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# Walking, well-being and community: racialized mothers building cultural citizenship using participatory arts and participatory action research

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## ABSTRACT

Committed to exploring democratic ways of doing research with racialized migrant women and taking up the theme of “what citizenship studies can learn from taking seriously migrant mothers’ experiences” for theory and practice this paper explores walking as a method for doing participatory arts-based research with women seeking asylum, drawing upon research undertaken in the North East of England with ten women seeking asylum. Together we developed a participatory arts and participatory action research project that focused upon walking, well-being and community. This paper shares some of the images and narratives created by women participants along the walk, which offer multi-sensory, dialogic and visual routes to understanding, and suggests that arts-based methodologies, using walking biographies, might counter exclusionary processes and practices, generate greater knowledge and understanding of women’s resources in building and performing cultural citizenship across racialized boundaries; and deliver on social justice by facilitating a radical democratic imaginary.

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## Introduction

In the introduction to this special issue Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani (2016) explore “the everyday experiences of participation and belonging of migrant mothers in actively forming new understandings of community, citizenship and political subjectivity against the grain of racialized practices of subjection and exclusion”. This paper contributes to this project by exploring walking as a method of conducting research with migrant women drawing upon participatory research conducted with ten women in the North East of England, some of whom are mothers, and at the time of the research was either seeking asylum, had refugee status [one woman] or were

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undocumented/had no recourse to public funds [their claim for asylum had been refused].

The research used participatory arts (PA) and performative methods including walking, photography and film. Outcomes included a series of walks, an exhibition, a film<sup>1</sup> and some co-produced articles. These outcomes are utilized, in this paper, to explore the ways in which the women, “who are not citizens participate in the common social, economic, and political life of a specific state and claim rights in these multiple domains” (Isin and Nielsen 2008). The research is underpinned by the interrelationship between critical theory, lived experience and “praxis” (as purposeful knowledge) in documenting and understanding women’s lives, experiences and their senses of “belonging”, as a dynamic process (Yuval-Davis 2006; O’Neill 2010; Haaken and O’Neill 2014).

In walking with the women, through a series of collective walks, post walk workshops and discussions, knowledge and “understanding” (Bourdieu 1996) is gained of women’s experiences in space, time and place (Heddon and Turner 2010) as well as their inter-subjective inter-corporeality (Dolezal 2015), their struggle for recognition, belonging as well as their “enactments”, of cultural citizenship in the new situation. By cultural citizenship (Pakulski 1997) I mean the right to presence and visibility, not marginalization; the right to dignity and maintenance of lifestyle – not assimilation to the dominant culture; and the right to dignifying representation – not stigmatization.

This research builds upon the author’s long history of doing PA and participatory action research (PAR) with groups and communities, artists and community arts organizations (O’Neill 2010), and her use of walking as an arts-based practice and biographical/narrative method (O’Neill and Hubbard 2010; Pink et al. 2010; O’Neill and Stenning 2014; O’Neill and Perivolaris 2015). The research contributes to the rich literature on PAR (Fals Borda 1983, 1987; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2008) and racialized citizenship (Kabeer 2002; Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2016). It also contribute to the developing field of mobilities research (Urry 2007; Buscher, Urry and Witchger 2011; Roy et al. 2015; Smith and Hall 2016). However, the use of walking as a biographical and phenomenological method<sup>2</sup> was inspired by artists (as well as social scientists), as a way of doing arts-based biographical research. The research was also influenced by feminist and critical theoretical work on contested citizenship (Kabeer 2005; Lister 2007; Lister et al. 2007) social justice<sup>3</sup> (Hudson 2006), the importance of the imaginary domain (Cornell 1995) and the concept of a radical democratic imaginary (Smith 1998).

In seeking to make sense of the migrant women’s experiences, both psychic and social/material, in performing and enacting citizenship, this paper claims that walking as an arts-based, biographical research method offers a powerful route to understanding the lived experiences of women

as well as the development of processes and practices of inclusion, towards a radical democratic imaginary. Indeed, for the women participants, walking in Middlesbrough is a radical democratic act and performance. For Cornell (1995) like Smith (1998) the imaginary domain is a moral and psychic space that is necessary in order to open, keep open and rework the repressed elements of the social imaginary.

Centrally, the paper reflects upon how asylum seeking and undocumented women creatively enact and perform citizenship through their everyday mobilities, their attachments to place and space in Teesside, and their situational authority, in guiding the collective walks. At the same time it evidences how women contest or challenge hegemonic and racialized “practices of subjection and exclusion” (Erel, Reynolds and Kaptani 2016, see also Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008) in both their experiences of living in Teesside as well through their contributions and participation to the arts-based project.

