'It's so messed up, it's unfair': conversations about the refugee crisis

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This paper centers on conversations with four refugee-background youth about how they make sense of the current global refugee-crisis. These conversations were part of my doctoral research about the forced migration and educational experiences of refugee-background students in Australia. My main aim here is to contribute to a body of work that pushes for shifts in notions around who the knowers are in research, more specifically in this case, who the knowers are within refugee crisis discourses. The key knowers in this paper are the group of young people who contributed with their perspectives and reflections about the crisis. The approach I propose is inspired by decolonial/feminist methodologies and concentrates on the role of people as knowers in their own lives. Here I see knowledge creation as deeply relational, contextual and embodied processes that absorb and create information to make sense of the world(s) we inhabit.

The beginning of the conversation: who is the knower in the refugee crisis?

It's spring time in Australia, the land of plenty. Beautiful blue skies and jacarandas are in full-bloom. A nice day, a warm day. On the other side of the globe, however, in faraway lands, distant from the island-nation I live in, the picture is grim. 'Walls of separation and racial discrimination, of hatred and fear, of humiliation and powerlessness continue to be erected around the world to divide and conquer, exacerbating existing conflicts' (Minh-ha 2011, p. 5). I see on TV, on the Internet, everyone is speaking about the crisis. Millions of people crossing to Europe. The image of complete despair. And there is the photo. The photo that shocked the world. The baby boy from Syria drowned, washed ashore in Turkey. Calls for compassion, for action.

The world is in shock! Amidst blue skies here and tragedy over there, I turn on my TV. I put on ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) and the show *Q&A* is on. The topic of tonight's show is timely: the refugee crisis (*Q&A* 2015).

The panel consisted of Mike Baird and Chris Bowen, two politicians representing the two major parties in Australia; Helen Joyce, a journalist in the field of economy; Geoffrey Roberston, an academic-expert in human rights issues; and Catherine Livingstone, a prominent business person. The debate went on. It was similar to many other debates I had seen on mainstream media. Maybe the difference was the focus this time on compassion in-light of the tragic photograph. The compassion was however, measured, quantified by the number of people *we* can *let in*. The *we* representing the people of Australia, or dare I say, the people who claim *ownership* of the nation? After the tragic photograph, the land of plenty could no longer be protected from the ugliness of war, the dreads of distant horrors were now visible (Hage 2016).

In 2015, the highest ever number of displaced people was recorded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with 21.3 million refugees and 3.2 million asylum seekers worldwide (AHRC 2017). And as international conflicts worsen, new groups of people are being displaced. Sadly, numbers are increasing at a faster rate than can be forecast (UNHCR 2016). In the midst of this grim picture, the growing number of people from the Global South seeking asylum in Western Europe, the US, and Australia, is being met with rising reluctance from these nations to grant asylum (Matthews 2013). Increasingly tough immigration policies go hand in hand with strong stances in deciding who is allowed or not to enter wealthy nations of the Global North[i] (Rizvi 2014).

I find it concerning to see that in exercising their sovereign power, nation-states have demonstrated they are prepared to welcome some migrants while excluding others. Within these discriminatory logics, asylum seekers and refugees are commonly perceived as an economic and cultural burden to host nations (Arnot, Pinson & Candappa 2009). Likewise, they are 'easily portrayed as inferior, malign or threatening' (Marfleet 2007, p. 142). Similar rationales apply to mind frames around border protection, desirable versus undesirable migrants and the idea that host nations are being invaded by non-white outsiders (Hage 2016). I am not then surprised to notice that within this discourse of panic, the topic of asylum seeker and refugee settlement provokes heated debates such as the one I witnessed on TV.

Volatile and unsettling times

The masses are coming

Displaced

Running away

Uncontrollable

Endless sea of faceless creatures

Incredible problem of now

People kept ignoring it

But that photo made it real

The crisis is now visible

'We' must help

Australia will do more

How much more?

10000 someone says

But who is more deserving of mercy?

Children and women (and better if they are Christian)

And let's take more Syrians but

less from South Sudan, Asia, Africa…

Numbers, numbers

How much cash can 'we' give?

The endless sea of faceless creatures

Overwhelming our stability

Dollars, how many dollars?

SOS it's a crisis!

