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Refusing Politics as Usual: Mapping Women of Colour's Radical Praxis in London and Amsterdam

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Abstract

This article explores an intriguing emergent organising strategy among women of colour activists in London and Amsterdam: a politics of refusal. In response to the triple catastrophes facing women of colour: the on-going roll back of social welfare states, the normalisation of the far right in everyday life and the xenophobic backlash against migrants, we find that some women of colour activists are deliberately withdrawing from view and working outside of dominant left activist spaces. Rather than demanding recognition and rights from institutional actors and supposed allies, many activists appeared to welcome and embrace their marginalisation as this exclusion from mainstream life creates the possibility for alternative ways of doing politics and being political. Drawing on Simpson (2007; 2014; 2017), we attempt to map the contours of women of colour's refusal politics and consider how refusal generates different approaches to sovereignty and ungovernability.

Keywords: women of colour, activism, refusal, sovereignty, austerity, far right

Introduction

Drawing on our cross-national comparative research project, *The Politics of Catastrophe*, which examines how women of colour activists in Austin, London and Amsterdam organise and mobilise against austerity, against the far right and for migrants' rights, we explore how these activists are subverting politics as usual by deploying a different kind of activist strategy. In this article, we consider the radical politics of women of colour activists by spotlighting an intriguing emergent political praxis—the politics of refusal—which appears to have been operationalised by a range of women of colour activists working in different, but related, contexts in each city¹. By 'refusal' we mean that 'to claim possibility is to refuse to acquiesce to empire or to crisis or to current political norms...to refuse

¹ We would like to thank Leah Bassel for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

is to insist on other of ways of being political together' (McGranahan 2018: 377). In other words, refusal is both a theory and practice that rejects the hegemonic politics and political identities imposed on racialised and colonial subjects in a given nation state and advances an alternative politics of dissent. We were surprised to find that women of colour organising and mobilising in two European countries had developed a similar—but not identical—praxis that Simpson (2007; 2014; 2017) documents among the Mohawk nation in so-called Canada. That these women of colour activists working at the heart of former imperial powers had also come to refuse the legitimacy of the state, albeit by a different route than what Simpson examines, is noteworthy for considering how women of colour are re-fashioning ideas about citizenship and solidarity practices. The activists we encountered in our study are undertaking innovative strategies that remain largely invisible or misunderstood in the broader activist milieu in each country. We seek to correct the record in an attempt to understand how these activists refuse and what kind of politics this generates in their respective contexts.

We begin this article by exploring the challenging environments in which the activists are working by examining how three inter-related crises take shape in both Britain and the Netherlands: 1. the on-going economic crisis and the roll back of the social welfare state 2. the European response to the continuing Mediterranean crisis and the xenophobic politics of migration and 3. the normalisation of far right politics in each country. We will then turn to examine in further detail Simpson's (2014) concept of refusal in relation to settler colonialism and how this relates to non-Indigenous women of colour organising at the heart of former European empires. We will move on to discuss our methods before analysing our findings.

The Politics of Catastrophe

The European Union is facing the tripartite and interconnected crises of austerity, a xenophobic backlash against migration and the normalisation of the far right. We are not claiming that these processes are new but rather the three-part crisis represents a conjuncture of particular events which together form a precarious political moment in which the activists in this study recognise as a threat that they must confront. For the purposes of this article, we focus on how this triple crisis manifests itself in two countries—Britain and the Netherlands—particularly in relation to women of colour. By 'women of colour', we refer to cis and trans women and non-binary femmes who experience the 'effects of processes of racialisation, class and gender domination as well as other sources of inequality, particularly hierarchies of legal status' (Bassel and Emejulu 2017: 6).

2018 marked a grim anniversary. It has been ten years since the start of the 2008 economic crisis in which global capitalism teetered on the verge of collapse. Whilst national states and supranational bodies bailed out the rogue financial services industry, they imposed austerity at home as both a cost savings measure and as a once in a generation opportunity to reshape the social welfare state and social citizenship. Austerity measures—deficit reductions through tax increases and cuts to public spending—have been pursued in both Britain and

the Netherlands with disastrous results, particularly for women of colour (Taylor-Gooby 2011; Bassel and Emejulu 2017). Since 2010, both the British and Dutch governments have committed themselves to slashing the provision of public services—from healthcare to childcare to housing.