Committed to exploring democratic ways of doing research with migrant women and taking up the concept of women migrants “enacting citizenship” (Erel 2013; Nair 2015) this paper shares the PA-based research conducted with ten women seeking asylum in the North East of England and extends debates on: visual, walking and mobile methods; cultural citizenship, racialized citizenship, belonging, community and social justice for women seeking asylum in the UK.

### **Socio-cultural-political context**

Women seek asylum for the same reasons as men, as well as fleeing gender-based sexual violence. Yet, these gendered dynamics are an under examined topic (Nair 2015). The recent Immigration Act 2016 alongside a range of restrictions put into place mean that it is incredibly hard to gain refugee status in Britain, if you do it is temporary and this increases vulnerability, especially for families (Mayblin 2015). Moreover the cultural and material landscape of “Brexit” in the UK makes for a hostile climate for both new arrivals and longer term migrants waiting for decisions on their asylum and immigration claims.

Recent migration surge in Europe, Europeanization of restrictive asylum policy, geopolitical changes, what Bauman (2004) calls “negative globalisation”, EU enlargement, “Brexit” and “Islamophobia” have heightened security concerns about unregulated migration and porous borders. In the UK a “race relations framework” (Schuster and Solomos 2004) is central to the development of asylum policy and most people come to understand the lived experience of asylum, exile and processes of belonging in contemporary western society through the mediated images and narratives of the mass media.

What is clear is that refugees and asylum seekers have become the folk devils of the twenty-first century and overall mainstream media representation of the asylum issue, the scapegoating of asylum seekers and tabloid headlines help to create fear and anxiety about the unwelcome “others” and to help set agendas that fuel racist discourses and practices. As Nagarajan (2013) argues “politicians and the press are locked in a cycle of increasing anti-immigrant rhetoric, presented as ‘uncomfortable truth’. Yet the problem is not immigration but socio-economic inequality”.

Moreover, Reynolds and Erel (2016) identified how migrant mothers are demonized as “benefit cheats”, “health tourists” and “welfare scroungers”. The “cultural diversity they embody, rather than being celebrated, is similarly viewed in terms of constituting a potential threat to social and cultural cohesion” despite the fact that they make a significant contribution to UK society, and “their cultural diversity can contribute to developing a future citizenry more comfortable with culturally and ethnically plural identities”.

The broader conflict at the centre of western nations’ responses to the plights of asylum seekers and refugees is seen in the changing response to migration surge in the Mediterranean, alongside a commitment to Human Rights and the 1951 Convention in the UK, and on the other hand powerful rhetoric aimed at protecting the borders of nation states, underpinned by the message “Go Home” or “stay out” as states lock down their borders and more recently in the mobs attacks on refugees in Stockholm (Osborne 2016) and the English Defence League marches in Dover (Sommers 2016).

The movement of people across borders is a key defining feature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Matthias Kispert’s film *No More Beyond* (2015) one of his interviewees, who had walked to the Melilla crossing fence, asks “What is the legal way to immigrate? Why don’t they give me this option? I am illegal because there is no legal route”.

Arendt (1998) identified “the twin phenomena of ‘political evil’ and ‘statelessness’ as the most daunting problems of the twentieth and twenty-first century” (Benhabib 2004, 50). Statelessness for Arendt meant loss of citizenship and loss of rights, indeed the loss of citizenship meant the loss of rights altogether. “One’s status as a rights-bearing person is contingent upon the recognition of one’s membership” and “In Arendtian language the right of humanity entitles us to become a member of civil society such that we can then be entitled to juridico-civil rights” (Benhabib 2004, 59).

Benhabib (2004) acknowledges the bifurcation between on the one hand universal human rights and on the other the right of state protection and that the nation state system carried “within it the seeds of exclusionary justice at home and aggression abroad” (61). Thus, the conflict between universal human rights and sovereignty claims are “the root paradox at the heart of the territorially bounded state-centric international order” (Benhabib 2004, 69).

This is documented very clearly in the work of Tastoglou and Dobrowlesky (2006) who discuss the “global realities that stem from the intricate interplay of gender, migration and citizenship, and the inclusions and exclusions that result under specific conditions” (Tastoglou and Dobrowlesky 2006, 4). For, despite the right to seek asylum being a human right, as both Benhabib (2004, 69) and the current responses to migration surge across Europe illustrate, “the obligation to grant asylum continues to be jealously guarded by states as a sovereign principle”. Not having one’s papers in order, being undocumented, *sans papiers*, is a form of social death that brings with it “quasi criminal status” a curtailment of human rights and no civil and political rights of association and representation (Benhabib 2004, 215).

For Benhabib, “the extension of full human rights to these individuals and the decriminalisation of their status is one of the most important tasks of cosmopolitan justice in our world” (2004, 168). Concepts of what constitutes citizenship and also social justice is vital in addressing these issues and inequalities, and can be explored through processes and practices of exclusion and inclusion.