Striking feature of our now

Things are getting worse

International conflicts are growing

New groups being displaced

They want to enter

Western Europe, US, Canada, Australia…

SOS

Generosity, compassion

'We' must help

Display our humanity

Our high morals

BUT

Incredible responsibility

Too many people, too many dollars, too much effort

'We' must deal with the problem

Turn back boats

Send money to the UN

Say welcome to a carefully selected few

Heated debate arises

Touching upon the essence of what nations represent

What it means to be human

Physical and symbolic boundaries

SOS

It's a crisis!

I kept thinking about what I heard in that debate on TV for months, I felt uncomfortable. And memories from my own history rolled in, refusing to dissipate. I remembered the 14-year-younger me, a woman of olive skin, fresh-off-the-plane, fresh to Australia. I was quickly made aware I was not quite white but had an acceptable skin tone within a complicated power structure around skin colours. I was also welcomed by the resident visa, my middle-class, educated self was granted. Yet, I soon realised that not all new-arrivals had the same 'G'day' with a smile offered to them. I remembered the undergraduate me learning in my linguistics class about the rhetoric used by the then Howard Government to dehumanize the so-called *boat-people*. I remembered when I entered the field of EAL (English as Additional Language) education and felt a sense of discomfort in the stark contrast of

migration experiences between my students at an exclusive private college and the new arrival refugees and asylum seekers who I tutored. Memories mixed with thoughts about the refugee crisis debate stayed with me and would not go away. I then read many academic articles on the topic. I thought that learning what academics had to say would be helpful to sooth my feelings of discomfort.

Yet, I felt a sense of frustration while reading research in the field of refugee and migration studies as most of what I read felt reductionist to me (with the exception of the authors I am including in this paper). In many of the texts, I saw responsibility placed purely within local actors in conflict areas; I saw efforts to analyse the deficits of areas where refugees originate from; I saw readings of the centrality of religion in the refugee crisis, especially Islam. At the same time, I saw widespread historical amnesia and failures to recognize the impact of colonial and neo-colonial powers in local conflicts. I also noticed an almost complete absence of knowledges from people of refugee-backgrounds about the crisis.

I noticed a pattern forming, a pattern of logics in knowledge production about refugeeism. I believe this pattern goes hand in hand, is part of, informs and is informed by the same logics that see refugees as the problem, as the scapegoat, without a careful global analysis that includes all actors involved in the crisis. In this way, 'many migration studies contribute to legitimising the practices of hegemonic populations in the racial/ethnic hierarchies and avoids confronting the racist discrimination and colonial legacies perpetuated' (Grosfoguel, Oso & Christou 2015, p. 644).

A headache kicked in. Most of what I read added to the sense of uneasiness I had after watching the debate on TV. I was not satisfied with the words and voices of knowledge that had come into my body. The knowledge brought forward in the debate and most academic literature represented many dominant viewpoints on the refugee crisis. It represented an entanglement of voices that went from attempts to explain the causes of the crisis to expressions of widespread hysteria mixed with feelings of responsibility to help the objectified and non-agentic refugees. I kept working hard to process all these ideas. It was when I recalled something Alejandra[ii], one of the research partners[iii] in my doctoral research project, had said:

> … concepts of foreign power and trade and investment and forming a power block against other rivals are so far removed from the daily experiences of the people who actually deal with it at the end of the day. And that just blows my mind, how like politics is still thought of in these big broad terms ...

Reflecting on Alejandra's words propelled me into asking more questions. Where does the knowledge produced about the refugee crisis come from? Who is the knower? Who are the experts? I start to comprehend that the debate on TV and the texts I read were similar to what Alejandra talked about- how politics and economics are theorised

in *big broad terms* without taking into consideration the lived knowledges of the people directly affected by decisions made by those in power. Absent are the perspectives of people who are/have been affected by this crisis at its most profound personal level; people of refugee-backgrounds. What is their take on the current refugee crisis?

I have asked this very question to Alejandra, Naarin, Mary, and Faith[iv] as part of my doctoral research about the educational experiences of refugee-background youth in Australia. Our conversations around their take on the crisis were part of an attempt to situate their educational experiences with their histories of forced migration and the broad conditions that surrounded their stories. This paper centers on these conversations about the current global refugee-crisis. My main aim here is to contribute to a body of work that pushes for shifts in notions around who the knowers are in research, more specifically in this case, who the knowers are within refugee crisis discourses. The key knowers in this paper are the group of young people who contributed with their perspectives and reflections. Here I see knowledge creation as deeply relational, contextual and embodied processes that absorb and create information to make sense of the world(s) we inhabit (Lugones 2003).

