Transnational Refugees: The Transformative Role of Art?

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Abstract: This paper focuses upon the transformative role of art and the methodological approach of working with artists to conduct ethnographic research with refugees and asylum seekers. In exploring the space or hyphen between ethnography (sociology) and arts based practice (photos, installations, textual practice) I suggest that the combination of biography/narrative (ethnography) and art (mimesis) becomes a "potential space" for transformative possibilities. More specifically, drawing upon Walter BENJAMIN's (1992) *The Storyteller* I will discuss the methodological contribution of combining biography/narrative with art forms (ethno-mimesis) in creating a "potential space", a reflective/safe space for dialogue and narratives to emerge around the themes of transnational identities, home and belonging. The importance of renewing methodologies for the work we do within the area of forced migration, humiliation, "egalization" and human rights (LINDNER, 2006), the role of the arts in processes of social inclusion, and the vital importance for creating spaces for dialogue and performative praxis through participatory methodologies are also discussed.

Table of Contents

"The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale ... The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced upon the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks" (Walter BENJAMIN, 1992, pp.87-89).

1. Introduction

In this paper I want to build upon previous work (O'NEILL 2002; O'NEILL & HARINDRANATH 2006[1]) and return to issues I have been grappling with for a number of years regarding: the transformative role and capacity of art and the importance of biographical (life story) research and the notion of ethno-mimesis (combination of art and ethnography) as critical theory in practice/praxis. This new approach focuses attention on the importance of renewing methodologies through inter-disciplinarity to better interpret social issues such as: i) migration, both forced and free, ii) the experiences of new arrivals, and iii) to facilitate the production of new knowledge and counter hegemonic texts to support the shifts taking place, borrowing Roger BROMLEY's (2000, p.20) words, that counter "exclusionary processes" and offer "representational challenges as part of a counter formulation and potentially radical cultural imaginary". [1]

This brings an approach to knowledge production as collaboratively made, not found, that in turn loosens the knowledge/power axis involved in knowledge production and expertness. In exploring these issues I will refer to three projects, two of which are based upon the principles of participatory action research and participatory arts and were conducted by the author. *Global Refugees: Exile Displacement and Belonging* (1998-2002) *and Making the Connections: Arts, Migration and Diaspora*[2] (2006-2008) were both funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC in the UK). The third, *Way from Home* was conducted and performed by Misha MYERS (2006). All three projects provide examples of performative praxis in that they seek to challenge and disrupt exclusionary discourses and processes that include negative images and vocabularies[3] and offer representational challenges that are transformative, that challenge "identity thinking"[4] by working in collaboration and participation with

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1   This body of work is situated at the intersection of Theory (critical theory/Western Marxism/sociology of art)—experience (ethnographic/biographical)—praxis (as purposeful knowledge) via visual, participatory, methodologies—in order to better understand lived experiences of exile and belonging; to feed in to policy and praxis; challenge and change sexual and social inequalities. This work is committed to fostering an interpretive role that includes creating spaces for the marginalised/subaltern to speak for themselves.

2   This project is convened by myself and Phil HUBBARD, both based at Loughborough University.

3   As pointed out by the BUCHANAN, GRILLO and THREADGOLD (2003) in their recent report on media coverage of asylum seekers, the main problem lies with the relentless repetition and overemphasis of precisely those images that reinforce particular stereotypes and a failure to source more diverse images to illustrate the many other aspects of the asylum issue.

4   "Identity thinking" is contained in the spurious equivalence (or identity) between asylum seekers and "social junk", "swamping" out towns and cities—thus, some media representations present

new arrivals, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and artists. Collaboration involves researcher, artist and "participant" working together as a team to facilitate expression in a variety of mediums that may include narrative, talk, and art making. Emerging themes pivot around concepts of transnational identities, home and belonging. [2]

Finally, I argue in this paper, based on the work of these projects, that in the process of renewing methodologies and working in collaboration with artists to conduct performative praxis via ethno-mimesis[5] in the hyphen between ethnographic biographical work and art a "potential space", a transformative space emerges. The inter-textuality of biography/narrative (ethnography) and art (mimesis) becomes a "potential space" for transformative possibilities. [3]

This methodological, performative approach is qualitatively different to much cultural sociology, cultural criminology or visual ethnography. In the latter, through photo elicitation or visual, poetic and digital methods, visual practices are incorporated as method: the researcher creates or makes use of visual data herself or elicits talk from participants using visual data they may/may not have produced (e.g. through the use of photographs or graffiti[6]). My approach is rather different—and involves working in collaboration with artists, performance artists, writers, poets, photographers and participants[7] in the space between ethnography and art. I define this approach as "ethno-mimesis"—a methodological practice and a process. [4]

2. The Wider Context: Identity Thinking, Mis-recognition and the Asylum-migration Nexus

It can be argued, that nationally in the UK, a commitment to international Human Rights legislation is currently overshadowed by a focus upon protecting borders and strengthening legislation to reduce the flow of people seeking asylum and refuge. The operation of governance in this area does not appear to operate in a clear way with internal integrity but rather is deeply problematic in offering a mixed message of "Welcome to Britain" and "Go Home". In the 1990's a series of Asylum and Immigration Acts were passed in the UK that served increasingly to restrict the rights and choices of asylum seekers and refugees, and ultimately lowered benefits. In January 2003 support was further eroded by Section 55 of the 2002 Asylum and Immigration Act. Asylum seekers who do not put an application in at the point of arrival were to receive no support. 2004 saw an

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equivalence between asylum seekers stereotyped as scroungers, tricksters and undeserving. Identity thinking assumes away the gap between subjective concepts and their objects (see O'NEILL, 2007a, pp.122-124).