It is within this precarious social, political and cultural context that asylum seeking women perform acts of cultural citizenship, that are not just about rights and obligations but about negotiating belonging and as Lister et al. (2007, 9) drawing upon Fraser (2003) states “an important element of belonging is participation”. Moreover, for Lister et al. (2007, 10) citizenship is experienced across a number of levels “from the intimate through the local, national and regional to the global, where it is sometimes represented in the language of cosmopolitanism and of human rights”. Referencing Jones and Gaventa (2002), Lister et al. (2007) describe how such multi-layered understandings of citizenship need also to be concerned with the “concrete ‘spaces and places’ in which citizenship is practiced” as an “identity and practice”.

### ***“Women, well-being and community in Teesside”***

In Ministry of Justice funded work in the North East, the North East Regional Race, Crime and Justice network undertook research across the three North East police force areas (Durham, Northumbria and Cleveland) on Race, Crime and Justice in 2011–12 (Craig et al. 2012).<sup>4</sup> One emerging issue was the need to focus on women’s specific experiences as migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in relation to community and well-being. Together with the regional refugee forum North East (RRFNE) and a women’s group, “Purple Rose Stockton” Maggie O’Neill, Janice Haaken and Susan Mansaray developed a PA and PAR project that focused upon women’s lives and well-being in order to: better understand asylum seeking, refugee and undocumented women’s experiences of living in Teesside (which has the largest dispersal of asylum seekers in the North East); challenge and change racial, sexual

and social inequalities; stimulate arts-based outcomes to share across a wider public; and impact upon policy and praxis.

The ten women who participated were from Africa, Asia and the Middle East and included teachers, nurses, mothers, a former MBA student and a journalist. They were all situated in the asylum, migration, community nexus (O'Neill 2010) and most were living in refugee housing provided by a local housing provider Jomast/G4S. Some were fleeing gender-based violence and others were claiming asylum based upon their precarious political situations as former activists; some arrived with families and others had left children behind when the time came to flee. During the project one young woman was detained, sent to a detention centre and was subsequently returned to her home country; this was devastating for her and for the group. We were thirteen women in total – ten of whom were women asylum seekers, a UK-based artist and two women academics (UK, USA).<sup>5</sup>

The arts-based research involved: conducting a critical recovery of the women's lives, journeys and histories using walking methods, storytelling, biographical, participatory and visual/photographic/filmic methods. We sought to make visible women's lives in Teesside, their connections and attachments to places and spaces in the city, their lived experiences, and issues; as well as sharing what community and community safety means to them with the widest possible audience, by exhibiting some of this work through talks, a travelling exhibition and a film.

Susan Mansaray, a community co-researcher on the project and founder of Purple Rose Stockton, a community organization supporting the health and well-being of migrant women, at the launch of the exhibition said: "this project depicts what women seeking asylum go through on a daily basis. If as a result of this project one individual's mind and perception towards asylum seekers will change, then we have achieved something".

O'Neill (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014) has argued that "arts-based research" – the production and analysis of visual, poetic, narrative and performative texts and the stories people tell about their lives – facilitates sensuous understanding of society and the complexity of the lives of migrants. This process is defined as "ethno-mimesis" drawing upon the work of Adorno and Benjamin on mimesis and the relationship between art and society and arts-based ethnographic research.

Listening to the experiences of people seeking safety, using ethnographic, biographical and artistic methods, and focusing attention upon the micrology of lived experience – the minutiae, the small scale – we can often reach a better understanding of the larger picture. As Adorno said, "the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass" (Adorno 1978, 50) meaning that focusing on the "micrology" of lived experience can often shed light on broader structures, relationships, discourses and processes that are not only the outcome but the medium of social action and meaning making.



**Figure 1.** Women walking.

The workshops and meetings took place in the RRFNE premises in Middlesbrough. In the first workshop following introductions and an open discussion about how we might organize the project, women were asked to draw a map from a place they call home to a special place,<sup>6</sup> marking the places and spaces along the way that were important to them. We then discussed the maps with each woman talking us through her map, routes and landmarks. In the process it was clear that many of the issues, spaces and places were common to the women; and that they wanted to take us on a collective walk, to show us their Middlesbrough. The walks took place over three days using the maps that the women had produced, singularly and then collectively, documenting the places and spaces in the city that are important to them, both safe zones and danger zones, places of comfort, belonging and also community.

During the walks we stopped at places the women wanted to share with us to converse, see, tune in, listen, record, photograph and film the route and the places, spaces and stories shared along the way, about their senses of community, well-being, belonging and becoming citizenship. In the participatory process, a collective story emerges in the context of their lives in Teesside; in “situational authority” they shared their stories (Figure 1).

