HOMEMAKING AND PLACES OF RESTORATION: BELONGING WITHIN AND BEYOND PLACES ASSIGNED TO SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE NETHERLANDS

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ABSTRACT. Refugees in the Netherlands are prioritized and given assistance with housing, although they have no say in where this housing is located. In this paper, we explore how recently arrived Syrian refugees cope with these regulatory practices by the national government and how their process of homemaking evolves in the new environments assigned to them. The article draws on qualitative data, including sedentary and walk-along interviews and pictures taken by recently arrived Syrian refugees in different Dutch cities. It shows how daily routines are vital for the social incorporation of refugees and how specific places can harm, but also matter, for processes of homemaking. Refugees actively find "places of restoration"—both within their new locality and beyond—and it is both the claim to belong as well as the claim to exert control over their own lives that plays an important role in newly arrived Syrians' homemaking processes. *Keywords: belonging, dispersal policies, homemaking, places of restoration, refugees.*

*I*n the Netherlands, after asylum-seekers are granted refugee status, they are allocated to a specific municipality, where they receive a one-time social-housing offer by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, or COA (Arnoldus, Dukes, and Musterd 2003). This accommodation is subsidised by the government and owned by the municipalities or housing associations. Although there is no formal obligation to accept this offer and refugees can take up residence anywhere and find housing independently, in practice this is difficult due to long waiting lists and a tight housing market, where it is expensive to find private rental housing. Moreover, refugees' lack of social networks in the new country of arrival make it complicated to find housing through friends/family.

In this paper, we raise the issue of how refugees' homemaking processes evolve against the background of Dutch dispersal policy and the refugee experience in general. We focus on the way in which refugees engage with their physical environment in everyday life and the role that landscapes play in homemaking. Adding refugees' subjectivities to these landscapes allows us to better understand their cognitive, as well as their emotional, links to the material space and the physical and social environment. Moreover, to be able to feel at

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home in a place is, of course, not only an individual affair depending on personal skills, but is also the result of, amongst others, specific governmental policies (see Portes and Rumbaut 1990, xix). The concept interrelates with society and depends on whether or not there is space offered in which to belong. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) calls this the politics of belonging: the interaction of groups who wish to belong with those in power who determine who belongs and who does not. We look at how homemaking at the level of the nation—which is more a space of identification and identity—interacts with the level of the city, which can be seen as a space that offers the possibility of daily interactions and real-life encounters with others.

Homemaking for Refugees

Home is often associated with rootedness and length of residency in a particular place (Gustafson 2006). For refugees who have been forced to leave their home and build new connections to place in a new environment, the process of homemaking is more complex. The literature on forced migration and homemaking states that migration often leads to a "roots shock" as refugees need to learn how to re-root in a new environment and feel safe again. The metaphor of "taking up roots" (Ghorashi 2014) is often used to refer to the process by which refugees settle down somewhere and make a new home. Moreover, homemaking is acknowledged to be a process that demands considerable physical and emotional energy (Dowling and Mee 2007), especially for refugees who often do not speak the language, have distinct cultural backgrounds, and have suffered from unsafe situations before arrival. There are also important differences in how these newcomers appropriate the category of refugee upon arrival. Sometimes it can a be positive experience and refugeeness becomes part of a collective identity in exile; however, it can also be experienced as a label/burden that overrules their social identity in many different ways (Malkki 1998). The elaboration of a legal refugee status into a social condition thus differs and depends on specific lived experiences.

Homemaking for refugees involves many different contexts and memories of places and people (see Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Ahmed and others 2003; Ralph and Staeheli 2011; Boccagni 2017). Joanna Long (2013) conceptualizes home as an interplay between the house and the world, the intimate and the global, the material and the symbolic. This deterritorialization of people and place opens up new and significant ways of understanding the importance of place in a fluid, changing, and contested globalized world (Massey 1992; Gieryn 2000; Gustafson 2006). Belonging thus needs to be framed beyond geographically fixed boundaries (Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006). At the same time, this deterritorialization runs the risk of diminishing the important relationship that refugees have with particular places in the new context of arrival and overlooks specific lived experiences.

