11. Exiles in the city: A triptych

Guido Snel, Sepp Eckenhaussen and Fien de Ruiter

The best way to see Amsterdam is through the eyes of an exile
Guido Snel

In the middle of what has come to be known as the ‘refugee crisis’ in the summer and autumn of 2015, a seemingly simple twist took place in the public discourse over the figure of the refugee as a result of one photo – a boy washed up on a beach. Until that point, the response to the eternal ambivalence towards the ‘newcomer’, the ‘migrant’, the ‘immigrant’ – what Georg Simmel suggestively characterised around 1900 as ‘the one who comes today and stays tomorrow’ – had degenerated into blunt rejection. Those who risked their lives on the Mediterranean Sea in order to reach the EU – preferably Germany or the United Kingdom – were at best economic refugees but in most cases simply fortune-hunters. But now national TV evenings for the refugees are organised and the entire nation sympathises with the train of refugees, as it did before with the starving people in Ethiopia or in other misery-ridden countries.

Traditionally, the counterargument to xenophobia is that migrants are good for society, that they expand the ways of life of a city or a country, that a wider variety of food becomes available in supermarkets, that we would all be less inward-looking and become more cosmopolitan. It is an argument that has proven to be vulnerable since 11 September 2001 and the ensuing debate on Islam. Not all residents of Amsterdam believe they have thrived as a result of the globalisation that has transformed the city since the 1990s into one of the cultural and business centres of Europe. In a certain sense, Amsterdam is indeed a segregated city. Districts and schools are monochrome (sometimes ethnically, always socially) and there is no equal opportunity for
everyone, whatever politics claims. The University of Amsterdam also engages in segregation. The Faculty of Humanities attracts the vast majority of its students from that part of the population that does not have its origins in the waves of immigration of the 20th century. The great migration to Western Europe – which began some fifty years ago with the wave of labour migrants and that was preceded and later intensified by post-colonial migrants – can be considered the most significant social development of the last half century in our part of the continent and demonstrates that the university is no longer firmly rooted in society. In short, the claim that migration is good for our city is not only vulnerable; such a claim may very well be the social privilege of liberal, cosmopolitan intellectuals such as myself. We need – and it may even be a basic need – a diverse society. We stand on the productive side of social diversity; we reap the rewards.

The privilege of the exile

And yet, we who speak about migration from our privileged position do so not (or not only) ex cathedra. Inspired by personal experiences with exiles, I decided to develop a course of study around them. In the 2014-15 academic year, Bachelor students (in music, philosophy, European studies, literature, history and the Dutch language) examined their own city, Amsterdam, from a surprisingly large number of disciplines.

My studies in Serbo-Croatian at the University of Amsterdam were not only instructive because of my teachers and the courses but because at the time I was placed in the cultural infusion of Yugoslavian (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian) immigration as a result of the language. I learned to speak the language fluently in a few months. I learned to listen to peers who just like me were building up their lives but unlike me and my fellow students had had to overcome unimaginable hurdles. I penetrated the circle of immigrants and came to know people in their 30s and 40s
who had had a life in their country of origin (often an impressive career, because unlike the refugee the exile is privileged) and who, once in Amsterdam, had seemingly effortlessly picked up from where they had left off in Sarajevo or elsewhere. From among these people, I would like to put one in the spotlight here because he, the exile, showed me – born and bred in neighbour-ing Amstelveen – the true potential of Amsterdam like no other person could.