### **Walking methods: why walking?**

Through “walking biographies” and visually representing the walks we were able to get in touch with women’s “realities” in sensory, inter-subjective and inter-corporeal ways – that fostered “understanding”<sup>7</sup> (Bourdieu 1996) and

critical reflection, particularly when walking with groups who are marginalized and racialized such as asylum seeking women. O'Neill (2014) argues that the corporeal and sensory engagement involved in walking together necessarily involves reflection on ways of knowing and understanding in biographical research, and shared narratives of belonging and participation. As we will see in the next section, walking with women helps to identify, in a corporeal and affective way the "concrete 'spaces and places' in which citizenship is practiced" as an "identity and practice" (Lister et al. 2007, 10).

Combining participatory, biographical and visual research, and "walking", can open a shared space, an imaginary domain (Cornell 1995), generate sensory knowledge and shared "understanding" about belonging and citizenship; and in the process facilitate creative and transformative impact on the people, situation, environment and policy terrain, through the research process, findings and outputs. The policy relevance of the method is important given the socio-cultural context outlined above.

There is a long tradition of walking in ethnographic and anthropological research (Ingold and Lee-Vergunst 2008; Pink 2008; Edensor 2010; Irving 2010; Radley et al. 2010), but not in biographical sociology (O'Neill 2014), or feminist research with migrant women. Clark and Emmel (2010, 1) in a UK-funded community study discuss walking interviews as a way of understanding how their participants "create, maintain, and dissemble their networks, neighbourhoods, and communities".

In this research with women asylum seekers we moved beyond the notion of "walking" as a method discussed by ethnographers, planners and anthropologists that helps us understand how space and place is made and used, how neighbourhoods are formed, re-formed and sustained, towards the creative application of this mobile method as a deeply engaged relational way of "attuning" (Scheff 2006) to the life of the women that evokes knowing and "understanding" through "empathic" and "embodied learning" (Pink 2007, 245) to help us access the way that citizenship is enacted and performed, phenomenologically as well as materially, in the lived experiences and narratives of the women who participated.

In the process of walking we becoming "attuned" to the women, we see the spaces and places, the city through their eyes; and walking together can advance connection, dialogue, active listening and understanding. In this way walking as an embodied research practice and process is relational, discursive and reflective (O'Neill, Roberts, and Sparkes 2014). Importantly, it is also sensory and multi-modal, it facilitates multiple modalities of experience and inter-subjective, inter-corporeal connection, recognition and understanding, experienced in the sensory entanglements that occur when walking.

As Solnit states "walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world"

(Solnit 2001, 29). Thus it is a broad sensory and knowing experience which includes being or consciousness and phenomenological understanding. Indeed, walking, for most of us, is integral to what De Certeau (1984) calls an “everyday practice” the practices and experience of everyday life (Edensor 2010; Pink et al. 2010, 2).

Together we researched and documented the sensory, embodied, inter-subjective stories and sensory modalities that are elicited when walking with migrant women – and in doing so challenge racialized hierarchies, myths and stereotypes about asylum and migration, and provide an opportunity to explore the ways that women perform and enact citizenship in an emergent, relational way.

For Haaken and O’Neill (2014, 84–85) from a biographic and psychoanalytic perspective, the use of walking, with this group of women

centers as much on *connecting* with women’s lived experiences through the ethnographic, visual, biographical methods; *imagining* – of creating and improvising a holding space for narratives of experience, memory, poetry, movement, and imagery to emerge – rather than *discovering* an already-there environment.

Using participatory methods, working with women as co-researchers, we sought to tell a story of women asylum seekers as complex and active agents in *navigating* the city and ever mindful of our potential as researchers to collude in the persecutory apparatus of the State, even in our attempts to “bear witness” to lives lived precariously on the margins. We suggest that combining psychoanalytic-feminist theory and visual-ethnographic methods – walking biographical interviews – widens the critical space for re-imagining migration, even as working in the hyphens, these in-between spaces and thus destabilizes efforts to arrive at simple truths.

Extending this further, performance artist Myers (2010, 59) describes walking as the “the art of conversive wayfinding” and part of this involves “interacting with and knowing place” through

kinaesthetic, synesthetic and sonesthetic perception: sharing “earpoints” and “viewpoints” with another through intimate or conversational conviviality; use of present tense and the tension between the real-time present and a past present; and the use of particular rhythmic structures and narrative paces and paths to encourage experiential, creative and critical states of witness.

Using walking to conduct biographical research draws upon the “inventive qualities of walking” (Fulton 2010, 8–12) that elicits phenomenological, psycho-social, biographical understanding experienced through inter-subjective recognitions.

