Nu is mijn huis een soort klein Syrië geworden:

Exploring feelings of home and belonging among Syrian refugees in the Netherlands

Mohamad Hafez, Damascene Athan Series. Photo by Alex Olevitch[1].

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[1] Syrian artist Mohamad Hafez left Syria for the United States in early 2003 on a single-entry visa. As an architect and sculpturer, his miniatures of home and the Damascene scenery represent the intimate relationship he feels with the city he was only able to return to once.

Abstract

This research aims to understand the process of belonging by analysing where and how Syrian refugees experience belonging in the Netherlands. Against the background of national integration debates that have defined belonging and integration in the Netherlands in synonymity with being able to culturally assimilate, it is argued that that seeing belonging in terms of cultural assimilation has led to heavy focus on integration criteria like language acquisition, labour market entry, and education as conditions for being able to feel "at home". As the data collected from semi-structured interviews show and by using Antonsich' conceptualisation of *place-belongingness* as a foundation from which the process of belonging is explored, it is emphasised that feeling "at home" is a multidimensional process that stretches between and beyond different locations, with refugees developing different methods to adapt to new environments, circumstances, and communities in order to be able to feel "at home". Apart from the physical home functioning as a safe and private environment where one can be 'at ease' in, the data gathered from the interviews show that experiencing feeling "at home" within the physical home is under constant negotiating with the neighbourhood environment as social connections and encounters in the direct neighbourhood affect feeling "at home" in the physical home itself, showing that the physical home is not merely an impermeable private stronghold but rather a starting point from which other places in the wider neighbourhood environment are explored. In addition to the analysis of this feeling "at home" in the physical home, concrete public places are explored for their unique qualities and provide a person with possibilities to attach to new places when such qualities are recognised. Specifically, places of *restoration* and places of *sociality* are claimed to enable belonging by their capabilities to increase self-awareness through active participation. Exploring public spaces like *buurthuizen* and nursing homes enabled the respondents to be a caregiver instead of a care-receiver, adding an existential dimension to their perception on how belonging is experienced and meaningful place-attachment is effectuated on a local scale.

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Introduction

"no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
your neighbors running faster than you
breath bloody in their throats
the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
is holding a gun bigger than his body
you only leave home when home won't let you stay[2]."

"No one leaves home, unless home is the mouth of a shark". With these words, the British-Somali poet and activist Warsan Shire begins her poem *Home*, an illustrative piece that fearlessly describes the experiences of a young girl forced to leave her war-torn homeland. In the poem, Shire narrates the voices of many who had to leave their country of origin by force, memorising 'home' as the distant place that had to be left behind, leaving an intimate connection between the now and then. Whilst it is undeniable that the notion of home includes intimate linkages between people and place, comprehending complex structures, with refugees both identifying themselves in reference to their physical homelands and the country currently residing in, 'home' is not merely an important indicator of identification, but a continuous indicative process that gives meaning to the different stages the refugee experience. Trying to understand the perceptions of refugees illuminates the complexity of the ways in which people construct, remember, and lay claim to particular places as "homelands". This research aims therefore to contribute to those who were forced to leave by investigating how feelings of home and belonging are experienced, and how the notion of 'home' continues to impact their lives whilst being in a different country.

Traditionally, migration-related research has been conducted on both ends of migration. One the one hand, there is extensive research on the pre-migration phase and the decision-making process of migrants, and, on the other hand, the post-migration phase, with its focus on the economic and social impact of migration on host societies has been among the dominant topics for migration researchers. It is striking that the migration narrative of human movement has for a major part been told from the position of 'fixed points'; the A and the B, the push and the pull, the sender and the host, the origin and the destination. Migration, and the capacity of people to mobilise themselves, is hardly a linear process, but happens within a transnational spectrum and through networks that connect many migrants to others, and therefore, to quote the work of Mimi Scheller and John Urry, it is increasingly important to go

[2] Warsan Shire, 'Home' in: Alessandro Triulzi and Robert Lawrence McKenzie, *Long Journeys. African Migrants on the Road* (Boston 2013) xi.

'beyond the imagery of "terrains" as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes[3]'. For this reason, it is necessary to emphasise refugee networks as systems that contribute – for better or worse – to refugee identities, and to challenge assumptions that follow a sedentarist, destination-country perspective that leads to insufficient comparisons between the native population and refugees by emphasising certain integration indicators such as language acquisition, education, labour-market status and income[4]. In addition to this, and referring to Saskia Bonjour and Hein de Haas' article on the the "migrant with poor prospects", the changed perspective of the Dutch government regarding some migrants as 'the unassimilable migrant Other rather than as a societal problem' shows that the perception of feelings of home and belonging as a substantial and integral part of governmental policies are often neglected, despite the growing attention and use of 'home' in politics: an indication of the necessity to study how studying belonging can contribute to better understandings of refugee integration[5].

Therefore, this research will analyse where and how Syrian refugees experience belonging in middle-sized cities in the Netherlands. Instead of using the scope of the refugee-host relationship, this research will focus specifically on refugee-refugee relationality and consequently tries to shift away from relationships that are, according to human geographer Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, archetypical in the field of refugee studies and refugee response: the relationship between refugees on the one hand, and INGO's, UN Agencies, states and citizens on the other[6]. Pivotal here is that by centralising the role of displaced people as providers of assistance and support to other people, and to enable those people to emphasize their perceptions on what feeling "at home" means, this research amplifies that displaced people cannot simply be subjugated to passive actors dependent on active providers of support – most notably states and INGO's – and therefore stresses the importance of the malleability of refugee identities in their pursuit to adapt to new environments. As a consequence, by taking the relationality of refugees in shared spaces as a starting point of reference, and by in the first place acknowledging that displaced people share a history sharing, contesting, and (re)constructing spaces over long periods of time with other people, this research stresses that feeling "at home" is a multidimensional process that stretches between and beyond different locations, with refugees developing different methods to adapt to new environments, circumstances, and communities. By using the scope of people who have been in the Netherlands for a longer period of time, and by observing how this group of refugees manifest themselves as active participants in both individual and communal homemaking processes, it is assumed that valuable insights on particular places of belonging can be observed.

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[3] Mimi Scheller and John Urry, 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and Planning* 28 (2006) 209.

[4] Anja van Heelsum, 'Aspirations and frustrations: experiences of recent refugees in the Netherlands', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40:13 (2017) 2138.
In the article on of the experiences of refugees after migration to the Netherlands, van Heelsum follows the ideas on aspirations and capabilities of economist Amartya Sen, and later applied by scholars like Hein de Haas and Stephen Castles.

[5] Saskia Bonjour and Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'The "migrant with poor prospects": racialized intersections of class and culture in Dutch civic integration debates', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41:5 (2018) 896.

[6] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'Shifting the gaze: Palestinian and Syrian refugees sharing and contesting space in Lebanon' in: *Refuge in a Moving World* (Chicago 2020) 402.

To answer how and where Syrian refugees experience belonging in the Netherlands, this research uses a qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews with nine refugees from Syria who have entered the Netherlands prior to 2018. As mentioned before, with the focus being on refugee-refugee relationality, a qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interviews with people that are part of the refugee community might provide insights on the perception of integration and how feelings of home and belonging contribute to the experiences of refugees in the Netherlands. In order to ensure a safe environment for the interviewees, and to ensure that the intellectual knowledge provided by the interviewees is indeed safeguarded, this research uses the framework presented in *Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies* by Ricard Zapata-Barrero and Evren Yalaz as guide in providing the necessary precautions and considerations for the conduct the interviews. Next to the use of semi-structured interviews as primary sources, this research applies supplementary primary analysis on some additional primary sources to highlight how feeling "at home" and belonging are framed within current public debates. With the ultimate aim being to (re)construct the narratives of those who were forced to leave their homelands, the results of this qualitative case study with refugees demonstrates by not only what places of homemaking are recognised but also includes how such places are experienced, how social connections help in the construction of identity, and how the agency of refugees and their experiences can highlight possible difficulties with how integration is perceived.

To provide answers to the research question, this research will consist of three chapters. In the first chapter, it is first and foremost important to stress how from a policy perspective integration and belonging have become synonymous with cultural assimilation, and stresses that seeing integration in terms of cultural assimilation has led to heavy focus on integration criteria like language acquisition, labour market entry, and education as conditions for being able to feel "at home". In addition to this problem framing, it is pivotal to explain how the concept of home and belonging can be analysed, and how the framework of Marco Antonsich and his conceptualisation of *place-belongingness* can contribute to gain a better understanding of the refugee perceptions on belonging. The second chapter will display the findings of empirical research and focuses on how the physical home environment as a location of feeling "at home" is experienced by the respondents. By making a distinction between the *material* dimension and the *social* dimension of the physical home, it is argued that the physical home environment as a place of belonging itself is under constant negotiation, and often functions as a starting point from which other places in the wider neighbourhood environment are explored. Following the findings in chapter two, chapter three emphasises how concrete public places affect feeling "at home", and highlights how public places by means of their specific qualities help Syrian refugees to experience a deeper sense of belonging. By exploring the definitions of places of *restoration* as used by Robyn Sampson and Sandra Gifford, and places of *sociality* as locations where such specific qualities are found, it is argued that such places are not only of importance for increasing social connections but also help people address just those personal qualities that are of importance to them, thus increasing self-awareness through meaningful place-attachment.

Chapter I: Integration and belonging in the Netherlands

The consequences of integration framing: the 'culturalization' of belonging

The powerful idea of home and belonging has been the subject of growing attention in the last decades. In the political arena, the message is to make the Netherlands feel like 'home' again. If there is one thing that the weeks and months preceding the past elections of March 17 have shown vividly, the be "at home" and the feeling that is assumed by this term has become a continuous catchphrase for political parties from left to right. For those parties on the populist right, the right to feel "at home" belongs to the Dutch citizens who feel threatened by *gelukszoekers* die hier niet thuishoren[7]'. The winner of the election, the centre right liberal VVD led by prime minister Mark Rutte, has mentioned the word 'home' fifteen times in its party programme, proposing to educate those who's asylum application is rejected in the language of the "homeland" to prevent rooting to the Dutch soil[8]. However, it is not only the right that claims to give back "the feeling of home": we hear it in discussions about working from home during the Covid19 global pandemic, in discussions about nursing homes and the eroded healthcare system, and in the aftermath of the child benefit scandal that led to the resignation of the government.

Within integration debates, the notion of belonging and who is 'granted' belonging often deteriorates in integration policies that aim to develop an environment where everyone can feel "at home" in. Without doubt, the issue of integration – and the politics that apply integration policies - has been a controversial and much contested concept within migration research. Examining the relationship between the hosting state and the migrant newcomer implicitly resonates around the assumption that integration is a process aiming to include migrants into the malleable host society, which inherently requires some degree of mutual accommodation from both sides. This premise of integration as a *two-way process* claims that integration involves both refugees and host society members, with both actors contributing to ensure that refugees have access to jobs, education, housing, health, among other conditions part of a dignified way of living. This view on integration, according to Alison Strang and Alastair Ager, points to the importance of mutual accommodation by emphasising the 'need to consider means of social connection between refugees and those other members of the communities within which they settle[9]'. The controversiality around the issue of integration remains however open as perspectives

[7] Partij voor de Vrijheid, 'Het gaat om u: Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025' see: https://www.pvv.nl/images/09012020/verkiezingen2020/0acxyuew34z/VerkiezingsProgramma2021-Final.pdf page 27.

