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'If I didn't know you what would you want me to see?': Poetic mappings in neo-materialist research with young asylum seekers and refugees

Abstract:

The following article puts to work an affirmative approach to critical theory through poetic mappings *of* the process of crafting *identity boxes* with ESOL students from refugee and asylum backgrounds in a Glasgow-based college in Scotland (UK). The article takes as its starting point the work of feminist and neo-materialist thinkers who argue for an ontological re-orientation of our practices of inquiry. This involves the questioning of positivist research orientations, which regard language as mere second-order representations of a primary reality. We argue that such representationalist logic can implicate research participants in deficit orientations, especially when their embodied and often contested ways of being in the world defy purely linguistic or other 'fixed' cultural representations. With the aim to embrace epistemological uncertainty and prioritise our participants' embodied self-articulations over our "rage for meaning" (MacLure 2013), we experimented with poetic mappings as neomaterialist, arts-based research tools.

Keywords: New materialism, ESOL education, epistemological uncertainty, arts-based research, poetic mapping, identity box pedagogy

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1 Introduction: why poems and vignettes in our research?

(Insert Figure 0: Bahadur presents his identity box; Figure 1: A close-up of Bahadur's art work)

Bahadur: Mother

You asked me to print a picture of Amir Khan and his mother

just the right size

so it could be your main backdrop

I don't know who Amir is

you are surprised

but explain patiently to me

about the man on the printed, glossy photograph

a boxer hugging his mother

You say thank you three times

It's only a photograph I say

You like kickboxing. You keep fit.

To visit New York Central Stadium is your dream.

The home office doesn't believe your age.

I guess you don't seem the vulnerable type.

A man to some

a friend to others (maybe many)

a student here

a brother somewhere far

Iranian

Teherani

but most importantly a son.

You tell me

you put the boxer and his mother in your box

because you, like Amir, love your mum

and miss her

you do not know where she is

but maybe

you say

one day

you can see her again.

(Bahadur)

The above poem was written by the authors of this article. It reflects on a research encounter with Bahadur who is part of a group of 19 ESOL students at a Glasgow-based College in Scotland, who we got to know through our work as researchers on the UK-funded, AHRC – large grant project 'Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State' (RM Borders). The poem and vignette (below) reflect on our interaction with students during a 4-week long, arts-based class activity. Here, students crafted an 'identity box' with the aim to communicate what *they* wanted people, outside their classroom environment, to know about them. The picture above shows Bahadur's identity box: a boxing ring, with references to his favourite boxer Amir Khan and his mother, Muhammad Ali and New York Central Stadium.

Rather than focussing on a close analysis of the boxes' pictorial references, we decided instead to give the reader a sense of the boxes' *emergence*, and our interactions with students during the crafting process. Snippets of conversations and descriptions of exchanges, that took place during the making of the boxes, are woven into our (sometimes poetic) reflections, which were stimulated by these interactions. By making transparent, but not fully explaining, how and why Amir Khan's picture found its way into Bahadur's 'identiy box', we invite the reader to get a glimpse of the discursive movements in our research. Through a

presentation of the researchers' five poems and five vignettes in this paper, we wish to show that our research did not happen from a stance of 'neutrality' or in isolation from the crafting process. Our readings of and reactions to students' pictorial choices and comments on their art works, are part of the research's discursive processes that we, researchers, were part of and helped shaping.

(Vignette)

Bahadur. When you show me the picture of your favourite boxer, I didn't know yet what it meant to you. My knowledge of boxing equals zero. I didn't know that it was the relationship that was most important in the picture. The boxer, an excellent sportsman, is hugging his mother. You mention your mother often and carefully place the picture in your box. You laugh at me when I don't know about New York Central Stadium and what it would mean to see a match there. A small Iranian flag in the top right corner over the tough-looking boxer guy who is ready to fight. To be a son one day again soon.

2 Setting the scene for research
2.1 The research project and our ESOL classroom

The RM Borders project, which sets the framework for this paper, set out to investigate intercultural and multilingual practices in contexts where the subject of the encounter – and her/his languages – are under different forms of pain and pressure – psychologically, socially and politically. As part of a team which comprises the college educators, researchers located in the field of clinical psychology, language and arts education, we explore the role that arts-based pedagogies play within these contested environments.