Walking with the women through Teesside reminds us of what Ingold and Lee-Vergunst (2008, 97) describe as knitting together “time and place” and that walking is a narrative process that weaves together time and space” bringing past, present and future time together. Through walking, “conversive

wayfinding”, through attuning and connecting we can experience, discover and interpret the process and practices of women’s attempts at performing and enacting citizenship.

## Performing cultural citizenship

There are two broad senses in which the walks we undertook facilitate or uncover the performance of cultural citizenship. First, the collective walk was a performance/performative intervention in and of itself, in the group’s taking hold of space and moving collectively through various public and private spaces, streets and buildings in Middlesborough. The very process and performance of taking a collective walk and stopping to engage with certain places, buildings and spaces as a group of asylum seeking women, challenges racialized hierarchies of subjection and exclusion, particularly in public spaces.

Middlesborough is a stronghold of the English Defence league in the North East and a city marked out by high indicators of poverty and deprivation and only recent experience of in-migration from asylum seekers dispersed to the available housing stock in the poorest areas. Given the demise of racial equality council’s and the closure of regional government offices, the development of refugee community organizations takes place in an austerity landscape where the RRFNE (based in Middlesbrough) since the reduction of the North East Refugee Service (NERS) provides a collective focus, support and voice for refugee communities in the North East. Research in the region documents the harsh realities of racism, incivilities, prejudice and discrimination experiences by asylum seekers and BME communities (Craig et al. 2012; Donovan, MacDonald, and Clayton 2014; Littler and Feldman 2015).

The collective walks we undertook claimed a women-centred space, and were a visible marker of and challenge to exclusionary processes and practices directed towards women asylum seekers – walking together through the streets, park, library, shopping centre, solicitors offices, community cafes, food bank, Teesside University, education support organizations and the police station – highlighted the articulation of women’s right to public space, the right to support for their asylum claims and an articulation of cultural citizenship as belonging – the right to presence and visibility and the right to dignifying representation. The women also expressed feeling a greater sense of belonging and connection by walking in a group, some also felt safer in doing so – their right to space enhanced and reinforced in the collective.

Second, in the sense that the ethnographic, biographical and performative walks made visible women’s acts of citizenship that Isin and Nielsen (2008, 4) discusses. “Acts of citizenship create a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is ‘yet to come’”. These are the acts where “subjects constitute

themselves as citizens, or better still, the right to have rights is due" (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2). The emphasis is on the "acts" or "deeds" not the subjects.

The articulation of women's biographical experiences in both public and private spaces is vitally important to the development of dialogue, a recognitive theory of social justice and cultural citizenship, particularly when the voices of migrants are mediated by others, notably the mainstream press and media; and the dominant image of an asylum seeker is of a young man breaking into Britain.

This research uncovered the women's experiences and hidden histories, their feelings of loss at leaving loved ones and separation from home, their escape from violence and trauma, female genital mutilation and sexual and domestic violence; their acts of political resistance and subsequent need to flee. The space for democratic contestation and performative citizenship was also facilitated through the combination of biography and art making, creating a potential space for visualizing their stories that might lead to understanding that challenges myths and stereotypes about women as "scroungers" and "welfare recipients" (Reynolds and Erel 2016).

Grossman and O'Brien (2011, 54) argue that participatory media (film, photography, digital storytelling and also radio) can foster a space to help articulate "diverse immigrant voices". In their work with new immigrant communities in Ireland they highlight the tension and dialectic between a "politics of voice" and a "political listening". Noting the challenges of participatory media they state that there is a "precariousness" in the space between "voice" and "listening", alongside "understanding" and "comprehension", underpinned by "systemic unequal and social power relations".

Acknowledging this precarity in performing and enacting citizenship the research and visual and filmic texts shared below help to open and keep open spaces for resistance, reflection and dialogue/discussion (evoking both voice and listening) an imaginary domain, a radical democratic imaginary marked by the principles of social justice as discursiveness, relationalism and reflectiveness (Hudson 2006) in sharp contrast to the asylum seekers as a "negative Other" (Hudson 2003, 103).<sup>8</sup>

A core group of women worked with the researchers to choose the exhibition images, create the exhibition booklet, create broadcast quality sound files of one of the women reading her poetry (her work articulates the complex feelings and experiences of doing cultural citizenship and plays a large role in the film produced by Janice Haaken in collaboration with the group) and support the exhibition as it travelled to community venues and conferences.

The importance of doing research in participation with the very people situated in the asylum, migration community nexus cannot be overstated in order to – uncover hidden histories, ensure space for democratic contestation and thinking through citizenship as performative. Enhanced by creative methods that combine ethnography and art making and in this case

walking and visual methods, creates a potential space for re-thinking the concept of cultural citizenship and women as enacting citizenship in the “margins of the margins” (Agamben 1995).