5 Using Trin T. MIN-HA's (1989, 1991) concept of the hyphen (as third space).

6 See for example Andy MILLIE's (2008) paper on urban aesthetics and anti-social behaviour, Jeff FERRELL (1996, 2003 and FERRELL, HAYWARD, MORRISON & PRESDEE's 2004) cultural criminology texts and Sarah PINK's (2001, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) body of work on visual ethnography and anthropology.

7 Misha MYERS calls participants "percipients" acknowledging their expert knowledge and challenging the power dynamics involved in researcher/researched models of knowledge production.

additional Asylum and Immigration Act with the implementation of sections 2 and 9 in particular adding to the hardship and humiliation experienced by asylum seekers both on arrival and at the end of their claims. Section 2 "criminalises" those who arrive without a passport and without reasonable excuse and under Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004, families who have reached the end of the asylum process and exhausted all their appeal rights can have their financial support and accommodation removed if they "fail to take reasonable steps" to leave the UK. In the event that families are made destitute, they can face having their children removed and taken into the care of Social Services. During the passage of the Bill, the Government said their aim was not to make victims of families with children but to encourage them to take up voluntary return packages[8]. [5]

In 2005 the Government announced the "New Asylum Model" as part of a five-year strategy[9] to streamline the process. Refugees will initially be given temporary status for five years; they will only receive permanent status if they are still considered to be at risk at the end of this period. More refused asylum seekers will be detained and electronic tagging will be used in such cases. More recently the 2006 Immigration Asylum and Nationality Act was followed in 2007 by the UK Borders Bill. Reporting on the 2007 Bill (which will be enacted this year) Keith BEST (2007, n.p.) Chief Executive of the Immigration Advisory Service had this to say:

> "There is an inherent conflict between the Government talking and acting tough about clamping down on illegal immigration on one hand and seeking to facilitate entry of workers needed for the British economy. No doubt, in a democracy, the Government would claim that it is right to deal with the public's fears of abuse of our immigration system so often articulated in the media: to act as a sounding board of public opinion. There is a danger that overall immigration policy is seen to be determined by its abuse and negative factors rather than its contribution to the economy and positive ones". [6]

These processes of social exclusion are reinforced by some elements of the mass media. BROMLEY (2007, p.1) states that the "the circulation in politics and the media of a set of negative images and vocabularies relating to refugees and asylum seekers has become part of a new exclusionary process".[10] The main problem lies in the fragmentary information and knowledge found in media reports and the relentless repetition and overemphasis on precisely those images that reinforce particular stereotypes and a failure to source more diverse images (SAEED, 2007; BUCHANAN et al., 2003; HARINDRANATH, 2006; BAILEY,

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8   See http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/downloads/rc_reports/Section9_report_Feb06.pdf for more information.

9   The Model has three distinct features: 1) segmentation of claims (applicants will be assigned to segments or pathways for the processing of their claims); 2) fast-track processing; 3) case ownership—a single case owner will be responsible for each applicant through the asylum process. Harmonisation of asylum policies across Europe is also being conducted within the framework of a common European asylum system (CEAS); see SCHUSTER (2005).

10 BROMLEY's (2007) paper was given to a seminar on "Destitution and the Role of the Alternative Ethnic Media", part of the "Making Connections: arts, migration and Diaspora" series of seminars and workshops convened by the author; see http://www.makingtheconnections.info/. Permission gained for use of quotations from Roger BROMLEY.

2006). SAEED (2007, p.182) confirms that a substantial amount of research documents hostile public opinion towards asylum seekers, yet when people encounter asylum seekers on a personal level, there is greater tolerance and understanding. [7]

In an earlier article, O'NEILL and HARINDRANATH (2006) explored the use and importance of taking a biographical approach to conduct participatory action research (PAR) with asylum seekers and refugees in order to understand better the lived experiences of exile and belonging; to contribute to the important field of Biographical Sociology; to provide a safe space for stories to be told and heard and, in turn, for these stories to feed into policy and praxis. They developed a case for theory building based upon lived experience using biographical materials, both narrative and visual, as critical theory in practice towards a vision of social justice that challenges the dominant knowledge/power axis embedded in current governance and media policy relating to forced migration. They suggested that forced migration/asylum discourses, focusing on the exclusion of the "other" (involving criminalisation, detention and deportation) and the maintenance and control of borders (developing ever more tighter controls on entry and asylum applications), exist in tension with discourses that speak of human rights, responsibilities and possibilities for multi-cultural citizenship (especially in the community cohesion literature). [8]

There is, therefore, a conflict at the heart of the New Labour Government's approach to asylum policy linked to the "alterity" of the asylum seeker that promulgates hegemonic ideologies and discourses around rights to belonging and citizenship, perceived access to resources (redistribution) and misrecognition fostering suspicion of the "stranger". Alongside discourses of fairness and rights to enter and seek refuge, there exist regressive discourses that water down the vitally important actual and symbolic 1951 UN Convention, and foster a split between "bogus" and "genuine" refugees, making it extremely hard to seek asylum in the UK. This raises important ethico-political issues relating to the politics of representation, recognition, democracy, and impacts deeply upon experiences of a sense of belonging and citizenship. Ethical and political knowledge about who asylum seekers are, why and how they had to flee and why they are seeking asylum, is absolutely crucial to foster better understanding, tolerance and social justice. [9]

As O'NEILL and HARINDRANATH (2006) argue, there are a few exemplary reports, television documentaries, filmic texts and arts based work that provide an alternative voice from the perspective of the refugee or asylum seeker.[11] However, overall, in the mainstream media, asylum seekers and refugees tend to