In the Netherlands, under a series of coalition governments led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte since 2011, more than €55bn in spending cuts have been implemented (Weske et al 2014) alongside asymmetrical tax increases that hit the poorest households hardest (Oxfam 2013). The centre-right Dutch government has been explicit in its welfare roll back and have called for the end of the welfare state and replacing it with the ‘participation society’—in which citizens and the private sector step into the role once occupied by the state. In announcing the new package of austerity measures to be implemented by his government, the Dutch king stated: ‘Combined with the need to reduce the government deficit, this leads to a gradual change from the classical welfare state to a participation society. Everyone who is able, is asked to take responsibility for their own life and environment’ (Rijksoverheid 2013: 2). For the Netherlands, austerity has translated into the decentralisation of service provision from the national state to municipalities and with that transfer has come deep cuts to funding for services with the assumption that citizens will be activated to take care of themselves and their communities. Since 2013, there has been a slow economic recovery—but women of colour have not seen the fruits of the expanding Dutch economy, as we will discuss in more detail below.

Even though Britain is outside the Eurozone and has now left the European Union, it has nevertheless also enthusiastically embraced austerity. First under a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 with Prime Minister David Cameron and continuing to today’s current Conservative government led by Boris Johnson, slashing public spending—and dithering over Brexit—have been the defining policy programme of these governments. Since 2010, more than £83bn has been cut from the social welfare state (Women’s Budget Group 2018). Britain has been radical in its implementation of austerity measures combining a slash and burn approach to essential public services with an often overlooked tax cut for the wealthiest households. The impact of austerity measures has been so severe that it led the United Nations special rapporteur on poverty to call the cutbacks in Britain ‘cruel and misogynistic’ (Alston 2018). In particular, the botched implementation of Universal Credit (a rationalised and extremely punitive cash benefit that combines several types benefits into a single monthly payment) alongside deep cuts in other services—particularly childcare and housing—have left the poorest households in a precarious economic position.

Before the crisis, women of colour in both Britain and the Netherlands were already in long-term precarious social and economic circumstances (OECD 2012). Due to the asymmetrical impacts of austerity on the poorest households, women of colour are disproportionately impacted by these unprecedented cuts to public spending which sharpen and deepen already existing social and economic inequalities (Theodoropoulou and Watt 2011; Bassel and Emejulu 2015; Bassel and Emejulu 2017). As Bassel and Emejulu (2017) have extensively

documented, women of colour in Britain experience a double hit under austerity: as the welfare state shrinks they lose their jobs in the public sector whilst simultaneously falling through the social safety net as benefits become harder to obtain and/or are eliminated altogether. Thus, over the last decade of the economic crisis, we have seen poverty rates increase for all women of colour—regardless of their class position. For British Pakistani and Bangladeshi households in particular, more than 50% are living in poverty and for Black British groups, a little less than half of all households are living in poverty (Women’s Budget Group 2018).

Trying to understand the economic position of women of colour in the Netherlands is very complicated because the government does not consistently collect race and ethnic statistics nor does it consistently disaggregate gender data on the basis of race or ethnicity. Worse still, race is silenced in the Dutch lexicon, with social scientists and policymakers opting to use the amorphous and inaccurate term ‘person with a migration background’ to describe racialised groups—whether they are Dutch citizens or not. This makes it extremely difficult to understand and analyse intersecting inequalities whilst also classifying racialised Dutch citizens as permanent outsiders (for an in depth discussion of this problem, see Wekker 2016). Regardless, from the available data we can see that women of colour are more likely to be living in poverty than their white counterparts with 52% of Moroccan Dutch women and 47% of Turkish Dutch women living in poverty. Even though incomes for a majority of Dutch households have recovered since the 2008 crisis, this recovery has not been evenly distributed across all groups—especially in relation to women of colour (Statistics Netherlands 2019).

The Mediterranean crisis, which was an ‘invisible’ crisis of human trafficking and perilous crossings by sea since 2010, came to widespread public attention in summer 2015 and has challenged the principles of European solidarity and raised urgent questions about the state’s obligations to protect vulnerable groups who do not enjoy citizenship rights (Crawley et al 2016). Since the early stages of this crisis, the EU has been unable to agree a common response as asylum seekers from first the Syrian civil war and later as those fleeing violence and poverty from across the African continent sought protection in Europe. Those southern European countries already hit hardest by austerity struggle with providing adequate support for asylum seekers and refugees whilst richer countries in Northern Europe have shirked their responsibilities to uphold human rights and dignity (with the exception of Germany, no other EU country has taken its agreed quota for refugee resettlement). Rather than take seriously the push factors that lead people to flee their homes in search of safety abroad, the EU has responded with a zero tolerance approach by refusing to allow safe harbour to boats carrying desperate people to its shores. Even though the Mediterranean crisis does not capture headlines the way it used to in 2015, refugees are still dying in large numbers at sea. Out of 102,042 arrivals in 2019, 1,334 deaths have been recorded. And at the time of writing in 2020, there have thus far been 68,350 arrivals and 804 deaths (International Organisation for Migration 2020). Because the EU and individual countries—particularly Italy—are beginning to criminalise humanitarian aid at sea by non-governmental