An overarching theme of the walks was the women’s search for asylum. We used this as the title of the film: *Searching for Asylum*. Within this overarching theme the following themes emerged in the walks: the importance of women’s storytelling capacities to move official listeners; their self-determination and agency in the search for freedom and the material, spatial, emotional and symbolic barriers they face, accommodate and/or overcome; the importance of recognition and the relational sense of belonging in the transnational and often temporary spaces they inhabit, sometimes expressed as solidarity.

### **Women’s storytelling capacities**

In [Figure 2](#) the women are gathered around a local solicitors office. All of the women had the solicitor on their map and this was an important place in their collective story.

This is very important for without a solicitor your asylum claim will not go anywhere. I remember when I first came to Stockton and my asylum claim was refused and my solicitor was very supportive. When you have one who is supportive it helps a lot. When I was refused I was very depressed and she talked to me like a friend, giving me assurance and support. That meant a lot. Solicitors are like doctors, some can make you better and some cannot. (Mo)



**Figure 2.** Sharing a walk as a performative intervention and empathic witnessing.

Women's claims for asylum rest on the power of their stories especially if they no longer have, or were forced to flee without the documents required for their claim. "Finding a solicitor to take your case and move it forward is very important".

### ***Self-determination and agency: othering and resisting "racialized practices of subjection and exclusion" in seeking citizenship***

The imagined community (Anderson 1991) of the nation state and the sovereign right to exclude is operationalized and embedded in the UK in law and order politics and discourses on immigration and race relations policy (Schuster and Solomos 1999; Pickering 2005; Sales 2007; Mayblin 2015). Asylum and immigration are treated as one in the public imagination. Increasingly restrictive policies, a focus on securing stronger and stronger border controls and the "securitization" of migration closes down debate and increasingly presents asylum seekers as "bogus" "illegal" competing for "our" jobs and resources (Bauman 2004; Sales 2007; Jones et al. 2014; Lewis et al. 2014).

Marked by dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, for Lister (2007) citizenship is a multi-layered concept and involves an understanding of the individual as a socially situated self and not just a bearer of rights. In resisting what is experienced as "racialized practices of subjection and exclusion" in their search for asylum the women expressed anxiety and concern at having to "sign" at the police station every two weeks. This expectation and process were experienced as deeply problematic to all of the women. They all spoke about the process as difficult, the ever-present risk of being detained, the dehumanizing experience and the sleepless nights that preceded their visit "to sign" (Figure 3).

If you don't sign in, you can be taken to prison. I signed today and all night I did not sleep all night, I feel sick, I did not know what would happen to me. Every asylum seeker relates to the police station. Most of us here have never been to police station in our home country, so for me to go to police station I could not believe it on top of everything else you are going through you have to go to police station to sign. For me because of my journalistic background I was probing saying why, why the police station just to put my signature down. I go there and they say "are you living at the same address". And you say of course, because you gave me the accommodation. And we sign for our support. It does not make sense I do not like to go there I really dislike it. But we comply it does not make any sense, I hate and dislike it but then I have no choice. (Sonja)

I hate this place it is the worst place in this town. It is the police station. Any asylum seeker will not like this any time you go every 2 weeks I don't sleep if I go to sign, this stress I have it is too much for me, it is 50/50 they may detain you. (Belle)



**Figure 3.** Signing at the police station is part of the asylum process.

Seeking justice and recognition of their claims and building a sense of belonging the experience of signing at the police station defines women as subject-objects at the mercy of the state and the state officials and reduces them to either having the right to remain [until; the next time they sign] or to be detained and removed.

One of the women was detained at the police station on the first day of our walks, she was asked to return later that day and she was taken to a detention centre and subsequently removed from the UK. The group immediately sprang into action and organized a petition and worked with the RRFNE to offer support and solidarity in seeking justice for her.

The experience was a reminder of the fragile situations of the women in the “margins of the margins” and as Benhabib (2004, 215) states the “social death” and “quasi criminal status” afforded to those whose claims are refused, who are “undocumented” and the subsequent curtailment of human, civil and political rights of association and representation (Benhabib 2004, 215).

That’s as far as it goes really, we haven’t got much power being outside, and we can’t do much to be honest. (Sonja)

The campaign, petition and fundraising by the group members was an example of resistance to “racialized practices of subjection and exclusion” and the right to citizenship and social justice.

Many of the places and spaces we stopped at and discussed along the walk were symbolic of the women’s self-determination and agency in their search

for asylum and freedom as well as the material, spatial, emotional and symbolic barriers they face and accommodate or overcome in the asylum process.

Mo described the “realities of the asylum system” in an image of “a barrier, a wall”. She went on to share how “many things are not allowed for us ... driving licence, internet, bank account ... and university”. Yet she also described feeling “really lucky” because she is with her family, that her son is safe and she feels hopeful.

