getting too specific and detailed about the events that prompted our reflections. Part of the writing process of this chapter included several rounds of feedback from our supervisors, who are part of the editorial group of this book. In this text, we try to integrate their comments. At times, there are tensions between us, such as when we have different perspectives of care related to our different positionings.

We try to engage these tensions in dialogue. While this chapter reflects shared experiences, it is important to note that the perspectives presented in this text are partial and positioned and primarily told from our perspectives – we cannot claim to speak for others, just nearby (Minh-ha, 1982).

In this regard, we adopt critical juxtaposition (Espiritu, 2014) as a method for deliberately bringing together seemingly disconnected perspectives. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate an inclusive approach to academic writing – one that values sharing, difference, and emotional engagement as integral components of knowledge production within the social sciences (Haraway, 1997; De la Bellacasa, 2012). It aims to counteract the isolation of academic work by actively generating a sense of shared experience and connection and (re)affirming that we are not alone in our perspectives and insights (Haraway, 1997; see also Ahmed, 2017, on the politics of citation). Critical juxtaposition is also a way of engaging with boundaries. By exploring different proximities and distances within ourselves, between each other, and with our readers, we aim to set, practice, and express boundaries of care in our writing.

Identifying, Expressing, and Practicing Boundaries: Fabian's Narrative

LIMBO is a creative workshop series co-created with queer refugee[24] artists and an art institute.[25] Its structure has evolved. In the beginning, we shaped the workshops with various remunerated (queer/ refugee/ artist) facilitators, bringing diverse perspectives and media. The workshops were free and open to anyone identifying as LGBTQIA+ with a forced migration experience. Later, we shifted to recurring facilitators due to the burden of care falling disproportionally on me (Fabian) but more on that later. The workshops focused on creative media, such as drawing, sculpting, writing, and photography, as tools for storytelling, sharing reflections, and co-creating knowledges connected to queer refugee experiences in the Netherlands and beyond. Throughout the project, which started in January 2022 and is ongoing[26], we had different iterations of the organizing team, with whom we reflected after each workshop on how it went, implementing insights directly into subsequent sessions. Hence, we embraced a flexible, adaptive framework prioritizing participants' wishes and well-being.

Before LIMBO, in two previous creative research collaborations as part of my PhD research, I learned that many participants were often overwhelmed, isolated and dealing with

[24] The terms "queer" and "refugees" are contested and should be used with care. Many LIMBO members identify as queer, using the term to challenge societal norms (Jagose, 1996). However, some prefer other labels. In this context, we use "queer" as both an umbrella term and an activist stance. Being aware that the term "refugee" may have negative, essentialist connotations, we aim to challenge these connotations by emphasizing the positive aspects of displaced identities (Malkki, 1992).

[25] LIMBO originated in, and was hosted and financially supported by, the art institute Framer Framed. After the first eight weeks of the project, LIMBO was meant to finish. However, the community, Framer Framed and Fabian decided to continue because of a shared desire to do so. Framer Framed then got additional two-year funding from Fonds Cultuurparticipatie for the project "Through Art We Care," which LIMBO is part of. After this funding, LIMBO continued with one-year financial support of ILGA-Europe and moved to another location.

[26] The time of writing is November 2024. Our current ILGA-Europe funding allows us to continue until July 2025. It is yet unclear if we (can) continue after that.

depression. After collaborating in the creative research project Art for Change[27] in a one-on-one setting, some more soft-spoken participants expressed that they did not feel comfortable in a group setting, particularly when others in the group were taking up a lot of space. Since collaborating one-on-one was not sustainable on a large scale for me as project coordinator, I started asking queer refugee artists how we could co-create an attractive project that was inclusive of different types of voices, loud or soft, confident or shy. In close collaboration, we came up with fun creative workshops to keep one's mind off daily stress in a safer environment where one can let their guard down, without having to be social or strong or happy – encouraging mutual expressions of vulnerability. To lower the barrier of participation, participants were free to come and go as they pleased and we started each session by setting intentions to create a safer space. This was also a way to practice consent. We chose to use safer space – rather than brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2023) – because we followed the community's lingo. By adding the *–r* to safe, we acknowledged that although complete safety can never be guaranteed, we can commit to intentions of creating a safer space. Setting intentions became a practice of listening to and respecting each other's needs and wishes, in collectively deciding what safer means for us in that moment. Everyone was encouraged, but never pressured, to contribute, continuously reminded of consent (Bennett, 2018; Fangahanel, 2020).[28]

Each time, we prepared soup and snacks. We focused on joyful creative exercises, which consequently made it easier to reflect and share struggles. LIMBO grew into a space where everyone (both participants and facilitators) intertwined their creativity, work, and personal lives through various artistic practices, reflecting and sharing personal narratives, sometimes mundane and joyful, other times vulnerable and full of hardships. We saw how even the soft-spoken participants opened up and became more vocal about what they wanted within and outside of LIMBO. It was beautiful to see a lot of growth, both on the personal level and on the level of LIMBO as a collective (see also Holle et al., 2024). LIMBO emerged as a space for the full range of human emotions, where members actively engaged in caring for one another. Relationships deepened, and participants started referring to LIMBO as family. Many expressed that it felt like a place of hope and belonging. As the project grew, participants were further encouraged to take on leadership roles within (parts of) the workshops. Ideas and opportunities for collaborations with other organizations and festivals emerged; we organized semi-public events as platforms for artists to perform or sell and share their works, and there were multiple ideas from individuals within the group. To give one of many examples, there was a desire to create a lifestyle magazine showcasing talents of the LIMBO community, including fashion, art, photography, storytelling and activism.

However, LIMBO's growth also brought challenges, such as the increasingly overwhelming task of listening to these ideas for projects or collaboration, which mostly came from *one* part of the organizing team. As project coordinator, I started setting boundaries, explaining that we did not have capacity to support the multitude of ideas and collaborations. Maintaining a safer space was becoming progressively difficult, particularly for the part of the team not involved in these ideas. The initiators acknowledged and understood the boundaries.

[27] More on this project here: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations/art-for-change
[28] We go more in depth about such practices in Chapters 4 and 5.

Nevertheless, when conflicts and complications arose in those projects and collaborations, I was asked for guidance or mediation. I had built strong relationships of trust with everyone, which meant that in moments of conflict or confusion, all turned to me. Our team, which had gradually evolved into a support structure for the entire group, found *itself* increasingly in need of support. Witnessing all these dynamics, aware of my own privileged position, paired with the knowledge of how important LIMBO had become for its individual members, made it extremely difficult to continuously express my personal boundaries, as well as boundaries for the team and project as a whole.

At this point, I was completely entangled and enmeshed with the group as (best) friend, project coordinator, listener and carer. Eventually, the emotional burden of care, managing conflicts, and navigating mental health issues present in the group, coupled with my academic responsibilities in a period of mourning due to loss in my private life, led to my burnout, and necessitated taking a step back to reflect and heal. During this time, I had to stop working because of my health situation. I could hardly sleep. I could not stop thinking about how to best communicate boundaries, since my attempts had not been effective. I also worried about the burden of care falling too much on other members of the group in my absence. I panicked each time I got a WhatsApp notification, because this was our main mode of communication and the LIMBO WhatsApp group consisted of approximately fifty members at that time. I also worried about how the rest of the group would be affected, because we had not informed the group of the conflicts in order to protect everyone involved.

Meanwhile, the art institution expressed that they did not have proper capacity to deal with conflicts and issues related to mental health. Therefore, due to unresolved conflicts within the group – and me being on sick leave – the art institution, the organizing team, as well as my academic supervisors and myself, felt it was irresponsible to continue hosting the workshops without me being present. Thus, we temporarily paused the workshops in order to reflect and organize a proper support structure. One of my supervisors took over communication with some members in the group. In an attempt to keep supporting the group, other team members stayed connected via WhatsApp and encouraged the group to meet at other queer events.

The break came as a shock to the group since they were unaware of what was going on. It felt like a break from our strong focus on collectively making decisions and caring for one another. Even though the break was necessary, it felt like my fears of how it would negatively affect the group, were confirmed. Stopping these gatherings proved to be hard. It highlighted the profound interdependency within LIMBO, because it affected individuals in the group and myself strongly. Several LIMBO members reached out to me asking when LIMBO would restart. One heartfelt message highlights this bond, expressing they were getting sick without LIMBO:

> Okay, I'm really so sorry to hear that you're still healing. I hope you soon get back on your feet. Fabian to be honest we need you, in your strong, energetic ... yeah we need you and we really need LIMBO. I'm getting sick because LIMBO is part of us and we are not so sure when LIMBO gets back. For some of us, LIMBO really did a lot of great work. Now our lives, when we see LIMBO not back, we just get sick. But you started LIMBO, you did

> not start it for yourself. You started it for us, the refugees who don't have family here, but LIMBO became part of us, part of our family. Sorry I'm getting emotional. Yeah, I'm very sorry because I don't want you to feel how I'm feeling. It is my prayer that you feel well quicker and quicker, so that you get back onto your feet. We need you, and we need LIMBO. Get well very very soon, bye. (Voice message in WhatsApp, LIMBO member, 18 April 2023)

This message hit me hard. I was confronted with the significance of this space in the lives of its members. I knew that LIMBO served as a source of care for its participants, contributing to their overall well-being, but messages such as these revealed how enmeshed LIMBO had become in their lives – as well as mine. Before my burnout, the interdependency felt uplifting and healing, but while we were on hold, it felt detrimental. Many participants do not have a support network outside of LIMBO, so when it (temporarily) disappeared, it affected individuals in the group tremendously, which was heart-breaking for me. I felt powerless, worried and responsible for the well-being of (individuals in) the group. I felt guilt and shame – that I was prioritizing my own healing over that of the collective. And while I understood rationally that the situation was more complex, that is not how it *felt* at the time. By sharing this experience, I aim to practice a vulnerable methodology (Page, 2017) and shed light on the "shadow work" (Illich, 1980) of engaged scholarship – the emotional and embodied labour that is integrated in co-creation but is often written out of research findings. From this experience, we learned that finding a delicate balance and navigating between academic pursuits and community care can be extremely challenging, revealing the impact on both researcher and participants.

Even though the period of forced distance was very challenging, the physical and emotional distance made it possible to heal, critically reflect and understand the impact of these conflicts and transitions. For me, the period of disengagement and recovery from burnout was painful, but ultimately strengthened the project, and myself, in terms of sustainability and transparency. There is value in recognizing when disengagement is necessary, both for oneself and for others. Physical, emotional, and temporal distance can help manage the intensity of research relationships. Maintaining emotional distance can at times be necessary to express clear boundaries and protect oneself from becoming overwhelmed. After a break of six months, we continued with support in the form of new team members to rebuild trust and distribute care responsibilities. We established clear roles within the newly formed team, continuing to identify and include the group's desires based on their input. We now aim to share our responsibilities so that LIMBO can sustain as a vibrant thriving community without over-reliance on any one person. Moving forward, establishing clear structures and shared responsibilities remains essential for LIMBO's continued journey. While I am grateful that LIMBO was able to recover from this period of uncertainty, I recognize that this is not always the case. Sometimes conflict in research causes collaborations to break down. Still, often these breakages reveal the intricacies of our relationships and interdependencies.

When Boundaries Are Transgressed: Alexandra's Narrative

Reflecting on my own academic trajectory, I recognize that (in the past) I have performed my assumption of "engaged researcher," believing that true engagement in the field meant saying "yes" to every research-related opportunity that came my way – even when I would have rather said "no." Indeed, boundaries are the hard part. Since all my fieldwork has taken place in locales, I did not live long-term and contexts where I did not (yet) have a network of relations, I have approached fieldwork as a window of opportunity – intense and temporary, with no time to waste. In the process, I often pushed my personal boundaries when it felt necessary for my research or the relationships I cared about.