Concrete places may trigger emotional and affective responses that are part of the homemaking process and new connections are built to new places. This has been, to a great extent, overlooked in the literature on homemaking. In line with Suzy Hall (2013), we argue here that the effects of the physical environment and material phenomena on how they condition, constrain, and create opportunities for social and spatial relationships need more attention. Apart from situating homemaking for refugees in the context of transnational migration and global connections, it is equally important to recognize that transnational migration is grounded through attention to the ways in which such processes are locally lived and produced (see Mitchell 1997; Lamb 2002).

Paolo Boccagni's (2017) conceptualization of homemaking as an active process involving efforts to establish security and familiarity—as well as a sense of control or autonomy in a new place—perfectly fits the situation of refugees. Boccagni's definition of home incorporates questions around how home is reconstituted, reimagined, and enacted, and about home as a special kind of relationship with place, one that revolves around materiality, the realm of social relationships, memories, and discourses. With the discursive, he means that homing is not merely an individual affair, because it interrelates with processes of social-spatial inclusion and exclusion.

Much research that focuses on the material dimensions of homemaking is centered around the house in which people live and the way in which people decorate it (Walsh 2006; Buitelaar and Stock 2010; Miller 2011; Ryan-Saha 2015). This material dimension can provide refuge in a social and psychological sense and also bring ontological security (Dupuis and Thorns 1998), which is very important for refugees who have, most of the time, experienced considerable insecurity. Material objects and decorating the house can, for example, be important means for coming to terms with past experiences of dispossession and enable people to reengage with everyday life (Ryan-Saha 2015). In this article, our focus is not so much on the house; instead, we look at the material dimension of places within the living environment and how these localities contribute to homemaking. In their 2013 study, Clare Rishbeth and Mark Powell show that gaining knowledge of the locality is part of the homemaking process. Homing thus involves an array of places, both public and private. Places such as Islamic supermarkets, halal butchers, or mosques (Huizinga and van Hoven 2018) can, for example, represent the traditions, norms, and values practiced in the country of origin (Ehrkamp 2005) and can offer a safe and familiar environment in which newcomers can explore an unfamiliar host society (Duyvendak 2011).

Apart from the material dimension, people also tend to feel at home somewhere because of the social relationships they make in a particular place. For refugees, we expect it to be more difficult to belong because being located at a great distance from relatives or other migrant community members with whom they wish to connect has an impact on how much they feel at home in

their new environment. Interactions with other refugees, neighbors, and volunteers are important elements to take into consideration while studying refugees' homemaking processes. Our approach—which sees refugees as actors within particular places, who make their own contributions on top of what and to where they have been assigned—is well captured in Boccagni's (2017) conceptualization of homemaking as an active process.

In addition, the refugee label is highly politicized (Zetter 2007) and in the context of the 2015 migration flows and EU "migration crisis" there has been a political and media push to delabel refugees and focus on "economic migrants" (Crawley and Skleparis 2017; Kuschminder 2018). While this does not seem to reduce the space for protection nor hospitality for the already settled Syrian refugees in the Netherlands, they did have to deal with resentment, distrust, and stereotypes among Dutch citizens making it harder to belong.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative research with Syrians who obtained refugee status after January 2014 in the Netherlands. In-depth interviews were conducted with 49 Syrian refugees with the aim of capturing Syrians' everyday experiences with settlement and homemaking in various locations in the Netherlands. With some of them, we spoke several times, both formally as well as informally. Our team consisted of a mix of male and female researchers with Dutch and Syrian backgrounds. Two female Syrian students conducted the interviews as part of a research internship through the InclUUsion program at Utrecht University and helped with the translations. One male Syrian was hired as a junior researcher for this project. He helped with data collection and translating and was partly responsible for the coding. Most of the interviews were undertaken in Arabic so people could more easily express their feelings. These interviews were later translated into English by our Syrian research assistants. Twelve interviews were completed in Dutch because respondents wanted to practice their language skills (and preferred not to be interviewed with a translator) and the interviewers were Dutch. Although these respondents had not mastered the Dutch language, they could express themselves and, more important in doing so, they were recognized for their incorporation in Dutch society. Additionally, some also felt freer to talk. All respondents signed an informed consent form written in Dutch and Arabic or agreed verbally with participating in the research.