The conversation continues: focusing on the knower and conversations-as-method

Recollections started flying through my mind mixed with jumbled thoughts and feelings. The debate, the voices, the thoughts, the memories, got louder and louder, they could no longer be contained within my body.

Knowledges live everywhere, always situated, non-universal, temporal (Haraway 1992). Multiple understandings of the worlds we inhabit are constantly being formed. There's no one single truth, no single knower. But why are some people bound to be objects of inquiry, to be dissected, scrutinized, made fully transparent or knowable? Why are a handful of people given the right to know, the right to authority over knowledge? Knowledge in this manner, is treated like capital to be accumulated, transmitted, a possession, with have/have nots (Richardson 1997, p. 79).

With thoughts about knowledge, knowers, resonating within, I felt discomfort once again. Discomfort with the master narratives and injustices of realities around me. Discomfort with the ways knowledge is invented in academia, the silences, the exclusions! Through an entanglement of power structures, the authority to know in abstract forms, to make universal claims about others, to speak from above, is granted to a selected few—normally white, males, from the Global North (Anzaldúa 2009; Grosfuguel 2012). I wondered how to break away from academia's oppressing rhetoric, from long-lasting patterns of power in knowledge production 'that presents its conjunctures as universal truth while concealing its patriarchal privilege and posture'

(Anzaldúa 1990b, p. xxiii). I then remembered something Mignolo (2009, p. 162) had proposed:

> In order to call into question the modern/colonial foundation of the control of knowledge, it is necessary to focus on the knower rather than on the known.

His proposition stayed with me as I tried to work out how to formulate this paper. Yet, there are so many questions I would like to answer here, so many notions I long to challenge. The issue is that one answer opens-up another question and off it goes, never ending wonderings. However, this space is limited and there are simply too many questions that I cannot answer within the scope of this article. 'Here questions are constantly moving and one cannot define, finish, or close. This is a praxis of not being so sure' (Lather 1998, p. 488). What I aim to do nevertheless, is to go 'beyond subject-object divide' and engage with people through conversations (Anzaldúa 2002, p. 541). A key aspect of what I then propose is to work in relation to people, with a constant attention to self-reflection and through this process proceed towards a shift in the focus of who the knowers are in research, more specifically in the case of this paper, who the knowers are within refugee crisis discourses.

In this way, I want this paper to challenge the kind of research ethics which is 'characterized by either silencing the subject of research or by rendering him/her/them as fully transparent or knowable' (Maldonado-Torres 2011, p. 10). I thus seek to contest violent epistemic logics by working with people as partners in co-constructing knowledge and not as objects of inquiry. This approach is inspired by feminist/decolonial methodologies that concentrate on the role of people as knowers in their own lives (see Anzaldúa 1990a; Mutua & Swadener 2004; Pérez Huber 2009; Saavedra & Nymark 2008).

Given my focus, perhaps it would be fair for me to claim that we, the research partners and I, co-created knowledge while having conversations about the refugee crisis. This is what I want to claim but as my reflections about knowledge creation deepen, I realize that things are more complicated than what they may have seemed. In no way do I want to erase the central role that collaboration plays here, but I need to be careful when talking about co-creation of knowledge with the research partners. I must recognize the unequal contributions to this co-creation. While research partners have contributed with their knowledges and analysis, I am still the researcher, the writer, with my own motivations and agendas (Pillow 2003). I recognize a doubleness in the space I sit as a researcher. On the one hand, I claim a position of mediator in the conversation between the research partners and you, the reader. On the other hand, I am the person with the task of typing these words and dealing with the complexities of knowledge creation and representation in research.

As I sat in front of my computer, with the density of this in-between, double space (Anzaldúa 1987), I was not sure what to do next. I fell into my 'stuck place' feeling heavy with 'the responsibility of being invited in to tell other people's stories' (Lather 1998, p. 223). I was not certain or clear about how to shape this article, how to represent the conversations I had with the research partners, how to represent the knowledge they shared with me on paper, how to analyse the conversations without appropriating and objectifying. 'How can we re-present lives? How can we write lives so that our writing has mattered?' (Richardson 1997, pp. 79-80). I had transcripts, journal entries, notes, all over my desk. Despair! Paralysis, analytical-phobia kicked in, 'the academic angel' (Mackinlay 2016, personal correspondence) on my shoulder saying with authority: this is not how you write an academic article. I tried to relax and keep writing. It wasn't working. I then remembered the encouraging words of two of my favourite authors:

> [You] need to give up the notion that there is a 'correct' way to write theory. (Anzaldúa 1990b, p. xx)

> One way to begin to represent lives is to create new forms of telling, new rituals for sharing …There is no single way—much less 'right' way—of staging a text … Like wet clay, it can be shaped and reshaped … writing is a process of discovery. (Richardson 1997, pp. 80-93)

Thanks, I said. With wet clay in my hands, I pushed the restrictive academic angel out of my sight (at least for the moment). Feeling slightly more confident but never comfortable, off I went, I typed away…

The sections that follow is what I built with wet clay, in a particular moment to (re)present conversations about the refugee crisis. To (re)present and read these conversations I propose an experiment in communication, sharing of knowledge, engagement, and *border-crossing* which I call *conversations-as-method*. What I mean is that throughout this paper my method of engagement with research partners, their stories, their reflections, the related literature and with myself, is through conversations. For me, conversations-as-method denote dialogical relations located within a research project, which in turn is situated within layers of multiple and complex contexts where the young people I worked with, the authors I engaged with, you, and I, are located. Through conversations-as-method the theorising takes place WITH—along with, next to, amongst, together. With, connotes being in relation to someone and relationality guides the kind of ethics driving this paper and the knowledge created here (Anzaldúa 2015).

Introductions[v]

Before we move forward to the conversations about the refugee crisis, please meet the people who worked with me in making this paper possible: Mary, Faith, Naarin and Alejandra. I selected the following passages from the beginning of each of their stories as they introduced themselves and their stories of migration:

Mary

My name is Mary, I'm 20 years old and I come from Burundi … We came to Australia in 2009, in April, from Zimbabwe. We lived in the Zimbabwean refugee camp before we were given the humanitarian visa by the United Nations to come to Australia. We lived in Zimbabwe for 4 years. I left Burundi when I was 9 or 10.

Faith

My name is Faith, I am 20 years of age, I am from the Democratic Republic of Congo and I arrived here in Australia in 2012 and I'm currently studying a Double degree of nursing and bachelor of public health … We had a war in 1998 … and we just stayed with our parents because we were still young so in 2007 when it was terrible again so I had to leave and that's when I met my sister, we reunited. My parents were left in my country.

Naarin

My name is Naarin. I'm actually from Kurdistan in Iran, the Iranian part I'd say. Most people call us Iranian or call us Kurdish. It really doesn't matter. I'm 23 turning 24 and I have been here for like 11 years now. We left Iran when I was 9 I think, as far as I remember, that was late 2000 but before leaving there I used to go to school, have a normal life with friends.

Alejandra

My name is Alejandra, I'm 20 years old, I am from El Salvador … I've been living in Brisbane since I was 2 and I came here with my family. There was a civil war in El Salvador in the 80s mostly and my parents were involved in the guerrilla side of things and then after the war finished my dad left the organization because it was very corrupt … so around the time I was born they had a list of the people who they felt were too dangerous and they were going to kill them off and so my dad was on that list.

Conversations about the refugee crisis

Mary—The woman who sees what came before

It was a rainy cold day. I felt run down and tired. The journey to the local library on public transport was long as usual. The drops of rain outside, I was glad to be inside the bus thinking about the interview to come. I got a little wet walking from the bus stop to the building and I was happy again to be in the warmth of the suburban library.

When Mary arrived, we went to a big private area in one corner of the library. There was the usual buzz of people using computers, browsing books, kids and parents spread around the adjacent room. She had a

cold and wasn't feeling great either but she still had the energy to share her views with me. We got to chat about topics that we had raised in our previous encounters. Just before the end of the interview I asked:

> Fabi: You said something last week that I started thinking about, you mentioned that in Zimbabwe the curriculum is in English because of European colonization. And I think that European colonization has been quite a strong theme in our conversations. I don't know if you have an opinion about this but here we go … how much do you think that European colonization has contributed to the instability in Africa?

> Mary looked into my eyes and said with a firm voice:

> Mary: Very big!

> We looked at each other and shared a moment of connection. That kind of moment when you sort of know what each other is thinking. We laughed together.

> M: You know that yourself, it's very big because it created conflict and for many cases it resulted in people fleeing their countries, not having enough education and setting people to rely on foreign aid.