Our Glasgow ESOL classroom is a highly intercultural and multilingual environment. During break time, we regularly hear and enjoy the sounds of Borgow, Kinda, Tigrinya, Amharic, Arabic, Farsi, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Dutch and French. English, for all of these young people, is an additional language, sometimes an L2 but often an L3 or L4. Students are between 16 and 20 years old and have left (and often lost) parents and relatives to escape countries that, because of the escalations of war, political conflict and repressive state actions against citizens, made normal and peaceful lives impossible for them. As a result of this, some students might also not have had continuous access to formal education in their home countries (Education Scotland 2014: 9). All of the students reside in Glasgow (Scotland, UK) and most are so called *unaccompanied minors*, a legal term which means that students have often reached, and now live in the UK, unaccompanied by adults, parents or a guardian and

are involved in the complicated and lengthy process of applying for refugee status in the UK. In her systematic review of studies that research mental distress in unaccompanied refugee minors, Berhane (2015) points out that this group is at a high risk of psychological distress. This entails ethical considerations for college educators' approaches to classroom learning and, equally, for our approaches to research in students' learning environments. Discursive structures have to be set up in a way that do not frame students in deficit positions (for example as non-speakers of English) or force them to relive traumatic events. Instead, students need to be allowed to steer their own learning, as well as the research process, at their own pace and in a way that makes room for their interests and existing knowledge.

2.2 Holistic approaches to learning: The 16+ programme

The 16+ ESOL course programme at Glasgow Clyde College was uniquely developed in order to create a safe and stimulating learning environment in which students could experience their existing knowledges, skills and interests as significant (language) learning assets. 16+ class activities often prioritise creative arts methods such as drama, crafting and creative writing as well as involve outdoor learning projects, for example, led by Scottish forestry commission. In a holistic approach to learning, these activities are combined with extensive personal guidance provision and sustained collaborations with local counselling and mental health services in order to support students' emotional and psychological well-being.

The crafting of the identity box thus serves as a vivid method example for 16+'s everyday approaches to classroom learning. Lyn's (the students' teacher) guidance for the creation of the identity box was straightforward. She encouraged her students to use a simple shoebox as their 3D canvas to create a piece of art that took the title '*What I want you to know about me*' as the starting point for the crafting process. This class activity takes place at a moment where media representations of individuals and families seeking protection and better, safer lives in the UK/Europe are (often) accompanied by (sometimes shrill) discussions around who is (and who isn't) worthy of the public's sympathy and government's help. Students were thus not asked to create a fully readable articulation of self which could have run the danger of serving an equally fixed identity discourse. Instead, they were invited to undertake a partly paradoxical task. Students were asked to curate identity in the space of a shoe box that was (on average) not more than 50 cm wide, 30 cm high and 25 cm deep in

size. The spatial limitation of this small 3D canvas appropriately referenced the contested nature of students' acts of telling about themselves.

2.3 Problematising identity

The making of the identity box cannot be equated with the creation of a form of counter-identity, opposed to what might be considered discriminatory public representations of refugees' lives and identities. The very notion of identity that underlies the concept of curating *self* in a shoebox of very limited size, in fact seeks to problematise the idea of identity as a "primary, originary reality 'out there', which can be easily captured in any form of cultural representation" (St. Pierre 2013: 649). By inviting students to craft an identity box, we, researchers and educators, had to be careful not get trapped in a purely phenomenological orientation; one that denies the *precarious* and *becoming* nature of students' ways of being in the world (Barad 2003, 2007). In other words, the impossible task to represent – to *fit* and *fix* identity into a shoe box – acts as a material reference to the wider power dynamics and thus ethical questions that underlies students' acts of "giving adequate accounts of themselves" (Butler 2005: 50). Lyn (the students' teacher) reminds us hereby to pay attention to the constant – and often precarious –shifts that mark students' lives:

> The future is very uncertain, not just because of the external forces that are controlling young people's lives like the home office or you know like benefit agency all that stuff, but actually in terms of their identity because their identity is in a constant state of shift. You know and I have mentioned this before but I was very struck in discussing with a couple of young people about the changes that have happened to them since they came to the UK and one of them said 'when we came here we were broken and what has happened is a process of becoming whole again but it's not finished yet' and it's also a process that almost, it goes forwards and it goes backwards because there is part of the process which is coming to accept that I will never be the person that I was in my own country, in my own family, in my own context. (from an interview with Lyn)

In this interview about her students, Lyn complicates a notion of 'refugee identity' that can be easily formulated in any form of cultural representation. She reminds us that each individual student is undergoing a process of (ongoing) identity formation; one that is often marked by past, precarious and often traumatic life experiences, but also strong hopes for the future. Peace scholars Lederach and Lederach (2010) hereby explain the significance of "at-homeness" experiences for students who have lost a home and social relationships:

> Violence destroys what was understood and known. What was assumed, taken for granted as 'normal' on a daily basis, has disappeared and people suspend, or outright lose the capacity to feel at home. Home often serves as a relational metaphor of feeling surrounded by love, a sense of well-being, shelter and unconditional acceptance. Violence destroys this feeling and the capacity to be oneself without mistrust or pretension; it destroys a sense of at-homeness. (Lederach and Lederach 2010: 63.)