Dragan Klaić arrived in August or September of 1991. He became director of the Dutch Theatre Institute on the Herengracht in Amsterdam. The job interested him only partially. He was a writer and a scientist and above all a theatre maker. He accepted the job because he knew that he had to escape Yugoslavia with his family, and the position in Amsterdam had presented itself to him. Later he wrote that he had been ‘practising’ his exile for years before coming to Amsterdam by moving with his family to London and then on to Yale, thereby casting out his social network further and further. But perhaps this is a romanticised version. Exiles tend to romanticise their choices and dilemmas like no other, in a reality that is bleak and stark. In any event, his exile was exemplary. He was crazy about Amsterdam, but most probably he considered Dutch culture – including the theatre – covertly provincial. He had simply seen too much of the rest of the world. This alone taught me to put my own city in perspective. And then there were the famous dinners at his house. He was a good cook (in London he had worked in a French restaurant when he was a student, learning both fluent English and the basic techniques of the famous French chef Escoffier). On a weekly basis, the most diverse groups of people joined him for dinner: fellow exiles passing through, colleagues from foreign universities, but mainly Amsterdammers, bien étonnés de se retrouver ensemble. Because although Amsterdammers may have the reputation of being hospitable, in practice they will defend their own social sphere with tooth and nail. At Dragan’s place, you got to know half the people in the Amsterdam cultural community within a year. In the meantime he travelled a lot, worked
very hard and slept so little that he regularly closed his eyes when at the head of his table, without any sense of embarrassment.

If I had to summarise what his friendship meant to me, then it would be learning to look at things in perspective – the perspective of an outsider. For while a true urbanite may be proud of his city, city chauvinism is not for him. The true urbanite knows that other cities have more of the same and always to a greater degree. The true quality of a city is its complexity which exists in the endless links that the city – as an organism of steel and stone – maintains with other metropolitans elsewhere, beyond the country’s borders. And in that unbelievably complex organism, one is always in more than one place at the same time. An exhibition, a film, a new novel, the political issues of the day – things that cause people to feel that distinctive, fleeting excitement in their own city – everything that one experiences goes through the prism of the urban experience, which always makes everyone somewhat of an outsider. In exile, this experience is condensed (sometimes leading to unbearable pressure).

The exile’s part

The pain is often for the exile, while the satisfaction of curing is for the receiving city. And the city has a selective memory. It honours the memory of famous exiles – the Spinozas – but all the other hundreds and thousands are forgotten or at least not remembered. And yet they contribute to the texture of the city.

This is why I gave the students the following assignment: search for exiles in archives, via the internet, everywhere, and see who you come across. This not only led to the creation of an inventory (which was partly based on coincidence), it also mapped out the most obvious structures in which exiles are remembered. The output was prodigious. Research was conducted on famous exiles in Amsterdam such as Yuri Egorov, the pianist who escaped the Soviet Union at the end of the 1970s, and his compatriot Andrei Amalrik, who received shelter from the writer Karel
van het Reve. These were well-documented exiles: in Egorov’s case there were concert recordings, a documentary and a novel based on his life. And the research on Amalrik even uncovered questions about him that came up in a parliamentary session. But also the less well-known cases came into view. A number of students looked into the lives of Indonesian intellectuals and artists who fled Suharto’s regime. Basuki Resobowo – painter, writer and communist – chose to waste away in self-imposed misery in a basement near Oosterpark. The exiles’ university, it was discovered, was an important refuge for them, for example for Sorin Alexandrescu in literature and Dubravka Ugrešić in Slavic studies (she testified to this in a roman à clef). Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman taught at the University of Amsterdam in the 1960s, and two students reconstructed his network with great precision. They found out that the university had kept no records of the content of the lectures that Dorfman had given there.

And the networks of the students themselves? The ex-cathedra approach was quickly disavowed. Dorfman turned out to have lived in the same street as one of the students who researched him, and her family members turned out to know people in Dorfman’s network. One student, who taught Dutch as a volunteer to so-called illegals, made a convincing plea to also include one of her students – hereafter referred to under the pseudonym Ahlam – with her own definition of exile. Ahlam is one of the refugees who, having been refused asylum, has been wandering the streets of Amsterdam since 2012. The acuteness of her case was cause for despondence, but her combativeness gave hope. The course I was teaching had suddenly been hurled into current events, similar to when I ended up, albeit via a language, in the heart of Amsterdam as cosmopolitan city in the 1990s. The two essays below are about the exiles Basuki Resobowo and Ahlam. They show that exile is no guarantee for cosmopolitan citizenship. The one exile, suffocating in bitterness or hubris, led an invisible life; the other is fighting for her own rights and those of her compatriots and is thereby strengthening the city. But both of them hold up a mirror to Amsterdam for those who want to see it.
A man without a country and without a city
Sepp Eckenhaussen

It must have been when he was seventeen that Basuki Resobowo, the son of a shoemaker, born in 1916 in Sumatra, decided not to tread the beaten path. He dropped his training to become a primary school teacher and enrolled instead in the art academy in Bandung. He became friends with famous contemporaries such as Soedjojono. With their expressionistic painting, they put Indonesia on the world map as a culturally developed country. Armed with drawings and paintings, these nationalistic world revolutionaries travelled throughout the country during Indonesia’s fight for independence (1945-49) to support the cause.