organisations, it seems that it is defacto EU policy to turn the Mediterranean into a graveyard (Klemp 2019).

If refugees survive the journey across the seas, they face a hostile and unwelcoming environment in individual nation states. In Britain since 2010, migration policy has been driven by the Conservative Party's target to decrease *all* immigration to the 'tens of thousands' (Johnston 2019). This has meant that the majority of asylum applications, 68%, are refused. The process of seeking asylum can be tortuously slow. In 2017, more than 14,000 people were waiting for a decision on their asylum application for more than six months (Refugee Action 2018). Because it is unlawful for asylum seekers to work or claim any benefits whilst they are waiting for a decision on their application, many are plunged into poverty and uncertainty until the Home Office decides their fate. It is well documented that a hostile environment policy of detention and destitution drives state provision for asylum seekers in order to encourage them to leave the country (Jones et al 2017). Asylum seekers are expected to survive on less than £40 per week per person and live in substandard accommodation (Refugee Action 2018; Mayblin and James 2019). For those whose asylum applications are unsuccessful, all public support is withdrawn and all asylum seekers are at risk of detention and eventual deportation.

In the Netherlands, asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their applications are housed in reception centres, receive weekly allowances of €42 per person and, if they are waiting for a decision for more than six months, are allowed to work up to 24 hours per week. However, in practice, it is incredibly difficult for asylum seekers to gain access to the labour market because of the bureaucratic disincentives placed on employers. Further, if an asylum seeker does obtain employment, she is only allowed to keep 25% of her income, up to a maximum of €196 per month and she must start paying the state for her accommodation (Dutch Council for Refugees 2019). Legally, it seems that asylum seekers have more rights in the Netherlands than in Britain, but in practice an implicit hostile environment policy is also in effect in the Dutch context.

In Europe, economic insecurity has combined with fears about migration to generate destabilising, illiberal politics. This rise of the far right has in turn sparked a crisis for both centre-left and centre-right mainline political parties whose identities, aims and electoral fortunes have been transformed during this unpredictable moment of change (Mudde 2019; Brils, Muis and Gaidyte 2020). Indeed, the surprise 52%/48% vote for the United Kingdom to exit the European Union and the on-going institutional paralysis and disorganisation on managing the Brexit negotiations with the EU has helped spawn a new far right party—the Brexit Party—which trounced both Labour and the Conservatives at the 2019 European elections. The Conservative Party, which has been (mis)managing Brexit, has been pulled further to the right in order to stop the defection of its voters to UKIP and the Brexit Party. After the previous Prime Minister, Theresa May, was forced out of 10 Downing Street due to her shambolic approach to Brexit, Boris Johnson was voted in as party leader and he, in turn, installed a hard right cabinet threatening a no-deal Brexit, an even harsher crackdown on immigration and a vow to expand the numbers of police officers and prison beds.