Yet, when my boundaries were *crossed*, in the context of a research collaboration with a close friend, I knew it – I felt it – immediately. The trust between us had been broken. While I will not delineate the specificities of this transgression, I will specify that I am speaking of emotional boundaries, which I understand as the limits we set to protect our emotional well-being. These boundaries help maintain a healthy sense of self, manage relationships, and prevent emotional burnout or manipulation. In this narrative, I reflect upon this transgression's *somatics* – how it *felt*, how it was *embodied* – as well as how it rippled through other relations connected to my research, namely, my relationship with my supervisors. In doing so, I aim to show how research relations often extend deeper and broader than we realize. Individual ruptures cannot be isolated. Instead, they are always embedded, revealing the extent of our interdependencies. To trace these entanglements, I engage autoethnography and carrying as method (Puwar, 2020), attending to my body as a living archive.

To situate this narrative, I will first contextualize my research, which focuses on practices and processes of knowledge-creation and coalition-building in the context of the migrant justice movement in California. Between 2020 and 2022, I undertook fieldwork in San Diego, where I engaged participatory methods like ethnography, participant-observation, and artistic co-creation, which involved interacting with various community stakeholders, including refugee families, organizers, NGOs, university staff, and students.[29] During this time, I befriended a community organizer whose collaboration became vital to my project. While our relationship was initially characterized by reciprocity, inspiration, and care, it later became a source of alienation, confusion, and stress.

In the weeks and months that followed, a pattern of setting boundaries – and then having them crossed – emerged. I felt disconnected from the community I was working with because I could not explain to them what was happening without revealing the details of the boundary transgression. I felt stuck and, to an extent, entrapped. My body was tense. I had intrusive thoughts that kept me up at night and made me feel physically ill: *I am a bad researcher. I am a bad friend. I am a disappointment. I am lazy. I will never finish my PhD. Why can't I just get over it and move on?* These thoughts went round and round. As I became further overwhelmed, I began isolating myself. I struggled to perform basic tasks, like getting out of bed in the morning. Everything felt impossible – and this sense of impossibility, which I experienced as a loss of creativity, hurt me deeply. I could only see limitations, especially my own. I felt stuck,

[29] An example of this research can be viewed here: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations/education-for-change

and the more time passed, the harder it was to (re)start. In this sense, fieldwork was "an intensely personal experience" (Sultana, 2007, p. 380), and, at times, tremendously distressing.

When I communicated these issues to my supervisors, who were in the Netherlands, they suggested we set up a Zoom meeting as soon as possible to discuss my "plan B." Although meeting online was not ideal, it was necessary, since we were far apart. Going into that meeting, I hoped my supervisors would hold space for me to express my anger, frustration, and sadness, but the primary focus was whether the data I had already collected was still usable in the context of our project. *Had my research collaborator signed a consent form, what agreements had been made, were these in writing?* While I understood the importance and practicalities of these questions, I also felt that this procedural, problem-solving approach left little space for me to express my emotions and ask for support.

I remember feeling as though I had not met their expectations, that I should have known in advance that this research relationship would rupture, that I should have been better prepared for it. Yet, while the unpredictability of fieldwork can be expected to an extent, we cannot presume to know in advance how things will unfold. Not knowing is part of the fluid and evolving nature of fieldwork; it is also part of the fluid and evolving nature of boundaries and the relations in which boundaries are entangled.

After reading a draft of this chapter, one of my supervisors reflected that she might have misjudged the situation, since our communication lines were ineffective. From her perspective, her concerns about data were expressed in order to protect me and ensure that my PhD trajectory would stay on track. However, I did not interpret her intentions this way. Indeed, our differing expectations around how care is given and received highlight the subjective and contextual nature of care. When my boundaries were crossed, I needed care; when my supervisors offered care, I did not feel cared for. Yet the incongruencies in how we experienced this event do not signal care's absence but rather reveal care's complexity – particularly its ambiguous presence when a relationship is disturbed.

While it is challenging to write about (my own) vulnerability in an "academically respectable manner" (Puwar, 2008, p. 2), I believe it is important to do so. Indeed, feminist scholars have long argued that the personal is political, and our positionality – who we are, how we are, and where we are (socio-politically) located – shapes our research. But the personal is also relational. In an article exploring her experience of sexual violence during fieldwork, Schneider (2020) writes: "The ways in which our embodiment conditions our access to knowledge is an epistemological and methodological question, not solely a feminist one" (p. 189). Reading Schneider's text after my boundaries were transgressed felt like an affirmation. *Our embodiment conditions our access to knowledge.* Indeed, but our embodiment does more than this – it also conditions our capacity to (co-)create knowledge and the knowledge that is able to emerge through research. Because you cannot cultivate upon scorched earth – at least not immediately. There must be a period of recovery. Still, sometimes, the relationship cannot be recovered – even with time, care, and mutual effort.

This was the case with my research collaborator and me. Although we continued to work together and I was able to complete my fieldwork and the projects that were underway with the community, there were many delays and I spent a great deal of time and energy worrying that things would completely unravel. Fortunately, this never happened. Our

friendship, however, is another story. We have not recovered or transformed the relationship, though we have tried. This continues to be a source of pain for both of us. I feel the lasting somatics of this experience every day – in my body, in my writing, in the space between myself and my friend, myself and my supervisors. I feel it and it hurts. By feeling my way through a form of grief that comes when boundaries are transgressed and relationships break down, I have come to understand intimately the vulnerability and interdependency of research. Relationships that are part of research involve risk and require care.

Trust and Emotional Engagement

In both our narratives, trust emerges as a crucial factor – both the building and the breaking of trust. A foundation of trust and care thus becomes essential for sustaining research collaborations, allowing for flexibility and mutual understanding in times of (temporary) distance, or when trust has been broken and must be repaired. For each of us, the closeness of collaboration at times felt overwhelming, making it challenging to establish – and hold onto – boundaries. Yet periods of disengagement highlighted the spatial, temporal, and emotional dimensions that shape our research relationships. We found that physical and temporal distance from the relationships in which we were enmeshed offered a sense of relief, reducing the urgency and intensity that close proximity can bring. We had to trust that things would resolve in their own time and that periods of distance or delays would not erode our sense of care and trust in these relationships. For Fabian, disengagement, grounded in a foundation of care, allowed their connections not only to endure but to transform. A shared sense of forgiveness and understanding brought flexibility to the ways they could step back and re-engage as the situation allowed. For Alexandra, the relationship did not resolve, though she holds out hope that there will be repair and transformation. For her the "not yet" signals the "persistence of the possible" (Landman, 1993). Indeed, trust and care are not guaranteed but must be created and maintained. At the same time, trust does not require constant proximity or engagement, but rather reciprocity – an ongoing and shared commitment.

The emotional weight of this process was undeniable. Engaged research demands a high level of emotional engagement, challenging us to *stay with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016). It asks us to lean into the challenges, holding space for our own emotions and those of our collaborators. This was not an easy task; the process was emotionally heavy for both of us, demanding constant reflection and adjustment. Through these challenges, however, we came to rethink our understanding – and praxis – of engaged scholarship and we came to recognize the value of emotional engagement as a form of commitment – to each other, to the research, and to the communities we work with. This process, while demanding, and at times painful, showed us what it means to care, to remain present, and to create knowledge in community with others – even when it is hard. Given this, how might we reimagine boundaries of care in engaged scholarship?

Boundaries of Care Within the Context of Engaged Research Collaborations

Let's first unpack "boundaries," to then unpack "care" in the context of engaged research. Boundaries can be understood as lines of dis/comfort. These lines exist whether we tell others about them or not, though boundaries are more likely to be crossed if we don't communicate

them. Plett (2020) describes boundaries as having a soft, permeable membrane, akin to the membrane of a cell. This metaphor suggests that boundaries are flexible structures that allow for exchange and interaction while maintaining a sense of separation and protection. In academic contexts, boundaries are typically defined by professionalism and formalized through procedural guidelines (Schneider, 2020). Yet, as the narratives above elucidate, community-engaged research often entails more porous boundaries, which do not begin and end with signing consent forms. Boundary-work, then, is part of building relationships of trust, and must also be understood in terms of emotions and affects. When we have intimate knowledge of our collaborators' vulnerability (and they of ours), we may feel a greater sense of responsibility – not out of duty, but out of care. In turn, this makes it difficult to disengage, even when boundaries are crossed. In engaged research, we must thus negotiate multiple dimensions of relationships, such as intuition, care, and risk management, as well as improvise our way throughout complicated situations. There are no preset guidelines.

On the one hand, scholarly community engagement entails a deep level of care and commitment to others, while, on the other hand, it necessitates recognizing personal limitations and the embeddedness of self-care. This balancing act involves staying informed and involved without becoming overwhelmed or burned out. The lines are unclear as there is a continuous flow between caring-about, caring-with, caring-for, and being-cared-for. Fabian's case exemplifies this blurring of the multiple roles we embody as engaged researchers. Fabian felt completely entangled in both private and work-related issues, navigating the blurred boundaries between roles of best friend, project coordinator, researcher, mentor, mediator and so on. Despite foregrounding ongoing consent as one of the essential principles of LIMBO – and stressing to participants that consent can be revoked at any time, even without explanation – Fabian struggled when it came to establishing and maintaining their own boundaries. For Alexandra, the repeated transgression of boundaries combined with the fluid and evolving nature of fieldwork, created a sense of overwhelm. This uncertainty made decision-making challenging, but decisions had to be made in order to keep moving forward with the research. Doing so involved boundary-work – compressing and expanding, solidifying and dissolving, reinforcing and loosening.

Shifting our focus from boundaries, let's unpack care. Care operates within these boundaries, fostering connection, empathy, and mutual support. Fisher and Tronto define care as actions that maintain, continue, and repair our world, including our bodies, selves, and environment (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, in Tronto, 2010). Feminist ethics of care stresses the importance of relationships and interconnectedness, valuing personal involvement and emotional engagement (De la Bellacasa, 2017). For De la Bellacasa (2012), care is not just a moral obligation in research, but a vital affective state, an ethical imperative, and a practical labour. She specifies that care is inherently relational, dynamic, and shaped by connections. Care thus involves navigating the messy reality of relationships within societal structures, acknowledging both the labour and difficulties in sustaining care, as well as the conditional and insecure nature of collaborations. Similarly, Ellis (2016) describes relational care ethics as "ongoing, uncertain processes." Often, the "right" action in a given situation is not clear or may not exist, but decisions must still be made. Sometimes, we make mistakes or see better ways of doing things in hindsight. In fact, "most 'ethical reflection occurs after the fact' as we

consider what we have done and the consequences it produced and try to learn to do things better" (Ellis, 2016, p. 17). Applying care in engaged research thus involves asking "what do we do now?" It centres around relational autonomy – how our autonomy is shaped by and dependent on our relationships with others (Mackenzie, 2014). This encompasses a form of boundary-work that requires mutual vulnerability and trust, confronting difficulties together, and staying present with each other – even when we are not, or cannot be, physically present. We hold space in research, but we also need space in research.

Relational Autonomy

Essentially, our experiences illustrate the complexity of relational autonomy in practice; when trust and communication falter, the shared responsibility of setting and respecting boundaries can become strained. Breakdowns in relationships necessitate finding ways to navigate decision-making and boundary-setting. These dynamics underscores a key insight from literature on relational autonomy: our identities are deeply influenced by our interactions with others and the social contexts in which these relationships unfold. Relational theorists stress that our identities are formed, sustained, and revised in relational connections to specific others within specific social contexts (Mackenzie, 2014). These contexts include intersecting social categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class, which both enable and constrain our choices. Promoting autonomy involves (co-)creating conditions that enable individuals to lead self-determining lives, while recognizing that individuals are not isolated, self-sufficient entities but are fundamentally interconnected with others in their social and personal environments (Mackenzie, 2014). Relational autonomy suggests that our sense of self and our capacity for autonomy are continuously influenced and reshaped by our interactions and relationships. Mackenzie (2014) addresses the value of relational autonomy: first, to mitigate feelings of powerlessness and loss of agency; and second, to contest objectionable paternalism – when individuals or groups take actions on behalf of others without their consent or against their will, often assuming they know what is best (p. 45). Given this, what does understanding autonomy relationally mean for boundaries in engaged research?