[8] VVD, 'Nieuwe keuzes in een nieuwe tijd: Verkiezingsprogramma 2021-2025' see: http://www.vvd.nl/content/uploads/2021/02/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2021-2025.pdf page 58.

[9] Alison Strang and Alastair Ager, 'Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21:2 (2008) 177.
In addition to this, the UNHCR reports in their July 2014 discussion paper that the *two-way process* of integration can be described as a dynamic, multifaceted and gradual process comprising distinct but inter-related legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions, which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and meet the needs of a diverse population.

on responsibility have tended to focus on assimilation, with all problematic effects. One common view, for example, is to see integration as a *one-way process*, in which refugees and migrants must adapt to the host society, whereas the host society does not follow up to the responsibility to adapt to them[10]. This view on integration is in line with assimilatory perspectives often heard in public debates that state that migrants should eventually give up on their own cultures and values and adopt those of the new society. In academia, critics of the assimilation approach rightfully argue that such an approach does not recognize the cultural and social diversity of migrant populations, resulting in the danger that those who do not manage to achieve the same adaptation goals and 'fail' to integrate are framed as a 'problematic[11]'.

In general, one of the primary problems arising from discussions around integration is how the question who does or does not belong is defined. If anything, it seems that the perception of 'who belongs here' is grounded in the definition of citizenship, and what membership of a community based on the same rights and duties comprehends. As the influential sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis elaborates, when embarking on individual or group feelings of belonging, one must consider the boundaries of the 'imagined' political community of belonging and how these boundaries separate 'us' and 'them'. In what Yuval-Davis has called the 'politics of belonging', specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways and for particular collectivities are at the same time projects that are constructed by those dominant political collectivities for exactly those collectivities it imagines[12]. Recognizing that it is inherently impossible to imagine all members of the nation as a part of the national political community, these boundaries implicitly include some people whilst it excludes others[13]. The political debates that define citizenship in terms of belonging to the nation have therefore sparked renewed interest on who 'deserves' to belong to that community and make use of the rights that come with such membership, and who does not.

Following the theory of Yuval-Davis, historian Peter Scholten has excellently explained how integration frameshifts and perceptions around citizenship have shifted in the Netherlands towards defining citizenship in terms of cultural assimilation. According to Scholten, research on policy documents issued roughly between 1960 and 2010 show that policy framing has led to an amplification of cultural differences between the 'native Dutch' and newcomers, with the definition of citizenship shifting from people as emancipated, active participants of society to a certain 'shared citizenship'. This 'shared citizenship implies a more assimilationist definition that highlights the 'cultural differences […], now framed as problematic cultural distances[14]'. As in many European countries, the 'civic integration turn' in

[10] Stephen Castles, Maja Korac, Ellie Casta and Stephen Vertovec, 'Integration: Mapping the Field', *University of Oxford Centre for Migration and Policy* (2002) 113.
[11] Alison Strang and Alastair Ager, 'Refugee Integration: Emerging Trends and Remaining Agendas', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23:4 (2010) 601.
[12] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging', *Patterns of Prejudice* 40:3 (2006) 204.
[13] Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the politics of belonging', 209.
[14] Peter Scholten, 'Frames and frameshifts in Dutch immigrant integration policy and research' in: *Framing Immigrant Integration* (Amsterdam 2011) 79.
Looking at the construction of problem frames and frameshifts from a Dutch policy level, Scholten mentions that a distinguishment can be made between four different policy episodes: the lack of immigrant integration policy until about 1978; a minorities policy until the early 1990s; an integration policy until the turn of the millennium; and,

the Netherlands – where integration requirements are applied so to select those who are expected to integrate smoothly – represented 'a fundamental change' as the selective policies aimed to grant entry to 'the most desirable' led on the contrary to the framing of mostly 'non-western migrants' – and refugees in particular - as groups that are unlikely to 'fit' in Dutch society[15]. Within public discourse, the rhetoric used to indicate the cultural (un)assimilability seems not to mince words. '*Je moet je plek in Nederland verdienen'*, according to centre-right parliamentarian Bente Bekker (VVD), echoing that one has to 'earn' the same rights to be able to belong here, a statement that in the same article is followed by a reference to the majority as '*hardwerkende mensen die zich nog wel veilig moeten voelen in ons land*[16]'. Examples like the above point to the dominant group clinging on to the right of granting belonging only to those who carry with them an obscurely defined set of qualities and potential to assimilate with Dutch society. To integrate and to be a citizen in the Netherlands, so it seems, is not only learning the language and participating within the national institutions: earning your citizenship is to assimilate to the cultural standards set by the majority. According to specialists of the Dutch case like Jan Willem Duyvendak and Saskia Bonjour, the idea that the Dutch government is responsible for emancipating immigrants has even totally evaporated, shifting the responsibility away from the state towards the individual, denying state responsibility based on a 'radical change in perceived assimilability of "migrants with poor prospects", usually "non-Western" who's economic characteristics cannot be overcome[17]'.

The consequences of the 'civic integration turn' and who is to be included in the process of integration highlights a dilemma for integration researchers. As migration scholar Anja van Heelsum has emphasised, the effects of defining integration and the usage of different terminology (e.g., acculturation, assimilation, etc) to explain its effects has intentionally or not led to a dominant destination-country perspective and, as a consequence, heavy focus on indicators of integration that we assume to be requirements for 'successful' integration[18]. Without doubt, commonly used indicators of integration like language acquisition, labour-market entry, educational background, and income are elemental benchmarks of research, revealing undoubtedly insightful data that can explain individual processes of feeling "at home" in a country. However, applying these indicators becomes problematic when comparing newcomers to the dominant native group, as this will always result in 'lower' integration scores. Seen the rhetoric's used by beforementioned politicians, the problem is that if we only focus on the key indicators of integration proposed by government policy, and follow the strictly formulated formula of integration,

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lastly, an integration policy 'new style'. According to Scholten, integration policies are not exclusively building from an application of specific integration models, but rather translate through a 'succession of frames' through which integration and problem 'framing' is observed.

[15] Saskia Bonjour and Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'The "migrant with poor prospects": racialized intersections of class and culture in Dutch civic integration debates', 896.

[16] Guus Valk and Petra de Koning, 'VVD-Kamerlid Bente Bekker: 'Je moet je plek in Nederland verdienen', *NRC* (19 November 2020) see: https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/11/19/vvd-kamerlid-bente-becker-je-moet-je-plek-in-nederland-verdienen-a4020785

[17] Saskia Bonjour and Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'The "migrant with poor prospects": racialized intersections of class and culture in Dutch civic integration debates', 896.

[18] Anja van Heelsum, 'Aspirations and frustrations: experiences of recent refugees in the Netherlands', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40:13 (2017) 2137.

we not only neglect the point of view of immigrants themselves, but also as a consequence contribute to grant citizenship only to those who have to 'potential' to fit into Dutch society by comparing newcomers to the 'hardwerkende Nederlander' as epitome of what is 'average' or 'normal'. Newcomers might not even have the goal to become in all aspects similar to a native citizen as they might have completely different aspirations and perceptions: maybe they are merely looking for a safe haven, or be reunited with family, or just want to be free to express how they feel and what they think. The interplay between 'seeking' and 'granting' belonging, and the distinction between 'us' and 'them', should therefore not only be limited to indicators like language acquisition and the potential to enter the labour-market, but should transcend from the focus on what immigrants themselves consider important when settling in a new country.

Conclusively, to get a better understanding of the perceptions of refugees in the Netherlands, it is pivotal to understand how processes of belonging and feeling "at home" can be used to explore the perceptions of newcomers themselves. To do so, the following will offer an explanation of what feeling "at home" could encompass, and how the concept of *place-belongingness* can be used to explain not only in which material places one experiences belonging but also how feeling "at home" is experienced.

The meaning of home: conceptualising belonging

As mentioned before, the concept of belonging and home has caught the attention from many in the academic and public fields. Especially after the dramatic events of the early 2000s, with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the rise of right-wing nationalist populism, and, in the case of the Netherlands, the assassination of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, the stark contrast between those who belong and those who do not has functioned as catalysts for academics in their pursuit of getting a better understanding of the many emotional layers explain how feeling "at home" can be defined.

There are many ways to explain what is understood by belonging, and when we experience the emotion of feeling "at home". In the context of the Netherlands, the unmistakable influence of sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak is worth mentioning. Pointing to the Dutch societal context, Duyvendak stresses that where in many other Western countries 'home' is often observed as a *personal space*, in the Netherlands 'the metaphor of home as a *public* and *ideological* space' is increasingly being used by policy makers as a site where citizens are taught how to live their lives in line with public norms[19]. This statement indicates that the boundaries between the private 'home' and the public feeling "at home" have become more and more fluid in terms of the impact both the private and the public have on each other, and, more importantly, has according to Duyvendak led to the claim on 'home' as a *moral category* that 'distinguishes between those who "naturally" belong to the Dutch home […] and those who do not and need "governmental help to become integrated', the latter often being migrants and refugees[20]. Moreover, feeling "at home" hints to a familiarity to certain spaces that feel safe or trusted, secure, or comfortable.

[19] Jan Willem Duyvendak, Leeke Reinders and Fenneke Wekker, 'Homing the Dutch: An Introduction', *Home Cultures* 13:2 (2016) 88.
[20] Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'Homing the Dutch: An Introduction', 92.

This inherently could mean that feeling "at home" is place-bound, with the home being a fixed and rooted place, a 'stronghold against change' seamlessly stable in a rapidly changing and mobile world[21]. But on the contrary, it is safe to say that in general people experience feeling "at home" as a connection to one or multiple locations: a home, a neighbourhood, a city, the local sports club or restaurant you often visit. Evidently, this feeling is unconsciously experienced, only to be recognized and appreciated when such a cherished location changes or disappears, when leaving such a place or going back to it. It would therefore be a mistake to analyse feeling "at home" as a singular emotion that is limited to only one primary space or place, as to "feel at home" is an emotion that transcends from place as a feeling of comfort, security, and intimacy; a feeling of independence and being able to be yourself; or a feeling of familiarity, the predictable, and being amongst other who are like you.

In addition to the above, Duyvendak distinguishes three aspects that are important to keep in mind: *familiarity, home-as-haven,* and *home-as-heaven*. Proposed as the pre-condition for the latter aspects, *familiarity* refers to feelings of home 'based on knowledge and recognition of the place, the people inhabiting it, and the norms, habits, and practices involved in that space', and are expressed through routines of everyday life[22]. *Haven* refers to a safe, comfortable, or predictable place where someone feels 'at ease'. By posing *home-as-heaven*, Duyvendak refers a situation where you can be yourself, surround yourself with like-minded people and are able to put into practice the ideas that you have and the activities that you want to do[23]. Where the characteristics of *haven* are more grounded in the physical aspects of locations, or the exact features of places, this is less necessary when referring to "feelings of home" as *heavenly,* a feeling that is more symbolic as it indicates not immediately 'the "places" that are and stay the same' but are indicating an 'enduring collective process of construction, negotiation, and redefinition[24]'. Evidently, the connotation of belonging does not indicate a linear process that is observable apart from each other, but rather resonates as multi-dimensional, contextual, and hybrid process that stretches back-and-forth between fixed geographic locations[25].