This ongoing process of re-gaining a sense of "at-homeness" (Lederach and Lederach 2010: 63) and making identity is of course experienced differently by each individual student. We thus have to remember that "the term refugee functions a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological and spiritual situations" (Malkki 1995: 496, as quoted in Dennis 2008: 212).

In a context like Glasgow Clyde College, where most students have experienced the pressure and potential trauma of having to tell and re-tell their personal story (over and over) in an institutional setting (the UK's Home Office), ethical reflection on how our arts-based method constitutes and reconstitutes students' acts of telling about themselves, is equally imperative. Performance scholar Dennis (2007, 2008, 2009) suggests that students' acts of giving accounts of themselves can by no means be considered a neutral affair but in fact entails ethical considerations on how the act of *storytelling* in pedagogy and research constitutes students' voices:

> The personal story in the refugee context represents a complex, cultural, political and social currency. (...) It is thus necessary to question how theatre [or any other arts-based method] translates to the refugee context where people are required to tell their stories – over and over and over again. Who is listening? (...). The refugee context is structured around the repeated requirement to tell within a culture of institutional disbelief (...); a story is represented as currency to earn the next stage of entry. (Dennis 2007: 357.)

3 Principles of our identity box pedagogy

3.1 Problematising linear narratives

Dennis (2008) is critical of the "redemptive promises of linear narrative structures" (p. 214) which can essentialise participants' speaking positions in a deficit-oriented discursive set-up – e.g., the "refugee subject" who tells authentic stories versus the "non-refugee witness" who listens (and verifies) (Shuman 2005, as cited in Dennis 2008: 212). Linear narratives, Dennis' notes, can run the risk of fixing participants' identity positions, without acknowledging the multiplicity of individual histories and psychological situations hidden underneath the blanket 'refugee story'. "Performing in the asylum context demands aesthetic transformation of the testimony into theatre that reaches beyond naturalistic representations of trauma" (Dennis 2008: 213).

Dennis' call for "aesthetic transformations" (Dennis 2008: 213) in drama-based work equally applies to our identity box pedagogy: the performative act of crafting had to invite a multiple position-taking that was not limited by a false belief in authentic storytelling. It was hence crucial that students did not have to remember, or worse, re-live traumatic life events.

Our emphasis on what *they wanted us to know*, however, also had to encourage students to cherish memories, or articulate specific issues, if they wished to, either 'secretly' (encoded in the material) or in more direct representations.

The concept of identity and "giving an account of oneself" (Butler 2005) that underlies the crafting of the identity box is thus, to quote Hickey-Moody (2013), "a creative affirmation of [this process of ongoing] becoming and a resistance to our acceptance of a determined, striated world around us" (p. 130). We wanted to affirm that "each young voice matters precisely because it is different" (Hickey-Moody 2013: 123) and not because their voices, through the medium of the boxes, can be usefully streamlined into clear-cut (counter-) representations of *refugee identity*. The identity boxes cannot be analysed in isolation but need to be read through the process of art-making as well as the process of relationship-building (amongst students, with us) that occurred during these makings. The boxes' representational potency and our readings are deeply interlinked with these process-based aspects of art-making and pedagogy, which Hickey-Moody (2016: 64) describes as "more discrete forms of citizenship that articulate through *belonging to*, and *participating in*, (youth arts subcultures)".

3.2 Literacy as socially constructed

The concept of literacy that underlies such non-representational and process-based emphasis in arts education is thus "sceptical of referentiality as a form of truth-making in narratives" (Hassett 2016: 135). Literacy is regarded as "multifaceted, socially constructed and only relevant within the lived world of the children [or teenagers and young adults in our case]" (Hassett 2008, as quoted by Hassett 2016: 146). Dunn et al. (2012) give a practical example of how digital technology and drama pedagogy put to work such socially-constructed model of literacy within the lived world of newly arrived refugee children in Australia:

> In choosing to base the drama upon a playful, fantasy-based narrative, we were hoping to avoid the kind of responses to resettlement and resilience that apply a deficit model or focus on the challenges this experience brings (Dunn et al. 2012: 496).

Through the use of a fictional narrative that was centred around Rollo, a young robot who has travelled to Earth from a distant planet with her robot dog Sparky, the educator-researchers invited students to inhabit positions of expertise (e.g., as interpreters for Sparky who cannot speak English) and build on students' real-world interests (in animals, robots) and their sense of play. The work of Arizpe et al. (2015) with wordless picture books equally develops a

form of socially-constructed intercultural literacy which takes newly arrived refugee children's life experiences and hopes for their own futures as the starting point for multimodal activities and conversations. Here, visual literacy is "re-defined as less about a set of skills and more about socio-cultural contexts and social negotiations" (Serafini 2014: 20–24, as quoted by Hassett 2016: 137).