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11 ICAR Focus: Connecting Futures Through Film used PAR to produce films with local young people and new arrival young people in Coventry and Peterborough to help foster cohesion/better community relations (see http://www.icar.org.uk/focus/); "A Sense of Belonging" project led by Creative Exchange worked with 73 projects cross the UK to look at the role of culture and arts in the resettlement process (http://cultureartsrefugees.creativexchange.org/car/asenseof/; Exiled Writers Ink (http://www.exiledwriters.co.uk/); and many community arts organisations are working in participatory ways with new arrivals through film, arts, crafts, photography and dance.

be represented by others, such as NGO's, advocacy and support groups. It is important that asylum seekers have the right to represent themselves and are given the space to do so. [10]

The interpretive role for social research—ethnography, biography—and performative-arts based work is in making the unfamiliar familiar as well as fostering mutual understanding of diverse communities, cultural traditions, subcultures and ultimately tolerance of diversity (see, BAUMAN, 1992) in countering "misrecognition" and fostering mutuality. [11]

3. Wider Socio-political Context

Stephen CASTLES (2003), Zygmunt BAUMAN (1998), and Phillip MARFLEET (2006) all focus theoretical attention on the global dimensions of forced and economic migration. For CASTLES (2003, p.17) "migration in general and forced migration in particular are amongst the most important social expressions of global connections and processes". MARFLEET (2006), urges us to think about "transnational communities" in relation to "circuits of migration" and diasporas (scatterings) as "networked communities". Within the context of migration research, he argues that three developments have been crucial to the growth of transnational communities. First, changes in new technologies of mass transport (international tourism, mass air transport); second, changes in the means of communication (virtual communication, satellite, Internet and cyber environment), and finally "the generalisation worldwide of ideas about human entitlement" or human rights that create "new frameworks of understanding" (MARFLEET 2006, p.216). Moreover, one-dimensional analyses focusing upon push-pull factors in relation to economic need and the demands of the market are now too limited and linear. The complex movements of migrants involves undertaking multiple journeys "which may involve repeat, shuttle, orbital, ricochet and yo-yo migrations" in attempts at settlement and return (MARFLEET, 2006, p.216). [12]

CASTLES (2003) outlines the foundations for a sociology of forced migration and suggests a shift in focus from a sociology of the nation-state to a transnational sociology. The key issue is transnational connectedness and the way this affects national societies, local communities and individuals (CASTLES, 2003, p.24; URRY, 2000). In examining networks, global flows, and how transnational communities are the focus "for social and cultural identity for both economic and forced migrants" (CASTLES, 2003, p.27) CASTLES argues that methodologically the underlying principles should take into account interdisciplinarity, historical understanding, comparative analysis, transnational social transformation, local, regional and national patterns of social and cultural relations, human agency *and* the need for participatory methods. [13]

The remainder of this paper examines CASTLES's (2003) suggestion of integrating the ethnographic with the political aspects of a sociology of forced migration. This is achieved, in my view, by exploring the concepts of transnational identities, home and belonging through a methodological approach to research that

incorporates ethnography, narrative research and art as ethno-mimesis.[12] This work illustrates the need for organisational interdisciplinarity, not only academic interdisciplinarity: "it seems necessary to identify and develop new engagements with organizations and governments that deal with issues of refugees and immigration, citizenship and sovereignty, human rights and other rights, as well as the concept of humanitarian intervention" (MALKKI, 1995, p.516). [14]

In short, this interpretive, interdisciplinary approach includes creating spaces for the subaltern to speak for themselves through ethnographic biographical work as well as through visual, poetic artistic methods in ways that may impact on governance of this issue.[13] Combining ethnography with arts, working in the hyphen, the space in between, offers a critical theory in praxis. [15]

4. Critical Theory in Praxis

4.1 The transformative role of biography

Biographical research can resist dominant messages relating to the asylum-migration nexus that we find in some media messages and images. "Ultimately biographical research counters the sanitized, demonized or hidden aspects of the lived cultures of exile and belonging ... In so doing biography research helps to produce knowledge as a form of social justice"[14] (O'NEILL & HARINDRANATH, 2006, pp.42-43). This productive dimension is articulated well by ROBERTS (2006, p.149) in relation to people's narratives of lived experience: "a crucial element of narrative research is the assumption that narratives are relational and reflective, being told between individuals (and groups) and involving how experiences and events are conceived—and also informative of subsequent action". [16]

So, narrative biographical research is not simply the transcription of talk to aid analysis through a story or biography but also includes the performative. John GIVEN (2006) has written eloquently about the transformative role of biographical narrative and storytelling combined with digital technologies: "based on an understanding of the narrative construction of identity as an emplaced, embodied, antipoetic process explored through the application of a biographical narrative interview methodology" (GIVEN, 2006, p.56, see also http://www.narrativeworks.com/). [17]

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12 For more information on ethno-mimesis see O'NEILL (2002, 2007a, 2007b).

13 See BIRD (2008) for an excellent discussion of language and translation in art therapy in relation to forced migration.

14 As suggested in O'NEILL, WOODS and WEBSTER (2004, pp.75-76), the concept of social justice is neatly summarised by CRIBB and GEWIRTZ (drawing upon but extending models developed by Nancy FRASER, and Iris Marion YOUNG) as constituted by: distributive justice, which includes concerns about what calls economic justice and is defined as the absence of exploitation, economic marginalisation and deprivation; cultural justice, defined as the absence of cultural domination, non recognition and disrespect; and associational justice. A holistic understanding of social justice combines distributive, cultural and associational justice, and ways of stranding these together. Social justice is re-produced through participatory democracy.