For refugees, it is an understatement to say that the experience of displacement is an integral part of the search for belonging. To be dispersed from the homeland is not only an impactful moment in terms of the decision-making involved to leave the homeland behind, it also the moment where different collective processes come together: to cope with the trauma of losing place and people, to move to unknown places, and to find communities there where one can feel "at home". Being a refugee marks the lack of homeland, yet to be a 'refugees' and to be labelled as such is so powerful and complex that we should be cautious to use it to define human experiences and categorise a group of people[26]. Ultimately, refugee groups are not homogenous, as they arrive at different times, are of different cultures carrying

[21] Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home. Nostalgia and Belonging in Western Europe and the United States* (Basingstoke 2011) 28.
[22] Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'Homing the Dutch: An Introduction', 93.
[23] Jan Willen Duyvendak, *Thuis: het drama van een sentimentele samenleving* (Amsterdam 2017) 21.
[24] Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'Homing the Dutch: An Introduction', 94.
[25] Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging: An Analytical Framework', *Geography Compass* 4:6 (2010) 645.
[26] Maggie O'Neill and Tony Spybey, 'Global Refugees, Exile, Displacement and Belonging', *Sociology* 37:1 (2003) 8.

with them different languages, needs and life stories. This is important to keep in mind when addressing a framework that can be useful in explaining how certain physical places can help people experience belonging, and how the emotional attachment of the individual to a specific place can be explained.

Place-belongingness and relationality

Before embarking on how the concept of *place-belongingness* as posed by human geographer Marco Antonsich can be used to explain where and how Syrian refugees in the Netherlands experience belonging, it is important to consider that belonging is, of course, not merely an individual process of 'being in place' but also part of a collective process that is rooted in the transnational character and diasporic features that Syrian refugees experience. After all, as refugees and displaced people ultimately have to cope with the complexity and multiplicity of constructing, contesting, and sharing places of belonging over time, they do so in within networks that stretch well beyond regional and national borders. As anthropologist Liisa Malkki has convincingly argued in her influential article on the rooting of peoples, to try to understand the circumstances and collective relations in refugee networks is to acknowledge that as people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced, they 'invent homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases […] through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit[27]'. As transnational migrants forced from their land their land of origin, it is clear that these sets of interpersonal ties transcend both from the country of origin, the country of destination and the places that are in between those fixed points highlighting the importance of place as a fluid, changing, and contested. Collective processes of belonging are therefore not simply rooted in fixed geographical containers and involves more than characterising refugees and asylum seekers 'only and persistently in terms of the act of flight from 'home', and in terms of their orientation to 'return' even when they have settled in a new place and have made it a new 'home[28]'. Especially through social connections and emotional attachments to a multiplicity of specific places – both now and in the past – can meaningful belonging be observed.

Building from the multi-locational character of forced migration, the analytical framework posed by human geographer Marco Antonsich serves as an excellent and comprehensive scope to explain how belonging is experienced by refugees. According to Antonsich, belonging should be analysed as a personal, intimate feeling of being "at home" and uses the concept of *place-belongingness* to describe feeling "at home" as a connection to 'a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment[29]'. Five interrelated factors that create a personal sense of belonging are distinguished here: auto-biographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal. First, Antonsich points to the importance of auto-biographical factors that include past personal experiences, relations and memories that attach a

[27] Liisa Malkki, 'National geographic: the rooting of peoples and the territorialization of national identity among scholars and refugees', *Cultural Anthropology* 7:1 (1992) 24.
[28] Floya Anthias, 'Belongings in a Globalising and Unequal World: rethinking translocations' in: *The Situated Politics of Belonging* (London 2006) 18.
[29] Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging: An Analytical Framework', 646.

person to a certain place. This could mean someone's childhood memories or even the memories of the ancestors of a person. Second, relational factors refer to the personal and social ties of an individual in a certain place, varying from relationships with friends and family members to certain 'weak ties', like occasional encounters with strangers in public spaces. Third, cultural factors encompass according to the traditions, habits and cultural expressions often resonating through language. Fourth, the economic factors are indeed of importance since economic factors serve to create a stable material condition for the individual and the family. Lastly, legal factors – such as legal rights and permit of residence – are an important component in providing security, and determine the circumstances under which an individual can participate in society[30].

Despite the accurate and comprehensive display of interrelated factors that explain where and how one feels "at home", the research in this thesis builds solely on auto-biographical and relational factors in explaining where and how Syrian refugees experience belonging. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there has been extensive research conducted that explains how cultural (language acquisition), economic (work and income), and legal (status) factors are beneficial for refugees in their search for belonging. After all, these provide refugees with attributes and qualifications necessary to be able to become self-sufficient and ultimately less reliant on government aid. However, as this research focuses on material places of belonging in the neighbourhood, researching auto-biographical and relational factors might lead to less predictable outcomes, especially when taking into consideration that the target group has lived in the Netherlands for a longer period of time, and have been extensively exposed to questions regarding language, work, and status. Also, as is mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, applying such indicators is problematic as these indicators can oftentimes be deducted to unequal comparisons with the majority native group, the result being 'lower' integration scores. Secondly, in addition to the first, this research is not about measuring how 'integrated' a person is, but rather seeks to find what places are important locators for feeling "at home". It is assumed that the decision to use qualitative methods has the potential to highlight how the process of belonging helps attach a person to a given place by being able to ask questions on how belonging is experienced in relation to others, and how past experiences of feeling "at home" help feeling "at home" now.

As this research bases itself on different individual perceptions of feeling "at home" in the physical home as well as feeling "at home" in public places, it should be made clear in advance that it is hardly the aim of this research to somehow distil these narratives into a mere assumption of what the 'Syrian' identity comprehends. The danger of deciding to focus on one location of interest could after all to designate auto-biographical elements of someone's personal narratives as only feasible through this one location, thus neglecting all the other places that a person relates to. For example, there has been extensive research on the home as a location of constancy and ontological security wherein day to day routines of human existence is performed with the aim to provide refuge in a social and psychological sense, an unmissable aspect when considering that refugees have experienced long periods of insecurity

[30] Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging: An Analytical Framework', 647.

stretched over time[31]. The essence of the physical home as a place of (non)belonging is without doubt clinically important, as the next chapter will show. However, as one of the respondents for this research has made clear, the home is not only regarded as a safe and secure space, but also as a place that is often turned into a place of 'public interference', where the expectancy to integrate 'successfully' and to be a 'success' is assumed to mean to convert the home into a place where 'success' means to 'live like them'. This is an indication that focussing on one material and concrete place would evoke an incomplete image of a broader feeling "at home", as there are many other places that trigger emotional and affective responses that display larger processes of feeling "at home".

Conclusively, this study on Syrian refugees considers a sense of belonging on the local neighbourhood scale as key in exploring where and how Syrian refugees feel "at home" in the Netherlands. At the local level, it is assumed that the dimensions of belonging as posed by Marco Antonsich can be observed. The decision to focus on both the private, physical home environment and public spaces within the neighbourhood is twofold. Firstly, the physical home environment is often used as a starting point for feeling "at home" in a new environment. It is therefore important to explore how material and social elements of the physical home environment contribute to a sense of belonging. Secondly, as focusing on merely one location of belonging would end up in a narrow image of belonging, concrete public places are explored as places that offer specific qualities less present in the physical home environment. After all, to be able to understand how one feels "at home" is to understand how different places are connected, and why some elements of belonging are assigned to one place but not to another.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative research with Syrians who obtained refugee status before January 2018 in the Netherlands and have lived between 3 and 6 years in the Netherlands. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim to capture the everyday experiences of homemaking and belonging among respondents in in the physical home environment as well as in public spaces in the neighbourhood**.** As the group of interest is hard to get to as they are out of the scope of formal institutions and organisations that provide aid when just arrived in the Netherlands, the selection of stories from the interviewed provide a unique insight in how belonging is experienced among Syrians. Next to that, acquiring original material from the sources was possible as the group interviewed usually had acquired social contacts due to their length of stay in the Netherlands, which helped them to compare their experiences both to other people and to other places. Lastly, this group represents a good mix of difference in sex, age, educational background, and geographic location, therefore representing a wide array of different perspectives within the Syrian community.

A questionnaire consisting of five open-ended questions was send to the respondents prior to the actual interview, giving the respondents enough time to process, to get familiar with the subject, and to ask questions about the subject in advance of the interview. All respondents verbally consented with

[31] Ann Dupuis and David C. Thorns, 'Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security'*, The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review* (1998) 24.

participation in the research in the beginning of each interview. With some of them, after conducting and analysing the data gathered from the initial interview, another interview was agreed upon. With the exception of one, all interviews were held in Dutch, with the important note being that all of these respondents were not only comfortable to speak in Dutch but felt comfortable to speak about their emotions when doing so. Sometimes the respondents would acknowledge that speaking in Dutch would be good practice to them, which not only showed dedication and eagerness to learn but even more so emphasized the actual capability and dexterity of being able to discuss intimate feelings, a quality that not all newcomers get critical acclaim for. After all, even after being in the Netherlands for 3+ years, learning a language is not something that is easy to master.

The respondents vary in gender, age, educational background, and residential location. Also, in terms of religious and cultural background, the respondents comprehend a wide scope of identification markers, with some referring to themselves and their identity as Sunni Muslim or Catholic, whilst others pointed to their Kurdish background, their roots in the Syrian hinterland, or identified themselves as simply culturally bound to Syria as a 'moderate freethinker'. The common narrative behind the stories they shared is the narrative of being a refugee living in a community in exile, an unmistakable overlapping theme that culminates to being part of the Syrian community abroad. The loss of the homeland, and to be labelled a 'refugees', is so powerful and complex that cautiousness is necessary when defining human experiences and assigning those experiences to a group of people[1]. Especially during the first moments of the interview, the respondents fragment themselves as refugees. This could be a certain reflex evoked by past experiences with officials, the research subject itself, or by the position opposite a native Dutch (white) interviewer. Regarding the latter, when talking about bad experiences with Dutch people, they would not directly address 'Dutchness' to me but would rather use examples of encounters with Dutch aid workers, colleagues, neighbours and others to emphasize socio-cultural differences. Ultimately, refugee groups are not homogenous, as they arrive at different times, are of different cultural backgrounds, with different needs and aspirations. Above all, it was made clear that this research is not to substantiate the 'level' of integration or to give the impression that the respondent would participate in yet another 'refugee meets native interviewer' experience, which created an atmosphere that would invite the respondents to talk about personal experiences and less about 'being a refugee'.