> We must develop our capacity not only to hear, but also to see. The creation of images produced by ourselves rather than by nature or a machine, serves to show that the world can be re-created. The creation of Images of the world as we want it to be, is the best way to penetrate the future. (Boal 2006: 46, quoted in Arizpe et al. 2014: 306.)

With reference to theatre educator Augusto Boal (2006) and his Theatre Of The Oppressed, which draws on a critical pedagogical orientation (Freire 1973, 1995), Arizpe et al. (2014) also assert the practice of hope that is inherent in the act of re-creating the world in images and materiality.

> Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions', that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what *can be* done (Rancière 2004: 35).

Students' artful *fictions* in their identity boxes protect them from being turned by us into ambassadors of a coherent essentialist cultural (self-)identity (Arizpe et al. 2014: 319). This is what students want us (educators, researchers) to see and know about them and our thinking about the *real*, *their* and *our* identity is embedded in the rhythms and flows of students' material fictions (Rancière 2004). Educational psychologist Yohani (2008), by drawing on ecological perspectives in hope studies (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986), equally highlights the active aspects of hope that can be fostered through arts-based pedagogies, when these allows students to engage with their current experiences but also "to move beyond their current contexts and reflect on past experiences and future goals" (Yohani 2008: 316).

4 The performative nature of knowledge creation

4.1 A new materialist research approach

We wish to locate our research approach within these process-based aspects of art-making, pedagogy and identity formation. Drawing on new materialist and feminist scholars (Braidotti 2006; Barad 2003, 2007; Hickey-Moody 2016, 2013; Hickey-Moody and Page 2016; Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007; MacLure 2013; Lenz Taguchi 2013; Martin and Kamberelis 2013), we believe that a re-making of our representation-driven (quantitative and qualitative) research practices are a necessary step to taking into account the performative nature of

knowledge creation and the contested social realities that underlie our everyday research encounters.

> By eschewing notions of essentialist identities, brute data, and fixed categorization of phenomena and processes, postmodern/post-structural approaches aim for more dynamic, historic, contingent, and situated understandings of complex human interactions, events, and institutions (Palermo 2002; Sarup 1993, quoted in Martin and Kamberelis 2013: 669).

New materialists like Martin and Kamberelis (2013) seek to put to work the post-structuralist and postmodern theories of scholars such as Deleuze (2004); Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Derrida (1978) and Foucault (1989) and challenge our engrained beliefs in the signifying power of words to represent finite truths about reality. Barad (2003, 2007) and Braidotti (2006), for example, ask us to re-consider the idea that our ways of being in the world – our ontologies – can be ever fully known and meaningfully represented in the first place. St. Pierre (2013) and Lather (2009b, 2013) question the representational logic of positivist approaches to science, which believes in the correspondence between description and reality and presupposes the separation between a distanced knower and the known, which/who is entangled in reality. Approaches that work from a representationalist logic, new materialists note, can falsely assume that there is a (sociologically, materially, psychologically) stable world out there; one which can be known and represented in pre-conceived epistemological frameworks (Law 2004). A pure representationalist belief can then, at worst, disguise the power-dynamics that underpin supposedly neutral practices of inquiry. "It is that methods, their rules, and even more methods' practices, not only describe but also help to produce the reality that they understand" (Law 2004: 5).

New materialists (St. Pierre 2013; MacLure 2013; Lenz Taguchi 2013; Martin and Kamberelis 2013) question the power of language as mere second-order materiality and neutral representative of a stable material world. Instead, they reclaim *language* and *voice* as first-order materiality in an "aesthetics of depthlessness" (St. Pierre 2013: 649). Here, language is not seen as representative of reality but existing *with* it on the surface, where meaning is made *in interdependence* with other material agents (our bodies, the environment) (St. Pierre 2013). Lather (2013) reminds us that we need to even think our researcher subjectivity from such position of "material entanglement" (p. 630), in which our language *becomes* from within material "intra-action" (Barad 2003) with other human beings but also with non-human agents. Braidotti (interviewed in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 34) explains that a feminist emphasis on *embodiment* goes hand in hand with such radical rejection of essentialism.

> In feminist theory one speaks as a woman, although the subject "woman" is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables, such as class, race, age, life-style, sexual preference and others. One *speaks as* a woman in order to empower women, to activate socio-symbolic changes in their condition; this is a radically anti-essentialist position. (Interview with Rosi Braidotti in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 34.)