Unlike Britain, the Netherlands has long normalised the far right in its mainstream political discourse as key political entrepreneurs—from Pim Fortuyn, to Geert Wilders to Thierry Baudet—have been able to leverage Islamophobia to penetrate the mainstream, shape public opinion and reap electoral rewards (Witteveen 2017; Verloo 2018). Perhaps what is different in this political moment is how the then Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, has sought to maneuver his party platform to avoid being outflanked on the right by Geert Wilders. For the 2017 Dutch general election, Wilders’ Freedom Party (PVV) was seeking a major breakthrough to become a key player in any coalition government. Rutte steered his Freedom and Democracy Party (VVD) even further to the right on immigration with an infamous open letter he penned to the Dutch electorate exhorting immigrants to integrate fully or leave the country: ‘I can understand when people think: “I’d rather you leave.” I feel that way too. Act normal or go away’ (Blaustein 2017). This xenophobic screed, combined with a recovering economy, appeared to be enough to return Rutte to power and defeat Wilders. What this open letter also accomplished was the colonisation of mainstream parties by far right arguments and policies (Milacic and Vukovic 2018). Whilst Wilders’ PVV appears to be on the wane, it lost all its seats at the 2019 European elections, it has been replaced by another far right upstart, Thierry Baudet’s Forum for Democracy (FvD) which won three seats in the most recent European elections and 86 seats—the most of any political party—in the Dutch provincial elections of the same year. Baudet’s FvD distinguishes itself from the xenophobia of Wilders by appealing not only to a fear of invasion by non-Western migrants but espousing a grand narrative of Western supremacy: ‘We are heirs to the greatest civilization that ever existed’ (Baudet 2019). This wider conservative net goes beyond migration policy, additionally denouncing women’s reproductive rights as a threat to European growth and denying the reality of climate change (Jones 2016; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Note, in 2020, Baudet was forced out of FvD.

Given this uncertain political and economic moment, what is the fate of women of colour activists working for equality and social justice? Before turning to explore their politics, we want to first examine how activists’ emergent strategy—refusal—echoes the work of Audra Simpson and the refusal politics of the Mohawks in so-called Canada.

The politics of refusal

Refusal is not a new concept in radical politics. To refuse to consent, to comply or to recognise authority is the bedrock of activism. Conscientious objectors refuse to recognise the legitimacy of war, civil rights activists refuse to be perpetual second-class citizens and queer activists refuse the gender binary. Refusal is an act of subversion that is meant to spotlight the arbitrariness of the current social order and provide alternative spaces for other ways of doing and being. For Audra Simpson, however, refusal is a praxis related to the aforementioned resistance work but it is distinct, because refusal must be inextricably tied to the repudiation of colonial dispossession and the abolition of the settler colonial state. In Simpson’s anthropological work mapping Indigenous sovereignty and selfhood practices of the Mohawk nation, refusal is not simply

about resistance but rather dissenting from the entire 'apparatus of state power' (2016: 328) to become ungovernable. For Simpson (2014; 2017), it is the settler colonial state itself that is illegitimate so the politics and citizenship practices the state produces cannot be consented to by the Mohawks. Thus a new kind of political order is (re)established when Mohawks re-assert sovereignty over themselves and their land. Land and Indigenous people's relationship to it is transformed from a space of enclosure and commodified possession to a relational process of stewardship with land as the source of identity, kinship and cosmology.

According to Simpson, refusal is a revolutionary and collective act of becoming. Refusal is a politics of becoming because it 'holds a truth [and] structures this truth as a stance through time...Refusal operates as historical consciousness...it is a manifestation of deep awareness of the past [and]...this consciousness avenges the prior injustice and pointing to its on-going life in the present' (Simpson 2016: 329). By refusing both the authority and the legitimacy of the state, Mohawks are able to recover the memory of things past—genocide, dispossession—but also the deep truth of being sovereign and a self-governing people. To refuse is a collective act of agency of shrugging off the power relations of the settler colonial state and re-imagining new forms of legitimacy that do not depend on domination. A key part of refusal is eschewing settler colonial citizenship. To dissent from this kind of citizenship is 'a refusal to play various games. Among those games is citizenship: voting, paying taxes—actions that would move Mohawks out of their own sovereignty into settler citizenship and into the promise of whiteness' (Simpson 2016: 328). Thus, refusal becomes a collective politics of possibility to imagine and make real alternative social orders and relations. According to Simpson, when Mohawks refuse, they are also building alternative forms of citizenship:

In spite of the rules of the state, in spite of the governance structure that attempts to implement them (or not implement them, or find an alternative to them), there are other workings of citizenship. This is that 'feeling citizenship' or 'primary citizenship,' the affective sense of being a Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke, in spite of the lack of recognition that some might unjustly experience' (Simpson 2014: 173).

Grounded in the historical memory of being sovereign, 'feeling citizenship' is 'a complex of social belonging, of family, of intracommunity recognition and responsibility' (ibid: 188). Simpson's feeling citizenship offers us a window into the possibilities of becoming when we refuse.