For this reason, instead of focusing on common civic integration themes such as work, language, and education, questions concerning social connections and contacts, the neighbourhood and public places, and genuine interests and hobbies seemed more surprising and inviting for the respondents, triggering more revealing conversations about how feeling "at home" is experienced. Great care was taken into analysing the needs of the respondents, working around their schedule, and leaving the choice where to meet up to them. Creating an informal environment for people to feel comfortable in is not a given fact, especially when taking into consideration that the majority of the interviews were held online due to the government's travel restrictions in response to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Even though

meeting in person and sharing the same physical space might have provided a different atmosphere, it was found that all the respondents seemed comfortable having the interview held online. Ultimately, three of the interviews were held in an alternative location (two at the home, one at a café), and six interviews were held online through the video-platforms Zoom and Skype.

Recruitment of and access to respondents was provided for by contacts within my professional network, and through professionals that are aligned with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. In some cases, respondents would refer me to other respondents, creating a "snowball sampling" effect that would connect me to others within their network.

Syrians in the Netherlands live dispersed all over the country as a result of the Dutch placement policy, with larger municipalities housing more permit-holders than smaller municipalities. Of the nine respondents interviewed, all except one live in middle-sized cities. Middle-sized cities in the Netherlands are defined in accordance with the national government, who qualifies middle-sized cities in within a G40 city network that comprehends forty cities throughout the Netherlands[32]. In terms of comparability, the middle-size cities used in this research share similarities in terms of city size, demographic density, infrastructure, and substantial quantity of public places. As a result, by emphasising communal experiences in middle to small sized cities this research aims to shift the focus away from larger cities, thus providing in gaining valuable insights from those areas often underscored. For reasons of privacy, the name of the small town one of the respondents resides in is deleted as the number of refugees there is relatively small, making it easy to identify the person of matter. In addition to this, the decision was made to use aliases for all respondents.

[32] See for more information on the G40 stedennetwerk: https://www.g40stedennetwerk.nl/

Chapter II: The experience of belonging in the physical home environment

Quantitative and qualitative understandings of feeling "at home"

Syrian refugees are by far the largest group of refugees who have come to live in the Netherlands in recent years. In between 1 January 2014 and 1 January 2017, 89.000 persons applied for asylum, with 58.000 of them being from Syria. In terms of percentages, the number of Syrians seeking refuge increased greatly due to the ongoing war, with 53 percent (2014) of all asylum applicants coming from Syria, followed by 66 percent in 2015 and 71 percent in 2016[33]. Although the number of Syrians coming to the Netherlands is declining, recently published data by the social economic council (SER) show that from 1 September 2019 to 1 September 2020, 5.436 Syrians arrived in the Netherlands, making up 21 percent of the total of applicants[34].

Within this context and given the high number of Syrians entering the Netherlands, it may be no surprise that many institutions have aimed to highlight the development and position of Syrian newcomers. A great number of quantitative studies have focused on a wide range of topics that include the effects of demographic spreading, leven of education, integration, language acquisition, income, health, and many other facets[35]. The outcome of those studies that base themselves in quantitative research are indeed helpful in getting insight in current and potential problems, as it delineates collected data and can help generalize by means of a deductive approach and by means of the usage of concepts like validity, reliability, and generalizability as cornerstones from which quantitative research is evaluated[36]. In contrast, however, the danger is that – especially when taking account of personal narratives and perceptions on specific subjects like belonging – a generalized display of data might fail to achieve more specific indications of what the group of interest finds important, ultimately culminating pivotal data into an ocean of numbers.

Here, the quantitative data provided in the rapport 'Syrische statushouders op weg in Nederland' by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) exemplifies how quantitative data is used to explain if Syrian refugees feel "at home" in the Netherlands. Surprisingly, the interpretation of the data

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[33] Jaco Dagevos, Emily Miltenburg, Martine de Mooij, Djamila Schans, Ellen Uiters and Alet Wijga, 'Syrische statushouders op weg in Nederland: De ontwikkeling van hun positie en leefsituatie', *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* (2020) 11.

[34] Sociaal Economische Raad, 'Aantallen & Herkomst', Aantallen & herkomst | SER.
The numbers provided here are displayed as the total of Syrian nationals and includes both the person applying for asylum as well as the family often arriving later in the Netherlands. The data is actualized up until February 2021

[35] Jaco Dagevos, Maja Djundeva, Willem Huijnk, Martine de Mooi, Annemarie Ruijsbroek, Djamila Schans and Ellen Uiters, 'Policy in the starting blocks: The role of policy in developments in the position and life situation of Syrian asylum permit-holders', *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* (2021) 13.
In terms of demographic spreading after obtaining an asylum residence permit, Syrians end up dispersed throughout the country. As a result of the Dutch placement policy, a formula is used to relocate refugees in accordance with the number of inhabitants a municipality has, with larger municipalities housing more permit-holders than smaller municipalities, the idea being that this policy helps prevent segregation on a longer term. The SCP rapport shows that this dispersal method actually leads to unequal outcomes on for example the labour market.

[36] Patricia Leavy, 'Discussion: Concepts and Strategies for Evaluating Oral History Research' in: *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford 2011) 144.

collected among 3200 Syrians between early 2014 and 2017 shows that of the respondents interviewed only 1 percent of the interviewed acknowledges not to feel "at home" in the Netherlands, with 80 percent stating that they feel "at home" in the Netherlands and 20 percent 'sometimes' feeling "at home[37]". The degree of feeling "at home" remains relatively stable between 2017 and 2019, with around the same number of respondents confirming that they feel "at home" in the Netherlands. The method used by SCP includes a survey asking the respondents if they feel "at home" in the Netherlands, and uses the meta-concept of 'the nation' as point of reference when asking if someone feels "at home" here. Seen the large number of respondents used, this seems to be rather logical. After all, the assumption that all people can to some extent reflect on the Netherlands as a place of belonging, of feeling "at home", is grounded in the fact that they all have been here for a while and thus can refer to this place when asked a closed yes/no question, thereby providing the SCP with measurable data. Evidently, it could be that when someone is asked if they feel "at home" in the Netherlands, what might be the outcome is that the freedom to be yourself and to reside in an environment that is safe – especially compared to the unsafe situation in the homeland and during travel – inserts a feeling of feeling "at home" that is related to the nation.

However, such a quantitative approach used by SCP does not highlight exactly 'where' in the nation someone feels at home, what locations are used for feeling "at home", and how belonging is experienced in relation to other people. The danger of the quantitative usage of 'the nation' as a point of reference for researching feeling "at home" is that specific notions of belonging are not captured. Indeed, 'safety' and being able to 'be yourself' are indicators of feeling "at home", but these indicators should also be researched at a micro-level – among many other indicators - in order to get an understanding of how one experienced belonging, locating what specific places are used to experience feeling "at home". Next to that, meta-statistical overviews and displays of large sets of numbers do at the same time evoke the feeling that feeling "at home" can be distilled to binary contradictions, and misses the opportunity to highlight how feeling "at home" is a continuous, hybrid, and translocational process that is under constant negotiation with other places where one can experience belonging.

Given the remarkable number of Syrians confirming that they feel "at home" in the Netherlands, it seems therefore all the more relevant to use a qualitative approach when investigating where exactly someone experiences the feeling to be "at home". An excellent example of this is given by urban geographer Ilse van Liempt, who rightly argues in her qualitative study on recently arrived Syrian refugees in the Netherlands that belonging does not merely happen only in relation to the context of transnational migration and global connections, but through its connection between the everyday experiences of individuals in local neighbourhoods and their capability to condition, constrain and create opportunities for social and spatial relationships with others who give meaning to the same spaces[38]. It is safe to say that

[37] Jaco Dagevos, 'Syrische statushouders op weg in Nederland: De ontwikkeling van hun positie en leefsituatie', 150.
[38] Ilse van Liempt and Richard Staring, 'Homemaking and places of restoration: belonging within and beyond places assigned to Syrian refugees in the Netherlands', *Geographical Review* (2020) 3.

in general people experience belonging on many different occasions, and by different and multiple locations: in the home, in the neighbourhood, the city, the church community, when visiting a public square or a restaurant that is considered your favourite. Evidently, feeling to be "at home" is unconsciously experienced, only to be recognized and appreciated when such a cherished location changes or disappears, when leaving such a place, or going back to it. It would therefore be a mistake to analyse feeling "at home" as an emotion that limits itself to only one primary space or place – like feeling "at home" to the nation. Overall, as is mentioned earlier, experiencing belonging ties a person to multiple places, sparking a feeling that transcends from and connects to such places accompanied by feelings of being comfortable, secure, and intimate; feelings of independence and being able to be yourself; or a feeling of familiarity, predictability, a feeling that is shared with others amongst who you feel belonging to.

All respondents referred to the physical home environment as a place where they experience belonging. The next part will therefore address some of the experiences of the respondents, and their reflections on the process of homemaking at home. The results show a distinction made between the home as a *material* dimension, as a physical place that is considered a safe haven that facilitates the freedom to be your individual self, and the home as a *social* dimension, a place that is strongly connected to its direct surroundings and is seen as both a private stronghold to feel safe in as well as an integral part of the public domain in which social interactions with others contribute to feelings of belonging.

The physical home: the material dimension of belonging

For those who have experienced the traumatic events of dislocation and the loss of both personal contacts and material belongings, it is an understatement to say that being granted a residence permit and obtaining a house to settle in is met with relief. After all, when some of the legal barriers are taken away, and when appointed a house in a designated municipality, one can finally start building a place in an environment that is stable, that offers privacy, and is in general considered safer than previous environments. Whilst reminiscing about the times when residing in the asylum seeker centre in Hoogeveen, Fares (33), who currently works for VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, described the feeling of leaving the asylum seeker centre and settling in the municipality of Hilversum as 'relieving':

> *Ik had het geluk dat ik vanaf het moment van aankomst in Nederland bij een vriend kon blijven logeren, dus ik was niet vaak te vinden in het AZC. Je hebt daar geen privacy, iedereen zit op elkaar. Toen ik mijn verblijfsvergunning kreeg en op uitnodiging van de gemeente Hilversum een huis ben gaan bezichtigen was ik enorm opgelucht. Bij het zien van het enorme balkon buiten vroeg ik of dit ook van mij was, of dat ik dit moest delen. Het bleek van mij te zijn. Dezelfde dag heb ik bij de Action een matras, borden en bestek gehaald. Sindsdien ben ik hier*[39].

[39] Interview with Fares on 23 April 2021. Recorded at his residence.

For most of them, the road to obtaining a house is not without its obstacles. Being able to finally leave the environment of the asylum seeker centre marks the start of a new beginning, in a new environment where one can start building a home. However, even when obtained a permit and being allocated a home, it is not self-evident that this 'starting point' is not in itself in contest. Yasin (41), for example, expresses how after obtaining a residence permit, he initially lived in a house together with his then wife and three children but after their divorce was allocated to an *opvanghuis* (shelter) until he was assigned a new home three years later:

> *Ik heb sinds een jaar een eigen woning in Bussum. Eindelijk. Eerst woonde ik met mijn vrouw en drie kinderen in een huis, maar na de scheiding heb ik drie jaar in een opvanghuis voor gescheiden mensen gezeten. Ik kon mijn kinderen daar niet ontvangen, dat kon ik ze niet aandoen. Nu kan ik ze elke week ontvangen. Ik heb het gevoel dat mijn hier nu pas begint*[40].