> F: So do you think that has had an impact in what we call today the refugee crisis?

> M: Very much, yes … because in my opinion I think that if it wasn't for them there wouldn't be so many refugees, especially African refugees.

> I paused. I was thinking about what to ask next.

> F: Do you think there is a solution for the refugee crisis?

> Mary paused for a few seconds and looked thoughtful. She gathered her thoughts and answered:

> M: I think that it can be if they help underdeveloped countries … I'm not saying that underdeveloped countries don't need foreign aid but maybe if they could invest in education and building and providing tools for farmers to use. Because I think that for me the problem, especially for underdeveloped countries is that the foreign aid they get is not teaching them to rely on themselves but it's teaching them to depend on foreign aid which is killing more generations because if that aid stops and you have no qualifications you are screwed. So I think that investing in education and farming tools and helping people to be more aware of social issues, that way people in their own countries could resolve their own issues.

> F: I think what you are talking about is being self-sustainable.

> M: Yeah, self-sustainable instead of relying on foreign aid.

She now looked tired and I decided to end the interview. I was feeling tired too.

F: That's it. Anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked you?

We shared another laugh, like we had so much more to say but we would leave it for today.

Faith—They kill, for supremacy they will

It was a Friday afternoon and we were sitting in a meeting room in the busy inner-city university library where Faith studies. Similar to our previous meetings, Faith made an impact on me, with his presence and with his soft-spoken way of theorising. I noticed that he often spoke in metaphors, almost in a biblical way and I think this might have to do with his very strong Christian roots or perhaps it could also be something he inherited from his parents. The stories and the examples that his parents told him as a child had a strong influence on him and he mentioned it a number of times during our conversations. We spoke for a long time, in fact I didn't even notice the time passing. After a while I decided to touch on the subject of the refugee crisis.

Fabi: I think that if we talk about the world today we can say that we are facing a refugee crisis. The war in Syria, all of the troubles in the Middle East, there's still quite a lot of tensions in Africa, parts of Asia, everywhere. There are millions and millions of people who have to flee their homes. So I think we can call it a crisis, right? I wonder what your views are on what generates this crisis. Where does it come from?

There was only a short pause and off he went, looking thoughtful and speaking without hesitation, slowly but steady:

Faith: I think it's a question of men's will. It's always related to power but first is understanding that any nation can have a change but there's little preparation for any change. We are still facing these situations that we have now with many refugees fleeing from their countries and are settling in other lands. It's just fruits of what happened before. I remember back from my past that in our country we at same point we also had refugees with us. These refugees were from another country as well. So some parts of our country received them very well and other parts didn't really receive them very well. They just thought: we will never be refugees to another land because we are great, we are mighty, we have everything. That's a problem. If you think it won't change, you won't have anything that will affect you. That's a wrong belief so with that when we came to first troubles, troubles came from where people were not accepted … So they had to fight for that, to find a place where they can live. So by fighting like that our country became disrupted. Now their land was also disrupted. Two nations now instead of one, the reason because no one had the heart of helping. It's in the word of God, helping another nation. Most of the wars between nations are just because this nation feels like they are a special nation. If you like, for example, think that

I'm a very special person and this one is minor. This minor will try to do something to at least make you believe that he's also somehow a being.

He caught his breath and kept going.

Faith: And another reason is someone who just wants to conquer, to have powers above someone. Even if someone is at peace with him because he has that feeling of just wanting to be someone superior, that's something that will also make war. Most of these wars are caused by that. So it's always superiority and now we have other wars because of religion. That my religion can be superior and have the strongest God, our faith is good. The other religion won't accept that, it will be against it and they'll fight. So most wars are just surrounding failing to understand someone as another fellow, failing to maintain equality and instead trying to praise superiority, just wanting to be superior over someone.

Fabi: Is there a solution do you think?

He looked at me and said calmly:

Faith: Solutions always come from sitting together, finding the problem and when the problem is found then we just discuss it. Another solution is loving another person first because if you love another person you just know that well I love myself but at least I love someone else cause you won't be at war with someone that you love. So it's loving someone as you love yourself.

I thought about what he had said for a moment and responded.

Fabi: So maybe it's about spreading love and you're saying that it's also about dialogue.