Moreover, GIVEN (2006, p.59) states that: "Linking narrative analysis to other developing research traditions like those of visual sociology, performative arts, child observation studies, and narrative therapy could also enrich the potential analytical frames within which such data could be located and interpreted". [18]

Similarly, Kip JONES (2006, p.69) opens up the transformative potential of performative social science stressing that the current "emerging synthesis of the arts and social sciences presents challenges to the methodological-philosophical foundations of knowledge". JONES (2006) argues that examining this synthesis requires an understanding of new ways to conceptualise knowledge transfer in such disciplinary crossings and introduces the "relational aesthetics" of the French curator Nicolas BOURRIAUD. JONES (2006, p.69) writes:

> "The principles of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (Bourriaud, 2002) offer one theoretical grounding to the search at hand, basing theories of art in terms of co-operation, relationship, community and a broad definition of public spaces. I am suggesting Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* as a starting point because I think he offers a post-modern, contemporary framework that allows social scientists to think about aesthetics and means of dissemination from the arts in our work in refreshing ways" (JONES 2006, p.69). [19]

This discussion links the performative, productive dimension of narrative to the relational and emerging synthesis between arts and social sciences *and* underpins the ethno-mimetic process and practice. Combining ethnographic biographical narratives with artistic representations of "migrants" lived experiences can be transformative, providing recognition, voice, a means of sharing identities through inter-disciplinarity and hybridity. Such border crossings can enrich our theoretical work and, as JONES (2006) states help us to re-think inter-disciplinarity, the relationships between the arts and social sciences, in new ways and, I argue, may lead to critical theory as praxis. [20]

4.2 The transformative role of art

Generally, for critical theorists and cultural sociologists the relationship of art to society is one of mediation (see ADORNO, 1978, 1984, 1997; BENJAMIN, 1985, 1992; NICHOLSEN, 1997, 1999; WITKIN, 1974, 1995, 1998 and WOLFF, 1981). Art is a "feeling form" created in the tension between sensuous knowing, the playfulness and creativity of the artist *and* the historically given techniques and means of production. Art is a social product not just a reflection on its social origins and it manifests its own specificity—it is constitutive. Art makes visible experiences, hopes, ideas; it is a reflective space and socially it brings something new into the world—it contributes to knowledge and understanding. In so doing it is intrinsically political. For Shierry NICHOLSEN (1997, drawing upon BARTHES) photography has the power to pierce us and bring us in touch with intractable reality in ways that we cannot forget and helps us to develop a broader more compassionate and accurate consciousness. ADORNO (1984, 1997), BENJAMIN (1985) and WOLFF (1981) examine the way that art represents the sedimented "stuff" of society—in that "society" emerges/unfolds in works of art. Trin MIN-HA

(1989) argues that the challenge of hyphenated reality is expressed through bringing becoming Asian-American into story (BROMLEY, 2001, p.5) and she does this in her filmic work by inter-relating dialogue/narrative and re-presentational forms. More recently, DE LA FUENTE (2007, p.409) makes a good case for the development of the "new sociology of art" and the contingency of art making that includes "framing questions about the aesthetic properties of art and artworks in a way that is compatible with social constructionism". In doing so he draws upon MOLOTOCH's (see De La FUENTE, 2007) sociology of consumer goods *Where Stuff Comes From* to explain the mediation of art and society in a way that is very helpful to the discussion in this section of the paper:

> "Art entails objects (or situations) that have the capacity to draw upon 'social-psychological associations' which are heavily compressed and give that object (or situation) an air of 'transcendence'. Art transcends mundane and routine perception, by compressing experience in the following manner: the magic of art is in the way complex social and psychological stimuli are made to conjoin, a kind of *lash up* of sensualities" (MOLOTOCH quoted in De La FUENTE, 2007, p.419) [21]

ADORNO (1984, 1997) writes about how the enigmatic character of works gives them their significance—spirit animates art work—and aesthetic experience involves awareness of the inside and outside of art. The dialectic of mimesis and constructive rationality constitutes the dialectic of art and society. At one end of the pole we have mimesis and at the other constructive rationality. Mimesis as SALVERSON (2001, p.123) says is not a "mirror of reality"—"(a)s an ethical approach to suffering, mimesis need not hold up a mirror of evidence to show "it" (pain, injustice, torture) ... but may instead reach toward and engage "them" (the names, the people, the embodied event)". In this way, we can say that mimesis can "depict something of reality's alienating character" (HEYNON, 1999, p.175). [22]

In summary, I am arguing that mimesis is not intended to represent the mimicry or similarity of the work of art to what it represents, and I argue that through the mimetic moment of cognition we can develop a critical perspective that includes "empathy" as sensuous knowing. "Empathy is produced, the unbearable is seen as if from a third eye" (BROMLEY, 2000, p.20). Knowledge is produced forcing us to abandon instrumental rationality and reach towards a more sensuous understanding that incorporates feeling involvement as well as cognitive reflection. The methodological contribution of ethno-mimesis, argued in this article, 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"—and, specifically in this paper, in relation to themes of transnational identities, home and belonging. Thus, ethno-mimesis involves the mimetic re-telling of life narratives in artistic form capturing more sensuous meanings and experiences including memories, experiences, associations—indeed, all the senses involved in narration. Working with an ethnographer and an artist the storyteller (e.g. the migrant, refugee, asylum seeker) can find the ways and means of re-presenting her story facilitated by the collaborative process (O'NEILL & HUBBARD, 2007). [23]

4.2.1 BENJAMIN, the storyteller and dialectical images

For Walter BENJAMIN (1992, pp.89-90), the "imaginary' is central to utopian political thinking and in order to counter the petrification of the imagination he stresses the need to revolutionise our image worlds. Two inter-related strands in his work concern us here: the role of images and the role of words. In *The Storyteller* he tells us that storytelling plays a primary role in the household of humanity in contrast to the role of information—(a fragment of a story of a life can tell us so much more than 100 pages of information about a life).