The park, green space and fountains were places that all of the women had on their maps, and were identified as positive places, that make them feel good. Sonja shared her feelings about the fountains in the park and its relationship to their experience of the asylum process.

We can see how the water comes up, goes down and the pressure comes up again. It is symbolic for the women in the sense where they have been pushed down by the system they fight they fight to stay up they fight and fight to come up again they fall but they get up again and rise.

Importantly, in the face of the women being rendered so isolated and powerless, the very act of sharing these experiences and making them public (to the researchers/artists and through the film to a wider public) is one aspect of resistance and gaining political subjectivity against the backdrop of dehumanization, humiliation and being deprived of dignity.

The accommodation of women asylum seekers in Middlesbrough marks them out both materially and symbolically because they were living in houses with the doors painted red (Figure 4). This is currently the subject of



**Figure 4.** Red door.



**Figure 5.** Domestic spaces can be risky spaces.

an inquiry by the Home Office. The women described the stigmatizing effect because “everyone knows that asylum seekers live behind the red doors”. This marked them out as Other, as different, as asylum seekers.

After years of campaigning an award winning journalist from the *Times*, Andrew Norfolk, took up the issue and printed a damning report that named and shamed the housing provider, Jomast/G4S and indeed, local politicians who had done nothing, despite the campaigns that documented the racism and race hate that ensued – because of this symbolic and material signifier. They are currently being re-painted different colours (Norfolk 2016).

Other barriers defined by the women included the fact that public spaces can offer more protection than domestic spaces with officials entering the homes of women without any notice, reinforcing their lack of rights in the new situation (Figure 5).

When you are an asylum seeker, life is everywhere with the least facilities. We just want to be alive.

All of the women defined public spaces, the community café, open door (a charity that operated a foodbank and a drop in as well as support for the destitute and undocumented) and the park, university and library as places where they felt a sense of freedom, community and belonging. One woman described the greenspace in front of the library as her home.

This is my home. We are re building our life here. I love the library, I love it, and my children love it. The library is celebrating 100 years I love to spend time here I feel so relaxed and I feel hospitality and welcome. I sit in the park and feel free. (Hanna)

This woman also “loved” living near the University and took many photographs of the main building; she had been a senior lecturer at a University in her home city. Currently she is registering for her PhD at a University in the North East (Figure 6).

Teesside University is very close to my house I feel that I am living when I see the University. When I was 22 I studied for four years, then I became an assistant lecturer and then a lecturer and senior lecturer I feel like my life is the University. (Hanna)

### **Recognition, relationships and solidarity**

The relational aspect of performing citizenship and belonging was highlighted by all women. Some of the women spoke about the importance of a charity called *Open Door* in relation to both material and relational support (Figure 7).

When I was thrown out of my accommodation, the home office don't care if you are a woman or a man, they just throw you out and I wonder what people like me can do without this place, *open door*, and when I come here they make feel like I belong, like I am human.

All of the women spoke about the importance of friendship and supporting each other and the places and people that offer recognition, support and solidarity (Figure 8).



**Figure 6.** “I feel I am living when I see the University”.



**Figure 7.** Sharing a walk.

After a long time my first solicitor cut me off as they said I had only fifty per cent case. Refugee Council were very good they supported me, treated me normally not as an asylum seeker ... . Linda's Place, Open Door and the Church help a lot. When I did not sleep the whole night I go and I feel good there, Linda helps a lot and makes you feel ok. (Fran)



**Figure 8.** Friends and relationships are crucial for a sense of belonging offering support and solidarity.

I am really lucky when I came here and meet new friends and heard about their life I realise that I am very lucky because I have a family, I love my family and when we are together we are very happy because I have a son I have a very kind husband. There are many problems for people who are single who live with others and share kitchen and toilet and other things and it can be a problem when they are alone. (Mo)

The process of flight and arrival can be dangerous, faced with barriers and feelings of displacement and loneliness. Freedom, safety, hope, friendship and belonging are the building blocks of a new life.

Organisations like Linda's Place, Open Door and the Church help a lot. When I did not sleep the whole night I go and I feel good there. Linda helps a lot and makes you feel ok, supports, is sympathetic and with all the negatives it is important that there are people like that.

"Freedom is the best thing in the whole world I need freedom more than food and oxygen. We do not have freedom in my country" (Mo).

Taken together the themes emerging from the walks, women's narratives and the film created from the walks illustrate the "four values of inclusive citizenship" that Kabeer (2005) defines as emerging from "empirical work in the Global South and accounts from below". These four values are: justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity.