A feminist focus on a person's embodiment considers language and voice not as signifiers of static truths but as embedded in a complex set of in-flux experiences and power relations, which renders the act of *speaking* and *representing* a political act. A new materialist/feminist research orientation thus does not mean the end of representation (and language for that matter). It is the beginning of what Law (2009) calls a "politics of the real" (p. 243), which *makes transparent* the power dynamics underlying our active acts of representing ourselves (*speaking as*) and others (*speaking for*) in the world. Such productive research orientation is thus mindful of the danger of presuming that our research participants' ontologies – Bahadur's and his classmates' ways of being in the world (linguistically, sociologically, psychologically) – can ever be fully 'known' by our existing discursive practices. Instead, we are aware that *alternative* research practices need to be shaped by research participants' complex positions of embodiment and "complex and contradictory set of experiences" (Braidotti in Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012: 34). In other words, our research practices and representations cannot rely on "epistemological guarantees" (Lather 1993, 2013). They need to *become* through the same process-based focus on *making* (art, research) and *relationship-building* that we formulated for our identity box pedagogy above.

4.2 A rhizomatic research aesthetics

Despite such new materialist focus, the linguistic was not entirely dismissed during the making of the boxes. Many students decided to embed words – in various languages – into their displays and we (researchers) also reflect in language on these processes of making (art, research). We cannot fully escape linguistic representation. Students' words (and other acts of self-representation) as well as our poetic (language-based) reflections, however, do not stand in isolation. They are part of a wider network of embodied, performative acts (relationship-building, crafting and re-crafting the material) that are not marked by representational linearity (Lather 2009a, 2009b, 2013) but work on principles of connection and heterogeneity, multiplicity and rupture:

> A method of the rhizome type can analyse language only by decentring it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8.)

With the aim to put to work such Deuleuzian-Guattarian rhizomatic research aesthetics, we sought to pay attention to those aspects of research that are normally omitted or not accounted for by our practices of inquiry. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 4) call these discursive interruptions "lines of flight and movements of de-territorialisation" because these assert the performative (and interconnected) nature of knowledge. In our encounters with students, such "lines of flights" were embodied, for example, by students' multiple, non-dominant languages (Kinda, Arabic, Farsi, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Dutch, French, Pushto, Borgow, Tigrinya and Amharic), which we researchers *did not speak* and the conventional language arrangements of our methods of inquiry *did not account for*. "Movements of de-territorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4) were also asserted by the multiple affective dimensions and non-academic capabilities which students brought to class: their ability to form strong bonds with their classmates, support each other's learning process and look after each other in the classroom and beyond; their many non-academic skills and interests (weaving, baking, decorating, dancing, singing, sports), which had shown during many in- and out-of-school activities and are evident in their identity boxes. Students' forms of embodiment "slowed down our rage for meaning" (MacLure 2013: 663) and defied absorption into purely language-based frameworks. Instead, these "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4) drew attention to the "hinterland of practices" (Law 2009: 241) present in our research environment.

4.3 Poems and vignettes as poetic mapping tools

> The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 12.)

In this last part of the article we poetically map some of the performative acts of knowledge creation that took place during and after the making of the identity boxes. Our poems and vignettes can be said to act as 'new materialist tools' in this mapping process. They weave together poetically descriptions of particular interactions, snippets of conversations and our researcher reflections into what St. Pierre (2013: 649) calls an "aesthetics of depthlessness" that opens out for thought the discursive processes of pedagogy, art making and 'research making' that underpinned our encounters. By focussing on particular interactions, sometimes singular words, specific gestures and/or material assemblages, we do not wish to establish a new research systematicity; one which now also adequately charts the non-verbal through a

poetic approach. Instead, our poetic reflections have to be read in a new materialist mode, in which the act of interpretation and mastery of knowledge is always slightly out of our sole control:

> We are obliged to acknowledge that data have their way of making themselves intelligible to us (...) The glow appears around singular points – "bottlenecks, knots and foyers" (Deleuze 2004: 63). It involves a loss of mastery of language (and ultimately over ourselves). (MacLure 2013: 660-661)

The 'glowing moments' (MacLure 2013) which we focus on in our poems and vignettes below were not chosen because they were the most linguistically 'meaningful'. The chosen fragments of conversations, observations and reflections were not those that best lent themselves to our (linguistic) interpretation and/or most truthful representation of the process of crafting the identity boxes. Instead, the poems and vignettes reference moments which often evaded our neat interpretation, but which yet lingered with us, touched us, challenged us and sometimes even made us feel stuck for words (or any other appropriate utterances). In new materialist terms then, our poems and vignettes tentatively reference those "lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) by students Fahim, Bilal, Kim-Ly, Amber and Bahadur, which lead us researchers to *lose our language*. What we lost is a research language in a linear, analytic, explanatory format and found a more poetic form able to chart some of the performative acts that made up the (verbal and non-verbal) map of our research process.