McGranahan (2016) outlines four constitutive elements of refusal that we think offer a helpful guide in trying to understand how women of colour activists working at the heart of former imperial powers in Britain and the Netherlands are also engaging in refusal politics. Firstly, McGranahan argues that refusal is always generative. Refusal is not an anti-politics, a politics of apathy or political nihilism, instead, is it a revolutionary process of creating alternative spaces and practices to create new possibilities outside the strictures of the settler colonial state. Second, she posits that refusal is a collective process: it produces

community through the solidarity politics of dissent and the creation of alternative modes of being political together. Next, McGranahan, like Simpson, reminds us that refusal is not the same as resistance since refusal rejects the hierarchical relations of the settler colonial state. Refusal politics does not consent to the usual binary of domination/subjugation that resistance politics requires to animate action. Rather, refusal radically flattens relations between different individuals and groups and works from a position of a priori equality. When we talk about this idea of recovering sovereignty, a key part of this process is not consenting to being positioned as inferior, marginal or Other. To be a sovereign subject means that one is self-possessed and is able to confer on oneself meaning and legitimacy. Finally, refusal is a politics of hope. To be a refusing subject is to be an optimist. To join together with others to shake off the entanglements of the state and to take a chance to build the world anew necessitates a hope that another world is possible and that it can be forged through the collective imagination of a determined group of people.

Understanding refusal as a collective politics of hope, solidarity and radical equality outside the state makes it possible to see how women of colour in Europe, whilst not asserting their sovereignty over land, are declaring sovereignty over their own bodies and their body politic in order to build a new world outside the stranglehold of formerly colonial states in which coloniality is alive and well. Refusal politics for women of colour, is, of course, nothing new. From the fugitive practices of maroonage to counter-storytelling for collective caring, women of colour have always refused and organised against their debasement and marginalisation (Hill Collins 2000; Hartman 2019).

However, what strikes us as important about Audra Simpson's insights and its connections to women of colour in Europe in this paper, is the collective turning away from that what is in order to step into uncertainty to create different kinds of social relations and to remember things past—of another time, place and space of sovereignty that perhaps cannot ever be reached but can serve as a lodestar for imagining otherwise. The activists in our study push us to try to understand that their refusal happens on terms that cannot be easily reduced or equated to existing lexicons and cannot be assimilated into, say, anarchist thought. We take their refusal seriously by not misrepresenting their experimental politics. As we will demonstrate later in this article, the activist women in this study are stepping away from the typical hierarchical embodiments of colonial citizenship and its attendant acts of citizenship in relation to the state and supposed leftist allies acting in public space (Isin 2008; Bassel 2014). Activists are refusing the state and are attempting to explode the myths of state sovereignty to assert a self-sovereignty that does not seek legitimacy from either the state or their white allies. To that end, we will now turn to explore our project methods and then pivot to our findings of women of colour's politics of refusal in Europe.

Methods

For our *Politics of Catastrophe* research project, we undertook fieldwork from November 2017 to December 2018 across three sites: Britain (London), the United States (Austin) and the Netherlands (Amsterdam). In the interests of

space, we will be focusing only on the data from London and Amsterdam. We selected each of these cities because of their long histories of women of colour activism and the dense and varied networks of women of colour activists working creatively on anti-austerity, anti-fascism and migrants' rights. Each of these cities represent a space for experimental and influential activism. London, as the heart of the British empire, has incubated a range of important women of colour activists and groups from the deportee Claudia Jones in the 1950s to the women of the British Black Panthers in the 1960s and 1970s, to the Brixton Black Women's Group and the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent in the 1980s (Sudbury 1998; Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018; Emejulu forthcoming 2021). The legacies of these anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist activists live on through organisations such Sisters Uncut and Black Lives Matter UK today. Amsterdam, also a metropole of empire, has long been a site of guest worker labour activism for racial justice and fair housing in the post-war period and later as a space of experiments in living by radical queer collectives of colour in the 1980s and 1990s such as Sister Outsider, Ashanti and Black Orchid (El-Tayeb 2011; Weiner 2014; Frank 2019). The city is currently ground zero for the anti-*Zwarte Piet* struggle—more of which will be discussed below—and radical collectives such as Kick Out *Zwarte Piet* and the New Urban Collective who are very conscious of being inheritors of a radical legacy in Amsterdam.