It implies that setting boundaries is not just an individual task but a collective effort that must be adaptable to the evolving dynamics of relationships. Our boundaries are part of a dynamic interplay with those around us, where mutual influence and negotiation are key. Yet, as shown in our narratives, this interconnectedness often complicates the practice of setting boundaries and making decisions when research relationships – whether temporarily or permanently – break down. When a relationship deteriorates or boundaries are transgressed, it disrupts the collaborative decision-making process, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and resentment. This was the case for Alexandra, who felt stuck and unsure how to move forward. Community collaborations were postponed, her PhD trajectory stalled, and her relationship with supervisors declined, as she struggled to create new boundaries that would allow the research to continue. Within this context, Alexandra felt it was necessary to prioritize personal well-being, but she constantly questioned whether this arose out of a desire for care or a desire to feel in control. Boundaries were drawn and redrawn – a cycle that felt endless. This tension between care and control underscores the complexity of relational autonomy. For Fabian, mediating conflicting desires, directions, and

points of view in a way that was mutually satisfying was incredibly challenging. It felt impossible to keep all conflicting parties content and engaged, while attempting not to exclude anyone. Fabian repeated their boundaries of not becoming involved in LIMBO-related projects, and the conflicts within those, multiple times. They saw how these conflicts affected the core task of co-creating a safer space together. Unfortunately, it took Fabian's burnout to force listening and adhering to boundaries. Even though the boundaries were expressed and acknowledged rationally before, the forced break became a painful emotional learning experience for everyone involved, which deepened understanding. Fortunately, through collective effort, the *care*ful re-setting of boundaries, distinguishing clear roles, and respecting autonomy and self-care, relations within LIMBO were repaired.

Vulnerability

The complexity of relational autonomy in practice, especially in moments of strained communication, brings us to the concept of vulnerability. Navigating these dynamics often exposes individuals to a heightened sense of openness and risk, as trust and shared responsibility rely not only on boundaries but also on a willingness to be vulnerable. Embracing vulnerability becomes essential in maintaining relationships and facilitating meaningful collaboration, even amid potential discomfort or uncertainty. Following Górska (2016), we understand vulnerability not as "the politics of living with open wounds but rather about the politics of life as being in a continuous process of ambiguous transformations towards change" (p. 302). This process is never fully complete but always in flux, encompassing ambiguities, failures, potentials, pain, pleasure, affinities, separations, empowerment, and weakness. This form of vulnerability is always contextually situated within global and local power dynamics (p. 303). Our awareness of our collaborators' vulnerability, as well as the images and narratives we construct about ourselves and others, adds another layer of complexity. Engaged scholars must stay reflexive about their own power and privileged positions – supported by institutions, supervisors, and financial resources – in relation to their research collaborators. That said, it is not only our collaborators who are vulnerable. Research encompasses a web of power relationships: between researchers and collaborators; PhDs and supervisors; supervisors and institutions. This list is not exhaustive. Within the relations mentioned, there are various constellations of privilege, responsibility, and vulnerability. These power relations are not distributed evenly, and recognizing these differing levels of responsibility and vulnerability underscores the ethical challenges in setting boundaries.

Page (2017) emphasizes the importance of ethical responsiveness in research encounters, particularly in acknowledging affective experiences and vulnerabilities, and poses the question: "And what if we do not know how to respond?" (p. 19). Her question highlights the uncertainty of co-creative work and hints at the vulnerability of collaboration. As the discord between Alexandra and her supervisors demonstrates, sometimes we do not know how to respond, how to offer care, or how to receive it. However, the inability to connect in such moments does not always signal the absence of care. Instead, it may reveal care's complexity. In these instances, Page reminds us that while emotional responses can provide valuable insights, we should not use them to speculate about others' motives. Ethical

responsiveness then lies not in the affective reaction itself but in the ongoing commitment to *stay with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016) – and with each other.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The interdependency among ourselves, our collaborators, institutions, and supervisors create a network of relationships that fundamentally shapes our work. None of us operates in isolation; each step and decision we take impacts others. This mutual reliance is both enabling and constraining, providing opportunities for mutual learning and care while simultaneously demanding careful negotiation between distance and closeness. As we navigated these entanglements, we attempted to balance between our own needs and those of our collaborators and stakeholders, revealing how we depend upon one another.

Our research relationships transcended conventional professional boundaries, blurring into spaces of friendship, chosen family, and mutual care. But where do we draw the line of intimacy in research? The very nature of intimacy requires vulnerability, which is both a strength and a risk. Too much intimacy, or intimacy without boundaries, can destabilize relationships, challenging our ability to care. Managing relationships requires clarity around expectations, particularly in navigating asymmetries and power dynamics that shape fieldwork. From collaborators to supervisors, each relationship holds unique assumptions, fluid constellations of power, and shifting degrees of privilege. These dynamics often carry unspoken expectations that need to be surfaced and renegotiated over time. When taken for granted, these assumptions can lead to misunderstandings, with the potential to harm relationships or undermine the research itself. "Staying with the trouble" becomes essential here, allowing for discomfort and not rushing to resolve it.

Given the complex and uneven positionalities of all involved, engaged research often involves navigating unpredictable situations that have no preset guidelines on what to do. Therefore, it requires a willingness to navigate the complexities and challenges that arise from the intertwining of personal and professional realms. Each collaboration, whether between researchers, participants, or institutional bodies, carries an inherent interdependency that shapes both the journey and outcomes of research. Yet there is an often-overlooked aspect of research processes that may profoundly impact knowledge production – namely, the role of conflict. Although the impact of conflict – through discord, emotional struggles, or burnout – is less often discussed in academic writing, conflict is also a part of research, and it can significantly influence the ways in which knowledge is both created and constrained.

For this reason, in this complex landscape of interdependency, intimacy, asymmetry, and emotion, our fieldwork experiences underscore the need for a non-idealized thinking-approach to care. While caring research relationships can indeed be rewarding, a romanticized view may overlook the potential for conflict, resentment, and shifting power dynamics. It can create unrealistic expectations and overlook care's inherent complexities (Tronto, 2010). We have thus come to view boundaries *as* care, because boundaries not only demonstrate concern for others, but also for oneself, a community, and research itself. This ongoing process involves establishing, maintaining, expressing, and resetting boundaries. The fluid

nature of boundaries, relational autonomy and the complexities around vulnerability may explain why boundaries of care in engaged research are difficult to establish and maintain in time, or at the right time. By distinguishing complexities and challenges of care, we hope it allows (aspiring) engaged scholars to reflect on their own oftentimes challenging research contexts. It may help set realistic expectations for caring research relations, mitigating the risk of harm by overstepping ones or others' emotional, physical, and/or social boundaries, as well as ensuring that research is conducted ethically, sustainably, and with care for all those involved. When boundaries are not expressed, are too loose, or are transgressed, the ability to offer and receive care is compromised, and the impact resonates through the entire research process. Conversely, when respected, boundaries allow researchers to cultivate relationships founded on trust and reciprocity that can sustain discomfort, (temporary) disengagement, rupture and repair.

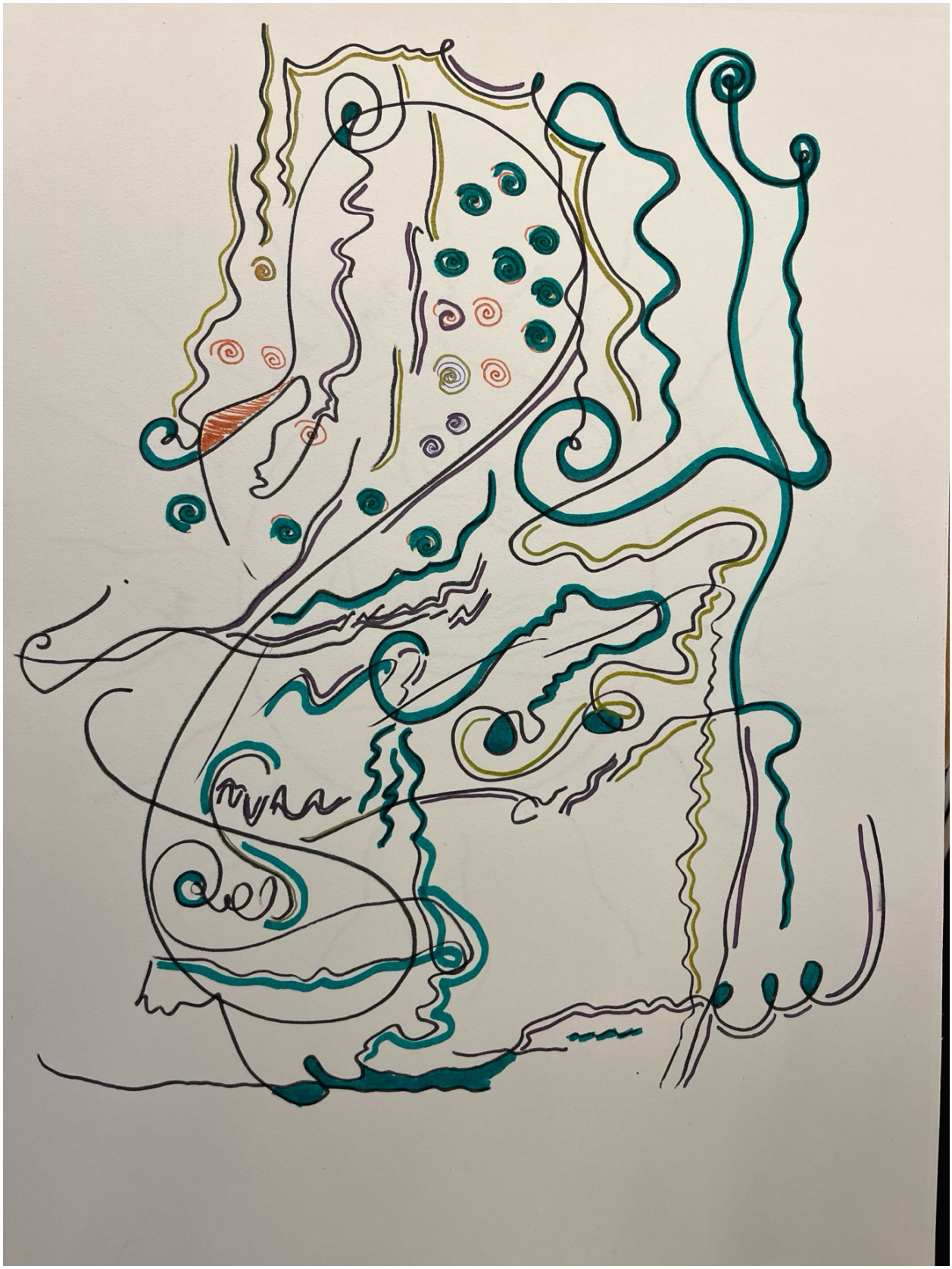


Figure 25. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 20 February 2022.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

We began this research journey with a question: *What are the challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees in the Netherlands?* This question resonates beyond the walls of the university or the spaces of our workshops. The ethics of relation (trust, care and accountability) extend into the social and political fabric in which this research is situated. In recent years, we have witnessed electoral successes of populist right-wing parties that have gained ground by exploiting fear and division. Against this backdrop, the practice of co-creation and relational ethics offers a modest but tangible model of how people with different positions, vulnerabilities, and forms of knowledge can still meet in mutual respect and imagine better just futures. To situate this research within its wider social context, the following section turns to the current political climate in the Netherlands, to reveal why engaged and relational scholarship remains urgent and necessary today.