The poems are entitled: *Hopseyomo (Bread), Love, Salam Hurya (Peace), Banh-sanh (Cake)*; and *Mother* (quoted in the introduction).

5 Our poetic research map

A Thursday morning in a Glasgow College in May 2015. The lively rustling and chatter of twenty students garnering pictures, beads, stickers, papers, figurines and other glittery, sticky, feathery, fleecy, woody bits and pieces in boxes of crafting materials. Amharic, Farsi, Vietnamese words hurtle through the air whilst students are gluing, cutting, ripping, folding and drawing things into order. There are jokes in Arabic and definite teasing in Pushto on display whilst scissors, glue sticks and pens are passed across tables. Students do not take much notice of us.

I (Katja) ask if I can film some of them with the small video camera I brought and capture their attention to detail: wooden furniture and paper lampshades, a boxing ring, a small drawing of a room in Sudan ... Many of the boxes depict a cosy-looking, neatly decorated

room or home place. Overall, however, the boxes' themes are varied. None of them can be easily pinned down or linked to specific issues in students' lives. There are real references to life experiences and past memories – boat journeys, the depiction of a lost home place, the representation of loved relatives and friends. We read hopes for a normal life: being surrounded by people you love, a 'cosy' home, an interesting hobby. Hopes for bigger things are displayed in the form of pertinent symbols: peace doves, peace signs, hearts. Most often, however, we have to read between the lines of the colourful displays and our rage for meaning has to slow down, whilst students keep crafting, chatting, re-assembling. Their self-expression is trumping our need to understand explicitly and channel their lives into clear-cut representations.

5.1 Fahim: Hopsayomo (Bread)

(Insert figure 2: Finishing stages; Figure 3: Writing on the back wall; Figure 4: A picture of baking hands; Figure 5: Fahim's final box on display)

A lion.

A leopard.

A sheep.

A giraffe.

A donkey.

A zebra.

An elephant.

A cow.

The donkey, bigger than the elephant.

The cow, smaller than the leopard.

The giraffe, the size of the sheep.

A motley crew of animals

grazing your carefully crafted terrain.

You tell me your grandfather died

on your way to Libya

from Sudan

where you couldn't stay

He used to teach you the Koran

He was a kind man.

You cut out cards:

Islamic green.

Sudan.

(some of the English text cut off)

Green has been associated with Islam (...)

Desert-dwelling Arab tribes (...)

A harsh dry climate (...)

'Hopsayomo' (this is how I hear you)

Bread

you know how to make it

'but we make it without...'

you can't find the English words when I ask

about the picture of the kneading hands making

'Hop-sa-yo-mo'

when you speak Kinda (or is it Borgow, I cannot tell your tongues apart)

your hands in the air

(your kneading moves)

'We do a fire on the floor'

A small hole

The water flows

(your dough-stirring moves)

We keep a fire and then

there will be

Hopsayomo

yes

Hopsayomo

yes

How does it taste like?

Without soup you can eat it

(hands touching your mouth)

it is so good

Wow.

without anything

you can eat it

just like that

because it is so delicious

Hopsayomo

people who live in the countryside

just use Hopsayomo

many people just eat

Hopsayomo

Did you learn how to make Hopsayomo?

I ask

'yea yea' (my silly question!)

of course

he likes to make it

but here it is difficult.

Maybe in the countryside

but in the city

impossible.

How can you?

You can't

No

You can't

Bread is different here

not much

but it is not the same.

I never forget my story.

Shukran (in Arabic)

softer for a Kinda speaker

Shugran

Thank you story.

I love you.

Fahim. You joke around with your classmates. Somebody found a false moustache in all those boxes of material. You wear it proudly whilst making your rapper moves and the class cheering you on to be Big Shawn. Fahim in your Bob Marley T-Shirt. I admire your little zoo and read the cards you displayed behind the cow and the donkey. You remembered the kindness of your grandfather who taught you the Koran when you were a little boy and on a long and complicated journey towards safety which your grandfather did not survive. Fahim, your big winning smile across your face whilst I take the photograph in which the animals are posing too (it seems). You know how to handle animals (I think), farm the land (your teacher Lyn says). You know how to use your hands, make bread (you assure me). Your rapper moves turning into the skilful, kneading hands of a breadmaker, with your finished box on display. Your smile returns when I ask you to tell me about the picture of the hands in Borgow, because English is too square for stories about making bread over open fires. Your eyebrows raised when I ask if you enjoy making bread. A silly question (a towny's question my grandfather would likely say). Who wouldn't enjoy making bread that tastes so good that it is difficult to find words (any words in any language) for it, so good that you just have to taste it, so good that you do not even need to eat soup with it (you explain carefully). "People in the countryside know" (your words). Last year you made Hop-sa-yo-mo (outside, over an open fire) for your class. They watched and tasted. This was the last time you made bread (you tell me) whilst teaching me patiently how to say: Hopsayomo!