After the war of independence, Resobowo became active in national politics. He became well-known at the national level. He stood for election for the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) but never made it into parliament. He was, however, appointed ‘head of the department for fine arts’ of the LEKRIS, a left-oriented institute affiliated with the PKI that focused on the cultural development of the people. In addition, Resobowo worked in the (communist) film industry as an actor and a painter of decors. Because almost all Indonesian-spoken films just after the war were Chinese productions, Resobowo often travelled back and forth between the two countries.

The road to Amsterdam

On 30 September 1965, the notorious Indonesian coup took place in which six generals were killed in one night. In the chaotic power vacuum that followed, a surviving general, Suharto, grasped the reins of power. Suharto put the blame for the six murders on the PKI and unleashed a communist witch hunt that cost the lives of half a million people. At the time of the coup, Resobowo was in China supervising filming and decided to bide his time there. He was quickly stripped of his citizenship. From
one day to the next, Resobowo went from having a vibrant social, political and cultural life in the centre of power to being thrown back into the margins of society.

The artist-cum-politician was forced to settle in a refugee camp for PKI members in China. Frustrated by his own situation, Resobowo became irritated by the other inhabitants of the camp. Later he wrote that the leaders of the PKI in exile were guilty of ‘self-satisfaction, lack of discipline and ideological superficiality’. This resulted in a total absence of a ‘framework for the continuation of the [political] struggle’. What especially irritated Resobowo about daily life in the camp was the narrow-minded sexual morality. To make matters worse, Resobowo was ‘forbidden to leave China (by the foreign PKI leaders) because there was a suspicion that the PKI was planning to move to Eastern Europe. If this happened, it could damage relations between the host (the Communist Party of China) and the PKI because there were strong differences of opinion between Moscow and Peking.’

After seven years in the PKI camp, Resobowo’s luck changed for the better: in 1972, relations between the Communist Party of China and the PKI deteriorated to such an extent that members of the PKI were no longer welcome in China. Resobowo seized this opportunity to travel to Europa. Through Germany, he arrived in the Netherlands. After receiving political asylum, Resobowo settled in a one-room apartment facing Oosterpark in Amsterdam. According to eye witnesses, his house was shabbily furnished and was like ‘a cave smelling of excrement’. However, Resobowo was not dissatisfied with his hometown because ‘Holland [was] known for its generosity towards the Indonesian people (...) [and] mastering the language [eased] his life and undertakings in his new domicile.’

Adjacent to Oosterpark

In China, Resobowo’s creative activities had been put on the back burner, but in Amsterdam they began to blossom again.
In his basement adjacent to Oosterpark, canvases and pots of paint (partly filled with cigarette butts) took up most of the space. Various young, unknown artists of Indonesian descent visited Resobowo’s house. Nothing is known about his social life in Amsterdam. The only academic literature in which Basuki Resobowo is mentioned is a description of the Indonesian film industry before 1965. In Dutch newspaper archives, the artist is nowhere to be found. None of Resobowo’s paintings are found in any famous Dutch collections, let alone in a museum. The house adjacent to Oosterpark, where Resobowo lived for more than a quarter of his life, was demolished long ago.

And yet Resobowo did leave some traces of himself. After having lived in the Netherlands for more than a decade, he began to write. Between 1986 and 1991, he wrote three books which included a three-part autobiography and a discourse on art theory. These works are kept in the archives of the International Institute for Social History (Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, IISG) in Amsterdam and are accessible to everyone. Resobowo published all his books on his own, which makes the ‘books’ appear at first glance to be thin periodicals or pamphlets. But once opened, their richness immediately comes across. In addition to the text, they are filled with reproductions of Resobowo’s pen drawings and caricatures. It is clear from these publications that in 1991 Resobowo had in no way shaken off his idealistic plumage. In Tentang seni-lukis Indonesia, there is a picture with the following caption: ‘What is the difference between Sukarno and Suharto? Both stand on top of a pile of bodies of the people.’ In the same chapter he hits out at his fellow exiles – former PKI members who had withdrawn to a ‘safe and tranquil stage’ – the PKI’s government in exile, and ‘medieval’ Indonesian society. One by one, Resobowo alienated himself from his former allies and carried on as a ‘single fighter’, as he described himself.