Questions around work, education, and civic integration were issues about which most respondents had been asked before and, in fact, had also (for many) been interviewed about before they talked to us. Questions concerning social contacts, the neighborhood, leisure time, and concrete public spaces were more surprising for them and triggered more revealing conversations. Being able to go beyond the standard story and to take more time also enabled people to integrate fragmented memories and develop new narratives that sometimes made them

feel better (see Herman 2001). Telling stories on their own terms can sometimes repair certain ruptures to refugees' identities.

Of the 49 respondents, 7 agreed to do a walk-along interview in addition to an in-depth one. Walk-along interviews are conversations that take place during walks guided by the respondents. This specific mobile methodology has an eye for the importance of surroundings and for the fact that the behavior, emotions, and experiences of people are formed in conjunction with the environment in which they take place (Kusenbach 2003; Ingold and Lee 2008; Moles 2008). Walking interviews produce more place-specific data than indoor interviews and help researchers to better understand the role of the physical environment in refugees' homemaking. It also allows the researcher to know more about the relationship between what people say and where they say it (Evans and Jones 2011). Certain places, for example, trigger particular emotions and memories that would not otherwise have been shared (Jones and others 2008; Huizinga and van Hoven 2018). Moreover, stories *in situ* provide a better understanding of the context dependency of certain experiences and include sensorial data like smells, sounds, and colors that would otherwise remain uncovered. Connecting with these deeper layers in the stories allowed us to capture the refugees' experiences and narratives in a different way and created spaces within the research in which to notice the untold (Ghorashi 2007).

We also asked respondents to take pictures during these walks. This involved participants directly in the research. Some later sent us pictures of places that were important to them. Another advantage of this method is that respondents have the freedom to introduce researchers to places they would otherwise maybe never think of as part of their study, such as a specific bench in a particular park. Finally, the dialogical, interactive situation thus created makes the well-known hierarchical relationship that forms part of any interview less visible, sometimes even less present (Ghorashi 2007). This also helps the conversation to run more smoothly (Corradi 1991).

Access to respondents was provided through the personal networks of our Syrian research assistants, through professionals and volunteers of organizations that support Syrian refugees, through participation in language cafés, and by entering Syrian cafés, hairdressers, and other Syrian businesses. Some respondents referred us to other Syrians. Female and less-educated Syrians were more difficult to find, but we made sure that we had a mixed sample in order to capture the diversity of experiences within the Syrian community in the Netherlands. Most of the interviews were carried out in people's homes, but we also conducted interviews in cafés, community centers, and a barbershop.

Our respondents varied in gender, educational background, age, and residential location (see Appendix 1). We interviewed 31 male and 18 female Syrians, which roughly represents the gender division within the Syrian community in the Netherlands, of whom 65 percent are male (Dagevos and others 2018). In terms of

education, around one-third of the Syrians in the Netherlands had completed their higher education, one-third the middle years of schooling, and one-third the lower level of education (Dagevos and others 2018). Syrians in the Netherlands live dispersed all over the country and the concentrations in cities such as Amsterdam (3,000), Rotterdam (2,800), and the Hague (1,900) are relatively small. We conducted 11 interviews in larger cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht), 21 in middle-sized cities (according to the measurement of the national government, which has a G40 city network for those that are defined as middle sized), and 17 in small towns. The names of the small towns are deleted for reasons of privacy—the number of refugees there are mostly so small that it would be too easy to identify our respondents. Our interviews are all recorded and, if needed, translated, transcribed, and anonymized. The transcripts are coded and analyzed with support from qualitative data analysis software.

"The bench that made me feel at home." Material Dimensions of Homemaking

Once asylum-seekers in the Netherlands receive their refugee status, they get offered a house by a social housing corporation and they can begin to settle in. Apart from trying to make the house match their needs, refugees also start exploring their direct living environment. A 32-year-old Syrian man, who now lives in a middle-sized city in the east of the Netherlands, took us to an important place where, he told us, he had been so happy once he discovered it. He described the place as beautiful, quiet, and green, and the bench as a place where he goes to relax and enjoy life.

