

We Are Here: Look with Us, Not at Us
Notes on Powerless Sovereignty

By Jo van der Spek for M2M

“Alone we are nothing.” (anonymous member of We Are Here)

Since 2011 irregular migrants, refused asylum seekers, undocumented aliens or whatever they are called, have taken the stage in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam this movement of refugees-on-the-street has a name: We Are Here (WAH <http://wijzijnhier.org/who-we-are/>) . No longer they are in hiding, no more relying on lawyers or helpers, no more being alone and exposed to all sorts of mistreatment. Out in the open, together, demonstrating and camping, demanding a solution. Demanding normal life. An impossible demand? False hope? Short cut to suicide? Or is WAH the solution? Could the show-‘n’-tell method finally succeed in toppling a deadly pyramid of cold measures? Is society moved enough to move their government, to rewind, undo and recreate another world? A world where no man or woman is illegal, where rich and poor can see through hate and fear, where the tourist is equal to the alien. We Are Here is a radical answer to a brutal denial. It’s NO, NO, NO against GO, GO, GO.

Me and my migrant.

Quite often people ask me “what is your solution?” Well, let us first understand what is the problem, because the way you define the problem defines the path to any solution. The power to define is at the heart of the struggle of people that are usually (made) invisible, unheard, disposable.

Imagine you’re a lucky refugee from Eritrea, Sudan or Syria. Lucky because you made it all the way. You are fortunate enough to quickly obtain a refugee status and are allowed to enter the Dutch welfare system through the front gate. Sooner or later you will find out that the tedious and often humiliating life in an AZC (Center for Asylum Seekers) , all the paperwork, even the trouble to get your family safe with you, and getting all the hidden codes right, that all this was just the beginning of normal life in the Netherlands. Thou shalt participate. Integration in a this country is your duty, your fate. And your problem. It is an offer you cannot refuse, but in exchange you are supposed to sacrifice your identity. As they say in Dutch: “*Doe mee of ik schiet.*” (Join or Die).

Take a paperless migrant. Access denied. You live on the street, in the jungle. You are not supposed to be here at all. You are stuck in the black hole of Europe’s migration management, starving in the swamp. Bare life. Negative: leave this country, go back, disappear. You will say: I can’t go back, give me papers, a residence permit, a chance to show that I can work, can contribute, can realize my dreams. He may refer to the well-known American principle of the right to the pursuit of happiness. This is what We Are Here is all about. Not to be an outlaw, a criminal, a beggar, a slave.

A journalist, a politician or maybe yourself would rather look at the problem as too many migrants, too much trouble, risk, even danger. And too many people, readers, voters or friends not liking them migrants, natives afraid to lose their reservation. Their most frequently asked question: “How many are there?” (Answer: we don’t count, everybody counts). They usually find a polite and abstract way of formulating the problem, a reluctance to make it personal and concrete. This reluctance may occur out of fear for your own ignorance or prejudice, afraid to make an incorrect assumption. Or just polite to not offend the other in the conversation. This is the civilized Western eye.

Here we should not forget the homegrown average racist, possibly less civilized, with a myopic bias believing claims about knifing Islamists and voodoo practitioners going after your daughter, your

job, your neighborhood, your pension. In their eye migrants are at best *gelukzoekers* (fortune seekers), in pursuit of happiness. At worst they are profiteers, trespassers and terrorists. Obviously for these folks, the migrants are the problem. But not this nice black guy next door :)

Then there are people who've had intense encounters with refugees, migrants, documented or not, from all parts of the world. Some may have lived themselves among Africans or Asians, or have a common love life. These people will not speak in general abstractions, but rather refer to their private encounters and personal relations. They may be upset about the obstacles that separate one from the other. The unfair visa requirements, the operational autism of the IND, the confusing cultural differences, the expectations turning into frustrations. Migration is a personal story, a challenge for your relation to the other. And to the world. And that can be a huge problem too.