Both the caricatures and the written text are in Bahasa Indonesian. The only traces that Resobowo left in the Netherlands are thus very poorly accessible without knowledge of Bahasa Indonesian. Because Resobowo spoke Dutch well by his own
account, he must have consciously chosen not to target a Dutch audience. Resobowo's involvement was, even after all those years, still completely reserved for Indonesia. His use of the term ‘single fighter’ reflects his resignation to or even embrace of his (ideological) isolation in the Netherlands. It is in fact not so surprising that there are so few traces of Resobowo.

Successive events in 1998 brought an end to this status quo. In May of that year, Suharto's reign came to an end. Soon thereafter Resobowo travelled to Indonesia to set foot on native soil for the first time in 33 years. It was as if he had put off his death in order to experience that moment. On 5 January 1999, Basuki Resobowo died, 83 years old, in Amsterdam.

In the 33 years of Resobowo's absence, Indonesia had undergone many changes. Resobowo's idealism turned out to be focused on a homeland of bygone days. Coming back to his homeland no longer felt to him as coming home. Most probably this is what 'exile' effectively means: to find oneself in an 'intermediate country'. Since 1972, Resobowo's identity had been based neither on the Netherlands nor on the 'actual' Indonesia. Yet it was precisely this 'being in between' that offered him a new self-image as a single fighter. From this identity he actively reflected on his situation and shaped it creatively: 'Luckily I was able to paint and now I try the best I can to write. I try with all my heart with my art and my writing, even if it is perhaps meaningless, and I can set myself a good objective to fight for.' It is clear that Resobowo had made the identity of the isolated single fighter so much his own that he no longer felt connected to the actual Indonesia after returning. The intermediate country had become his homeland.

Excluded in the middle of the city

_Fien de Ruiter_

A woman with an ochre-yellow headscarf wrapped around her head is on her bed speaking on the phone in Somali. On the other side of the room, a woman hidden under a mountain
of clothes is staring out of the window. Everywhere there are pieces of fabric hanging to demarcate areas and to keep the room somewhat warm. There is a heater in the middle of the room. Against the wall there are eight beds, all strewn with pillows and blankets. On the floor is a Dutch secondary-school mathematics book. African music is playing in the background. Ahlam sits cross-legged in the middle of the room, looking at an old TV that is showing the livestream of a parliamentary debate on the Dutch government’s integration policy. Whenever she doesn’t understand a particular word, she looks it up on her telephone.

Shelter

At the end of May 2015, the ‘Vluchtgebouw’ (the ‘refuge building’) on the Jan Tooropstraat in Amsterdam was evacuated. The three women that were in the room described above were forced to move out and find lodging elsewhere, together with approximately seventy other residents. Their new residence became the former district office of New West Amsterdam, which had been empty for some time. As has often happened when refugees ended up on the street, a group of squatters had helped them find a new building. This was not likely to be the last building the refugees were to settle in. The group of residents are all part of the organisation called We Are Here. This group was formed in 2012 when a number of asylum seekers whose requests for asylum had been rejected came together and chose to unite in a tent camp in Osdorp. The tent camp was evacuated but the group moved on. They settled in the Vluchtkerk (refuge church), the Vluchtfat (refuge flat), the Vluchtpark (refuge park), the Vluchtkantoor (refuge office), the Vluchthaven (refuge port), the Vluchttgarage (refuge garage) and the Vluchtgebouw (refuge building). They recently moved again, after having been kicked out of the twentieth building they had squatted. In the meantime the group has expanded to include more than one
hundred refugees with rejected asylum requests, spread out over Amsterdam. The constant wandering about for a new shelter is wearing the refugees out.