> When I arrived here, in Meppel [a city in the northeast of the Netherlands], at first I went to the city, I looked at the shops, I tried to discover the town. I also looked online to see whether there were beautiful new places to discover. Sometimes I visited big cities and walked around. And then I found this place. Now I am here regularly with friends to swim and sometimes we also come here in the evening to smoke shisha, here on this bench. (R7)

Benches may have various contrasting meanings and uses, simultaneously, and these will change throughout the day and night as well as over longer periods of time (Risbeth and Rogaly 2018). Bench space in principle allows for both connection with the new environment as well as with the past and momentary solitude; it is also a site for self-care. For this man, the bench is a place to relax and to socialize. By "friends" he refers to Arab friends but, two or three times, he also brought Dutch friends to this special bench—a place that he had discovered himself. Inviting new friends to a place to participate in an activity—smoking shisha—that reminded him of his former home offers feelings of comfort, safety, and familiarity (see Ehrkamp 2005; Ehrkamp and Leitner 2006). The habit, the smell, and the taste of shisha reminded him of how he used to socialize with friends back in Syria, a habit he was keen on sharing with new friends. It is the memory that is triggered by this place and the atmosphere that make him feel home, as is the potential to reconnect past and present lives. By

Fig. 1—The bench that makes me feel at home.

creating a sense of belonging within a particular local place (with certain people) through connecting the new environment with his past, this Syrian man feels embedded, in a wider sense, to society as a whole while sitting on the bench.

SPACES OF RESTORATION

When asked about which places would have meaning for them, respondents often mentioned green open spaces—places with aesthetic qualities of beauty, where one can relax, empty one's head, and forget about one's worries, and where one's level of energy is once again restored. During the walk-along interviews we visited many "places of restoration," places with restorative qualities that can help to cure physical ill health, heal spiritual unrest and stress, and generally relax people more (Sampson and Gifford 2010). One Syrian woman in a small town, for example, explained why she likes to visit green spaces so much.

I like quiet places, peaceful places, with a lot of green and water. I am so busy with school and work that this really feels good. I come home here. I need quiet places like this one. (R10)

Research shows that access to green spaces usually has a positive effect on well-being and mental health (Schwanen and Wong 2014; Duff 2016). Places that promote experiences of relaxation and restoration were highly valued aspects of Syrian refugees' homemaking. Apart from healing, restorative places also enable people to reconstruct their counternarrative of healing and control. Sharing, retelling, and revising these stories in the context of a walk-along interview enables people to integrate their fragmented memories, develop coherent narratives, and avoid psychiatric sequelae, such as posttraumatic stress and symptoms of depression (Herman 2001).

In these quiet and often restorative places, respondents often remembered the formal interview we had had earlier in time and picked up on certain parts of that conversation. The same 32-year-old Syrian man who introduced us to the bench also took us to an open space at the waterside where it was a bit chilly and not a little

Fig. 2—The water side where I come to terms with rough experiences.

windy. While we were standing there, he referred back to the interview we had previously had but now he went into much more detail about the emotions stemming from the time he spent in Greece.

He told us that his stay in Greece had been the toughest period in his life and we both felt the emotions that this place at the waterside triggered. This man had been stuck in Greece for eight months, a time when he worried a lot and did not know what was going to happen to him. The insecurity and the fear of the unknown in Greece is something that has been widely documented (Pallister-Wilkins 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli 2018; Tunaboylu and van Liempt 2020). The concept of places of restoration allows us to elaborate on how refugees, in their places of arrival, come to terms with their rough experiences.

> When faced with disruption such as the loss of home, separation from family member/ friends, refugees may need to reconstruct their identity to encompass their losses and embrace new environments to position themselves between home and host culture. (Puvimanasinghe and others 2014, 70)

The preference for green spaces was not limited to small towns. Syrians told us that they enjoy green spaces in larger cities as well. They visit parks not only for the quietness, but also to meet with friends. Places where they can meet up socially are important sites for reaffirming relationships and for creating a sense of belonging and being at home. A 35-year-old Syrian man from Amsterdam, for example, enjoys the parks very much, especially in the summer when he can hang out there with friends.