This poignant example given by Yasin encircles that only when conditions of the physical home as a place of stability and safety are met it is possible to feel "at home" in such a place. Yasin, who's journey in the Netherlands is characterised by instability as he had to leave the home after the divorce and then found himself in a shared living place that evoked feelings of being unsafe, which he exemplified by mentioning that he would rather not have his children over when being at the *opvanghuis*. The double psychological burden of on the one hand coping with pre-migration stressors the traumatic experience of fleeing his country, and, on the other hand, the renewed feeling of not being in a stable environment after all shows the importance of living in a place that is considered your own safe and secure place.

The qualities of a home are in the first place assigned to by the respondents as a place of stability, as a place to feel safe in. After relocating to the designated municipality, the home itself is transformed into a place that feels familiar, comforting, and more in general is approached as an environment where one can finally be 'at ease'. The definition of *home-as-haven*, as posed by sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak, seems to be fit in with the statements of the respondents, who refer to the physical home as a place that facilitates feelings of safety by means of creating an environment that feels familiar to them. Familiarity here is understood as feelings of home 'based on knowledge and recognition of the place, the people inhabiting it, and the norms, habits, and practices involved in that space', and are expressed through routines of everyday life[41]. In its most concrete ways, the physical home is a stronghold where someone can truly be him or herself, relieved from interference from the outside. When being asked what feeling "at home" encompasses, Harouk (39), who has lived in Zwolle for the past four years and currently lives together with his husband, explains the impact the physical home has as a space where he can express his own identity:

[40] Interview with Yasin on 4 June 2021. Recorded via Zoom.
[41] Jan Willem Duyvendak, 'Homing the Dutch: An Introduction', 93.

Mijn huis in Zwolle is de eerste plek waar ik mijzelf kan zijn. Waar ik vrij en veilig kan zijn. Toen ik naar mijn huis in Zwolle verhuisde na anderhalf jaar in het AZC… kwam ik voor het eerst in een huis waar ik mijzelf kan zijn. Waar ik mensen ontmoet die ik wil ontmoeten. Waar ik geen geheimen meer hoef te hebben, omdat ik in Syrië en toen ik in het AZC zat mijn identiteit verborgen hield. Als homo. In Zwolle kreeg ik de kans om mijzelf te zijn[42].

The description of the home as a *havenly* place where you can be yourself includes the idea that material objects and the decorating of the house can, at some point, are a coming to terms with past experiences of dispossession and enable people to reengage with everyday life[43]. To an extent, the house is turned into a place that resembles the house that was left behind in the homeland, a recreation of the place that felt familiar and "like home". Of those respondents who expressed to do the interview at their homes, great care was taken into showing the range of things that make up the home – from the wallpaper and photos on the wall, to the drawings, and the favourite spot within the house. These material aspects associated with the home reflect the personal relationship with the home lost. At the same time, it would be too narrow to state that the house is simply identified as a mirror image based on material belongings, as the home more importantly is seen as a physical construction where feeling "at home" can be expressed freely through social encounters with others in the direct surrounding of the home. Being hospitable and having a person over in the house seemed to revolve around the appreciation of the customs, values and habits that are defined by the respondents as 'typical Syrian'. When having the interview in the house of the respondent, sharing thoughts in a space that is familiar to the respondent induced feelings of recognition of their identity as Syrian, whilst simultaneously the respondents were keen to exchange thoughts on how the way of living at home in Syria can be compared to living in the Netherlands. Without question, while reflecting on auto-biographical elements and delving into memories of moments when *not* having a physical place having to rely upon - primarily during the period from leaving the home in the homeland and obtaining a home in the Netherlands - appreciation of having a home where one can be "at home" is related to the loss of such a place.

Reflecting on the physical characteristics of the house, all respondents described physical elements as important, although different respondents discussed different aspects of the house as (non)desirable or (non)satisfactory. For some, the importance of having enough space – rooms, a balcony, a garden – is mentioned as an important aspect of mental wellbeing, as being able to move around in the home environment is in sharp contrast with the experienced of overcrowded environments of the asylum seeker centre. Next to the characteristics of the interior of the house, the infrastructure of the surrounding environment is mentioned as it increases mobility and the accessibility of public places – schools, shops and markets, and places of recreation. However, for some, the physical aspects of the home environment are not so much seen through the perspective of the interior of the home itself but observed by mentioning the limiting characteristics of the architectural structure of the physical home.

[42] Interview with Harouk on 10 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.
[43] Eleanor Ryan-Saha, 'Repossession: Material Absences, Affective Presences, and the Life-Resumption Labors of Bosnians in Britain', *Social analysis* 59:1 (2015) 104.

Omar (33), for example, who lives in a social housing estate in Zwolle, expresses that the uninviting and static design of the housing estate's building block creates a physical distance between him and those living next to him. The social relationships he has tried to build with his direct neighbours are described as *afstandelijk* (aloof) and *voorzichtig* (cautious), but instead of pointing to possible cultural differences, he mentions in the first place that the physical design of the building is experienced as a barrier that prevents social contact from happening. In the early stages of his life in his current apartment, lack of contact with direct neighbours has prompted him to rather not make any efforts as past experiences with his neighbours as the formal response he received made him more cautious in building relations with others in his direct surroundings.

Next to the physical elements that make up the home and the potential of the home to be that *havenly* and familiar place, some of the respondents express that the physical home is not continuously experienced as an impermeable stronghold free of influence from the outside. Looking back at the first period of living in the home and comparing this period to other moments in time, the expectancy and pressure from the outside to integrate into Dutch society is perceived as by some of the respondents as a sign that feeling "at home" is to live in in the physical home according to what is thought to be in line with 'Dutch culture'. Harouk explains how external voices from the public realm find their way to the living room, sparking feelings of non-belonging in within his own home:

> *Toen ik hier [in Zwolle, red.] net nieuw was keek ik naar de TV en zag ik Klaas Dijkhoff. Er was ondertiteling, dus ik kon begrijpen wat hij zei. Hij zei: "Iedere vluchteling moet zijn bestaan in Nederland verdienen". Zijn woorden zaten in mijn hoofd. "Iedere vluchteling moet zijn bestaan verdienen". Vluchtelingen zijn alleen welkom als ze succes voor dit land kunnen brengen. Toen dacht ik: "Oh, ok, ik moet leven als een Nederlander, om te bevestigen dat ik mijn plek verdien…". Ik ga lunchen met een broodje ham, en ik ga om 5 uur 's avonds eten, en ik ga 's avonds op de bank naar de TV kijken. Ik ga alle gewoontes van Nederlanders overnemen om me thuis te voelen. Maar na een tijdje dacht ik "Nee, dit kan ik niet". Nu is mijn huis een soort klein Syrië geworden. Hoe we koken, hoe we slapen, het tapijt, alles, hoe we wakker worden met koffie en muziek, ja, om me thuis te voelen. Of, om me veilig te voelen*[44].

Harouk's statement indicates that to the pressure to integrate and to be 'granted' full membership of Dutch society leads to the physical home environment itself becoming a stage of conflict where (non)belonging and feeling "at home" are negotiated, with the assumption being that to feel "at home" is to adjust to the cultural standards and expectancies set by the majority. These feelings of (non)belonging can enter the home by means of television broadcasts or, more in general, the reception of news feeds that involve discussions and debates on integration and asylum policy. Sometimes, social encounters with other people in the direct environment are experienced as a direct assault on the way belonging in the home is experienced. One of the respondents, during a second interview, expressed her concern of being able to live like she and her family would like to do as the result of continuing racist comments by her direct neighbour, which not only directly affects the way she sees her physical home in terms of safety,

[44] Interview with Harouk on 10 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.

but also leads to hesitance if the way she lives "at home" is in accordance with how they should live. To experience discrimination is, of course, a very harmful example of how exclusion leads to how one feels detached from an environment that a person eagerly tries to convert into a place 'like home'. Fortunately, the example of discrimination in the direct environment of the neighbourhood given by this respondent is not shared by the other respondents, who seem to connect racism to other facets of everyday live, like when applying for a job or when trying to gain access to the labour market.

It seems therefore that the connotation of feeling "at home" at home does not encompass a linear process that primarily involves the material qualities of the home environment, but rather resonates as a multi-dimensional, contextual, and hybrid process that is in constant negotiation with the surrounding of the house itself[45]. As a result, the material dimension of the home cannot be seen apart from the position of the home as an important locator of maintaining social connections that help people acclimatise in the neighbourhood. This social dimension of home is what ties the physical home the personal experience of belonging, and therefore is dependent on the social dimension and situation of the home in its local setting.

Private and public: the social dimension of the physical home

If we are to understand the processes of belonging and feeling "at home" at home, it is important to understand that drastic changes in the social networks highly impact Syrian refugees. As a result of the flight, the stay in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iraq, or Jordan, the journey towards Europe, the time spent in refugee camps and later in reception centres in the Netherlands, and the relocation from asylum seeker centre to the municipality, social networks of refugees often have become dispersed. This transnational nature of social networks is indeed an important characteristic of the refugees' social networks, as dislocation results in more spreading out in geographical terms, connecting people in several different countries[46]. To experience belonging in the new home therefore cannot be seen apart from how life was experienced collectively in within the community – together with relatives, friends, and neighbours. Feelings of lost connections and deep concerns over uncertainties involving reunification with relatives and friends back home have an unmistakable impact on how the new environment in the Netherlands is perceived, and, as Omar mentions, if someone can truly feel "at home" in the home:

> *Wanneer ik wakker word, heb ik het gevoel dat ik nog langer wil slapen. Ik ben moe. En dit gevoel - ik denk dat dit algemeen is – geldt voor veel vluchtelingen. Ik weet niet precies wat het betekent – je 'thuis' voelen. Misschien als mijn vrouw naar Nederland komt verandert dat gevoel wel. Misschien voel ik me dan wel 'thuis'*[47].