From my personal perspective, as a participating activist of WAH, the problem is the current migration politics, or, as it is called clinically, migration management. These politics lead to death and despair among too many migrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. When the objects, victims and survivors targets of this war on migration start organizing and take the stage in a western capital, it is my trip too. As one of the proud godfathers of We Are Here, I tell my fearless friends without proper papers: "you are not the problem, you are the beginning of the solution". Because they shamelessly show themselves in their miserable circumstances, but also send a message to society: we want Normal life. A slogan that is at once banal and radical: we want to be like you. Equal.

- WAH has been the most successful political campaign of the century in the Netherlands, in the same league as the campaign to unmask *Zwarte Piet*, the black servant of the white saint Nicholas, as a racist icon.
- WAH has provided shelter for 100's of irregular migrants for 5 years. Almost 100 of them have obtained their status, individually.
- WAH has saved the squatters from becoming a negligible factor in the social life.
- WAH has saved the squatters from becoming a negligible factor in the social life, since squatting buildings for the damned of the earth is a new and respectable mission.
- WAH has prevented the criminalization of so-called illegal aliens, as was the intention of the government.
- WAH has determined the national political agenda with 2 governing parties unable to compromise their way out of the dilemma, stuck between the harsh and the almost human treatment of the human debris that they produce.

It's true! So how did we do this?

The hole in your shoe.

Het Asielgat, the black hole you find yourself in when your request for asylum is rejected and are not able to leave this country, will not be filled by the government. Exclusion is of the essence of every system, which says you are either in or out. "*We can't go back*" was the slogan WAH choose for the demonstration celebrating the 4th anniversary (<http://wijzijnhier.org/tijdslijn/we-are-here-is-four-september-4th-2016/>). And this is true in various ways. The uncountable members of WAH have all gone through a series of life changing experiences, leaving home, moving here, fighting for recognition and dignity, so many years lost in absurd life. etc. Supporters too have had exciting and frustrating moments. But refugees have lost a lot and left a lot behind. They will not be the same person when they would go back. Equally, the situation at home will not be the same as when they left. As supporters, we are not as innocent as when we first met. We have changed too. We can't go

back to where we were. We have to move on and hopefully forwards. Life is not supposed to stand still.

“*Life in a refugee camp is on hold*”, I heard Elisabeth Koek say on the radio, based on her experience in Syrian refugee camps. But Amsterdam is NOT a refugee camp.

A political solution for the asylum procedure that would give equal rights (to normal life) to all who are here (in Amsterdam) is not going to happen in the next few years. The mere presence, even symbolically, of WAH is a political fact and a statement in itself. (The mayor of Diemen did not understand this at all, when he asked the WAH band to play at the festival *Daarom Diemen* (Therefore Diemen) , but not make political statements. Undocumented migrants, presenting themselves as the WAH band IS a political statement in itself).

We Are Here had started in 2012 as a tent camp in a fringe neighborhood at the *Notweg* in Amsterdam Osdorp (<https://youtu.be/ZCYqHGWbI9k>). It was a ramshackle tent camp, completely off-grid, depending on the good hearted neighbors for food and a shower, but a sensation for the media, a shock for the authorities and an eye-opener for the people. The population rapidly grew into the hundreds, representatives joined te nation on TV and in Parliament, but nothing really changed. Until the mayor after two months of agony put an end to the camp. And then aborted the imminent self-organizing power and energy of the refs, hand in hand with the church folks. After the eviction on November 30th, shelter was found in an empty and ugly church, soon dubbed the *Vluchtkerk* (Refugee Church). It was first squatted and then patronized by the Protestant Church who had both the financial resources and the good connections with City Hall to run the show, and keep it under control.

We Are Here is presence (<https://www.facebook.com/WijZijnHier/>) AND presentation. Shelter is the basis of being present, both a temporary solution: we are together, safe AND a political statement: visibility, we are real, we exist. For most refs it is ONLY a temporary, or rather intermediary solution, from where to create individual solutions (status, black work, exposure in the media, etc.). A concrete building offers other migrants, supporters, helpers, media, politicians, etc. a meeting point, access to connect with the refs and do things. These things are usually not based on a political strategy at all. Emotional drive and personal relations prevail. The bad side of this, in my humble opinion, is that this approach creates dependencies, and individual paths, rather than collectivity, thinking together, planning and action. The charity aspect, that is also the key element in many of the religiously inspired support offers, can harm the necessary self-organization, articulation and self-representation of refugees-on-the-street. Self-organizing is necessary because it enables you to play your own role in the game and not serve only as a puppet.