7.1. The Current Political Climate in The Dutch Context

The Netherlands has seen a normalization of exclusionary political repertoires in mainstream discourse. Ideas long deemed extreme are now treated as ordinary parts of public debate (de Jonge & Gaufman, 2022; Rooduijn, 2023). Scholars note that mainstream parties have increasingly adopted the rhetoric and themes of radical-right[30] movements instead of moderating them. This shift is visible in how themes and framings – particularly around migration, Islam and national identity – circulate across parties, media, and public debate. The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD) have successfully pushed anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, and nationalist talking points, echoed by centrist politicians (Rooduijn, 2023). In Dutch political discourse, the PVV most consistently advances exclusionary migration narratives, blaming migrants for pressures on housing and the welfare state and portraying (especially Muslim) migrants as a threat to Dutch values and social cohesion – while other parties draw on only partial or more toned-down versions of these narratives (van Geresteijn, 2024).

Alongside the normalization of such xenophobic discourse, a second strand concerns the growing prominence of anti-gender/ anti-"woke" discourse. Gender and (non-heterosexual) sexuality themes – especially around trans rights and inclusive education – are increasingly narrated as matters of danger, ideology, or social breakdown rather than as questions around equal citizenship. FvD has led an "anti-woke" campaign portraying transgender people and pro-LGBT educators as threats to children and society (Segers, 2025). With this, the FvD has fuelled moral panic with false claims about drag queens, paedophilia and gender propaganda, equating (trans)gender 'ideology' and inclusive education as

[30] I use radical-right in Mudde's (2019) sense: as a sub-group of the far right that is hostile to liberal democracy yet accepts the essence of democracy (popular sovereignty and majority rule) while opposing key liberal-democratic principles such as minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of power. This differs from extreme right, which rejects democracy as such (think of fascism under Hitler or Mussolini) (Mudde, 2019).

sexualization (Segers, 2025). The liberal conservative party, VVD, traditionally positioned as centre-right, does not mirror this FvD-agenda, but it has drawn on the same terminology. In 2022, VVD leader and then-Minister of Justice Dilan Yeşilgöz described "wokism" as one of the key threats to the rule of law (NOS, 2022).

Notably, Yeşilgöz does not specify what she means by "wokism". The term woke originated as a US Black vernacular call to "stay woke" – to remain alert to deception and danger as a basic survival tactic. It gained wider public prominence in 2014, after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, when Black Lives Matter activists used "stay woke" as a cautionary watchword to remain vigilant for police brutality (Romano, 2020). In the Dutch debate, however, 'woke' is often detached from these origins and mobilized as a flexible label to target different objects – sometimes anti-racism, sometimes decolonial critique, sometimes Palestine solidarity activism, and sometimes queer and trans politics. That flexibility is precisely the point: as Judith Butler (2024) suggests, such labels work by gathering disparate anxieties under one banner, turning diffuse discomfort into a sense of imminent threat that can be mobilized as a call for control. And because queer activism includes struggles against racism and colonial violence, these targets are not neatly separable in practice.

Within this broader anti-'woke' repertoire, 'gender ideology' functions as one of its most portable and emotionally charged shorthand terms – an elastic label through which 'woke' is often concretized into a specific moral and political threat. Reading the Dutch 'anti-woke' turn through Butler helps clarify why the charge of 'gender ideology' spreads despite its vagueness. Ironically, it is labelled by anti-genderists as 'ideology' because they believe that "those who read books about gender are ostensibly subjected to their dogma and do not think independently or critically" (Butler, 2024, p. 20). Butler argues that anti-gender politics operates through a phantasm that turns fear or discomfort into imminent danger, which can then be mobilized to demand state control (Butler, 2024). The term 'gender ideology' shifts meaning across contexts:

> In various parts of the world, gender is figured not only as a threat to children, national security, or heterosexual marriage and the normative family but also as a plot by elites to impose their cultural values on "real people", a scheme for colonizing the Global South by the urban centres of the Global North. It is portrayed as a set of ideas that are in opposition to either science or religion, or both, or as a danger to civilization, a denial of nature, an attack on masculinity, or the effacement of the differences between the sexes. Gender is also sometimes regarded as a totalitarian threat or the work of the devil and thus cast as the most destructive force in the world, a contemporary and dangerous rival to God that must be countered, or destroyed, at all costs (Butler, 2024, pp. 4-5).

Despite all these differences and contradictions, the term 'gender ideology' frames gender as artificial, corrupting minds (of teenagers or children in particular) and dramatizes the threat it poses to women, children, nation and God. This dramaturgy licenses moral panic, self-victimization, and conspiracy talks, which can forge ad-hoc coalitions across religious conservatives, nationalists, and some self-described feminists (sometimes known as TERFs:

trans exclusionary radical feminists). Butler also argues that this phantasm displaces economic and social anxieties onto queer and trans people, converting systemic crises into moral crusades (Butler, 2024).

In the Dutch context, however, this scapegoating arguably more often targets refugees and migrants than queer and trans people – particularly through narratives that frame them as a cause of housing shortages, social disunity and decline of the welfare state (van Geresteijn, 2024). At the same time, it would be a mistake to treat anti-gender politics as irrelevant in the Netherlands. While attacks on queer or gender studies have remained marginal (and can hardly be compared to the current US context under Trump II), researchers note that the Dutch anti-'woke' rhetoric mirrors transnational anti-gender movements that cast LGBTQIA+ people as dangerous scapegoats and portray 'woke' values as existential threats (Segers, 2025; Samaras, 2025). In that sense, the mainstreaming of anti-gender rhetoric, from FvD to VVD talking points, is not a local anomaly but part of a transnational repertoire that abjectifies sexual and gender minorities and treats knowledge institutions as enemies to be subdued.

These developments unfold within a wider political moment in which questions of legitimacy, solidarity, and public dissent are being sharply contested. Since October 2023, the genocide in Gaza has become a major fault line in Dutch public life and in universities (Asem, 2025; Deutsch, 2024). Across Dutch campuses, students and staff organized demonstrations, encampments, and building occupations demanding divestment and an end to institutional ties with Israeli partners that are connected to the Israeli defence force (IDF). Several of these actions were met with police interventions, arrests, and heated public debate about the limits of protest and academic freedom (Deutsch, 2024; Mehra, 2025). At the same time, across much of Europe, freedom of expression has become increasingly contested terrain: a rapport by the United Nations argues that an extensive pattern of unlawful, discriminatory, and disproportionate restrictions has endangered the principles of human rights, disproportionally targeting Palestinian activists and their supporters (Khan, 2024). In this climate, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian discrimination, have intensified, and are frequently invoked in public discourse to police protest and to reassert who is seen as legitimate, reasonable, or extremist (Khan, 2024; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024). In such a charged landscape, engaging with each other – especially if it concerns such highly sensitive topics with different actors across institutions, communities, and activist spaces – becomes profoundly complex, and at times feels nearly impossible without relationships breaking, trust eroding, or positions hardening into camps.

This is why, for me, this backdrop matters for this dissertation's central concern: the conditions under which engaged, relational research with queer refugees can be sustained. In a climate shaped by migration hostility, hardened culture-war debates, and the complexity – sometimes near impossibility of having Palestine solidarity debates (Mehra, 2025), when both truth and solidarity are under pressure, collaborative, care-based forms of research offer a counter-practice: one that insists on interdependence, mutual accountability, and the power of collective imagination. Co-creative practice cultivates listening and makes claims through situated stories rather than abstract scare words. It rebuilds public reasoning in small, durable ways: people encounter each other as co-creators, co-authors, verify experience collectively,

and widen coalitions grounded in care rather than fear. In Butler's terms, this is a wager that shared vulnerability and deliberation can counter fearful authoritarian fantasy with democratic feeling and thought (Butler, 2024). Resisting fear and suspicion as the organizing principles of public life becomes an epistemic task: defending spaces where knowledge can still be produced through solidarity, dialogue, vulnerability, and shared humanity.

7.2 Challenges of Engaged (Creative/ Knowledge) Co-Creation

Against this backdrop, through stories of liminality, acts of queering, and practices of co-creation, we have approached the central question – *what are the challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees in the Netherlands* – from multiple angles. Revisiting my original PhD research proposal, I realized how the project had moved beyond its initial design. What primarily began as an attempt to *study* engagement gradually became an effort to *practice* it. The PhD proposal includes participatory elements, but it was still largely researcher centred. In practice, it shifted toward an enacted, embodied, and affective practice of co-creation, care and transformation: workshops were co-designed and co-facilitated, and both creative and academic outputs were co-authored.

In this concluding chapter, we revisit our central themes, synthesize lessons from each chapter, and consider how our understanding evolved as we leaned into co-creation, relational ethics, care, and queering. We aim to offer closure a clear response to the central research question while also staying faithful to the open-ended and plural ways of knowing that have shaped this project. For that reason, I write more frequently in first person plural ('we') here than in the Introduction. In the introduction I foregrounded my positionality, responsibilities, and the narrative arc through which this research took shape. In the conclusion, however, the emphasis shifts: the insights being summarized are not only the product of my individual analysis, but of a sustained collective process of making, reflecting, (dis)agreeing, revising, and learning together in workshops, conversations, and co-writing moments. Using 'we' is a way of acknowledging that I could not have arrived at many of these understandings alone, and of honouring the people who shaped the questions, methods, and interpretations, through their engagement and labour. At the same time, this is not a claim to shared ownership of this dissertation as a credential. I remain the author of the dissertation and the one responsible for its framing, synthesis, and final argumentation. The 'we' signals the collaborative epistemic conditions under which this work became possible, while the 'I' marks my specific role and accountability for its arguments and shortcomings.

Having said that, I now turn to what this co-creative scholarship demanded of us in practice – where it was difficult, and what it made possible. Engaged, collaborative research with queer refugees proved to be as demanding as it was rewarding. We encountered several key challenges inherent in this form of scholarship:

7.2.1 Emotional Care and Demands

This research demanded intensive emotional labour and care work. Holding space for participants' trauma and vulnerability, while navigating our own, led to periods of overwhelm and even burnout. The research has shown the complexity of working so closely with

communities, which is (or should be) a core ambition of community engaged scholarship (Kajner, 2013). At one point, our project had to pause when the weight of coordination and care exceeded my capacity. We learned that without sustainable structures of support, the labour, even when backed with love and care, can run the risk of exhausting those who carry it. The boundary between caring for others and caring for ourselves became a crucial issue. We had to realize that establishing, communicating, and maintaining boundaries is itself a form of care. A way to ensure that no one's well-being is sacrificed in the process of caring for another. Chapter 6, *Boundaries of Care*, emerged from this realization, stressing that care can become too heavy, and that boundaries are not static lines but ongoing, negotiated practices, which can be difficult to maintain when the going gets tough. In short, a major challenge was how to care deeply and share the burden of care without losing ourselves, balancing closeness with healthy distance at times, remembering that self-care is needed to sustain the work.

7.2.2 Navigating Power and Boundaries

Our engaged co-creative research disrupted traditional power dynamics between researcher and participants, which was both liberating but also tricky to navigate at times. As we blurred the line between researcher and researched, we found ourselves constantly negotiating roles, expectations, and boundaries. Sharing authority meant being open to vulnerability. For instance, admitting we didn't have all the answers, or expressing that we cannot do much to solve the many (personal, structural) problems queer refugee co-creators (may) experience in their individual situations outside of the project. We stumbled along the way while trying to stay confidently vulnerable. This required rigorous reflexivity: we had to remain alert and aware of how power moved within our relationships and be willing to adjust when imbalance or conflicts arose.

At times, conflicts did surface. Sometimes due to differences in worldviews, sometimes due to miscommunications (because English was not the first language for any of us), or for simply having different expectations. Also, because many LIMBO members are in dire situations, carry traumas, and live in 'limbo conditions' (oftentimes multiple years), delaying and obstructing personal healing to build a better life in their new context. Moments of conflicts were challenging, forcing us to confront discomfort rather than sweeping it aside. Also, here we learned that boundaries need continual recalibration: too much rigidity would undermine trust, but too much fluidity could lead to confusion or even harm. In Chapter 6, we noted that in "engaged research, we must thus negotiate multiple dimensions of relationships, such as intuition, care, and risk management, as well as improvise our way throughout complicated situations. There are no preset guidelines" (Ch. 6, p. 140).