The unmistakable feeling of loss of members of the community back in the homeland seems to serve as reflection as most of the people interviewed seem to relate to their feeling of belonging at home

[45] Marco Antonsich, 'Searching for Belonging: An Analytical Framework', 645.
[46] Nadja Al-Alí and Khalid Koser, 'Transnationalism, International Migration and Home' in: *New Approaches to Migration?* (Abingdon 2002) 1.
[47] Interview with Omar on 22 April 2021. Recorded via Skype.

directly to how and with whom they used to live in the homeland. It was found that when asked how life at home in the neighbourhood in Syria is experienced in comparison to living in the Netherlands, the respondents unanimously refer to the home in Syria as not only a *private* domain in which individual belonging is experienced but also an essential part of the *public* domain: a place that serves as space of invitation and gathering that is shared with others in the direct environment. Evidently, as Femke Buitelaar and Femke Stock argued, even if such a binary divide between 'private' and 'public' is maintained, the home cannot be restricted to the private realm as the notion of home can relate to layers that are hardly experienced as private – like the community, city, or nation[48]. This is not to say that there is no mention of the relation between the home as a private space and the home as a place within a wider public realm. Zahra (43), who lives in a small village in Zeeland together with her husband and their four children, stresses that even though she finds comfort in the resemblance between her current living place and the village she grew up in in Syria, she recognizes the different perception of sharing the physical home as a public space back home whilst comparing her experiences here in the Netherlands:

> *In mijn dorp kwam iedereen 's avonds bij elkaar. Ooms, tantes, buren, vrienden. We maakten altijd veel eten en vertelden elkaar verhalen. Eigenlijk was het nooit stil in huis. Hier is dat anders. Hier heb je buurthuizen waar je voor mensen kookt, waar mensen bij elkaar komen, maar dat is georganiseerd. Het spontane leven zoals in Syrië is hier niet aanwezig.*[49]

The affectionate tone used by Zahra to describe her village reveals how different it sometimes is in her current place of living. In comparison to their experiences in Syria, the above-described formal relationships between neighbours in the neighbourhood is experienced as difficult, as it is in contrast with how feeling "at home" is experienced in the public domain. These 'thin' neighbourhood encounters are confirmed as less meaningful because these encounters are perceived as a stark cultural contrast in terms of how Syrians spend their time with neighbours, which creates a barrier that is at times hard to overcome. Being a 'good neighbour' seems to mean not just having frequent contact with your neighbours, but about spending and sharing time in the home of the other, as Harouk explains:

> *Nederlanders moeten heel lang nadenken voordat ze iets met anderen delen. Zelfs tijd, zelfs afspraken, ze moeten heel lang nadenken voordat ze op een uitnodiging ingaan. Het fijne contact in het klooster, of het fijne contact met iemand langs de IJssel, of in de buurt: het blijft op die locatie. Ze hebben 'geen tijd' of 'geen ruimte'. Iemand heeft tijd voor jou of ruimte voor jou alleen op die tijd of die plaats*[50].

The word *nadenken* would more commonly be translated as to 'consider', to think something through or to take time to let something sink in. However, in this case, Harouk uses the word *nadenken* to describe that he experiences social encounters with Dutch people as calculative, as if the other literally has to 'do the math' or 'tick boxes' before the other would consider sharing time and space with him. Sharing the physical home as a public domain and 'forgetting time' when sharing such a moment reinforces feelings

[48] Marjo Buitelaar and Femke Stock, 'Making Homes in Turbulent Times: Moroccan-Dutch Muslims Contesting Dominant Discourses of Belonging' in: *Muslim Diaspora in the West* (2016) 165.
[49] Interview with Zahra on 21 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.
[50] Interview with Harouk on 10 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.

of inclusion, or exclusion. After all, when such shared moments within the physical home are limited because it has to 'fit in the agenda', it sparks feelings that a person is merely a number – a harmful thought that re-lives the experiences with governmental institutions and the formal attitude conceived during the application process. On the other hand, positive and therefore meaningful encounters with people – like direct neighbours – are seemingly related to a certain recognition that someone *is* part of the neighbourhood as a 'normal' person, as someone that one wants to share time with, and as someone that ultimately is seen and appreciated as part of the neighbourhood community. Ali (71), for example, considered himself 'lucky' as he feels he is able to share and exchange values and bridge cultural differences with others in the neighbourhood, therefore continue what he is used to doing back home in Damascus, and strengthening his ties with his neighbourhood in the Netherlands:

> One day, I offered my neighbour something to eat. He hesitated and did not have it. But a couple of months ago, I sat with my friend outside of my door, playing chessboard. Then my neighbour just passed, you know, and watched. "What are you doing?" "We're playing chess". I miss two or three pieces. He said OK, and then he left again. The day next, he brought a new system [a chessboard and pieces] for me. He said: "this is a gift for you". Imagine! I didn't ask him for anything. It made me feel lucky to be here. I'm trying to do exactly what I did in Syria. Being friendly with my neighbours, with anyone[51].

Bringing up memories of living in the neighbourhood in Syria, the respondents acknowledge that the physical home environment as a safe and private space is at the same time experienced as a public domain that is shared together with (extended) family, friends, and neighbours. It seems that the definition of home and feeling "at home" in the physical home is experienced as synonymous to feeling at home in the wider home environment: to feel belonging is to be part of the community that lives in a designated area like a neighbourhood. As a result, the *material* home functions as a place that connects a person to the wider socio-spatial environment by means of social connections and relationships with others that share nearby spaces. It was found that meaningful and positive encounters in the neighbourhood enforce feeling "at home" in the house, whereas 'thin' encounters are experienced as negative, potentially resulting in the house becoming a more secluded, privatised stronghold that needs to be protected. Social connections and encounters in the direct neighbourhood affect feeling "at home" in the physical home itself, which shows that the physical home is not merely an impermeable private stronghold where belonging is experienced, as the need to feel "at home" in relation to certain people, specific social settings or imagined communities an integrated part of the wider neighbourhood environment[52]. This is an indication that the physical home itself is merely one of the material and concrete places that trigger an emotional and affective response, a place that is under constant negotiation with its surroundings, and a place that drives people to explore other places in the city where one can emotionally attach to.

[51] Interview with Ali on 16 April 2021. Recorded at his residence.
[52] Buitelaar and Stock, 'Making Homes in Turbulent Times: Moroccan-Dutch Muslims Contesting Dominant Discourses of Belonging', 167.

Chapter III: Concrete public places and feelings of belonging

For people who have arrived in a new country and settled in a municipality, concrete public places are extremely important landmarks that help people develop a sense of belonging. Places like parks and green spaces, community centres, and recreative spaces are usually defined as public as they are provided by the public authorities as open and available spaces that can be used and shared by all members of the community[53]. The distinctive character of public spaces provides opportunities for social interaction and social inclusion, and can help with facilitating the development of community ties. As Alessandra Buonfino has mentioned before, concrete public spaces can offer feelings of 'good belonging' through 'good design, local landmarks, common spaces and symbols', and the (in)availability of such locators can lead to either positive or negative feelings of belonging – impacting the perception of the home environment, the neighbourhood, the city, or even the nation[54]. In a certain way, public spaces are an extension and an integral part of how feeling "at home" in the physical home environment is experienced, and the interaction between both the home environment and public spaces evidently contribute to overall feelings of belonging. Interactions between the home environment and other places in the neighbourhood therefore provide the basis for recognition, and for defining a place in society.

Neighbourhoods are comprised of a wide, varied and multi-layered scale of concrete public places that could potentially help in constructing valuable relationships that emotionally attaches an individual to a given place. Most of the respondents – who live outside the bigger urban cities in mid-size to small cities – seem to feel that their current place of residence suits them well, expressing their current mood in terms of 'happiness', 'gratefulness', or being 'lucky to be here and not in a different municipality[55]'. When asked what they liked about their neighbourhoods, a variety of reasons where given: some would point to infrastructure and accessibility of nearby cities to go to, whilst others would mention the availability of shops and markets in the direct surrounding, good schools for the children, or work and volunteering opportunities as reasons for feeling "at home". When asked about specific characteristics of their cities or villages, the respondents argued that they were happy to live in a place that is not as noisy and crowded, and sometimes would mention that – whilst comparing their experiences with experiences of other Syrians they know – would rather not be in a place that makes them feel on edge.

This is not to say that the abovementioned more 'general' feelings of belonging in the neighbourhood are without its contrasts. For some of the respondents, specific places of belonging were mentioned as locations that signify 'meeting other people' or 'feeling included', whilst for others the same

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[53] A. Madanipour, 'Why are the design and development of public spaces significant for cities?', *Environment and Planning* 26 (1999) 881.
In addition to this more generalized definition of public spaces as 'open' and 'accessible' places, Madanipour rightly points to the potential framing of open spaces as 'ideal type' spaces with a normative value. More accurately, public spaces can be defined as spaces that have been outside the boundaries of individual or small-group control, mediating between private spaces and used for a variety of often overlapping functional and symbolic purposes.
[54] Alessandra Buonfino and Louisa Thomson, 'Belonging in Contemporary Britain', *Commission on Integration & Cohesion* (2007) 18.
[55] Interview with Ali on 16 April 2021. Recorded at his residence.

location is experienced as a place that provokes harmful experiences and would rather be avoided. For example, when talking about meaningful or harmful places, Fares would mention travel hubs – like Hilversum central station, the airport or the docks – as meaningful as it epitomises the positive feeling of 'coming together', 'meeting friends', or 'going somewhere new' for him, whilst Harouk experiences travelling by train and going from one station to another as harmful as it reminds him of fleeing and being on the run. This example tells that the significance of specific places varies considerably, are under constant negotiation with the past, and therefore should not be regarded as a simplified 'truth' that is clinically and solidly connected to a specific public place.

However, apart from the different perception of specific public places and how personal perceptions differ from one another, two different categories within the wider neighbourhood environment were mentioned by the respondents for its specific qualities. Firstly, places of *restoration* – open green spaces like forests, fields, parks and waters – were named as particularly important for an individual sense of belonging in the neighbourhood enforced by its restorative qualities and contribution to mental well-being. Secondly, places of *sociality* appeared to be important for social interaction, cultural exchange and overall feelings of inclusion. Within this category, participating in activities that provide people with a sense of self-awareness seemed to help increase feeling "at home" in the municipality.

Places of restoration and open green spaces

When asked about which specific places have special meaning for them, the respondents would often mention open green places like nearby forests or fields, rivers and lakes, or public parks as places where one can wind down, forget about daily concerns, and 'lock in' with the nearby surroundings. As human geographers Robyn Sampson and Sandra M. Gifford have mentioned before, both individually and communally, open green spaces and their restorative characteristics have the capacity to contribute to recovery, increase overall feelings of well-being and good health and more in general offer different gateways for people in the process of becoming "at home" in their new environment[56]. The qualities that are assigned to green spaces comprehend a multifaceted spectrum, as the change of scenery is referred to by people as the entry to a 'high quality sensory and natural world', to an environment that is free of constraint and full of exploration, or to a place in which people can come together and share their stories and experiences[57]. More importantly, green spaces can provide restoration from stress and mental fatigue, and experiencing the restorative effects through such spaces are - certainly for people who have been through traumatic events themselves – an invaluable presence within the wider realm of the neighbourhood[58]. During an interview with Ahmed (42), who resides in Hilversum with his wife and two sons, it appeared that after talking for a while about his appreciation of labour/study opportunities in

[56] Robyn Sampson and Sandra M. Gifford, 'Place-making, settlement and well-being: The therapeutic landscapes of recently arrived youth with refugee backgrounds', *Health & Place* 16 (2010) 128.
[57] Jacquelin Burgess, Carolyn M. Harrison and Melanie Limb, 'People, Parks and the Urban Green: A Study of Popular Meanings and Values for Open Spaces in the City', *Urban Studies* 25 (1988) 471.
[58] Agnes van den Berg, Jolanda Maas, Robert A. Verheij and Peter P. Groenewegen, 'Green space as a buffer between stressful life events and health', *Social Science & Medicine* 70 (2010) 1204.

Hilversum, he seemed in thought when asked about what specific locations are of value to him. After a while, he notes that the surroundings of his place of residence have an important impact on his mental well-being:

> *Ik ga soms alleen wandelen in de bossen en voel me daar goed. Want ik houd niet van drukke plekken, maar van rustige plekken. Ik herinner me niet de namen, maar weet waar de mooie plekken zijn inmiddels. Wanneer ik stress ervaar ga ik daar heen, zeker een of twee keer per week. Ik vind dat belangrijk voor mijn gezondheid*[59].