By 'activists' we mean those cis and trans women and non-binary femmes organising and mobilising in both public and private spaces for equality and justice. In order to capture the richness of activists' experiences we undertook case studies in each city which combined several different methods in order to triangulate our data and afford the opportunity for comparison across three different national contexts. Through participant observation of campaign meetings and demonstrations, focus groups, semi-structured one to one interviews with activists and an analysis of activists' social media data—Twitter, Facebook and Instagram—we examined how women of colour define their activism, how they organise, who leads their groups and what difference they think they are making. In total, we interviewed 53 activists and observed 22 activist meetings and demonstrations. We spoke with activists working on a range of issues from prison abolition to anti-deportation work to those providing basic social services in their communities and those involved in cultural production. All participants have been given pseudonyms and all identifying aspects of their networks, organisations and/or campaigns have been removed. We will now turn to examine these activists' politics of refusal.

Refusal at the heart of empire

What struck us in the analysis of our fieldwork data was the surprising similarity between the Indigenous politics of refusal in settler colonial Canada that Simpson maps among the Mohawk nation and those acts of refusal practiced by women of colour in Amsterdam and London, in the heart of former empires. As we will demonstrate below, for women of colour activists, they articulated their refusal in four parts that correspond to McGranahan's framework for mapping refusal politics that we discussed earlier. First in the activists' dissent from the hierarchical relations of the state, which, secondly, creates space to claim self-definition and ungovernability. Third, activists understand this act of

claiming sovereignty over themselves as the foundation of community and solidarity building. Nevertheless, and finally, for their communities to survive, they had to exist under the radar, in a liminal space, outside the reach of the state and the white gaze of supposed ‘allies’.

We begin with Fatima, a Dutch-Moroccan anti-austerity activist in Amsterdam. She refuses the position of subjugation that the Dutch state demands of her—especially as a racialised Muslim woman:

I don't care. I don't care about your power, I don't care about your class, you are human. I will say what's on my mind. As a woman of colour, people are not used to that. Or they try to exoticise you and try to tell you what your identity is or where you fit in. But for me, I don't accept that. I have zero tolerance for those kinds of people who try to tell me who I am as a woman of colour. I will decide. (Fatima, Amsterdam, 2018)

Here, Fatima's refusal politics first manifests as refusing the binary of domination/subjugation of the usual resistance politics that the imperial state demands. Similar to what Simpson has documented, Fatima does not request or demand equality. Rather, she affirmatively claims equality for herself—and other women of colour—in order to assert her sovereignty and the power of self-definition. By confidently stating ‘I will decide’, Fatima is undertaking a powerful act of self-possession in a context that demands her self-effacement. Later in conversation, Fatima discusses how refusing domination by the state and the prevailing stereotypes about women of colour in Dutch society creates possibilities for ungovernability:

Women of colour are raised to be very nice and patient, but I don't adhere to those commands. I try to be rebellious and disruptive and dissident. Not for the sake of being a dissident but women have the right to be there [in public space] and women of colour have the right to be there, so on a personal level that is how it works for me. (Fatima, Amsterdam, 2018)

By refusing the hegemonic scripts of what constitutes women of colour and what is expected of them in terms of ‘appropriate behaviour’, Fatima demonstrates how activists can claim both self-definition and space for themselves, which we argue, echoes Simpson's analysis of Indigenous politics of refusal and the claiming of sovereignty over oneself and one's land. To be sure, we are not arguing that women of colour are claiming sovereignty over land—but by claiming very real discursive and material spaces in the metropolises of these former imperial powers, these acts of refusal create the possibility for different selves and politics.

However, seizing self-definition and becoming ungovernable is neither a smooth nor an unproblematic process. To take control of how one is perceived requires a confrontation with the racist, sexist and xenophobic discourses and practices that shape how one is viewed in society. This can be an extremely painful process. For Anouk, a Dutch Surinamese migrants' rights activist in Amsterdam, to claim oneself also means reckoning with anti-Blackness in the

Netherlands:

It's a joy to be a woman of colour, to be a Black woman, I wouldn't trade it for anything else. First of all, it's a joy, it's a sisterhood, a camaraderie, that I'm very thankful for. And it's hard. Because it also equals, it has come to equal erasure. Erasure, violence, misogynoir, all the freaking time. It's a double-edged sword. But I hate, I hate linking or saying we are equal to pain, or are equal to sadness. So I find it important to first say that it's a joy, and we are doing amazing work, and we've been doing so, and we'll continue to do so. (Anouk, Amsterdam, 2018)

For Anouk, the process of self-definition as a Black Dutch woman means recovering memories of past dispossession as a colonial subject and confronting contemporary colonial relations in Dutch society that denigrate and disrespect Black women. To claim another possible self that is understood as joyful she must also challenge the disabling discourses that structure her everyday life as a disrespected Other—by virtue of her race, class and gender. As Simpson (2007: 70) notes: '[A]nd so it is that concepts have teeth and teeth that bite through time'. To become a new and different self, Anouk is compelled to understand Dutch colonial history which brought her and her family to the country—these are the teeth that bite through time—and then use this remembrance as a framework to understand the inequalities she experiences in everyday life and as the galvanising force for creating alternative spaces and a new self. We see Anouk thinking through her process of becoming in relation to how she refuses the myths of her Dutch (colonial) citizenship.