Faith: Exactly, and having equality, knowing that if it comes this opportunity I have the right to access it and the other also has the right to access it. If you think that you are the only one who has the right to access this opportunity and the other one doesn't because of his race or his religion, because of the country where he's living or because of his generation, his ancestry, all of those, then you are wrong. And that will just cause war to erupt. We should have the same rights regardless of our differences.

In the exact moment when he finished this sentence his mobile rang.

F: I think this is a signal for us to finish.

We both laughed in agreement and I stopped recording.

Naarin—The problem that grew and grew

I arrived a few minutes early today at the campus where Naarin is completing her Masters' degree. I bought coffee for both of us and waited for her. When she arrived, we chose a table near some trees

because it was nice and quiet so we could chat comfortably. We drank our coffees as we talked. Naarin is soft spoken, yet eloquent and I felt comfortable with her from the beginning. We were there for quite a while and towards the end of the interview we started talking about countries that are facing wars in the Middle East and about the refugee crisis. Naarin pointed out:

Naarin: For example, the wars, nobody really cared, they just looked at it as a conflict between the government and the citizens of that country, and then it went bang, there went the creation of the so called fundamentalists who are taking over the Middle East. And then you are looking at it and America is saying, hey I can help, but it's … other nations are not helping if you know what I mean.

I was somehow lost so I tried to clarify.

Fabi: So what do you mean by help?

N: America says I wanna help but it's actually not helping because he has created those problems himself, he has armed his people to do what they are doing right now and they have united … they created the Taliban themselves, I can show you the video if you like.

She paused for a second, then continued passionately.

N: 'We have helped them, we have armed them', just so that they don't take over an area in Pakistan, and then they let those people with the equipment and so now, the Jihadists, their so called group, has grown and they became problems, the ISIS and stuff. But when they say we are going to help you but are they actually helping? They are not. They try to take over nation by nation in the Middle East, starting from Afghanistan and Syria and Lebanon …

F: They who?

N: The US, and then they keep saying, we are helping but they get rid of this and create something else.

I wanted to make sure I was following.

F: So it's kind of like, let's say Iraq, US says they went there to get rid of Saddam Hussein and then they created another problem, right?

N: Exactly … things go bad. Other problems would be like for example, other nations who, other powerful nations who can help but don't. So if they had helped to get rid of let's say the ISIS months ago or years ago, we wouldn't have this situation … Turkey, that's one of them, they have created them and they are not willing to help at all. And it's in the advantage for Turkey because it doesn't want to give that Kurdish area to the Kurdish people, it wants it to be under his area. I mean, I don't know if you know it but the whole thing started with Iraq giving independence to the Kurdish state, and so

Turkey got afraid of that, and that's when everything started … Is the world really doing the best to help? I don't think so. I think the problem is that the people who are in power are so selfish that they don't think about other people. And the individuals and other citizens, some can help and others can't. Is there a solution? I think if they ...

She paused for a few seconds. My impression was that she really wanted to say that there is a solution but in the end couldn't:

N: I don't think so … cause as long as these people are in power, not changing, nothing is going to change. And even if they do, there's always a chance of that new person becoming like them because they are in power …

F: and power corrupts people, right?

N: yeah, power and money.

We looked at each other, we had heavy expressions on our faces. We knew we were talking about such big problems with little hope for solutions. It was hard to smile. We kept talking for a few more minutes, trying to make sense of the messy world around us.

Alejandra—It's so messed up, it's unfair

It was a busy day at the inner city public library. All rooms full of students and people meeting. Alejandra was a few minutes late, so I made myself comfortable and got things ready for the interview, my laptop and digital voice recorder. This was the very final interview of the whole project and I was looking forward to talking to Alejandra. When she arrived, I was ready to go and we got straight into the conversation. We discussed a number of political subjects as Alejandra was quite outspoken and clearly interested in politics. We at some point started talking about the refugee crisis and I asked about her views on the subject.

Alejandra: It's hard, there are so many things that go into that. Well, conflict in certain areas, and people are going to flee for their lives. And then I guess, you know in my mind, I have the image of people walking in a line crossing Europe, trying to get to Germany and other countries shutting their borders. I don't know why people, I guess I'm really biased in that, I don't understand how people think it's worse, oh poor us taking this people in as if they (the receiving countries) are the victims. I'm not saying that it doesn't take a lot of good economic planning to house these people, I'm not saying that's not included, but I don't see why that is seen as the bigger issue than what people (refugees) have been through. The fact that people are messing up in other people's countries has nothing to do with them, like they are the victims. I don't know what the solution is because I think that governments, I think it is really easy to make refugees the scape goat because they often can't speak for themselves, and they are just seen as one mass, like coming in to take away 'our' resources.