> This park is really beautiful in the summer, but I do not like to go on my own. I only go when I have friends who like to join me. For me, this park with the water running through represents Europe. In Damascus, we do not have water and little lakes like here. In Syria, you have to travel to see the water and here you can just find it in the middle of a city. I love walking around here. With my friends, I always walk in circles in the park. In Syria that is what we used to do all the time; it is an activity. But here people look strangely at you. My Dutch friends ask me, "What do you mean? Just walking? Just like that? For no reason?" (R3)

Again, new surroundings are compared to and incorporated into older material and social settings. In doing so, Syrian respondents appropriate their new environment with its material objects and their activities, in an effort to create a sense of belonging and a new home. Next to green spaces, the urban environment is also very important for Syrian newcomers. Most Syrians in the Netherlands come from larger cities and are used to living in an urban environment (Van Liempt and Staring 2020). Syrians who have now been dispersed to smaller towns in their new country often visit larger cities at the weekend in order to feel the "urban vibe." This makes them feel at home. Visiting the city center, having a coffee at a terrace, and watching people pass by were important activities mentioned during these trips that helped them to relax and feel alive and at home. Next to a longing for quietness, to be able to make sense of everything that happened, the crowds were something that Syrian refugees also miss. They remind

Fɪɢ. 3—The park, with water running through, that represents Europe.

them of their previous life and fulfill their longing for a socially more active life. By being part of the crowd, people get the feeling that they are participating in life again and that they are part of this new society.

Syrian refugees thus develop new attachments to places within their direct environment. However, when they are housed in smaller towns, they also actively visit larger cities to find places where they can connect and feel at home. We observed during our interviews that respondents associated larger cities in the Netherlands with greater opportunities to find work or complete higher education, as well as with the presence of coethnics, relatives, and friends. These comments resonate with what Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar (2011) described as a process of "migrant subjective rescaling", in which migrants grant symbolic value to specific places and develop "their own hierarchies of places based on the value and prestige of localities within migrant transnational fields" (2011, 15). In turn, this may result in migrants settling in and contributing to the political and economic repositioning of these places. Taking refugees' agency into account, it becomes clear that, to a certain extent, there is a reordering taking place, when, for example, trips are made to other places and attachments grow beyond the static territories that were defined as their new "home" by the government. These spaces that refugees visit can be called restorative because embracing new environments helps to position them between the home and the host culture and, as such, adds to a sense of belonging (Puvimanasinghe and others 2014).

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HOMEMAKING

If we are to understand processes of arrival and homemaking it is important to know about the changes in the social networks of Syrian refugees. The refugees' social networks have often become dispersed as a result of the initial flight, the stay in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, or Jordan, the journey towards Europe, the time spent in reception centers in the Netherlands, and the dispersal policies after refugee recognition. The transnational nature of social networks is an important characteristic of the refugees' social networks (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Muller 2010), which are more spread out in geographical terms and often encompass people in several different countries. It was found that the concerns of respondents about unresolved uncertainties over family reunification—concerns that were, to a great extent, beyond their control—impacted heavily on their feeling at home in the new place. Family, friends, and sometimes adult children had to be left behind in neighboring countries or in Syria. A 35-year-old Syrian mother from the principal port city Latakia, for example, explained how the changes in her social network impact on her every-day life in the Netherlands.

> In Syria we lived in a harmonious environment. Now we are in a new environment where nothing can be compared with ours and we do not compare. Here we do not have a social life. Here we are dependent on our parents-in-law, which is very different from in Syria, where we had many friends, where it was easy to have contact with friends, to meet new people. My husband had a much better social life there. Now, after four years of living in the Netherlands he still does not have a friend who he can call to go and do something together. That is very hard. We do not have a normal life here. I don't know if Dutch people can live this way, but I hope we can find a solution, especially because we have a child now and he needs a social life. (R24)

Feeling alone in the Netherlands triggers memories of past social lives that were often presented as very dynamic and vibrant—emotions that go hand-in-hand. A 40-year-old Syrian man in Amsterdam, for example, recalls:

> In Syria, I was never alone; my whole family lived in the same neighborhood—my grandparents, my uncles, my parents, we all lived really close to each other. We did what we had to do during the day—we all had our duties—but in the evening we always met at my grandmother's place. The whole family came together, nicely together. My uncles, my aunts with all their children. That is what I miss the most here. (R5)

Respondents pointed out that it is hard to make friendships in the Netherlands in comparison to Syria because, in their opinion, everything is very formal in the Netherlands. One 35-year-old Syrian man explained that:

> In Syria, you have a lot of free time and you don't have to make appointments to meet with people. The situation there is much more flexible. The culture here is very different. If you want to meet with friends here, you have a lot to organize, you need to find a date, look on your calendar—that is something we don't know in Syria. (R09)

As a result of these contextual differences, some respondents pointed out that it is easier to make friends with people from Iran, Turkey, or the former Yugoslavia because it is much simpler to organize social events. Apart from the difference in planning and organizing, there is also a difference in rhythm that respondents notice. In the Netherlands, people go back home after work whereas, in Syria, it is normal to spend the evening/night with friends. A 31-year-old man who now resides in a small Dutch town explains how he misses these evenings out.

> The day in Syria evolves very differently from here. In Syria, people work hard but in the evening they go out to have fun. And also in between your job and your evening out you can do many things. Here, after work there is nothing you can do. Nine o'clock you start work, six o'clock you stop, and then you go home, you eat, you take a shower, you play with your kids for one hour, and then you go to bed. The next day it is exactly the same. In Syria, in the evening, friends would always visit us and it was cozier, we went out more. Everything is also open. Here, after eight o'clock, the only thing you can do is watch TV. In Syria, in the evening all the neighbors always came to sit with my father to talk, to drink, to smoke shisha—it was so cozy and that is what I really miss. (R14)

Physical separation from those left behind and feeling alone was a recurrent theme during our interviews. A young Syrian woman explained, for example, how she calls with her mother every day to try to kill this loneliness and to tell her how much she misses her.

> The bond I feel with my mother is very strong. My mother is like my sister, my girlfriend, my life, my subsidy, she is everything for me. I have not seen her for 1.5 years now which is difficult to accept. (R4)

Compared to older migration flows, current opportunities that come along with social media could act as a counterforce to loneliness as it increases the possibilities of expanding one's social network and maintaining one's ties with family members and friends (Dekker, Engbersen, and Faber 2016). Sedentary and walk-along interviews with the respondents were often interrupted by calls of family members or friends living in other European countries or in Syria through Skype or WhatsApp. The tone and easiness of these conversations in their mother tongue underlined the frequency of these online gatherings and their everyday character.

One of the interviewers, while getting a haircut, listened to the Syrian barber reflecting on his latest Skype call with his father in Aleppo, telling him not to come back to Syria as everything that he had loved—the buildings, the vibrancy, and the people—had either gone or were dead. "Build up your life and your future in the Netherlands" was his father's clear and serious advice, addressing his sons' hesitations in building his future by staying in the Netherlands. Conversations like these illustrate the Janus face of social media, as they can function as an important means in fighting loneliness, but also stress the physical

absence of those being loved and the dramatic real life effects of a war not only on people's everyday life but also on their future possibilities.

Although social media have become important communication channels in migration networks (Dekker and others 2016), it does not always function as an immediate substitution for support as exchanged by family members. In very few cases, relatives of our respondents lived close by in the Netherlands or in neighboring countries, such as Belgium or Germany. When financial resources allowed, visits were made to these relatives. However, most people suffered from a small and scattered social network, few resources for travel, and limited (physical) contact. Even when family members were present in the Netherlands, it was found to be difficult to make use of their support due to financial and sometimes cultural constraints, when people do not feel confident enough to travel long distances on public transport. A young Syrian mother, for example, explains why she cannot ask her mother to babysit, because her mother does not dare to take the bus on her own.