The most obvious, albeit negative illustration of the importance of self-management was the *Vluchtkerk*, where all recognized members of WAH were registered and handed ID's, excluding all other refs. While on the other hand all kinds of volunteers were welcome in the church , from hard core anarchists to newborn evangelists.

How was the collective of refugees destroyed? How was the growth of a powerful community stifled? And why are we still here? The Dutch disease is an affection that replaces solidarity by charity, that gives you hope but never satisfaction, that doesn't kill you but helps you perish by yourself. What are the symptoms of the Dutch disease as made visible by We Are Here?

- Keep them moving from camp to camp, jungle to jungle, building to building. Aborting attempts to become part of the local environment.

- Keep the building closed, without exchange. Suffocating those who stay inside the pressure cooker.
- Give some refugees their bloody individual status, making the collective weaker.
- Neglect their power to act, think and decide. Doing it for them.
- Condemn them to being refused, refugees, losers. In need of help and care only.

WAH is the presentation, the visible demonstration, that something is completely wrong in this country, or on this continent. People who are here are damned by the system. To end this damnation, we must change the system. Looking the right way, instead of looking away, is a good start. But personal attachment and charity are not enough. Private solutions are not sufficient. It is really necessary to act together for political change, for a different way of looking at migrants, refugees and at ourselves? Being visible as a group is the basis of presentation. This can be done in different ways. For me it is normal to make visible that We Are Here is in this place, this building. Hanging out banners, handing out flyers, welcoming visitors on a daily basis is the way to go, I would say. But this is NOT happening at all! And if it is happening, it is mostly done by supporters. The visibility for the refs is only every now and then in a demonstration, and spokes persons are talking with the media. But the lobbying is done by supporters, the flyers and press releases are mostly written by supporters. Again, the *Vluchtkerk* was a good illustration: no banner or flyer was visible from outside, everybody inside, doors closed. Lots of media and press, but not much empowerment or self-organizing by the refugees. Although I ought to share some doubt here. I tried myself to create a media space in the basement of the *Vluchtkerk*, with the idea to start producing visibility with and by the collective. This edit space was not adopted in practice, but it was but to a different use: a nicely carpeted prayer (islamic) room.

The good thing of the *Vluchtkerk* was that we broadened the popular support. Quantitatively. But NOT qualitatively. If the tent camp was something closely resembling to a Temporary Autonomous Zone, then the *Vluchtkerk* was quite the opposite. The recognizable refugees were taken in as threatened baby seals. All believers in goodness were invited to come cuddle them to death, embrace the lost lambs in their own herd. This spiritual recolonization did not happen, since the refugees retook the wheel and effectively sabotaged the higher order of the Protestant Deaconry. If only to replace it by a makeshift shelter in a squat run by some weird volunteers, that were happily accused of offering just a worse version of the regular AZC. After the voluntary departure from the *Vluchtkerk*, squatters, supporters and other volunteers opened buildings for the refugees. It was a long range of some 30 buildings that were squatted, lived in for a few weeks or even a year, and then evicted again. The supporters who felt responsible took the blame for the mess that the refs found themselves in. Sometimes happily, more often not.

In return, the most frequent complaint from the activist supporters was: the refs are not active. They just wait. I must admit that I also have trouble with the vegetative side of WAH, but reading *De Successtaker* by Arjen Mulder has shed some new light on this. From this book, I learned that parallel to the dynamic, conscious and rational walk of life, there is another, and much older layer of genetic, natural and instinctive part in human nature that follows a completely different logic. A swarm of geese that flies from north to south and back in a circular sequence does so without thinking or deciding, it just migrates because it is in their genes. A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song. A man doesn't move because he knows where he's going to, he walks because he has legs. We are here, because we are.