She stressed the words *our resources*. I nodded in agreement.

Fabi: yeah, like unwanted, less than human, things.

This time she nodded and kept explaining.

A: Yeah, they are just seen as things. And I think it's just really really easy to dehumanize, and that's what they have done in Australia with the asylum seekers, calling them illegal arrivals instead of people, because they are not illegal arrivals but yeah. I think it's just easy because there's been a lot of, I guess there's always been instability at some point, for politicians in Europe and I think it's very easy for them to make themselves look good to take a strong stance … So I don't know, like, ideally in my head I thought that it could be solved by making it, I don't know, compulsory for everyone to take in their fair share but even if you did that it wouldn't change people's minds because then people would just be resentful that they have been forced to take these people in and that wouldn't make things good for them as a society.

F: and it wouldn't actually solve the cause and that's why it's so hard.

We paused for a moment. We looked at each other with serious expressions. I think we were both asking ourselves if there's any solution for this mess.

A: It is because the people who flee these war zones have nothing, have absolutely nothing to do with the conflict. Have nothing to do with the people in charge who are trying to promote their own interests. So like, it's how countries think it's OK to make things difficult for other countries because you know, just for example, the Middle-East. The problem they are experiencing now, it didn't just appear last year, that's a whole history right there. Yes, there was a Syrian civil war but it's not just the civil war …

I looked confused because I am confused about the Syrian situation.

F: yeah, I can't even comprehend because there are so many different sides (in Syria) and everyone is fighting each other.

A: Yeah, there is. I had to do an assignment once for uni and that was 2 years ago: why hasn't the UN done anything in Syria? And basically, the US and Russia, who are so far away from Syria have competing interests in terms of trade and allies in the Middle-East and so they were blocking each other in the security council and nothing was getting done and this problem was just growing and growing. And these concepts of foreign power and trade and investment and forming a power block against other rivals are so far removed from the daily experiences of the people who actually deal with it at the end of the day. And that just blows my mind, how like politics is still thought of in these big broad terms and just not taking into account … and then when these people, when they arrive at your door step, you ignore them.

I nodded again. I responded with a sarcastic and then angry tone.

F: They say no no, this is not my problem but in many cases governments caused the problems to start with. That pisses me off!

She matched my anger.

A: Yeah, it's so messed up, it's unfair. This is one of the things I find unfair.

We talked for a little longer about the many things we found unfair. And then it was time to say goodbye. I felt grateful for the conversations we had.

(Not) final remarks to the conversations

It's July 2017, a winter day, a cold day. The trees outside bear the colours of the season. I sit here in my office, the computer with its flickering lights in front of me. I am eager to finish this article so that I can keep going, so that I can finish writing the thesis that waits for me. What can I say to end? I could say many things as endless words and jumbled ideas are simmering within. Yet, for now, I would like to share some common themes that emerged as I looked back at the conversations with Mary, Faith, Naarin, and Alejandra.

Colonial/Historical legacy

Fruits of what happened before

Fragile states of internal affairs

Colonial nation-states

Borders—shutting borders—border control

Western Military interventionism

Nations want to conquer

Neo-colonialism

Old conflicts

Simmering troubles that explode

Dependency

Ethnocentrism—feelings of superiority

Religion—who has the strongest GOD

Failing to see other people as humans

Blaming the victim

Dehumanization

Inequality of opportunities

<u>Power & Greed</u>

Selfishness

Governments promoting their own interests

Lack of care about the people

Conflict because of finite resources

Refugees become the scape goats

The complex relationship between humans and power

What I could do now is to go and find evidence from the literature on the refugee crisis to back up the themes that emerged from the *data*. I could find articles to validate or explain what the research *participants* have said. In this kind of deductive vertical interaction what *participants* have to say is seen as raw data that needs to be *cooked with the finest academic ingredients* before being presented to the reader. Guess what? I'm not going to that.