Kabeer (2005, 3) articulates these as follows: justice involves "when it is fair for people to be treated the same and when it is fair that they should be treated differently"; recognition involves "the intrinsic worth of all human beings, but also recognition of and respect for their differences" (4); self-determination involves "people's ability to exercise some degree of control over their lives" (5). Solidarity is, "the capacity to identify with others and to act in unity with them in their claims for justice and recognition" (7). In discussing Kabeer's work, Lister (2007, 50–51) states that this "value could be said to reflect a horizontal view of citizenship which accords as much significance to the relations between citizens as to the vertical relationship between the state and the individual".

In defining the development and momentum of the concept of citizenship Lister (2007, 52) like Smith (1998) also highlights the work of Mouffe (1992) and Young (1990) specifically the benefit of an "ethos of pluralization" that "makes possible a radical plural, rather than a dual way of thinking about citizenship and identity". Moreover, in the process of working with group differences "rather than suppressing them" and where a radical plural ethos is possible "without sacrificing citizenship's universalist emancipatory promise is expressed in the ideals of inclusion, participation and equal moral worth" (Lister 2007, 52).

Walking with women in Teesside underpinned by a participatory ethos of inclusion, participation, valuing all voices, has helped to make visible their performing and enacting citizenship in the context of complex, social and

political locations (whilst also highlighting justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity).

To summarize, the bottom line in relation to the women's accounts and enactments of citizenship is that through walking as a performative and biographical method, we were able to get in touch with lived experience in ways that were creative, relational, discursive and reflective; that both visualized and performed justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity. The research also highlighted the importance of innovate, creative ways of consulting, connecting with, "understanding" and sharing women's lives and stories.

Arts-based biographical methods involve an organic approach to research that engages the performative and sensing body. Arts-based walking methods are embodied, relational, sensory, multi-modal and can often help to access the unsayable or things that might not have emerged in a standard research interview. They involve the role of the imaginary, imagination and politics – a radical democratic imaginary. The dialogue and understanding that occurred as well as the visual outcomes helped to facilitate a space in which to articulate, perform and build women's resources for citizenship, albeit in contradictory and bounded ways. The performative act of walking, by racialized migrant women, in public spaces, can be a radical act that creates space for critical thinking and discourse, that challenges and works against the grain, that performs citizenship, that "the right to have rights is due" (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2). From this perspective, "democratisation is understood not as a set of superficial reforms, but as the struggle to institutionalise a radical democratic pluralist imaginary" (Smith 1998, 5).

The research analysis and outcomes utilized here provide us with an account of citizenship that counters exclusionary processes and practices, generates greater knowledge and understanding of women's resources in building and performing cultural citizenship across racialized boundaries; and seeks to deliver on social justice by facilitating a radical democratic imaginary.

The task ahead is to sketch out the possibilities for a generative (radical democratic imaginary) concept of transnational citizenship and community that transcends the limited and limiting notions of citizenship we find in government responses to the asylum-migration and community nexus, that connects the discursive, reflective and relational aspects of social justice in furthering the creative performativities of citizenship from below. Developing and extending creative, arts-based walking biographical research with migrant women, as discussed in this paper is one way forward.

## Notes

1. The film was produced by Janice Haaken and Maggie O'Neill. [Accessed 21st January 2017] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjT5lENga\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjT5lENga_M).

2. The author is a member of the Walking Artists Network and inspired by a number of the walking women artists, for example, Claire Qualmann and Dee Hedden of Walk Walk Walk.
3. Social justice is defined by Hudson (2006) as discursive, reflective and recognitive.
4. There was a common recognition that this is an urgent area of work in the North East region as relatively little appeared to be known about the profile of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups including refugees and asylum seekers and the criminal justice issues they face, although anecdotal evidence suggested both that the BME population had grown significantly over the recent past (albeit from a level which was low relative to that in the UK as a whole), and that the issue of racism was one which continued to affect them, both in individual and institutional settings.
5. The project and its methods are explained more fully in Haaken and O'Neill 2014; O'Neill and Mansaray 2012; Haaken and O'Neill 2014.
6. Thanks to Misha Myers for this walking guidance, see Myers 2006; O'Neill and Hubbard 2010.
7. "It is to give oneself a *general and genetic comprehension* of who the person is, based on the (theoretical or practical) command of the social conditions of existence and the social mechanisms which exert their effects on the whole ensemble of the category to which the person belongs... and a command of the psychological and social, both associated with a particular position and a particular trajectory in social space" (Bourdieu 1996, 22–23).
8. Hudson (2006) writes that discursiveness, relationalism and reflectiveness are the "principles that would characterize a justice that has the potential to escape being sexist and racist". Moreover that "feminist and race-critical criminologists have produced countless examples of the maleness and the whiteness of criminal justice". In part, the evidence can be found in the relative dearth of research on women's experiences of gender biased asylum laws and practices.

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