This realization also pointed us to the need of a non-idealized approach to care. While caring research relations can indeed be deeply rewarding, a romanticized view risks overlooking the tensions that inevitably arise. Care is not always soft or easy. It can be messy, demanding and unevenly distributed. Power shifts, misunderstandings, and even resentment can surface in safer spaces that meant to nurture connection. Recognizing this grounds the value of care. It reminds us that ethical, relational work involves navigating imperfection and friction, not avoiding them. However, what does this mean in practice? It is one thing to embrace imperfection in artistic creation, where failure can be generative. It is another to face

failure in the practices of care, especially when navigating different vulnerabilities and mutual interdependencies. The ethics of failure does not absolve one from responsibility; rather, it asks us to resist fantasies of purity or mastery in care. Following Greene (2025) and Halberstam (2011), failure becomes ethical not because harm is acceptable, but because acknowledging our limits opens space for healing, accountability, and transformation. In relations of care, this means recognizing that harm may occur even with good intentions, and that ethical responsibility begins not in denying or excusing it, but in how we respond, listen and remain answerable. In this sense, care becomes a practice of relational ethics, a continuous negotiation between closeness and distance, self and other, structure and flexibility. It requires a form of non-binary thinking that can hold contradiction and complexity at once. That care can heal and hurt, that boundaries can protect and restrict, and that meaningful knowledge often emerges through the tensions of collaboration itself, when people with different histories, privileges, and vulnerabilities, try to work and stay in relation despite discomfort or disagreement. In Chapter 4, we argued that truly democratic collaboration demanded ongoing dialogue about who holds decision-making power at each step, and the humility to step back or step up as needed, a delicate dance of decentring and recentring that we had to learn by trying, failing and trying again.

7.2.3 Structural and Institutional Strains

Our project did not unfold in a vacuum; it was affected by broader structural conditions. On a practical level, we grappled with resource limitations, continuity, and institutional constraints. Engaged scholarship of this kind requires time and funding, which can be challenging to secure and maintain. We experienced how enthusiasm and growth, while wonderful, can outpace the available infrastructure. For example, as LIMBO grew rapidly in members and visibility, the logistics of organizing (bi-)weekly or monthly creative workshops, exhibitions and/ or events became increasingly complex. We did not initially have support structures like mental health support or conflict mediation at hand. Lacking those types of support put strain on our team. We eventually realized "the need to keep it smaller and simpler because we had been seduced by the enthusiasm and growth" (Ch. 4, p. 109)

Another structural challenge came from academic conventions: working in non-traditional ways (mixing art with research, co-authoring with community members, prioritizing process over output) sometimes felt at odds with academia's metrics and timelines. Yet, in my case, this approach was also recognized and celebrated. Being part of an NWO VICI project offered a rare context where engaged, creative and co-creative methods were encouraged, rather than dismissed. This institutional support made a huge difference, it legitimized what other academics, even some that I spoke with, have considered "unscientific". It connects directly to what I described in the introduction regarding the emerging *Co-Creation Lab for Inclusive Knowledges* (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, n.d.). Institutional backing acknowledges that co-creation is an epistemic stance that requires institutional room, time, budget and legitimacy, moving beyond co-creation as a methodology depending on personal commitment, enthusiasm and volunteerism. Institutional backing holds potential for building collective resistance against extractive research practices with more durable collaborations

and sustained practices. Despite its challenges, LIMBO is an example that it can be done meaningfully.

However, even within our context of institutional support, tensions persisted. To sustain the project, we often found ourselves having to speak multiple 'languages' at once. We had to be multilingual, translating between academic expectations, the logics of the art institution, and the lived reality, needs, and rhythms of the community. Each world had its own tempo, vocabulary, and measures of success. In academia we had to frame our relational, process-based work in the language of research design, methodology and outcomes. Within the art institution there were expectations around visibility and public engagement. And in the community, the emphasis was on care, trust, and belonging, though for many visibility and recognition were also deeply important. For some participants, being seen and acknowledged through exhibitions and performances was itself a form of healing by reclaiming presence and voice. Interestingly, for each of these three contexts, the notion of safety was perhaps the most important, but each context also had different ideas, values, solutions or approaches on how to reach or maintain safety. These differences did not always match.

For instance, official consent forms were a requirement from the university, and official work or volunteer agreements a requirement from the funding body ILGA-Europe. This brought tensions because our entire project was a practice of trust, and several queer refugees, particularly those that were undocumented, did not feel comfortable signing official documents. Especially when trust was not yet built or earned (more on this in Ch. 4). Balancing these different rhythms and values required sensitivity and ongoing negotiation. It was not simply about communicating, but more about ensuring that no world dominated the others, and that the project could remain a space of reciprocity and integrity for everyone involved.

Over time, I realized how exceptional our project was. Occasionally, younger researchers, often master's or PhD students, approached me asking how they might do something similar, which made me realize how rare and privileged the conditions for our project were. The support from Framer Framed and the funding we received (later also from ILGA-Europe) made it possible to work ethically and with care. Without that support, the risk of exploitation (of asking co-creators to contribute emotionally and creatively without proper compensation) would have been much higher.

This realization led to a broader insight: how conditions of possibility shape what kinds of knowledge can be made, and by whom. Funding structures made this visible. Many funders support either community or art initiatives or academic research, but rarely both. Community-oriented funders often exclude large institutions like universities, while academic grants come with strict rules, timelines and eligibility criteria. And larger academic fundings are often meant for scholars with academic positions or titles, thus excluding PhDs like me – still having to earn the title. LIMBO existed precisely between these worlds. My own position reflected this ambiguity: I was both a PhD researcher and, formally, a volunteer managing the budget and coordinating the project. Because of funding criteria that did not allow university-projects, I could not officially present LIMBO as university-embedded research, even though it lies at the heart of this dissertation. This in-between position – between institution and community, between research and care – was both liberating and precarious. It allowed for creativity and independence, but also exposed how non-traditional, relational research

remains structurally fragile. If we truly want to support transformative, co-creative scholarship, our institutions and funding systems must learn to move beyond linear, product-driven models and value the process of relation itself as a legitimate academic contribution. Co-creation takes time, care, and sustained presence – qualities that are rarely acknowledged as academic performance or criteria in standard grant opportunities (Rast, 2022). Making this work sustainable is another challenge altogether. Yet relationships endure in ways that reports and deliverables do not. They form the groundwork for future proliferating connections, collaborations, mutual learning and solidarities that holds the potential to continue long after a project's formal end.

7.2.4 Maintaining Trust and Safety

Finally, a persistent challenge was creating and sustaining an environment of trust, consent, and safer space. After the first chapter, we understood that many queer refugees had experienced exploitation or tokenization in past research. There is a great body of work that addresses these issues from different angles. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2005) reminds us that:

> The history of research from many indigenous perspectives is so deeply embedded in colonization that it has been regarded as a tool only of colonization and not as a potential tool for self-determination and development. For indigenous peoples, research has a significance that is embedded in our history as natives under the gaze of Western science and colonialism. It is framed by indigenous attempts to escape the penetration and surveillance of that gaze while simultaneously reordering, reconstituting, and redefining ourselves as peoples and communities in a state of ongoing crisis. Research is a site of contestation not simply at the level of epistemology or methodology but also in its broadest sense as an organized scholarly activity that is deeply connected to power (Smith, 2005, p. 87).

Florence Ashley (2021) reflects on how to account for research fatigue, which is participants' "psychological and emotional exhaustion with research" (p. 270). Several participants in LIMBO's predecessor *Art for Change*, mentioned being tired of research, since they are asked to participate frequently but left feeling empty handed or even drained of energy afterwards.

Overcoming such initial scepticism required patient trust-building. We devoted time to collectively set intentions for a safer space (as described in Chapters 4 and 5), emphasizing that everyone's agency would be respected. Yet trust is not a one-time achievement and can be fragile. We learned that safety is dynamic, something we had to keep cultivating and sometimes repair when ruptured. Moments of tension (such as disagreements over sensitive topics, or when a boundary was crossed unintentionally) could threaten the sense of safety we worked so hard to build. These instances taught us that responding with transparency and care was critical: acknowledging mistakes, apologizing when needed, and learning together how to do better. In practice, this meant what Cairo calls being "safe enough to be brave", rather than promising absolute safety (Cairo, 2021, p. 197). It was a challenge to co-create a space where participants felt secure enough to take risks in self-expression, knowing that

discomfort might occur but would be handled with care. We discovered that holding such a space is delicate work; as Chapter 4 noted, it required constant attention to boundaries, consent and shared responsibility, as well as training or support for those facilitating the space. When done well, this effort pays off in trust and openness; when missteps happen, it tests the resilience of the relationships. Thus, the challenge was creating a safer space as well as maintaining it through all the ups and downs of the project.

In summary, the challenges of engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees in the Netherlands included significant emotional labour and risk of burnout, complex power negotiations and boundary-setting, structural limitations in resources and norms, and the delicate and ongoing work of cultivating trust. None of these challenges were insurmountable, but they required us to remain reflexive, adaptable, and compassionate with each other and ourselves. The very nature of our project (relational, liminal, and non-hierarchical) meant we often had to feel our way through uncharted territory, making mistakes and course-corrections as we went. On the contrary, they often came intertwined with opportunities, as discussed next.

7.3 Opportunities of Engaged (Creative/ Knowledge) Co-Creation

Against and alongside these challenges, our co-creative approach opened profound opportunities – for participants, for the knowledge we co-produced, for academia, and for the broader queer and migrant communities around us. Returning to the image introduced in the beginning of the dissertation, our research journey can be understood as a set of proliferating lines that, over time, formed thicker strands (De la Bellacasa, 2012). Each phase of the project generated a new line – another layer of knowledge that gained depth and resonance through co-creation. The earliest line concerned space: not only a physical location but a collective space built together around everyone's needs and desires (i.e., queer, safer, affective, creative). This line revealed the generative potential of co-creation once research participants take ownership of the space and project. The room itself became a shared achievement and a precondition for everything that followed.

A second line involved producing knowledge from the margins that rarely appear in academic or policy discourse. Through poetry, drawing, performance and collective reflection, participants articulated insights about displacement, belonging, intimacy, survival strategies, chosen family, fluid identities in terms of name, gender or self-understanding. Co-creation through art and care enabled forms of situated embodied, affective knowledge that emerge only at the margins. Art became both data and a method of theorizing.

A third line unfolded around healing. LIMBO was never designed as therapy, yet shared vulnerability, solidarity, and recognition, created conditions where participants could process pain, rebuild trust, and feel a sense of belonging and hope. This line thickened when artistic practice opened spaces for affective repair that are untypical – to put it mildly – in academic settings.

From here, the work expanded toward questions of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). Co-authorship, shared decision-making, and collaborative meaning-making redistributed who gets to define what counts as knowledge. Beyond being ethically sound, this redistribution

generated deeper, more accurate understandings of lived realities – recognizing queer refugees not only as informants but as knowers and leaders.

Closely related but distinct was another line concerning co-production more broadly. Participants shaped the workshop designs, public presentations, and research outputs. Knowledge became something we did together, not something extracted. This stance opened future trajectories in the form of new collaborations, friendships, artistic experiments and community-led initiatives that continue beyond the formal project.

Finally, co-creation revealed possibilities for challenging institutional boundaries. Operating between academia, art, and community work, LIMBO offered an alternative to traditional research models. These practices became a quiet form of resistance, demonstrating that knowledge can be produced relationally, collaboratively, and on terms shaped by those most affected.

Together, these lines show how co-creation generates knowledge not by moving in single direction, but by allowing multiple trajectories to meet and reinforce one another. The 'thickness' of this knowledge comes from layered, shared, and continually evolving forms of relation and understanding (De la Bellacasa, 2012).