Part of my conversations-as-method task was to look at the academic literature not to validate, but to complement what the research partners and I discussed in our conversations. As I searched for texts, I came across research that brought forward arguments that strongly resembled what the research partners discussed. For example, Marfleet (2007), Minh-ha (2011) and Tascón (2004) speak about the impossibility of reading the refugee crisis without looking at the past. Minh-ha explains that

> the creation of refugees remains bound to the historical forces and political events that precipitate it. It reflects a profound crisis of the major powers, the repercussions of which are made evident in the more specific, devastating crisis of the millions of individuals directly affected. (2011, p. 46)

Marfleet (2007) and Tascón (2004) stress the link between histories of colonisation and its legacies as core elements in the contemporary refugee crisis. Marfleet (2007, p. 137) affirms that 'new and renewed refugee crises such as those in Iraq, Darfur, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and Somalia each speak of the past. They are the outcome of complex colonial legacies, global developments, external interventions, local tensions and conflicts'. And an important aspect of this complex legacy was the creation of fixed borders around nation-states during the

colonial era which divided communities, placed different groups within the same nation, fostered nationalism and control of human movements (Tascón 2004, p. 240).

Holmes and Castañeda (2016) wrote about issues of borders, superiority and complicity. They argue that the refugee-crisis is complicated even further due to a tendency towards collective historical amnesia among the Global North and discourses that attempt to paint refugeeism as a threat to host nations who are in turn the victims of a crisis in which their homelands are being invaded by menacing outsiders (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). In response to this kind of discourse, Minh-ha (2011, p. 46) reminds wealthy countries that the illusion that refugeeism has nothing to do with them and is something on which *their* 'taxpayer's money should not be wasted is no longer tenable'. And while nations in the Global North are obsessed with border protection and defending their citizens from the ugliness and consequences of war, they often ignore their own complicity with the conflicts that force people to flee their homes (Hage 2016, p. 43). Whilst ignoring their involvement in 'historical political and economic policies' that strongly contribute to refugeeism, they place the responsibility 'in displaced people themselves' (Holmes & Castañeda 2016, p. 13).

What struck me the most as I read the articles I selected in parallel to the conversations with research partners, was that they were saying rather similar things. The difference was the language they used and the style of communication—different registers, similar messages. As I pondered on the differences and similarities between voices/language/register, questions jumped at me: Whose voices are you more likely to listen to? Whose voice/register is more visible and valid? Who is the knower in the refugee crisis? Is a 'horizontal dialogue' (Grosfuguel 2012), a more democratic, multi-vocal dialogue that challenges usual powerful monologues possible in research?

The messiness of writing research: (Not) final final remarks

With questions about the possibility of multi-vocal dialogues which I cannot yet answer, I say goodbye. I say goodbye with endless questions still surrounding my body. In this location of question marks, I want to stress further the complexities of entering a research space where I communicate, create and represent knowledges. Bob Lingard, one of my doctorate supervisors, asked me after revising a draft of this paper: 'I started to think about what the purpose of your paper is: is it to reflect on who is the knower in academic research? Is it about representation? Is it about writing research? Is it about a politics of the refugee crisis and how we might understand it? Some or all of these things and some more?' My answer: This paper has shifted, changed, transformed during the writing process. The writing has been an intricate and chaotic process of discovery (Richardson 1997). Thus, I believe the last option 'all of these things and more' is the most appropriate answer to Bob's question. Another comment I received as feedback, from my supervisor, Liz Mackinlay, was: 'Be careful with

attempting to give a Hollywood version of your research'. And I agree with her. Things are messy. And I do not intend to gloss over the challenges of creating knowledge in a research context. The knowledge created here sits in intricate territory, trying to make sense, create sense, and communicate in contradictory, complex, entangled 'worlds of sense' (Lugones 2003).

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Notes

[i] Despite finding the term Global North problematic, I will employ this term as I do not have a better option for the moment. I'm guided by Mignolo's (2011, pp. 166) definition of Global South/Global North as 'fuzzily delimited' areas of the globe that do not necessarily represent geographical locations. Following Mignolo's definition of Global North/South as metaphors to represent current global power/economic/social/political inequalities, I include Australia within the Global North category.

[ii] Pseudonym used for confidentiality purposes

[iii] Aware of problematics with formal research terminology, I decided to refer to the people who worked with me in this project as research partners. I chose the word partners because of the collaborative and reciprocal connotations of this term. I added research in front of partners to qualify the specific kind of partnership that we embarked on in the creation of this work.

[iv] Pseudonyms were chosen by research partners

[v] Interviews took place around Brisbane, Queensland, between July and December 2015 as part of a research project that received full ethical clearance.

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