> "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (pp.89-90). [24]

Thus, narrative storytelling is a sensory/sensuous experience, it is the opposite of information, it can be transformative, auratic, "co-ordinating soul, hand and eye" (BENJAMIN, 1992, p.107). In the same paper (and woven through many of his others) is BENJAMIN's notion of the political and emancipatory role of the image (dialectical images). He quotes Paul VALERY in *The Storyteller* reflecting upon a woman artist whose work involved the silk embroidery of figures:

> "artistic observation ... can attain an almost mystical depth ... the soul, the eye and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his own inner self ... With these words, soul, eye, and hand are brought into connection. Inter-acting with one another, they determine a practice" (BENJAMIN, 1992, p.106). [25]

CALDERBANK (2003, p.6) writes that BENJAMIN "argues for the politically emancipatory significance of the image for the way that we develop the capacity to actively intervene in and shape the world around us". WEIGEL (1996, p.x) articulates this more fully in the way that thinking in images can point the way out of ideological thinking and develop a critique, in that for Benjamin "images are not the object but the matrix and medium of his theoretical work". Thus, BENJAMIN does not theorise images but thinks in images and dialectical images are the basis for transformation of the collective as well as the individual:

> "In all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image sphere is opened, the world of universal and integral actualities ... the sphere ... in which political materialism and physical nature share the inner man, the psyche, the individual with dialectical justice, so that no limb remains unrent (BENJAMIN 1985, p.192). [26]

This is not to be interpreted as "encoding of meanings in images, but the insight that memory, and action find articulation in images, that ideas are structured as images, and that what is at stake is therefore a praxis that can operate with images—*a politics of images*, not a figurative or metaphorical politics" (WEIGEL,

1996, p.10; CAMPANER & O'NEILL, 2008). BENJAMIN develops a concept of action in which as thoughts become embodied in action—he speaks of the interpenetration of body—and image-space, "the theory establishes a relation of immediacy to the material of the social and symbolic" (WEIGEL, 1996, p.4). [27]

Here, "immediacy" is an important concept for BENJAMIN (1992) and ADORNO (1984)—meanings are not encoded in images, instead meanings emerge in "now time" like a flash, dialectically in the form of a constellation re-presenting wish images, utopian desires, and uncovering layers of meaning in past experience. A combination of the sensory, sensuous experience of narrativity "that preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time" (BENJAMIN, 1992, pp.89-90) and dialectical images may together generate "understanding" (in the sense given by BOURDIEU) and be transformative. [28]

The work of BENJAMIN, therefore, has an important relevance for discussion and research on the transformative role of art. So, if we combine the sensory/sensuous experience of storytelling with the sensory/sensuous immediacy of visual representations (a thinking in images) we are operating in an in between space (regarding disciplinary thinking) an overlapping space that is dialogic, visual; it is also an intra psychic space. [29]

In summary, the methodological contribution of combining ethnography and art/mimesis relates to a "potential space", a "dialogic space", a reflective space for dialogue, narratives and images to emerge (in this paper) around the themes of transnational identities, exile, home, and belonging. This in turn feeds into cultural politics and praxis (a radical democratic and cultural imaginary) that may help processes of social justice via a politics of recognition—as a counter to mis-recognition. However, this process is double-edged, for there is a danger of perpetuating injustice, what SALVERSON (2001, p.123) calls "an aesthetics of injury" and ADORNO (1984) refers to as the de-substantialisation of art—when suffering is consumed something of its horror is removed. Clearly ethical principles must guide this work such that permissions, informed consent and modes of dissemination are agreed at the outset and may change in the process of the work being undertaken and led by the participants. The methodological process I have described previously is, I argue, comparable with ADORNO's sense of "coming to know the work of art", involving immersion, identification and subsequent distancing followed by critical reflection—this is a deeply relational process. [30]

5. "Potential Space" / "Dialogic Space"

WINNICOTT (1982) called the "in between" space between subjective and objective reality "potential space" and wrote that creative perception is fostered by a negotiation of the gap between self and other. Indeed "this area relates to play, as well as to religious and aesthetic experience in adult life—indeed the whole cultural field" (GLOVER, 2005, p.2). The potential space/creative space "feels safe enough to support an ongoing process of relaxed self realization" and depends for its existence on living experiences (GLOVER, 2005, p.2). GLOVER

(2005) draws on MILNER's work and suggests that this meeting of the self and other is the territory explored by the artist, when engaged with the artistic medium and the problem of "boundaries, of merging and separation is a major theme" (GLOVER, 2005, p.2). Furthermore, this is absolutely an embodied process:

> "Like play 'the intermediate character of the work of art ... links the world of subjective reality with that of objective reality—harmoniously fusing the edges of each other without confusing them' ... The whole concept of culture and art are intimately linked with this concept" (GLOVER, 2005, p.19). [31]

WINNICOTT maintained that the creative impulse is central to understanding art. "The creative impulse is a thing-in-itself involved in both creative production and everyday creative living" (GLOVER, 2005, p.19). In the notion of "potential space" we have a model for child development, creativity, and "coming to know the work of art". With regard to the latter, GLOVER (2005) writes how MILNER describes the "aesthetic moment" where the space between the work and spectator is collapsed, the pull or fusion is experienced as a kind of merging without being taken over or becoming lost. ADORNO refers to this "coming to know the work of art" as a process of immersion, identification, followed by critical distancing and reflexivity involved in interpretation, commentary and criticism (O'NEILL, 2002, p.80). [32]