That's why I hate, hate, hate when people say like, for instance, in *Zwarte Piet* [the racist tradition in which white Dutch people don blackface as part of *Sinterklaas* celebrations in December each year] discussions...“but I'm also a citizen!” And I'm like: but what does that mean? If you're a citizen but some of us aren't and maybe will never be, they are not deserving of the violence that's coming towards them. And citizenship for us [Black people] does not mean much. It means, I don't know what it means, it doesn't mean that you can't get ethnically profiled, it doesn't mean that you get the same rights as the other person. It's the technicality of living...but it means something different for us. (Anouk, Amsterdam, 2018)

Rather than her legal status conferring on her some kind of privilege or sense of belonging, Anouk sees the falsehood for what it is. For Black and Brown Dutch citizens, their legal status does not offer them recognition by the state nor protection from state violence. It does not even confer on them the full status of citizens: as we discussed above, racialised Dutch citizens are formally categorised by the state as 'persons with a migration background'. As Simpson (2016: 328) notes, the function of citizenship in a settler colonial state is to 'move Mohawks out of their own sovereignty into settler citizenship and into the promise of whiteness'. Since Black and Brown Dutch citizens will only ever have precarious access to whiteness (note the fate of the former media darling and right-wing firebrand, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was forced out of the country by her

erstwhile far right colleagues), in reality Dutch citizenship means very little in the everyday life of racialised subjects. With this recognition, Anouk refuses the myth and hierarchical relations of her Dutch citizenship and stands in solidarity with her undocumented comrades who also experience the vicissitudes of the Dutch state.

By Anouk refusing the fictions of her legal status she creates the possibility to invent herself anew and build community outside and against the state. We see similar dynamics at play with Lieke, a Dutch Surinamese anti-*Zwarte Piet* activist. In her refusal of the institutionalised tradition of blackface, she has also built an activist community—although this has simultaneously come at the cost of alienating her family and friends who do not refuse:

So I think [a lot about] the creation of that activist family. That is a really interesting bond because people who are activists in my surroundings... We are quite isolated from our own family and friends because we are too radical... [They say] “why do you always have to bring up this [*Zwarte Piet*] conversation” and “why do you want to ruin this party?” So that is one thing, you know the feeling that you are being totally erased as a Black person in Europe...Then, these different nationalities you are seen and just coming together, that’s really empowering...Like I said we [anti-*Zwarte Piet* activists] are always the outcasts of our circles. And then when we come together we can laugh about being outcasts. (Lieke, Amsterdam, 2017)

For both Anouk and Lieke we can see how refusal is a simultaneous process of recovering memories and experiences of domination and subjection and using that as a way to use their agency to imagine different selves, different realities and different social relations. However, as Lieke notes, by refusing, one also becomes an outcast and a killjoy. It is in this space of being marginalised, of enacting liminality, that we see activists’ refusal politics most clearly realised. We think it is worth pausing here to discuss liminality in a little more detail. Liminality is a threshold, an in-between space, of being on the cusp of something else. Liminality is a space of uncertainty, pregnant with possibilities of creation (Emejulu forthcoming 2021). In much of the social science literature on liminality, being positioned in an in-between space is oftentimes represented as a form of exclusion. Being liminal means living in permanent marginalisation (Swerts 2017). Using Simposon’s refusal framework prompts us look again at the dynamics of liminality and helps us recuperate it from merely denoting women of colour’s perpetual marginalisation to transforming it into a possibility, into a kind of politics of becoming. Liminality then can be understood as a mode of creation.