To have nature within grasp seemed to provide the respondents with an always present opportunity to retreat, to be in a calm place and escape for a moment the buzz of the city. Green places, with their aesthetic qualities of beauty, therefore function as places where stressful everyday experiences within the municipality can prove to be 'healing', and the apparent peacefulness of such places are mentioned in terms of its quality to be stress-relieving. Most of the respondents seemed to refer to green places as locations existing within an environment that at times is experienced as busy or crowded. This feeling of crowdedness not only reflects the perception of the wider urban area itself, but can at times also include daily experiences within the physical home environment, an environment that can be due to its material attributes (lack of rooms/space inside) or social factors (lack of 'thick' personal relationships with direct neighbours) be used as a point of reference when referring to the restorative qualities of green spaces. Khadija (41), for example, explains that the tiny space she lives in with her two daughters sparked a certain longing for a private space where she can be 'at ease':

> *Hilversum is een zeer levendige stad, het doet me denken aan Damascus: een stad die nooit slaapt. Maar ik woon in een kleine kamer, in een gedeelde woning, en ik wil wat privacy in mijn leven hebben. Ik heb rust en privacy nodig, voor mij en mijn dochters, maar ook om de roman die ik schrijf af te maken. De bossen en meren in Hilversum geven mij een beetje privacy*[60].

Whilst praising forests, lakes, rivers and other green places for its restorative qualities, the word most often used to describe what sensation such places evoke is the Dutch word *rust*. This word does not only imply the relative tranquillity in contrast to the business of the urban experience, but seem to apply more specifically to a certain 'inner calmness', a state of mind that helps to relax and be 'at ease' in the direct environment. Fares, who was also mentioned in the previous chapter, describes his favourite place in the neighbourhood as follows:

> *Hier dichtbij in het bos is een soort van oud klooster en daar staat een stoel die overzicht geeft over een groot veld. Soms staan er ook paarden in het veld. Naast die stoel staat een boom waar allerlei gekleurde stenen in zitten. De boom is er voor de nabestaanden van overledenen om herinneringen op te halen. Voor mij is die plek, in combinatie met alle mooie natuur op de achtergrond, een bijzondere plek waar alles samenkomt: de gekleurde stenen in de boom, de stoel die erbij staat, het uitzicht over het veld op het bos. Deze plek geeft mij het gevoel van rust*[61].

[59] Interview with Ahmed on 2 May 2021. Recorded via Zoom.
[60] Interview with Khadija on 20 May 2021. Recorded via Zoom.
[61] Interview with Fares on 23 April 2021. Recorded at his residence.

To understand what the respondents understood when describing their favourite green places and how it gave them the feeling of *rust,* it appeared that such a feeling is usually attached to a specific spot within the designated space. Places to sit down, like chairs or benches, have been extensively described for their various and contrasting meanings, yet it is safe to say that bench space allows people to not only connect with the new environment but, as Ilse van Liempt has emphasised, also enable people to 'connect with the past in momentary solitude[62]'. The location Fares described seems to not just reflect how this material place helps him connect to his new environment, it also enables him to reconnect with past memories, connecting his own experiences to his current residence – more specifically, the exact location mentioned. The description of the location in the forest as a place *waar alles samenkomt* seemed to revolve around the symbolism of the stones in the tree, a tree that epitomises the loss of loved ones, a symbol not only for those who had previously laid down the stones but also others who would take the time to absorb its symbolic definition. Even though it was not explicitly mentioned, the chair and the tree seemed to deepen connections between Fares and other people, both in the present and the past, helping him to connect not only to this particular place, but more generally to feel connected in the here and now.

Conclusively, places of restoration like open green spaces seem to be mentioned by the respondents as places that fulfil their individual needs, and are explicitly named as locations where one can be 'at ease', relax a bit, and enjoy a moment of privacy in solitude. This is not to say that open green space are not also important for their quality as a meeting place, where social connections are built and where possibilities for communal recreation are present. Some mentioned that they would sit down with a friend, chat about common interests or just how the day was, exemplifying how public green spaces are meeting locations as well. However, green spaces seem to offer both a physical place as well as an imaginable zone where - on an individual level - one can come to terms with the past due to the restorative qualities. All in all, also given the fact that green spaces as restorative spaces are mentioned as stable and ever-present places where one can retreat, green spaces offer the respondents an alternative place to feel "at home" in by delving into its restorative qualities, qualities that are sometimes not found in the physical home environment.

Places of sociability: receiving and providing care

In addition to the importance of green spaces as places that provide as a stress-relieving environment that provides people with necessary privacy and *rust*, the respondents explicitly emphasize that they would experience being "at home" in places that are designated for social activities, where one can meet other people, build social connections, and more generally look for familiarities that help bind with the physical locations by the relationships developed. As is made clear, there are different degrees of belonging: some may experience weak belonging when there are little social connections to rely on, whilst others

[62] Ilse van Liempt and Richard Staring, 'Homemaking and places of restoration: belonging within and beyond places assigned to Syrian refugees in the Netherlands', 6.

experience strong and meaningful social connections that sparks individual recognition through one singular type of identity[63].

It should be no surprise that making new friends, engaging with communities, and developing new social relationships contribute greatly to a sense of 'strong' belonging and emotional attachment to a place. For the respondents, many different reasons were given when asked how public concrete places where others are met contribute to feeling "at home" in the place of residence. Most of them would reflect on their first moments in the municipality, when granted a permit residence and obtained a place to live, and it seemed that, at least initially, public places were primarily explained in terms of formality and obligation. Participating in language classes, attending for *begeleiding* (counselling) at VluchtelingenWerk, or meeting an official at the municipalities' *Sociaal Plein* for potential jobs are acknowledged as pivotal, yet the formal feel experienced at places designated to receive aid would at times be experienced as volatile, orchestrated and passive. When asked what has changed in the years after moving to a municipality, the respondents would mention that meaningful public places are places that feel familiar, where someone can actively participate in activities and events, and where someone feels a certain recognition of that part of someone's identity that is important to him or her.

Interestingly, it appeared that when asked how free time is spent, some of the respondent argued that voluntary positions in designated public places like *buurthuizen* (community centres), nursing homes, or church groups enable them not only by receive care, more importantly, gives them the opportunity to be a provider of care themselves. For people who have been displaced, and have shared, contested, and (re)constructed spaces over longer periods of time, it seems that those identifying with the displaced communities take upon themselves different roles of caring, supporting, and protecting others[64]. However, the role of 'care giver' does not limit itself to providing aid to other Syrian refugees, or the displaced Syrian community, but includes other refugees and non-migrants as well. Ali, who as an archaeologist worked as a teacher at the university of Damascus, explained that his role as a tutor drove him to a nearby *buurthuis* in Hilversum, a community place with rooms where classes can be set up. There, he weekly organises Arabic and Dutch language classes for minors, making himself available in a place that feels familiar to him. Whilst reminiscing about his central position in within the Syrian community, he stresses that it makes him feel proud to be of aid to others:

> I'm very proud, because, wherever I go I feel that my community listens to me. Not that they do exactly what I want, no no no. But they listen. I have a good reputation and tell them exactly the truth around everything around us and advise them. The point is, you know, I can't do anything about legal issues, and everyone has

[63] Alessandra Buonfino, 'Belonging in Contemporary Britain', 11.
[64] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'Shifting the gaze: Palestinian and Syrian refugees sharing, making and contesting space in Lebanon' in: *Refuge in a Moving World* (London, 2020) 403.
Although the research of Fiddian-Qasmiyeh is applied to camp-based settlement in the Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon, the notion of refugee-refugee humanitarianism seems to apply in destination countries as well, as the destination country can be seen as yet another shared space that stages new strategies for adaption.

his own fight. I tell them about my experiences, when to go to the *gemeente*, where to get advice, how to go to the hospital. They trust me[65].

Such initiatives as described by Ali, started by displaced people in response to being in a new environment, implies that meaningful concrete places offer a person space to be an active provider of support next to merely providing as a place where refugees experience belonging as passive recipients of aid. The relational development of refugees, based on auto-biographical elements such as memories, past experiences and knowhow gathered in within the transnational context of the homeland, the hosting country and in between, should therefore apply the notion that concrete public places can provide meaningful social connections that help a person (re)invent personal qualities that make someone feel "at home" in a specific place. Social connections – as is explained by Ali – are emerging in a symbiosis between current, everyday relationships built in the current place of residence, and social relationships that are based in the past. When such a connection between present and past is recognised by the individual, it seemed to amplify self-awareness as the distance between the 'self' and the 'other' became smaller, resulting in stronger feeling of place attachment and willingness to explore other places of belonging in the neighbourhood environment. Volunteering in nursing homes was specifically mentioned for its qualities to bridge differences and address personal characteristics of someone's own identity at the same time. Harouk, for example, notes that sharing stories about his past with the elderly made him identify himself not as a refugee, but as himself:

Toen ik vrijwilliger was in een zorginstelling ging twee keer per week langs om ouderen te helpen naar buiten te gaan. Ik nam ze naar buiten met de fiets, lopen, wandelen, en ik was ook bezig binnen de zorginstelling met organisaties op avonden waar we vertelden over elkaars gewoonten van vroeger. De vrouwen vertelden me over de gewoonten in Nederland en ik over het verleden in Syrië bij mijn oma. Ik voelde dat ook die deuren van die zorginstelling geopend werden, ik voelde me daar op een gegeven moment niet meer vluchteling. Ik voelde me Harouk[66].

The statement of Harouk indicates that public places not only provide in relational ways, and helps to actively reconnect with the past through the exchange of experiences with Dutch people, it also makes him feel less like a refugee and more like the person he likes to be. For others, too, the label 'refugee' seems to at times experienced as harmful as this label degrades people as merely receivers of aid, and taking up roles as caregivers empowers them, igniting self-awareness, and more generally enables them to addresses exactly those personal qualities that the respondents want to be recognised for. Sometimes, the respondents would refer to the roles they would take on within their respective communities in Syria, and how such roles are now being continued in the Netherlands. Specific, carefully chosen public spaces help facilitate the needs of the respondents. Zahra, for example, expressed that her passion for food has helped her connect to different public places – in her hometown in Syria, in Iraq, in the refugee camp in Turkey - where food was being prepared, as such places feel 'like home' to her. Her experience in such

[65] Interview with Ali on 16 April 2021. Recorded at his residence.
[66] Interview with Harouk on 10 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.

locations help her not only to connect and feel "at home" to the place she currently lives in, but also seems to help her connect to a multiplicity of transnational, complex and multidimensional places that she has visited in the past, places that are for her important reference points of how one feels "at home":

> *Als je ergens van houdt leer je sneller. Ik houd ervan te koken voor anderen. In Griekenland heb ik drie maanden in de keuken van het kamp geassisteerd. In Iraq raakte ik bevriend met 10 Indiase vrouwen met wie ik nog steeds contact heb. In welk land ik ook ben, ik leer me snel aan te passen. Hier* [in Nederland] *heb ik 6 maanden gewerkt in de keuken van een verzorgingstehuis. Ondanks dat het soms moeilijk is vanwege de taal heb ik geleerd Nederlands eten te koken voor Nederlandse ouderen. Dat geeft een mij een goed gevoel*[67].