From the above perspectives I would argue that engaging with (or mediating) the critical tensions between experience, feeling, emotion and materiality (constructive rationality) can help us to understand better the "micrology" of people's lives and, in turn, they can help us conceive more fully our own lives within the context of wider socio-political structures and processes—such as the governance of the asylum-migration nexus. In this process we can also access greater understanding of the implications of our own actions and subjective reflections (BIRD, 2008). [33]

There are similarities between the notion of ethno-mimesis, "potential space" and JONES's (2006) concept of "dialogic space" in his account of the coming of the performative in social research. For JONES (2006) traditional methodologies do not deal well with the sensory, emotional, and kinaesthetic aspects of lived experience; and in considering these aspects in research, interviews could be the locus not for gathering information but for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies.[15] Collaborating across disciplines "finding co-producers for our presentations ... pushing the limits of dissemination ... involving research participants in the production and dissemination of their own stories[16]" is for JONES (2006, p.74) a way of overcoming practical obstacles of knowledge transfer. This also involves "relational aesthetics": "Central to its (*relational aesthetics*) principles are intersubjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings,

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15 For example, see PINK's (2006, pp.105-28) work on walking with video (2007a) and especially her work on visual anthropology and hypermedia (2007b).

16 For an example, see: http://www.safetysoapbox.co.uk/ and http://www.makingtheconnections.info/.

events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality" (JONES, 2006, p.74). [34]

Moreover, in reference to potential space as dialogic space "It is in these moments of shared, extended reality that we connect to what it means to be human and, therefore, reached a higher plane of understanding and a blurring of individual differences" (JONES, 2006, p.83). [35]

It is helpful to reflect on the ethno-mimetic process and practice through a couple of examples. The first explores the research and arts based work with Bosnian and Afghan refugees and the research trajectory that has developed from it. The second explores the work of performance artist and educator Misha MYERS (2006) with refugees in Plymouth, UK. [36]

5.1 Exemplars—transnational refugees

5.2.1 Global refugees: exile, displacement and belonging

This first example of ethno-mimesis—a combination of biographical narrative and arts based work—enabled a research exchange between myself and a community arts organisation and two "communities" of refugees, Bosnian and Afghan. By using principles of ethno-mimesis and participatory action research, images were created (as described above) in creative workshops following a phase of life story narratives. The images and narratives that emerged were exhibited in gallery spaces and community centres. These performative texts challenged dominant images and stereotypes of the refugee/asylum seeker (as "bogus scroungers" as well as victim/passive and dependent) and represented the reality of courage and resistance in the face of tragedy and loss. Our intention was to make the work available to as wide an audience as possible to raise awareness, educate and empower—to support the development of the shift in discourses and dialogue, to feed into cultural politics and praxis. [37]

In *Global Refugees: Exile Displacement and Belonging* (1999-2002) the first phase of the research involved talking to two "communities" of refugees from Bosnia and Afghanistan about why I wanted to do the research, and whether or not this had any resonances for them. I wanted to work with arts based practice and biographical narratives (stories) to bring their experiences into voice. I wanted to use participatory action research methods that would include them, as well as artists and myself as partners and collaborators. And, I wanted to conduct biographical narrative interviews that would be led by the participants, and to give them the chance to re-present these stories visually with the help of artists, if they wanted to. It was agreed that the outcome of the research could be a means of challenging some of the stereotypes about "new arrivals" by sharing the narratives and images with a broader audience. We could, for example, produce an exhibition, newspaper articles, and/or essays that might challenge stereotypes of refugees and asylum seekers and generate better understanding of the Bosnians in Nottingham and Afghan communities in London. [38]

The second phase involved conducting biographical narrative interviews with community co-researchers—individuals who came forward from both communities to help conduct the interviews, liaise, take part and support the arts based work. During this phase it became clear that the Bosnian group were using precious photographs to illustrate their stories and we agreed to work with photographs/photography. The Afghan group wanted to explore their narratives in creative writing workshops and so we commissioned Exiled Writers Ink to facilitate this. A series of creative writing workshops were undertaken with Afghan refugees and asylum seekers led by Exiled Writers Ink that were also attended by myself, the community co-researcher, the lead artist in Nottingham as well as an MA student from University of East London's Refugee Studies programme who helped conduct the interviews in London. [39]

A series of arts based workshops were developed with the Bosnians where a smaller group (five) worked on the themes in their narratives with four artists and myself to produce visual and poetic re-presentations. Both groups produced some incredible visual and poetic texts from their experiences of exile, displacement and the process of developing a sense of belonging in the new situation. During this phase we talked in groups about themes from the interviews, possible ways of representing, as well as exploring the work of key artists and photographers; and we were led by creative writers to explore playing with words. The result was that both groups produced both visual and poetic texts while the artists facilitated the production of images with the participants. [40]

Thus, the transformative role of this interdisciplinary undertaking involved the production of dialectical images emerging from biographical work dealing with lived experiences through working across the borders of art/ethnography in a collaborative process between participants, involving subject-subject relations— not researcher-subject or a subject-object relations. [41]

In short, the ethno-mimetic and participatory research on "Global Refugees" draws attention to how the combination of biography/narrative (ethnography), and art (mimesis) can become a "potential space" for transformative possibilities for the participants as well as audiences. Crucial to this "potential space" is "understanding" in BOURDIEU's (1996, pp.22-23) sense of the word:

> "'Understanding' involves attempting to situate oneself in the place the interviewee occupies in the social space in order to understand them as necessarily what they are ... [T]o take their part ... is not to effect that 'projection of oneself into the other' of which the phenomenologist's speak".[17] [42]

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17 "It is to give oneself a *general and genetic comprehension* of who the person is, based on the (theoretical or practical) command of the social conditions of existence and the social mechanisms which exert their effects on the whole ensemble of the category to which the person belongs… and a command of the psychological and social, both associated with a particular position and a particular trajectory in social space. Against the old Diltheyan distinction, it must be accepted that *understanding and explaining are one"* (BOURDIEU, 1996, pp.22-23). The reflexive sociologist can "provide the felicific conditions which will facilitate open and frank communication" (FOWLER, 1996, p.14).