In what follows, we discuss four major strands of opportunity that emerged through our co-creative practice. Each strand corresponds to a line of knowledge described. Taken together, these strands show how co-creative engaged scholarship can (1) redistribute agency and self-representation, (2) cultivate community and healing, (3) generate errant and epistemically just forms of knowledge, and (4) contribute to broader societal transformation. They are presented separately for clarity, though in practice they overlapped and informed one another.

7.3.1 Agency and Self-Representation of Marginalized Voices

Co-creative engaged scholarship proved to be a powerful way of supporting queer refugee participants as knowledge-makers and storytellers. Instead of being seen or treated as subjects of study, participants became co-authors, co-researchers, and artists, actively shaping the direction and meaning of the project. This was evident from the first chapter's findings: queer refugees, through exilic art narratives, could unsettle dominant exclusionary discourses rather than conforming to them. By creating and sharing art on their own terms, they challenged the simplistic victim-or-threat frames that society often imposes. They showed that despite the challenges inherent to their state(s) of in-betweenness, it can also be a source of creativity and critical thinking, not merely a site of vulnerability.

It enables individuals who are too often silenced to speak back to power, using images, performances, and stories to assert 'we are here and we define ourselves.' We saw participants exercise a form of creative activism by performing a poem about their journey, showcasing their art works in a co-curated exhibition, or simply by voicing a critical insight during one of the creative workshops. Our public events amplified these voices further, inviting wider audiences to listen and learn. In doing so, the project provided a platform for advocacy: our co-created booklets and participants' art works could travel beyond our workshops and resonate with, circulate amongst, and influence wider circles. It affirmed that queer refugees hold insight, creativity, authority, and leadership, and that when scholarship

works with them, it can help bring that richness into view. As we concluded in Chapter 4, on conditions for transformative engaged scholarship, a space like LIMBO: "offers a space for the agency of queer refugees, enabling them to challenge social norms and create their own narratives on their own terms" (p. 110). This is not about empowerment granted from the outside, but about recognizing existing agency, and making space for it. For those who, in their everyday acts, become protagonists of social change.

This agency did not unfold in isolation. As participants shaped narratives on their own terms, they also shaped one another's sense of belonging and safety – leading into a second important strand: the formation of community and collective healing.

7.3.2 Community, Connection and Healing

A beautiful outcome of our project was the emergence of LIMBO as a strong community and network of care. What began as a series of creative workshops evolved into something akin to a chosen family. Participants often described LIMBO as a rare space where they felt truly safe, seen and accepted – sometimes for the first time since arriving in the Netherlands. The opportunity here was to co-create not just knowledge but belonging. By engaging in art, storytelling, meals, and celebrations together over an extended period (nearly 4 years), we cultivated bonds of trust, friendship and solidarity.

This had tangible emotional benefits: many participants spoke of the process as healing or therapeutic, even though we consistently avoided framing the project as therapy. In Chapter 5, we drew on a salutogenic perspective (Antonovsky, 1996), which shifts attention away from pathology and toward the resources, strengths, and forms of wholeness that help people navigate trauma. Co-facilitator Lana strongly endorses this orientation, emphasizing fullness rather than brokenness. This aligns with decolonial approaches to healing that view wellness as relational rather than individual. As Archibald (2006) notes:

> Holistic healing suggests that different therapies used in combination will more effectively address the healing needs of the whole person. For Indigenous people, the concept of holism extends beyond the mental, physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of individual lives to encompass relationships with families, communities and the physical environment. Such approaches challenge governments that compartmentalize funding through departments (health, education, housing, etc.), but they are natural to Indigenous service providers. A holistic approach also challenges many Western medical practitioners who separate physical and mental health and do not deal with the spiritual dimension (p. vii).

The act of sharing one's story or artwork in a supportive group allowed individuals to release burdens and find mutual recognition. There was collective healing in realizing 'I'm not alone in this'. Moreover, the joy and playfulness in our workshops (be it dancing, clowning, or crafting) provided much-needed relief from daily stresses of the asylum process and marginalization. Together, we laughed, we cried, we held space for each other's complexities. This sense of community also created a safety net beyond the project itself, through

friendships, informal get-togethers and a large WhatsApp support group managed by Alaaddin, to name a few examples.

The interdependency we built was an asset: it showed that care can be co-created just like knowledge. Chapter 5, *Through Art We Co-Create Care*, delved into how our rhizomatic community developed shared care practices. One insight was that non-paternalistic care flowed in multiple directions, not just from facilitators to participants, but among participants and from participants to facilitators. We experienced how research culture can be nourishing as opposed to extractive. The opportunity here is the possibility of research that doesn't just study community but rather becomes community. Despite the challenges and complexities inherent in 'becoming community', the potential is that participants and researchers end the process more connected and supported than when they began.

Crucially, these forms of community and mutual care also reshaped *how* knowledge was produced. As relationships deepened, so did our capacity to create knowledge collaboratively, errantly, and justly. The next section explores how this relational grounding thickened our understanding and expanded what could be known through co-creation.

7.3.3 Errant Knowledge and Epistemic Justice

The knowledge that emerged through practices of engaged co-creative scholarship, about queer refugee identities in the Dutch context, as well as on the arts-based methodology, was richer and more nuanced precisely because it was born from ongoing dialogue in creative ways. It carried multiple perspectives, grounded in lived experience, expressed through art, emotion, and conversation. The tensions and negotiations within the group made the understanding deeper and more layered than any one researcher could have produced alone. When participants are also co-authors, the research reflects their vocabularies, metaphors and emotions. This results in contextually grounded knowledge, nuanced because it is not abstracted from life, but entangled with it (Haraway, 1988). Plus, the dialogical nature of the process, with its moments of misunderstanding, negotiation, and revision, reveal the complexities of experience that a single, linear narrative, might have missed.

By braiding together academic theories with lived experiences and artistic expression, we tapped into what we might call errant knowledge. We draw on Édouard Glissant's (1997) notion of errantry to this research as a form of errant knowledge, which is knowledge that wanders relationally, rather than claiming mastery or universal truth. It learns through movement, encounter, and deviation, rather than through fixed methods or linear progression.

The chapters of this dissertation exemplify this. In Chapter 2, for instance, using a rhizomatic lens helped capture the nonlinear, networked way our workshops produced understanding. Ideas didn't move in a straight line from hypothesis to conclusion; they grew like a web, with personal stories, drawings, theories, and emotions all connecting form to meaning. This is a different epistemology. One that values multiple ways of knowing (the visual, the affective, the experiential, as well as the intellectual).

Crucially, co-creation did not only yield methodological insights. It also surfaced deep substantive knowledge about identity, survival, community, chosen family, queer belonging, love, and the strengths and fragilities of (becoming) community. This is knowledge many queer

refugees already carry, often learned through precarity and exile. It is knowledge about how to rebuild trust after conflict; how to navigate systems that silences your experience; how to imagine a life while living in suspension; how to form kinship in the absence of state protection. It is also knowledge about joy, creativity, and chosen family as strategies of endurance.

This is life knowledge, world-building knowledge, queer refugees possess (next to their individual professional, educational, creative knowledges). It is a kind of knowledge that sustains people when institutions fail them. Too often, this knowledge remains marginalized or dismissed in academic and policy spaces. In our project this knowledge led. It shaped our questions, guided our decisions, and defined our ethical commitments. It expanded what we came to understand about belonging, care, vulnerability, and futurity.

The opportunity here is a form of epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013): co-creation made space for knowledge that is typically marginalized. By engaging together as co-researchers and by treating creative expression as valid knowledge, we challenged the hierarchy that places academic knowledge above community knowledge. In our process, theory and experience informed each other in a reciprocal learning loop. For example, stories of being stuck waiting in the asylum process, caught between a lost past and an inaccessible future, gave concrete depth to theoretical concepts like liminality. Conversely, theory provides language for participants to contextualize their personal struggles in a broader societal or philosophical frame. This two-way enrichment made the outcomes more relevant, precise and transformative.

Moreover, co-creative knowledge tends to be more accessible, since it's also communicated through stories or art. In my own writing, I always keep queer refugees in mind. Even though most LIMBO members are not academically oriented, and many have trouble reading (long, academic) texts, there are few that have read every published chapter of this dissertation. Despite having to look up words in the dictionary while reading, they engage with our texts as well as related literature like *Holding Space* (Cairo, 2021). That is why I aim for an accessible yet academic tone, that resonates with both the queer refugee, as well as the academic, community. This makes the knowledge more democratic, reaching beyond academia to communities, and (hopefully) to policy arenas and the public. One of our aims was "to connect different situated knowledges and lived experiences with academic knowledges in inclusive ways" (Ch. 3, p. 84). The resulting insights about, for instance, conditions for transformative engaged scholarship (Chapter 4) or rhizomatic care (Chapter 5), carry credibility precisely because they were co-derived.

In short, an engaged co-creative approach expands what can be known and how we come to know, inviting perspectives that are relational rather than hierarchical. Our work models a methodology where community and academy learn from each other, potentially inspiring more scholars to adopt participatory, creative approaches.

7.3.4 Societal Impact and Transformation

Finally, engaged co-creation with queer refugees holds meaningful opportunities for broader societal and political impact. Knowledge co-created in this way does not stay confined to academic journals or this dissertation; it flows outward into society through the people and stories it touches. In our project, we saw multiple examples of this ripple effect. The public

LIMBO events were more than just showcasing; they were acts of advocacy. Visitors from the public, including people that work for NGOs like Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, LGBT Asylum Support and TransUnited, but also policymakers, encountered the oftentimes intimate artworks and compelling stories of our members. These encounters can humanize issues that are otherwise discussed abstractly (like the so-called refugee crisis or human rights issues) by centring personal voices. We had attendees express that they were deeply moved and broadened their perspectives, which is a subtle social impact at the level of hearts and minds.

Additionally, I learned that many queer activists distrust governmental, scientific or large institutional bodies. General public trust is only moderate in the Netherlands in comparison to 68 other countries, and scepticism is higher among those who feel alienated from elite structures (Cologna et al., 2024). Yet this project demonstrates that it is possible to create ethical, reciprocal projects within such institutions. When participants are part of such co-creative projects, where their voices shape the process, outputs, and relationships, or visitors attending public events where these knowledges are shared, they may begin to (partially) restore trust.

Moreover, the engaged nature of our project led to partnerships and initiatives that further amplified social change. Collaborating with art institutions, like Framer Framed, demonstrated how cultural spaces can tangibly support refugee inclusion, by providing (free) space, host public events, and help solidify funding. Our contributions to outlets like *Foam Magazine* and *Errant Journal* carried our stories and ideas into artistic and intellectual communities internationally. On a grassroots level, the project spurred co-creators to new actions: inspired by LIMBO's spirit, Sajad Salmanpour, went on to co-found *Queer Work*, a support initiative for queer refugees seeking employment, directly addressing a need that had surfaced in our meetings. While Alaaddin Ammar, co-founded *Q LIMBO,* further spreading and developing insights gained in our sessions. Artist and graphic designer Ariya has been part of both *Art for Change* and LIMBO and is now a professional artist, showcasing and selling their works in multiple venues over time. These examples illustrate how co-creation can activate and inspire leadership among participants; the confidence and skills gained in the project translate to further community engagement.

Institutionally, there is also an opportunity in how co-created knowledge can inform policy and practice. The insights from our chapters and booklets; on creating safer spaces, on holding space, on conditions for transformative impact, have the potential to guide NGOs, social workers, educators, artists and others that work with refugees or LGBTQIA+ communities. Several scholars that learned about our project took inspiration and courage to pursue something similar. Because our work centres voices from the margins, it carries an integrity and urgency that can speak to power in compelling ways.