For people like Zahra, the importance of learning from other people in public places – places that she carefully chooses - ignites a feeling of familiarity rooted in multiple places at the same time. Interestingly, when asked about her YouTube channel that she uses to display her passion for food, she notes that it is not so much about connecting to people that share the same Kurdish culture or values similar to the values she knows from her hometown, but more about connecting with other people of other cultures that share the same interests – may they be in Iraq, Greece, or the Netherlands. As a result, actively participating in activities in public places where care is given through shared interests enforces feelings of belonging as the distance between herself and others is bridged, connecting a wide arrange of past experiences to the present.

Experiencing belonging in public places

As the experience of belonging within the physical home cannot be seen apart from its location within the wider neighborhood environment, the decision to seek for public places in the neighbourhood comprises a process that delicately encloses individual needs that are necessary to feel "at home" in both the private and the public. On the one hand, when such needs are recognised – like the need for privacy, or the need to participate in activities where aid can be given – public places can provide by their specific qualities to help people feel "at home" in the wider neighbourhood environment. On the other hand, this also makes clear that groups which find only recognition and belonging from one source are most vulnerable to 'isolation, change and tensions', especially if such sources become 'unsustainable or divisive[68]'. Evidently, public places do not evoke a guaranteed, always summonable "feeling at home", but are by themselves platforms of negotiation: negotiation between the physical home and the wider neighbourhood environment, negotiation between current and past experiences, or negotiation between how a person relates to himself in relation to others.

When looking at the qualitative aspects of public places in their municipalities, some places are mentioned for their specific values, whilst other places are not mentioned at all. It would be suggestive to say that not mentioning specific places can be directly equated to coping mechanisms developed by people when being asked when do you not feel "at home". After all, it could be uncomfortable and

[67] Interview with Zahra on 21 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.
[68] Alessandra Buonfino, 'Belonging in Contemporary Britain', 7.

painful to share harmful experiences on public places where one experiences non-belonging with someone in a more powerful position. However, when asked about where someone would not feel "at home", usually the respondents would answer the question by substituting the 'where' for the 'whom'. Many of the respondents experienced unequal power relations in interactions with Dutch people and sometimes would bring up examples of harmful stereotyping that would make them feel alienated. Comments like "I did not know people have phones in Syria", or "I did not know Syrian's drink alcohol" made them feel more socially and physically distanced from the Netherlands, as such comments crudely emphasise who a person is in the eyes of the other. More importantly, as is argued in the above, it does not give people who settle in the Netherlands the possibility to address to others what you want to be recognised for: a teacher, a writer, an aid worker, or just someone 'like you'.

Conclusively, it was found that concrete public places are explored for their unique qualities that help a person attach to new places when such qualities are recognised. As the above has emphasised, different public places are used for different personal needs. Firstly, places of *restoration* like open green spaces seem to be important for its restorative qualities and its effect on mental well-being. Open green spaces provide in offering a stress-relieving environment where on an individual level one can find necessary feelings of privacy and *rust*, feelings that are not always present within the physical home environment. Secondly, places of *sociality* are not only mentioned in terms of providing possibilities to connect with others and build relationships, but are explicitly claimed to increasing self-awareness through active participation. As the chapter shows, exploring public spaces like *buurthuizen* and nursing homes resulted not only in increasing self-awareness through connection with others, it also enabled the respondents to be a caregiver instead of a care-receiver, addressing exactly those qualities one wants to be recognized for.

Conclusion

Nederland was als een droom. Toen ik in het vliegtuig zat en naar beneden keek zag ik de rivieren, het water en de bloemen, en ik zei tegen mijn man: "Vandaag ben ik opnieuw geboren[69]".

For people who have been forced to leave their home, the exploration of new grounds is met with an almost inexplainable complexity. After all, when the home has become 'the mouth of a shark', and the decision is made to leave and find refuge elsewhere, the search for safety is at times to follow dots on a horizon, not knowing what lies ahead. At the same time, it is the complex uncertainty of existence, the uncertainty of finding a safe place that can be considered home that drives people to look for such places, connecting the memories of what one understands as 'home' to new places that have the potential to be called 'home' in the future. Evidently, to be forced away from the home is hardly definable in terms of linear progression, as a 'leaving one place and finding another', but rather involves a process of constant negotiation with other people, places, and memories, stretching far beyond the spatial geographical containers of the "homeland", the "host land", and all that lies in between. The longing to feel "at home" is what ties up how people experience belonging, and, in the case of some, when such a place is found, it can be reason to claim you are 'born again'.

Considering the abovementioned and taking into account current refugee-related developments on an (inter)national scale, it is alarming to ascertain how national immigration- and integration policies in Europe continue to ferociously build on the premise of safeguarding 'national identity' whilst at the same time denying the right to belong through exclusion of those 'unfit' to culturally assimilate. At the fringes of Europe, the hardening of borders is taking dramatic shapes. High-tech border security and drone surveillance, the building of a wall of Trumpian proportions alongside the Evros river on the Greco-Turkish border, and illegal push-backs by national authorities: there seems to be no misunderstanding in how the barricades of Europe are being erected[70]. But what about the people who are already here, who have rightfully claimed and gained asylum, and have been building their lives on new grounds they may now call home? Not too long ago, Denmark became the first European nation to not renew residency permits for Syrian refugees, proclaiming that some areas of Syria are now safe for families to return to – affecting more than a hundred Syrians in Denmark who effectively lost their refugee status[71]. Even more recently, a proposition by the social-democrat Danish government to relocate asylum seekers to third countries outside the European Union passed national legislation, another undisguised indication of Denmark's intentions to tighten its immigration policies[72]. If we are deemed to follow the reasoning that the definition of 'home' is designated by

[69] Interview with Zahra on 21 March 2021. Recorded via Skype.
[70] Bram Vermeulen, 'Nieuw IJzeren Gordijn aan de Europese Grens', *NRC Weekend* (19 June 2021) 17.
[71] Emma Graham-Harrison and Mais Katt, 'Revealed: devastation that awaits Syrians facing expulsion by Denmark', *The Guardian* (9 May 2021) see: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/09/revealed-devastation-that-awaits-syrians-facing-expulsion-by-denmark
[72] 'Denmark asylum: Law passed to allow offshore asylum centres', *BBC* (3 June 2021) see: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57343572

European or national borders, as reasonable imaginations of the majority, reserved for only those who are likely to culturally assimilate, then what kind of 'home' are we talking of? Despite some national policies received criticism by the European Commission and humanitarian organizations, the effects of such exclusionary European developments on both those who are in need of refuge at the fringes of Europe and those who already found new homes in European countries is met with anxiousness and uncertainty. As one of the respondents explained whilst referring to the news on exclusionary legislation in other European countries, the feeling of being framed as 'other' resides between hopes and fears:

> *'Als je een vluchteling ontmoet, denken ze aan Denemarken. Ze denken: "misschien gaat het in andere Europese landen ook gebeuren". Nederland heeft ons veiligheid gegeven. Maar veiligheid is ook veilig zijn in je geest, dat je niet als bedreiging gezien wordt*[73]*'.*

If anything, this research has argued that belonging and to feel "at home" can be attached to many other places at the same time and exceeds the territorial demarcation of the nation as a place of exclusive belonging. Against the background of national immigration- and integration policies that define citizenship in terms of cultural assimilability, this research has emphasized that belonging on a local neighbourhood scale resonates as multi-dimensional, contextual, and hybrid process that stretches back-and-forth between fixed geographic locations, shifting between specific locations that a person considers important. By focusing on the physical home as a safe, *havenly* place on the one hand, and the exploration and appreciation of public places in the wider neighbourhood environment on the other, it is shown that that belonging implies a process of constant negotiation with other places, composed of a wide array of emotional attachments that build on auto-biographical and relational elements of belonging. As the chapter on the physical home implies, the respondents refer to the physical home as both a *material* place that one feels safe in and as a *social* place that is shared with others: family members, friends, and neighbours. Even though such a place can at times be experienced as a place of retreat, as a stronghold that is part of the private realm one needs to bolster in order to feel "at home", this research has shown that the physical home itself cannot be seen apart from the wider neighbourhood environment and is in itself a 'starting point' from which people start exploring other places of belonging. Building from this observation, this research has highlighted that concrete public places can function as both symbolic and functional landmarks that provided the respondents with specific qualities necessary to experience to feel "at home" in the municipality. As most of the respondents live in middle-sized cities that generally help facilitate to feel "at home" by means of well-organised infrastructure, available shops and markets, workplaces and schools, some public places are sought after for more specific reasons. In regards of this, places of *restoration* indicate that restorative qualities of public places are necessary to improve mental well-being by providing a

[73] Interview with Omar on 22 April 2021. Recorded via Skype.

stress-relieving environment where on an individual level one can find necessary feelings of privacy and *rust*: feelings that are not always present within the physical home environment. Next to that, places of *sociality* are found to be not only important for building social connections through active participation with others but also help increase self-awareness by offering possibilities to address exactly those qualities a person wants to be recognized for. For most of the respondents, being able to explore public places that help self-employ characteristics that one ascribes to oneself is something that is of pivotal importance, as such places provide in creating an accessible environment where a person is able to be a provider of care to others. Especially when considering that this research has focused on people who have been here for many years, the urge to explore new places of belonging and being able to connect such places to other places – in both the past and in the present – is something that is regarded incredibly important for people who are in search of belonging.

Admittedly, referring back to the question where and how Syrian refugees in the Netherlands experience belonging, it seems only possible to answer this question by acknowledging that such a question essentially produces a different answer by tomorrow. After all, despite the potential of places becoming familiar after a while, personal narratives are susceptible to change and alteration as constant interactions with both past and present shape how someone locates and experiences places of belonging – a process that is never ending. The common denominator here is that all those in search of belonging continuously look for places where they can feel like they are "at home" at: places where they can feel safe, 'at ease', or intimate in; places where they can be in solitude, or in public; places where they can mingle with others, or be alone for a while. Simply subjugating a group of people as passive and uninvolved subjects, as people with 'poor prospects' that are 'unlikely to fit in', or as people that have to 'earn' the right to belong here does not do just to the many remarkable, courageous and inventive personal stories of those who are longing for a place to call home. For the respondents of this research, in the limelight of being active participants of society, as people who move around and explore, and as people who take in and let go, at the essence.is the feeling that there are places and people who recognize them for who they are. Places that make it possible to feel "at home" again. Wherever home may be.

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Appendix 1. Overview of Syrian respondents

Name	Gender	Age	Residential location
Fares	Male	33	Middle-sized city
Yasin	Male	41	Middle-sized city
Harouk	Male	39	Middle-sized city
Omar	Male	31	Middle-sized city
Zahra	Female	43	Small town/village
Ali	Male	71	Middle-sized city
Ahmed	Male	42	Middle-sized city
Khadija	Female	41	Middle-sized city
Mahmoud[74]	Male	40	Middle-sized city

[74] The interview with Mahmoud is not included in the main text as experiences were primarily mentioned within the context of more general experiences of the city of residence, i.e. appreciation of infrastructure and availability of language classes.