Therefore, "understanding" emerges from methodological immersion in a subject-subject relationship. In this respect the commitment and "understanding" of the researcher and artist to the "other" and the social/spatial context facilitates the site of a "democratization of the hermeneutic" (FOWLER, 1996, p.15). The texts, objects and images emerging from this work have the potential to enable us to experience, imagine the overlapping spaces and places of exile, both physical, mental and social—the embodied experience of exile, displacement and emplacement/belonging. As KNOTT (2005, p.7) writes "These mental spaces [*can*] extend backwards in time, but also outwards, encapsulating our living as well as our dead relatives and our recent journeys, encounters and current identities". [43]

The following images were created by a young woman "V", facilitated by artist Maggy MILNER.[18] They produce a sensuous, kinaesthetic and spatial experience in the viewer: the simplicity and beauty of the images reflect a peaceful family oriented childhood, precious photographs, familial memories that shift and collapse through the gathering forces of war and humiliation. Graphically we see that this young woman's life was literally turned upside down. The images help us to understand the fragile nature of our lives and that they can be thrown into turmoil very quickly. At one of the exhibition openings "V" said:

> "We wanted to show how quickly things can change and how much we hope this will never happen to you. Everything changed so quickly. One morning my best friend said that her parents had told her she could not play with me anymore because I was Muslim. Soon afterwards my Father arranged safe passage across the border and we ended up in a refugee camp in Croatia. We were then given a choice Britain or America. My Mother chose Britain because it is closer to home" (V, quoted in O'NEILL & TOBOLEWSKA, 2002, p.124). [44]

The family of "V" were safely dispersed to England under the Bosnia programme of the mid 1990's from a Red Cross camp in Croatia. In Figure 5, separation from and transnational connectedness with family members and friends living in other European countries, as well as Bosnia, are represented in the letters dangling from strings—a central part of her new life as part of a transnational network/community and a Diaspora. The shiny newness of the image captures the joy of surviving, of being alive, of connectivity.

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18 These and other images from the project can be found on http://www.makingtheconnections.info/ as well as on Maggie MILNER's web-site: http://www.maggymilner.com/.

Fig. 1. and Fig. 2: My father built our house

Fig. 3 and Fig. 4: Our life turned upside down

Fig. 5: My life in the East Midlands [45]

Creative writing, emerging from the space between biographical interviews and playing with thoughts, words, senses through writing as a feeling form, led to a range of work by Afghan refugees and asylum seekers including photographs (the latter by the community co-researcher). The example below is a fragment of an epic poem written by Berang KOHDAMANI and translated by Suhaila ISMAT and Jennifer LANGER, Exiled Writers Ink. The excerpt is re-printed from the exhibition booklet.

> IN THE NAME OF KABUL
>
> My presence is here but
>
> My heart is in the alley-ways of Kabul
>
> My tongue utters its name
>
> My lips sing a song of Kabul
>
> The trees are shrouded in inky-blue,
>
> Years, months, weeks, days, mourning Kabul
>
> Oh traveller! Traverse my town silently
>
> For in mourning is Kabul
>
> He who is cognisant with its streets, its palaces
>
> Murmurs "Where am I?" Kabul
>
> Berang KOHDAMANI [Quoted with permission from Exiled Writers Ink] [46]

This initial research sparked a series of research projects building upon each other to eventually culminate in a regional network "Making the Connections: Arts, Migration and Diaspora". Based upon the principles of participatory action research and participatory arts the network examines the transformative role of arts and culture, supports interdisciplinary work, and facilitates a co-operative process of developing artworks and research as performative praxis that might have some impact and pose critical interventions for social and cultural policy in the East Midlands region.[19] [47]

5.2.2 Homingplace.org

Picking up on themes of home, belonging and transnational identities the arts based work of Misha MYERS (2006) [anthropologist, live artist and educator] provides a good example of ethno-mimesis and "potential space":[20]

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19 A Research Exchange programme developed research that led to the production of a report, making recommendations for a cultural strategy for working with refugees and asylum seekers in the East Midlands. The report raised awareness and helped to focus Arts Council (UK) funding for the region's artists in exile. A research network, "Making Connections: Arts, Migration and Diaspora" examines the transformative role of arts and culture in fostering integration and belonging for new arrivals in the East Midlands. The network builds upon the relational dimension of the earlier work as well as the strong regional work of the Arts Council East Midlands, academics in regional Universities, practitioners and policy makers in the arts, public and voluntary sector and diasporic communities to create synergies/collaborations across disciplinary boundaries, multiple layers of governance and lived experience. More significantly, perhaps, the network seeks to address artistic access and cultural inclusion, in ways that will enhance the lives and well-being of recent arrivals in the English East Midlands. Based upon PAR the network is currently examining the transformative role of arts and culture in fostering a sense of belonging for new arrivals in the East Midlands. A series of workshops and seminars seek to stimulate high-quality interdisciplinary research *and* the production of art works; facilitate connection, communication and feed into public policy; and contribute to public awareness of the issues facing new arrivals. An AHRC funded knowledge transfer fellowship (Transnational Communities: towards a sense of belonging) is now in process working with refugee groups and four community arts organisations to produce research as well as to ensure that our work leaves a legacy for the region through the development of a web-site and database. The latter programme focuses upon the transformative potential of our collaborative work and the relationship between ethnographic and artistic work. Thus it operationalises ethno-mimesis.