> I do not get much support here in the Netherlands from my family. My mother is not far but she cannot come and babysit because the bus system here is too complicated for her. I cannot ask her to take a bus and come to our house. (R43)

Social networks, of course, are not static and, in the Netherlands, new contacts are made with other Syrians and Arabic-speaking refugees who were first met in reception centers during the initial period of isolation (see Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore 2016). Contact with Dutch people is what many Syrians long for. Refugee reception in the Netherlands has recently shifted its focus to early and fast participation (Engbersen and others 2015), and in this context numerous community initiatives have emerged to support refugee reception and integration. Quantitative research has shown that 60 percent of all Syrians in the Netherlands have contact at least once a week with a Dutch friend or acquaintance (Dagevos and others 2018). A qualitative follow-up study (Van Liempt and Staring 2020), however, showed that these contacts are often instrumental and take place in the context of providing support, such as interactions in language cafés or contact with neighbors who want to help or with volunteers. The fact is that these contacts exist not so much on the basis of commonality. Rather, they emphasize the difference in social relations (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2018), which makes it less likely that they will remain over time and/or turn into friendships. One Syrian man in his 40s tells us, for example, that he sees the person who voluntarily helped him in the beginning only once a year now for a coffee and catch up.

Places that Harm

Amongst our respondents, the feeling of belonging for those living in small towns differed greatly from those living in middle-sized and larger towns. Some respondents described their town as beautiful, green, quiet, or peaceful, but we also observed differences between and within families. Young people often stressed their unhappiness in small towns because they could not see future opportunities there for them. Some people also felt unwanted or unsafe. One

Syrian woman explained how uncomfortable she feels in her village and the trouble she had with the refugee label ascribed to her.

> I am friendly with my neighbors, but the people here, they say, "You are a refugee, you live here on benefits. And we are paying taxes for you, for your benefits." So I don't feel welcome here, no. I would prefer to live in a larger city with fewer people watching me as if I were a burden. (R4)

Places can heal but they can also harm, depending on an individual's physical and social location and the way in which power is exercised in specific ones (Watkins and Jacoby 2007).

Many of our interviewees experienced unequal power relations in interactions with Dutch people and illustrated this by saying that Dutch people often expressed their attitudes and ideas about Syrians through stereotypical images, as if all Syrians are backward and uneducated, and ask questions like, "Do you have cars in Syria?" This makes them feel more socially and physically distanced from the Netherlands.

Research in the Netherlands around refugee-related social initiatives similarly found that, even if equal access, participation, and independence from governmental influences were ensured, a truly inclusive approach might still be endangered by power issues within these initiatives (Rast and Ghorashi 2018). Unequal power relations with volunteers, neighbors, and Dutch people in general can make refugees feel less at home. Our interviews revealed that sometimes the gaze of others greatly influences the extent to which a person may perceive himself or herself to be at home (see Buitelaar and Stock 2010). During a walk-along interview, one young Syrian woman explained that she found it difficult to attend school in the Netherlands wearing a headscarf because she feels it is not accepted there. She also shared with us an experience whereby her official contact person at the city council advised her to take off her headscarf because it would make finding a job easier. On top of that she feels group pressure from her Syrian friends, who tell her that taking off her headscarf would make her life easier in general. This pressure, and the sense that she needs to make a decision about it, takes up a lot of her mental space. Thus far, she has decided to "not give in to the pressure," because she does not want to compromise. "I think that people should take me as I am and not be allowed to judge me based on a piece of clothing."

These structural inequalities in how people are seen and treated by others impacts on Syrian respondents' feelings of belonging. As such, processes of belonging and homemaking are not only personal, but truly political (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Conclusion

For recently arrived Syrian refugees, the social environment changes drastically after the move. Many have had to leave family and friends behind and then, on arrival, have found that they were dispersed all over the country, which resulted in networks being scattered again and relatives not always ending up living close to each other. Many respondents stated that, compared to Syria, their social life is now poor and

the physical separation from those who are meaningful is only partially comforted through online interactions. In that sense, online social media contribute to homemaking as much as it hampers it. In this particular situation, it was found to be extremely important to carve out a place for oneself, to reorder daily life, and find opportunities for belonging to the new environment. We found that homemaking for Syrian refugees is a transnational phenomenon that takes place beyond borders, but also through concrete "sticky" place-making in the public and natural environment. One can feel at home in relation to places, specific settings, and certain people. Places can trigger memories and emotions and make you feel at home. They can also heal and have a therapeutic value, but they might also harm.