While ethnographic research often aims to document the lives of others, our co-creative approach unsettles that separation. Knowledge was lived, shaped and performed together, through art, dialogue and trust. Its integrity lies not in observation, but in relation. What distinguishes this work from traditional ethnography is the redistribution of epistemic authority. Co-creation transforms participants from interlocutors into co-authors; interpretation becomes collaboration rather than extractive; producing knowledge that is relational, situated, and collectively owned. In this way, the project did not simply represent

queer refugee experience, but it enacted a way of learning and knowing together grounded in reciprocity, vulnerability, and shared imagination. It shows that when refugees, academics and artists come together, we can imagine and forge new inclusive realities. In summary, the engaged co-creative approach offers an opportunity to change the world in small but significant ways by building empathy, mutual trust, challenging stereotypes, and creating models for community that others can learn from or develop further.

In reflecting on these opportunities, we feel a sense of hope and possibility. Yes, the work was challenging, often messy, and never perfect. But the very same aspects that were difficult opened doors to something new: deeper relationships, innovative insights, and ripple effects that reach beyond the project. The LIMBO project demonstrated that engaged scholarship, when done with care and creativity, can be transformative on multiple levels: individual, communal and even societal. It can validate and make space for leadership for those who are often pushed to society's margins, and in doing so, it can enrich academia and society with perspectives that are urgent and necessary.

Having outlined the central challenges and opportunities, we now turn to how these themes intersect with the key concepts that underpinned our work from the start, liminality, queering, and co-creation. Here, I reflect on how our understanding evolved throughout the project.

7.4 Liminality, Queering and Co-Creation: What They Came to Mean

With some distance, and after analysing and synthesizing the chapters together, three interrelated concepts crystallized as particularly generative lenses: liminality, queering, and co-creation. They form a shared vocabulary for describing what we were doing and learning and for making sense of both the possibilities and the frictions that emerged along the way. Here, we revisit each theme to illustrate what it came to mean for us in practice.

7.4.1 Liminality: The Potential of in-Betweenness.

From the beginning, liminality, the state of being "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969), has been a defining condition of the queer refugee experience and of our project's ethos. Chapter 1 discussed exilic positioning, describing how queer refugees exist between former and new home country, between past identity and future possibility, often belonging fully to neither. Rather than treating this in-betweenness as merely a source of loss or instability, we looked for its generative potential (Said, 1994; Turner, 1969). In the LIMBO project, we embraced liminality as a creative and critical space. We deliberately cultivated an environment that was something new in-between, a hybrid space where norms could be suspended and reimagined. In the workshops, the focus was on reflecting together on the generative aspects of in-betweenness itself. We explored how existing between cultures, languages, genders, or expectations could open alternative ways of thinking and creating.

This also meant resisting more neoliberal understandings of creativity, in which creativity is often reduced to innovation – measured through novelty, productivity, or upward growth (Jeanes, 2006). Instead, we approached creativity through the horizontal value of liminality: as a process of experimentation, play, and exploration that does not need to

culminate in a polished outcome to be meaningful. By shifting attention from final products to the experience of making together, the workshops could loosen pressures to perform and create space for self-discovery, expression, and collective reflection.

This became especially meaningful in a social climate where public debates around identity, belonging and so-called 'cancel culture' often demand clarity, conformity and fixed positions. Against this hardening discourse, our work in LIMBO invited a different orientation: one that values ambiguity and multiplicity as sources of originality, inspiration, imagination. Artmaking in this sense, became a practice of staying with uncertainty, of holding space for contradiction and fluidity, and of attending to what does not easily fit within existing categories.

Liminality was also inherent to our research process. We, as co-researchers, found ourselves between categories: not entirely academic, not entirely art, not entirely community or activism, but something in between. Instead of maintaining a strict scholar or subject stance, we shared the middle ground together. This was sometimes uncomfortable because the usual guide rails were not always there, but that discomfort was precisely where growth occurred. Echoing Victor Turner (1969) and others, we recognized that the space of waiting, transition, and not-yet-belonging can be fertile ground for transformation. Liminality became a source of critical insight and solidarity. Those living in-between could relate to one another and build a community that made waiting more bearable and meaningful.

Eventually, we came to see liminality not as a temporary state to escape, but as an ongoing reality to inhabit consciously. In a broader sense, everyone experiences some form of liminality in different stages of life. With refugees it is perhaps more apparent, especially those in the asylum process. Through their eyes, we learned that living in liminality has the potential to cultivate flexibility, empathy, and creativity. This dissertation, winding through personal stories and theoretical reflections, also dwells in the in-between, between disciplines, personal narratives and theory. And in doing so, it mirrors the productive possibilities of liminal space.

7.4.2 Queering: Embracing Nonconformity and Nonlinearity.

Queering, as both a theoretical stance and a practical approach, shaped every layer of this work. To queer something is to resist norms, to subvert what is taken for granted, and that is precisely what our project did in relation to research methods and narratives. From the outset, we drew inspiration from queer theory to question binary thinking and hierarchical structures. Tanja Kajner's (2013) article on engaged scholarship, was one of the first theoretical sources of inspiration, which is tellingly titled: *Beyond the Binary.* We asked: what does it mean to go beyond the binary? What if research did not follow a straight line? What if we disrupted the usual scripts of who holds knowledge and how it is expressed?

Throughout this dissertation, queering appeared in many forms. Conceptually, we learned to adopt non-binary thinking as a guiding principle, extending beyond gender to our understanding of identities and categories more broadly. We observed how queer refugees' experiences resist either/or definitions such as man or woman, gay or straight, citizen or alien, teacher or student. Embracing that complexity rather than simplifying it, was an act of queering our perspective. It allowed us to hold contradictory truths and find meaning in ambiguity. For

example, a participant could at the same time be thankful for (relative) safety in the Netherlands and critical of Dutch racism, both grateful and angry, without one emotion cancelling the other. In the LIMBO narratives, queering meant challenging homonormativity and homonationalism by stories that did not fit the 'grateful gay refugee'-trope. We expressed voices of those who felt unwelcome in mainstream LGBTQIA+ spaces or events like Amsterdam Pride, or who questioned that Western countries are automatically progressive safe havens.

Yet queering complexity does not mean dissolving all structure. Even as we resisted binaries and fixed identities, we recognized that people still live within systems where such categories carry real consequence. It therefore does not mean that categories are meaningless. We still oftentimes need categories to name and fight oppression and inequality or exclusion. Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) reminds us that recognizing the social construction of identity, does not mean that categories are irrelevant in this world. Categories such as woman, Black, refugee, queer, or transgender are produced through social and historical processes, yet they have tangible effects on people's lives and remain essential for collective political struggle and visibility (Crenshaw, 1991). For instance, to address the unique struggles of queer refugees, we must speak of 'queer refugees' as a category at times. Otherwise, their specific marginalization is erased. Non-binary thinking is not about discarding all labels, but about using labels strategically and self-reflexively, always aware they are approximations, not essences, because categories could become so fixed with negative connotations leaving barely any space for one's own self-definition (Ghorashi 2021).

Methodologically, we queered the research process by combining art and academia and embracing the "queer art of failure" (Halberstam, 2011). Following Alexandra Greene's (2025) call for a *feminist ethics of failure*, we learned to see moments of discomfort, hesitation, and discord not as signs of weakness, but as generative sites of learning and care. Greene reminds us that failure is not an objective fact but a situated judgement, often entangled with neoliberal academic pressures that individualize responsibility and equate success with productivity and control. By acknowledging failure as part of the research process – rather than something to conceal – we resisted those logics. In practice, this meant paying attention to what Greene (2025) describes as the "negative affects" (p. 1) of collaboration (i.e., frustration, doubt, fatigue, even distrust) as integral to, rather than separate from, the ethics of co-creation. Staying with these moments demanded humility and a willingness to see failure as care: as a way of holding, rather than resolving, contradiction or conflict. In this sense, queering the research process also meant reimagining success; not as the smooth production and/ or presentation of results, but as the ongoing negotiation of relationships, power, and responsibility within a group. Blending the personal with the political, trying to let go of control in having to reach perfect academic standards, and allowing the project to take a nonlinear path by responding to needs and desires from the group along the way. Traditional research often insists on a clear separation between research and subject, or between analysis and emotion. We intentionally crossed those boundaries, not as an act of rebellion but because maintaining them would have limited trust, and therefore truth and depth.

Embracing failure in this way also reshaped how we came to understand knowledge itself. What began as an effort to queer research methods gradually evolved into a rethinking

of how knowledge moves, connects, and grows. Rather than advancing through linear stages of success or mastery, our insights emerged through rhizomatic logics. In Chapters 2, 3 and 5, the idea of rhizomatic logics, drawn from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), offered a way to describe a non-heteronormative logic of knowledge. At first, we used the rhizome to contrast with the straight, hierarchical models that dominate traditional academia. As the project unfolded, we came to see that the rhizome was never just an image or metaphor for what we were doing. It was something we were inhabiting. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) remind us that the rhizome is not a symbol of connection, it is connection itself, a living principle of growth, relation and transformation. Thinking rhizomatically means refusing to represent the world from above and instead moving within it, tracing connections as they emerge. In that sense, the LIMBO project operated rhizomatically. Ideas, stories, and emotions intertwined, creating unpredictable pathways through which meaning moved. Knowledge did not follow a vertical order of causes and effects but spread laterally through encounters. The rhizome was present in how we worked, how we related, and how our understanding expanded.

Classical visions of history and knowledge, from Hegel's dialectic unfolding of Spirit (Akanaefu, 2024), to Marx's linear conception of time (Durán, 2020), assume that development follows a line, a teleological path toward completion or higher truth. Such thinking imagines progress as a vertical movement: one stage replaces the next, a new branch arises from the trunk. Yet our lived experience in the twenty-first century makes these grand narratives difficult to sustain. As Anna Tsing (2015) observes, the modernist "tree of progress" has splintered. Ecological breakdown, social inequality, and political regression reveal that the story of linear development no longer holds. In its place, Tsing (2015) invites us to follow the unpredictable, lateral connections of life in the ruins. A movement more akin to mycelial growth than to the smooth ascent promised by linear progress.

Thinking rhizomatically also helped reframe failure and uncertainty. In linear logic, a dead end marks defeat. In a rhizome, it is simply a point from which new connections may grow. This approach helped us reframe moments of tension or confusion in the project as opportunities for branching, for forming new understandings. The rhizome, in this sense, became both a philosophical concepts and a survival strategy. It offered a way to think beyond mastery, beyond the illusion of perfect order, toward a more relational form of knowledge making – messy, entangled, and alive. At the same time, while rhizomatic growth and learning is not about achieving mastery, the 'thickening of knowledge' through all the layers and lines presented here shows its generative potential.

7.4.3 Co-creation: Collaborative Knowledge-Making

Co-creation has been central to this dissertation, the practice that ties everything together. Methodologically, it refers to collaboration at every stage: from designing research activities to 'generating data' such as artworks, stories, and conversations, interpreting findings, and sharing outcomes. In traditional research paradigms, participants are oftentimes approached as sources to extract information from. Looking back, co-creation became a guiding principle that transformed both the research process and its outcomes. In Chapters 2 and 5, we described how designing the LIMBO workshops together with community members created an atmosphere of mutual trust. There, we connect co-creation to the rhizome in which "[t]he

community itself becomes the curriculum, cultivating real-time negotiation and construction of knowledge in an entangled web of relations. This enables a non-hierarchical, and reciprocal way of co-creation, which in turn contributes to a sense of connection, ownership, and agency (Cormier, 2008)" (pp, 124-125). Throughout the process, participants selected workshop themes, co-facilitated sessions, and decided how and when their stories would be shared. This shared ownership sometimes slowed or increased the pace or led the project in unplanned directions. Yet those moments taught us to let go of control and to listen with full attention.

This collaborative approach also extended to the projects' financial and organizational dimensions. For instance, when we applied for funding from ILGA-Europe, I took the lead in writing the grant proposal and drafting the budget, but every version was shared with the team. Decisions about how funds would be distributed were made transparently and collectively, inviting suggestions from all team members. This process ensure that money was treated as part of the co-creation rather than an external or managerial concern, reinforcing trust, transparency and accountability within the team.