20 Misha MYERS will join Phil HUBBARD, myself and the directors of four community arts organisations (City Arts, Nottingham, Charnwood Arts, Soft Touch, and Long Journey Home) in the region to launch the Knowledge Transfer work with a performance event replicating Misha's

> *"Homing Place* is a series of projects conceived by live artist and educator Misha MYERS exploring personal and cultural identifications and narratives of place, particularly related to the experience of cultural displacement. The performances, installations, events and processes she creates often invite an active, embodied, self-determined and collaborative participation and contribution of particular social groups to enable a space for creative and critical dialogue and reflection on the places people inhabit" (MYERS, 2007, http://www.homingplace.org/projects/index.cfm). [48]

One of MYERS projects is called *Way from Home* and this involves MYERS in

> "long-term collaboration with inhabitants of Plymouth, UK who are asylum seekers and refugees and with refugee support organizations. In these projects inhabitants were invited to creatively and critically reflect, document, and express different perspectives and experiences of belonging and dwelling in the city through creative spatial processes of wayfinding, mapping and walking" (MYERS, 2007, http://www.wayfromhome.org/) [49]

The project "Way from home" included guided walks which invited refugees and asylum seekers from Plymouth, UK, to make a map from a place they call home to a special place. Following this map as a guide, a walk was then taken superimposing landmarks of the city over the map of their home. The research is outlined (on the web) as follows:

> "You are invited to follow five of these walks presented here through an interactive three-dimensional version of each walker's original map along with audio recordings of the walker's responses to the score ...
>
> These maps become a series of personal identifications of place challenging the static nature of territory-maps or of territorial notions of place which exclude or make invisible the dynamic flow of peoples resulting from current and historical political and economic global events.
>
> With each individual that followed the steps of the score, they were reinvented. For some it was useful for creating a sense of belonging or familiarity with a place, for initiating connections where there was estrangement, for generating an autobiographical map or mnemonic of a life journey and for others it was a painful reminder of differences and the desire to return. Through the project the score continues to be reinvented to facilitate dialogue between public officials, such as, police officers, immigration officials, city councillors, housing officers, etc., and refugees and asylum seekers" (MYERS, 2007, http://www.wayfromhome.org/). [50]

The process of narrating aspects of one's biography connected to the here and now—Plymouth—linked also to memories of home in the potential space is created by the relationship between MYERS and the participants and literally *performed* in the practice of the walks. This, for me, is a good example of the creation of potential space—dialogic space—the relational space between subject and object, between the here, now and the past, action and image and is suffused with transformative possibilities. The performative nature of the walks

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work in Plymouth. Thus, it is launched by the model developed by Misha MYERS.

facilitated talk, dialogue with Misha in the form of biographical remembering as well as processes of emplacement; and for some sharpened feelings of displacement. [51]

6. Conclusion

I have suggested that in exploring the in betweenness, the hyphenated, hybrid space between ethnography and art we may occupy a third space, a potential space/dialogic space where transformative possibilities, and visual and textual products can emerge through "subject-reflexive feeling" (WITKIN, 1974) that may feed in to cultural politics and praxis. It may help processes of social justice via a politics of recognition, thereby countering the mis-recognition of the asylum seeker, refugee, migrant—the Other. The research/art/performative process and the creation of "performative spaces' in the walks around Plymouth, both territorially and in the imagination, help participants (as well as audiences) to reflect on transnational experiences in a performative way. This example links us back to the discussion of image/action in BENJAMIN's concept of dialectical images and the sensory potential of storytelling. These processes and practices are inherently creative and relational (JONES, 2006). I have also argued that the ethno-mimetic process is akin to ADORNO's "coming to know the work of art" through hyphenated work that is interdisciplinary, relational and reflexive, sensuous/sensory and performative. Through hybrid (hyphenated) spaces and places we can get involved in what MATARASSO (2006) calls democratisation— creating spaces for the marginalised/subaltern to speak for themselves—as subjects and objects of their own narratives. For, creating, *performing* narratives of subjectivities, lives and experiences are central to our attempts to better understand our social worlds, forging identities and a sense of belonging and helping to transform these worlds. "Democracy should not be mistaken for a natural outcome of development. It needs to be created, supported and protected" and "given its function as a creator of meanings and a carrier of values, culture is a powerful force within any strong democracy" (MATARASSO, 2006, p.4). [52]

The cultural arena is a crucial component of democratic life and everyone has the right to participate. Mutual recognition, participatory methodologies and performativity are centrally implicated in the ethno-mimetic work presented here as is the centrality of the radical cultural imaginary in fostering transformation, in revolutionising our image worlds towards a sense of transnational belonging. Returning to BENJAMIN, the role of the sociologist and artist as interpreters producing knowledge through interdisciplinary phenomenological research *and* artistic re-presentations of lived experience can help to counter identity thinking, make critical interventions, and help us to get in touch with our social worlds in ways which demand critical reflection through participatory methodologies, through what may be called a politics of inclusion. [53]

Acknowledgements

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My interdisciplinary research career over the last two decades has developed at the inter-sections of cultural, critical and feminist theory; renewed methodologies for socio-cultural research—including arts based methodologies (ethno-mimesis); and praxis through participatory action research (PAR) as an outcome of scholarly activity. I have a longstanding interest and engagement in collaborating with artists through ethnographic research (specifically biographical narrative research) as well as through participatory action research and participatory arts. Two key strands of research activity have been undertaken focusing upon prostitution/sex work/ the sex industry and the asylum-migration nexus. Both contribute to the fields of Cultural Criminology/Cultural Sociology. For more information see: Making the Connections: arts migration and DIaspora regional network (http://www.makingtheconnections.info/), Safety Soap Box (http://www.safetysoapbox.co.uk/), Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Global network (http://www.humiliationstudies.org/).

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