Via protests and lectures in Amsterdam, the escape group wants to generate more publicity for their problems. On the *We Are Here* website, there is a bank account number where donations can be made. But most of the help comes from local residents who bring food. It is not much food, but most of the days they have enough to survive on. If it is really too little, they appeal for help on Facebook or ask for help in other ways. They also find many useful things along the side of the road. In the Vluchtgebouw, one strip of flowery wallpaper was hung up that a resident had found on the street.

In this way, Ahlam and the others have been able to create their own micro-community, despite the fact that it has been made exceedingly difficult for them to participate in the society in which they live. In the lodgings there are different rooms, usually divided by nationality so that the residents can communicate with each other. Ahlam sleeps in a room with some fifteen other women, all of Somali descent. They usually cook and eat together. When someone comes to visit, such as a police officer monitoring the building’s fire safety, they are always willing to offer him or her a cup of tea or a plate of couscous. Ahlam almost always has a smile on her face. Despite all the setbacks she has experienced, she remains positive.

Besides her warm personality and her perseverance, there is something else that stands out about Ahlam: her overwhelming need for knowledge. After coming to the Netherlands when she was 25 years old, she tried to learn the Dutch language as quickly as possible. Because she was not allowed to work or study, she spent her days in the library surrounded by Dutch books. After five years, a shaky start with numerous moves and language lessons given by volunteers, she now speaks decent Dutch. She can make herself understood and have a conversation about difficult topics such as the procedures of the policy towards asylum seekers in the Netherlands. In this way she is able to
translate important information for people who can only speak Arabic, Somali or English. Ahlam often goes to the city hall with those living in the same squatters’ building in order to help them with paperwork. She is also very active within the We Are Here organisation. One of the important tasks she has there is to address the media.

Constantly roaming

Ahlam came to the Netherlands in November 2009. She was born in Saudi Arabia, the country to which her parents had fled from Somalia. She went to primary and secondary school there. She had a happy childhood. When the authorities found out that the family no longer had a valid residence permit, they threatened to send them back to Somalia, a country that was still torn by civil war. So the family fled to Yemen. Even though they were living illegally in Yemen, her father did everything possible to give Ahlam a good education. The result was that Ahlam graduated cum laude with a degree in medical studies. Medicine is her great passion. She often talks about it and cannot wait until she can work in a hospital and continue learning. In Yemen, she was only able to work as a doctor for a short period of time because circumstances forced her to flee the country in haste, leaving her mother and brothers behind. Her father had already passed away by then.

What is certain is that it is not going well for Ahlam in the Netherlands. After more than five years of living in this country, she has yet to procure a residence permit and has ended up on the streets after her request for asylum was rejected. In the meantime, the refugee situation in the Netherlands has changed drastically, in particular as a result of the influx of refugees from Syria. This has, however, no direct effect on the situation of the refugees of the We Are Here group. They are all still here, illegally, in the squatters’ buildings in Amsterdam.
Under current regulations, a refugee whose request for asylum has been rejected must return to his/her country of origin. Because Ahlam's parents come from Somalia and because they resided illegally in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Ahlam is officially considered Somalian. This means that Ahlam would not be sent back to Yemen or Saudi Arabia but to Somalia, a country she has never been to.

Ahlam has filed a new request for asylum and is waiting for a decision by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. She often dreams of what she would do if she finally receives a residence permit. She would go back to university as soon as possible so that she can work in Amsterdam as a heart surgeon. When she tells me that she wants to come home to a house where a husband and two children wait for her, a smile appears on her face: ‘And then he would of course already have dinner ready!’

**The authors**

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Further reading

http://amsterdam-in-exile.nl/

The quotes in the section on Resobowo in this essay are from *Bercermin dimuka kaca: seniman, seni dan masyarakat*, or *Mirror images: artist, art and society* (1986) and were translated from Indonesian by Sepp Eckenhaussen.

For more of Resobowo’s story and other stories about exile in Amsterdam, see the website www.amsterdam-in-exile.nl/basuki-resobowo-schrijver/.

Websites of ‘Wij Zijn Hier’ (‘We Are Here’): http://wijzijnhier.org/ and http://vluchtverhalen.nl/.