5.2 Amber: Love

(insert figure 6: Amber's box; Figure 7: Amber cutting out pictures of glamorous dresses; Figure 8: Amber's brother under a pink pearl drape)

There is your brother

in the purple, pink room with the felt walls.

'I have very much love for him'.

Can you talk about him in Arabic?

Yes.

(elegantly and fast)

It's Arabic from Kuwait

(I quit my beginner's course)

Those are my clothes in Kuwait.

Do you think people dress better in Kuwait?

Yes, they do.

I take a picture of your flag.

If I didn't know you

what would you want me to see?

The love for my brother

and what I like:

cats

make-up

flowers

and my brother.

All this I like
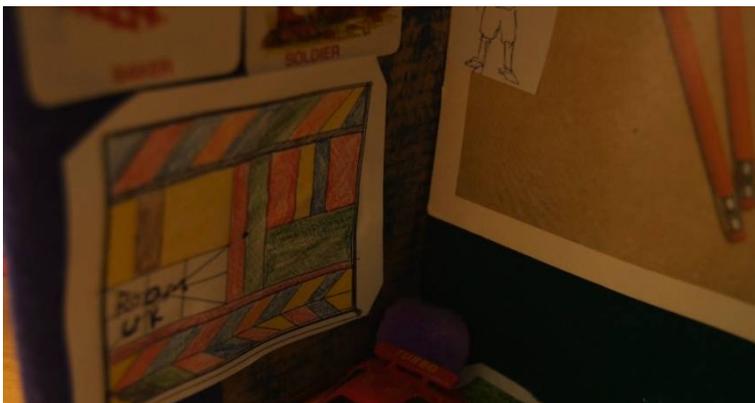
because

when I think of these things

they relax me and give me power.

Amber. You are known to be quiet in class, polite, softly spoken. Your box is loud, flashy, pink
and purple. A teenager's room with make-up and lipsticks showing best friends, glittery stars,
hearts and kittens. On the back of your box over the black felt, pictures of beautiful women

with shiny black hair and glamorous dresses. Needless to say that women in Kuwait know how to dress and better than women here (you explain this to me). Your mother is not well and you sometimes miss school because you have to help and interpret for her. Your backdrop: a big picture of you brother, the Kuwaiti flag under a pink pearl drape. You talk about your brother in Arabic so beautifully that it reminds me that I had signed up for a beginners' course and then quit because I am not a fast learner and because I was busy. How long would it take me to tune into that love you have for your brother, which unfolds so beautifully in Arabic and translates in any language. We can't miss what gives you power because you chose the brightest colours and draped your hope in pearls.

5.3 Bilal: Salam Hurya (Peace)

(insert figure 9: Bilal's identity box; Figure 10: Room UK; Figure 11: Room Sudan; Figure 12: A peace dove)

Breakfast?

I chose this picture because

before I came here

I remember about my past.

I didn't eat breakfast.

Your room in Sudan

(black and white, a red door)

Above the pointy roof top

a dove.

You room in the UK

(colourful, abstract, square)

A boy shouting something we can't hear

he is holding a flag

peace

Pencils in the background

Peace pencils

A book.

I like education.

Time is everything.

The plastic clock

ticking

over the red rubber horse

the red toy car

over the African trees which you like

Your symbol for peace. I count three doves in total.

I left my country ten years ago

I couldn't stay with my mother and father

Peace is important.

You speak Masali best

and a little bit of Arabic

you say apologetically

(and English I add)

The Masali word for freedom?

Salam Hurya.

There is no Masali word

for peace.

Bilal. You have been quietly crafting your box and we speak when it is almost finished. The African trees (which you miss) and the reddish horses, the pig and red toy car now placed above them. I look at your carefully arranged pictures when you suddenly swirl around your

box and a white dove is flying across with wings spread wide. You explain in Masali but there is no Masali word for peace so you say it in (Sudanese) Arabic and the word travels well and I repeat it after you: Salam Hurya. The boy with the football T-Shirt is holding a flag that says it all, in English: Peace. There are three white doves and a compass in the middle pointing to books and pencils and an image of Audrey Hepburn (?) that says: Breakfast. One dove is sitting on the pointy roof of your room in Sudan. Your 'Room UK' is rectangular, subdivided in many vibrant colours and one brown square. You placed it under cakes and a soldier with his rifle drawn.