Rather than marginalisation sparking action to gain recognition by the state or supposed leftist ‘allies’, activists instead embrace their liminality to foster community and work collectively to eschew the state. Especially for those anti-fascist and migrants’ rights activists, organising outside the state apparatus is a logical decision given that the state, particularly the police, operates as a lawless enterprise in their daily lives. Aarti, an anti-fascist activist in London who

organises against deportation raids by the police and who helps to run migrants' rights workshops, observes this about the state:

We can tell them [undocumented migrants] what their rights are, we can tell them this is the law, but the point is that the state doesn't operate within the law. Like, we can say to them usually they're stopping you because they're racially profiling you, but the point is if they've already stopped you and you don't have the right paperwork, they're still gonna go ahead and pursue you...And it's exactly the same extra-judicial way in which the police operate...[This] kind of logic is replicated across the ways in which the state operates with people that it knows are the most vulnerable...they don't play by the rules, so the best thing that we can do is at least let people know what the rules are. But when it comes to, like, actually your day-to-day interactions and how this is gonna play out if you are in these situations, you just have to do whatever you can. (Aarti, London, 2017)

Since the state is constantly visiting violence upon Black and Brown people—such as racial profiling, stop and search, actual physical violence and arrest of both citizens and non-citizens—refusing the social relations that the state demands, of domination/submission, trying to 'do whatever you can' to survive means accepting and embracing liminality as a way of life.

We see similar issues play out in a different part of London with Rhea, a British Asian prison abolitionist, and her comrades. In conversation, Rhea questions the direct action of some white activists in her network. She is concerned with whether this will actually bring real material benefits to poor and working class women of colour. She refuses the resistance dynamics of her current activism and instead bands together with other women of colour activists to create a different space—outside the state and the white gaze—in order to relate to each other in a different way and create something new. In so doing, she seeks to redefine what counts as activism and who gets to decide what radical action looks like. She argues:

Like how radical is it in this world where no one wants us to have a nice time and enjoy things. For us to be able to get together without any of these middle class white people and have an amazing time with art that we've created and like telling our stories. Like that's a really radical thing to even create that space...Because it's about community and that community as a radical act of being able to stand together. (Rhea, London, 2017)

Refusing creates the conditions for liminality. Liminality in turn makes a different kind of politics possible. As Sanne, a Cape Verdean Dutch migrants' rights activist in Amsterdam discusses, liminality is an opportunity to enact a kind of political jujitsu in which those with the least amount of power finally gain a voice to talk back and create a new, equitable social relations:

I stay as far away as possible from the government. That is why I call it a

kind of invisible activism...I believe very much in operating in a liminal space. That creates a lot of possibilities, whereas as soon as [my activism] is out in the open, and everyone knows what I am doing, I fear the worst for these [undocumented] women. By keeping it very low key, it's possible to get a lot of things done. [Liminality] creates a kind of discomfort, but with that discomfort something happens, which is that [white] people become completely silent. And that silence actually creates a window. Creating a window for those voices that are always silenced by that dominant culture'. (Sanne, Amsterdam, 2017)

For Sanne and the undocumented women with whom she works, refusal is the only way to engage in contemporary Dutch society which demands their effacement and subjugation. Refusal offers them an opportunity to work under the radar in which they are both sovereign and ungovernable in ways that are unintelligible to political theories and frameworks that demand translation into their own terms.

Conclusions

Over the course of our fieldwork, we noticed an experimental praxis being enacted by women of colour activists in London and Amsterdam. Whilst the activists were working on crises that were generated by the state—the cruel roll back of the social welfare state, the normalization of the far right and the rising tide of xenophobia—they were nevertheless opting to work outside the state apparatus. Rather than demanding recognition and rights, many of the activists with whom we spoke appeared to welcome and embrace their marginalisation as that exclusion from mainstream life created the conditions for different ways of doing politics and being political. In this article, we have attempted to map the contours of women of colour's refusal politics and consider how that shapes their activism. To be sure, we are not claiming that women of colour are asserting sovereignty over the land in Britain or the Netherlands. Nor are we claiming that they are first to experiment with their politics in this way. However, nor should this be a test of legitimacy. Rather than demand crumbs from the state, the activists took decisive action to eschew the subjugation that claiming rights in former imperial states exacts. As an alternative, activists have started to create fragile new communities outside the state and the white gaze in order to survive and protect those on whom the state wrecks violence. We wonder, however, how long this refusal and withdrawal can be sustained. These activists have given us insights into what becoming ungovernable can look like. For them, it is to embrace invisibility, to exist beyond the easy reach of the state in order to care and protect themselves and those who are also disrespected and despised. A new world is perhaps being built, but it will remain strategically invisible to many in order to preserve the precarious sovereignty these activists have painstakingly built for themselves.

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