We learned that co-creation demands humility. The researcher steps down from the role of expert and becomes collaborator and facilitator. The effect was that participants felt seen, respected and valued for their own expertise. I believe it also enriched our knowledge, since participants spoke very openly and critically as co-owners of the work, particularly when it came to co-authorship. This collective form of authorship remains rare in academia, yet it proved very meaningful. The reflections and analysis were shaped through multiple lenses; academic and experiential, globally North and South. Co-authorship demanded patience, compromise, and coordination, but it also built accountability. It becomes far more difficult to objectify or misrepresent someone when they are shaping the conversation that produces the text.

This approach represents one of the central opportunities of engaged scholarship. Collaborative knowledge-making produces research that is ethical and rigorous at once. Ethically, it counters extractive dynamics and allows for reciprocity, evident in the mutual benefits that emerged: friendships, skill-sharing, a place to experiment with facilitating (parts of) workshops, or public speaking, financial compensation, and tangible outcomes (two co-created booklets as well as this dissertation) that both researchers (myself and other engaged scholars) and participants could use in their own creative, academic, advocacy or grant-writing work. Analytically, co-interpretation among diverse collaborators helped identify gaps in understanding and revealed nuance. For instance, in Chapter 5, contributions from partners with different backgrounds brought layered perspectives on care, and how it was valued in LIMBO. Collectively reflecting helps prevent the very hierarchies and biases that engaged scholarship seeks to challenge.

Ultimately, co-creation reflects a commitment to democratizing knowledge. It insists that understanding about a community should be built together with that community. In our case, co-creation was both practical, since queer refugees are the most qualified to interpret their own experiences, and principled, as it embodied our belief in equality and justice. By the end of the project, co-creation felt essential. In future research, I would instinctively seek collaboration and would find it difficult to move to solitary or top-down modes of inquiry. Despite its challenges, LIMBO has demonstrated that co-creation is both possible and

potentially transformative. We hope it encourages other scholars to blur the boundaries between researcher and participant and to trust the shared crafting of knowledge.

In revisiting these three themes, we see how they intertwine. Liminality could be seen as the context (the in-between space we inhabited), queering as the stance (the critical, non-normative lens), and co-creation as the method for our engaged scholarship. Together, they allowed for a project that was experimental yet grounded, intimate and some might say radical. We attempted to stay true to queer ways of knowing, valuing fluidity, emotion, and relationship. By carrying liminality, queering, and co-creation from the introduction through every chapter, we attempted to live our principles throughout the research. This conclusion demonstrates their culmination.

7.5 Continuing the Conversation

As we close this dissertation, we are opening a conversation. Our central research question has been addressed: we have articulated the manifold challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship in co-creation with queer refugees. We have learned about the necessity of care and the pain of its limits, the joy of community and creativity, the lessons in conflict, the power of sharing knowledge and learning together, and the humility of sharing authority. We have provided answers, but these answers are not final verdicts, because each answer tends to generate new questions. For example, we learned the importance of holding space in our context, but how can other (or larger) contexts such as institutions support such space-holding emotionally, practically and financially in the long term? We learned that there are boundaries to care, but how can we better prepare engaged scholars to set, communicate and maintain those boundaries?

In closing, we find clarity in the journey we have traced: we clearly see the challenges that must be navigated and the opportunities that make those challenges worthwhile. We see how liminality, queering, and co-creation served as our compass, always pointing toward creativity and collaboration. We see how the chapters, taken together, argue for an academia that is more engaged, a scholarship that is more humane, and a conception of care that is centred in research, as well as balanced. We don't believe that there is a single message that emerges, but perhaps an important one is that knowledge co-created with care, courage, and integrity can transform all involved. It can transform strangers into kin, and ideas into actions.

This dissertation may end here, but the relationships and learnings it contains remain active, ready to adapt to new contexts. We conclude by standing in the liminal space between an ending and a beginning, grateful for what has been co-created, and hopeful for what is yet to come. The conversation continues, and we are excited to see where it flows.



Figure 26. Anonymous participant artwork from a LIMBO workshop, 20 February 2022.

EPILOGUE

Probably the most rewarding aspect of this project has been its transformative capacity for many, if not all, of us involved. What began as research about how academics might create knowledge together with LGBTQIA+ refugee communities gradually became research that required me to learn how to do so: patiently, relationally, and without the illusion of full control. Engaging so closely with co-creation, care, relational ethics, and queering, altered how I understand the work and myself.

At the start, the central question – *what are the challenges and opportunities of engaged scholarship with LGBTQIA+ refugees in the Dutch context?* – felt like something external to answer. Over time, I realize that the process of answering that question has changed how I understand scholarship itself. Initially, I saw co-creation as a method: a set of participatory techniques and conditions or principles for 'successful collaboration' between different actors, particularly between institutions and marginalized communities. But through the work, co-creation became more like an orientation. It asked a mindset of openness, humility, and trust in the collective process. I had to unlearn familiar habits, such as the impulse to control the path forward. Instead, I learned to follow the rhythms of the group of queer refugees (artists/ organizers/ asylum seekers) I was working with, allowing the collaboration to lead us in directions I could not have foreseen.

Over time, I also learned that ethical care involves resisting the temptation to protect others too much. In the beginning, I often tried to shield participants from possible harm, to prevent anything that might go wrong. Eventually, I saw that this could slide into a form of control: a well-intended, paternalistic form of care that assumes fragility rather than strength (Mackenzie, 2014). Letting go became an act of trust: trust in the resilience and agency of others, and trust that mistakes or awkward moments could be faced together. Care, I learned, is less about eliminating risk than about staying present when things feel uncertain or scary.

At times, this openness felt risky, particularly in our public presentations. The trust that we built in our creative workshops – workshops co-designed as safer spaces for collective inquiry through stories and art; where it was okay to be awkward, to fail and take risks – could easily be disrupted by judgements from outsiders. I often worried about participants' safety and well-being, because our poems might not fit conventional notions of 'quality', and our hosts or performers were sometimes shy or unsure in English or Dutch. Me and the other workshop facilitators had gently encouraged participants to take those public steps, yet I feared that a single harsh comment could undo months of slow confidence-building. At the same time, the moments that felt most exposed were often the moments that clarified why this work mattered: they made visible how creativity and community made our collective courage grow.

The first public presentation still stays with me. Curated by Mama Kil from *Sehaq Queer Refugees Group*, it included performances and artworks created in the workshops. One performance was provocative, funny and unsettling at once: the queer artist danced, and pressed their butt into a cake, and invited the audience to eat it. In a period when public intimacy still felt newly possible after Covid-19 restrictions, the performance confronted

intimacy, desire, closeness and unease in a public shared space. For me, it captured what co-creation could become: an experiment in trust, the vulnerability to expose how we were collectively bending conventional norms, both aesthetically and academically, and reimagining what can be shared, and how.

This event was full of unfinished, unpolished products, and some of our most generative ideas emerged precisely from what remained unfinished. Plans often shifted, workshops took unexpected turns, and ideas often exceeded the time and capacity available. At first, this gave me a lot of stress. Later, I began to understand and embrace unfinishedness as part of the work. The act of not completing something together, something that happened continuously during the workshops, became lessons in letting go of control. Failing to arrive at a polished end-product, led to the realization that imagination and creativity work through detours.

One of the workshops that embodied this insight most vividly was *Connecting Journeys, Stitching Timelines Together*. It was inspired by the image of tracing the literal steps one makes throughout life: from emerging out of the womb, to first steps, to school, growing up, moving, and arriving at where one stands now. When I was studying theatre, I often tried to imagine how such steps could form a continuous line from birth to the present, intersecting with other people's lines. Nine months after two lines intersect, a new line could emerge. I pictured these lines on a world map, like the dotted trails in *Indiana Jones* movies, tracing an airplane's path from point A to point B.

Somewhere halfway my PhD, I encountered *The Journey of Belonging* by Lala Bohang and Lara Nuberg, two Indo-European authors, one raised in Indonesia and the other in the Netherlands, who trace their intertwined histories (or *herstories*, as the authors call it). In the book, they use woollen threads to map events that shaped their paths, including those that predate their births. This imagery became the seed for the workshop. I asked the group to reflect on moments that had shaped their decisions, and, in turn, their timelines. We worked with four distinct periods: *History* (stretching as far back as each wished to trace until their birth), *Life until now*, *Future life, and Beyond*. I gave examples of pre-birth events in my own line, such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (on 6 and 9 August 1945), bringing about Japan's surrender in World War II and the sudden end to Indonesia's occupation. Only days later, Sukarno and Hatta proclaimed Indonesian independence, which sparked the four-year war of independence against the returning Dutch. One year later, my father was born in Jakarta, a moment where personal and world histories overlapped.

Each participant mapped turning points that range from global events to intimate encounters: an act of war, a political shift, a conversation that sparked migration, or a moment of love. We would first draw these timelines individually on paper, and later stitch them all together onto a huge ten-meter-long theatre curtain. In practice, we only managed to begin the first period, but the intention mattered as much as the completion.

Looking back, this workshop encapsulated a collective practice of making meaning across difference, time and geography. Stitching our timelines together mirrored the deeper work of weaving meaning, reflection, oftentimes mourning and imagination into a shared fabric (for more about 'weaving meaning' see also Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025). Even though we never finished the piece, the process revealed how artmaking can hold multiple temporalities at

once: the histories that shape us, the presents we inhabit, and the futures we desire. That unfinished curtain stands as a reminder that co-creation is open-ended, incomplete, and always in motion. Perhaps, the most transformative research outcomes are not polished products but evolving relations that continue to grow and connect long after the formal project ends.

Through this process, I developed a greater capacity for ambiguity and self-reflection. This work often held up a mirror: as participants entrusted me with their vulnerabilities, I had to confront my own. This was most evident when I experienced burnout. Initially, it felt like a personal failure and a rupture in our collective process. But through rest, distance, reflection, and support from supervisors and peers, I learned viscerally that care must include ourselves. Sometimes stepping back is not abandonment but responsibility: an ethical act of care for everyone involved.

This epilogue is meant as a reflection of my personal and professional growth and an acknowledgement of how knowledge is shaped by relationships. The dissertation carries analysis, theory and argument, but it also carries the traces of a process that required learning with others – learning how to listen, how to hesitate, how to change your convictions, and how to keep making something together under conditions that are rarely stable. Even though this is a finished dissertation, the project remains, for me, a practice and reminder of staying with complexity, holding space for one another, and trusting that what matters does not always arrive as a finished result.



Figure 26. Artwork "Direction Decoded" by Ariya, exhibited in Framer Framed 27 March – 8 May 2022.

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RESEARCH AS RELATION

Reimagining Scholarship through Queering, Art and Care with LGBTQIA+ Refugees



What becomes possible when engaged scholarship is queered through creative, co-created practice with LGBTQIA+ refugees in the Netherlands? Through a series of recurring workshops co-facilitated with queer migrants/ refugees, community organizers, and artists, this research shows how artmaking and storytelling can function as forms of knowledge-production, care and community-building. Across six published chapters, the dissertation develops a desire-based, participatory approach that foregrounds queer refugees' agency, creativity, critique, and lived experience. It shows how liminality, queering, and co-creation can operate as context, stance, and method for engaged research, while attending to the tensions that accompany such work – conflict, boundary-setting, and uneven care practices. It shows an example of co-creative scholarship as a rigorous and relevant practice: one that widens what counts as knowledge, who counts as a knower, and how research can help sustain more just ways of being together.

About the author: Fabian Holle (they/he) uses arts-based, and participatory methods across academic, artistic and community contexts. Before starting their PhD and teaching and supervising BSc/MSc sociology students at VU Amsterdam, they spent more than 18 years working as a performer and theatre-maker. Occasionally, they co-organize queer safer spaces grounded in care and collective responsibility.



Photo: Anja Robertus