5.4 Kim-Ly: Bahn-sanh (Cake)

(insert figures 13: Kim-ly's nail art; figure 14: Kim-Ly's box in its final stages; Figure 15: The bottom of Kim-Ly's box)

The fingernails!

(I bite mine)

Delicate ornaments of pink and white

(it would be surely inappropriate to ask you to teach me this art?)

Your paper house on tiger skinned walls

pine tree reflections in warm water colour ponds

your purple carpet reading

warm words: freedom, happy, love

under your soft rainbow, a dove-filled sky

somebody is baking.

It looks like my mum made some cake for me.

Cake?

A Vietnamese cake

I only know it in my language

'Banh-sahn', she is making 'Banh-sanh'

Yes.

Because when I was hungry

she made it for me.

It just makes me remember when I was little.

My mum makes good cake too

(why do I say this?).

Yes.

Banh-sanh.

(...)

Kim-Ly. When I speak to you sitting next to Arman (your boyfriend) he teases you about your fluffy woolly cotton clouds. The warm, soft colours in your box, over the pine trees, under the pompom rainbow, among the white doves flying in your tiger coloured sky. Shut up! You know how to put Arman in his place and make everybody laugh including yourself. There is a picture of a baker baking. A little paper house stands next to a toy car and patches of green coloured grass with the words Freedom Happy Love stretch out in front of it. Metallic confetti animals and leafs are guarding your home place. You remember your mother baking cake for you when you were small and still living in Vietnam: Banh-sanh. My mum makes good cake too I say and we sit together in silence for a moment.

6 Conclusion

By honing in on these five (poetic) nodes on the rhizomatic map of our arts-based engagement with students, we did not wish to re-establish a new research systematicity (Lather 2009a). Our "slippery representations" (Law and Lien 2012) sought to "chart open systems" (Martin and Kamberelis 2013: 670) and thus do not fully explain, but map our ever contingent, unpredictable and productive acts of knowledge construction. It is of course a

limitation of our approach that a viewing of the boxes by the reader is only possible through our photographic re-presentation and re-interpretation. The reader is not able to interact with the artworks first-hand, however open our process of mapping might wish to be. Our acts of mapping the process of art-making and pedagogy was further structured, and hence also limited, by the researchers/educators obvious deficits (e.g., linguistically) but also structured by our wish to experiment with a rhizomatic research aesthetics (that makes transparent and works with our deficits). As a result, students' reflections and feelings towards the creation of the boxes are left somewhat implicit through our photographic representation, poetic reflections and accompanying vignettes. We were not able to interact in students' spoken languages but also did not want to put students in a position of deficit and ask them to speak English only. At the same time it was important to us to not overemphasise the representational power of language for our analysis. This could have run the danger of rendering students' material acts of crafting and assembling their identity box less meaningful than their act of being able to talk about the boxes.

Here, our deficit to speak students' languages combined with our wish to value their art-making (and spoken languages) resulted in photographic and poetic representations that do not explicitly represent students' reflections and feelings (in language). Instead of these direct representations, the poems and vignettes reference the wider pedagogical interactions (and material interactions) that took place during the making and talking about the identity boxes. Fahim enthusiastically explains the making of bread in Borgow; Amber expresses her love for her brother joyfully in Arabic; Bilal is required to draw on his multiple language skills to find a word for *peace*, and the cake that Kim-Ly's mother used to bake for her when she was a little child and still living in Vietnam, needs to be named in Vietnamese. These are small acts of dignifying students' language and material practices as part of a rhizomatic research aesthetics that builds on the work of neo-materialist educators and scholars (e.g., Hickey-Moody 2013; Hickey-Moody and Page 2016). Through images, poetic reflections and vignettes we sought to invite the reader into our encounters with students without closing down the discursive terrain through a narrow analytic focus. Our mapping activity, however, cannot gloss over the fact that, in practice, our acts of neo-materialist mapping are still structured by discursive practices that do not comfortably work with Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) principles of multiplicity and heterogeneity (for example with diverse languages). Our identity box project is by no means a perfect or finished example of ontological re-orientation of research practice. As researchers and educators we find ourselves in a Deleuzian-Guattarian state of becoming. We aimed to rupture discursive practices that put our

students/participants in deficit positions. We hoped to face our own deficits and put students' expertise and our deficit to work in a poststructuralist, arts-based approach. As a result, our acts of experimentation require ongoing reflection and an ongoing creative research practice in which we keep losing familiar languages to "decentre them onto other dimensions and other registers" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8).

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