Concrete "places of restoration" (Sampson and Gifford 2010) were identified through walk-along interviews. Urban areas, with their diversity and populations, as well as green spaces such as parks and watersides, were found to act as sites of belonging where refugees start to feel at home because of the opportunity for material practices, such as smoking shisha, which bring back memories of an old life. However, they also have a restorative function. The restorative element is the quietness, but also the fact that people appropriate these spaces themselves—the joy when they "discover" spaces that they really like and the feeling of taking back control in a context of severe restrictions on mobility. As such, places of restoration play an important role in refugees' homemaking processes, because they facilitate attachment to places and are also vital in the process of claiming control over new lives. Our interviews show that it is both the claim to belong as well as the claim to exert control over their own lives that plays an important role in newly arrived Syrians' homemaking processes (see Boccagni 2017).

New spaces appropriated by refugees may also facilitate social encounters. As such, they become an opportunity to bond with new friends in a new environment. Interviews, however, showed that feelings of home are not only a matter of personal choice. They are also shaped (negatively) by the (mis)recognition and negative labelling by others and, in this case, also by a concrete dispersal policy that randomly allocates people to a location and rarely takes family connections into account. Earlier research in the Netherlands indicated that most refugees in the Netherlands regroup after a while (Gerritsen and others 2018) and that the majority eventually move to larger cities (Nicolaas and others 2010) for the job and educational opportunities they offer. Policy makers working on dispersal should carefully consider this, as well as gaining a better understanding of the multisited and open-ended parts of homemaking that involve sticky, concrete local spaces, where belonging emerges for refugees and restoration is experienced.

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APPENDIX 1. OVERVIEW OF SYRIAN RESPONDENTS

NO.	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	RESIDENTIAL LOCATION
1	Male	40	University (not finished)	Large city
2	Male	35	University (not finished)	Small town/village
3	Male	35	University (finished)	Large city
4	Female	27	University	Small town/village
5	Male	40	University	Large city
6	Female	23	High school	Middle-sized city
7	Male	32	Vocational education	Middle-sized city
8	Male	40	University (finished)	Middle-sized city
9	Male	35	University (finished)	Large city
10	Female	23	High school	Middle-sized city
11	Male	27	High school	Middle-sized city
12	Male	28	High school	Middle-sized city
13	Male	28	University (finished)	Large city
14	Male	31	High school	Small town/village
15	Male	25	High school	Middle-sized city
16	Male	22	High school	Middle-sized city
17	Female	29	University (finished)	Middle-sized city
18	Female	45	Vocational education	Small town/village
19	Male	58	Primary school	Middle-sized city
20	Male	33	High school	Large city
21	Male	33	University (finished)	Small town/village
22	Male	34	University (finished)	Large city
23	Female	31	University (finished)	Small town/village
24	Female	35	University (finished)	Small town/village
25	Male	38	University (finished)	Middle-sized city
26	Female	38	Vocational education	Middle-sized city

(continued)

—CONTINUED

NO.	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	RESIDENTIAL LOCATION
27	Female	19	Primary school	Middle-sized city
28	Male	40	Vocational education	Small town/village
29	Male	38	Primary school	Middle-sized city
30	Female	35	High school	Middle-sized city
31	Male	45	High school	Large city
32	Female	38	Primary school	Large city
33	Female	22	Primary school	Middle-sized city
34	Male	23	Primary school	Large city
35	Male	37	University (finished)	Small town/village
36	Female	33	High school	Middle-sized city
37	Male	48	High school	Middle-sized city
38	Female	42	High school	Small town/village
39	Male	20	University (not finished)	Small town/village
40	Male	64	High school	Small town/village
41	Female	39	Primary school	Small town/village
42	Male	34	Primary school	Small town/village
43	Female	33	Vocational education	Small town/village
44	Male	45	High school	Middle-sized city
45	Male	42	Primary school	Middle-sized city
46	Female	41	Vocational education	Middle-sized city
47	Female	33	University (finished)	Small town/village
48	Male	34	High school	Small town/village
49	Male	34	Vocational education	Large city