WAH is a loose and chaotic assembly of personal relations, innovative projects, daring performances and always surprising moves. Again and again, we have surprised the media, politicians and supporters alike. WAH is unpredictable, in its activity AND in its passivity. This is both a problem and an advantage, a paradox indeed. It's a problem if you think unity and well-coordinated planning and strategic organizing are the most important things. However, chaos can be an advantage if you can see diversity and uncontrollability as equally important aspects of this bunch of "borderliners". Complaining and blaming each other is not helpful. Generously accepting differences, recognizing seemingly opposing cultural codes and ways of life, coming out of your cocoon and seeing the value of other perspectives can be highly rewarding too.

Powerless Sovereignty

One of the myths created by WAH is self-organization. The refugees, it was proclaimed over and over, in *We Are Here*, are a self-organized collective. Among the supporters, there was an outspoken consensus about a fundamental rule: the refugees are in charge of their own fate, supporters do not lead, but follow the needs, ideas and initiatives of the refs. One of the leading Somali ladies of WAH told me in the summer of 2016: "We Are Here is nothing, it is invented by the supporters. They just pretend that it is still something". I felt she had a strong case for saying so. A few months later, the ladies had made up their mind and separated from the men by squatting their own building. They were fed up with men pissing and harassing around, not taking care of anything. The decision to go female only was announced in a general meeting and nobody objected. No one had a better idea. *We Are Her*.

It would be fun to list all the great actions, ideas and plans and initiatives and projects and studies and artworks that were proposed by students, occupiers, mothers, artists and other teachers to this refugee collective. As eager as the western supporter is to offer his or her support, sympathy and great ideas, so reluctant is the illegal migrant to go along with these proposals, invitations and seductive offers. S/he has been fooled, cheated, exploited, humiliated and betrayed enough, including by innocent, good willing folks. Some are only in it for the money. She may have her own ideas about what to do, do together. Pictures vary about what you need, or think you need. Or what the other needs, or thinks s/he needs, or what you think the other thinks, etc. And what together means. What self-organization is. This makes co-creation difficult.

Of course, undocumented refugees are NOT in charge of their own fate. If only because most of them do not FEEL it that way. In essence, an illegal alien, an irregular migrant, a refused asylum seeker, once s/he realizes the precariousness of the situation, once s/he has stopped believing false promises and sweet-talking helpers, once s/he has learned from fellow illegals, has shared their experiences with lawyers, IND, DT&V, the detention complex, the judge and all the compassionate, God-trusting white guys and girls who told them what to do, once they know where they really are: facing a wall of denial. A wall that ranges from "Sorry, I cannot help you", to "As long as you can pay" up to detention and deportation: Go, go, go.

Holland has the best bye-bye service in the world. It is called *DT&V, Dienst Terugkeer & Vertrek* (Repatriation and Departure Service). These people assist the migrant to return to the homeland AND to leave NL. The total collapse of communication between the irregular migrant and the civil servant of this service has inspired a variety of artists to create theatre and film and other stuff. In reality, only the last bit of the name matters: as long as you leave, we don't care where you go. The myth of return is typical sedentary logic, which supposes that man wants to be in one place, like a tree, He always wants to return and must be able to do so. If he is not able, he must be enabled. And if he doesn't go, he must be forced to. Many migrants, however, do not want to return, do not feel able to return but are quite eager to leave NL. But where can they go? It is almost as difficult for a state to get rid of unwanted aliens, stateless persons or otherwise misfits, by transferring him/her to

another country, as to forcibly deport somebody back to a homeland. In Europe, we still have the notorious Dublin Agreement. For people to go Canada or the USA other rules apply, but there are many obstacles too, especially if you have exhausted all your material reserves, including the family gold, the love of your friends and the goodwill of your supporters, to finance a transatlantic trip. And even then, the chances are that you will end up in the same shit elsewhere as the shit you just escaped from.

In a sense, the irregular migrant without a viable option to leave, is kept hostage by the system, by the state. He cannot leave and he cannot stay. This is the limbo. This is the challenge: the art of disappearing. The problem would disappear substantially if the state would handover residence permits, because that would enable a migrant to return to see his or her family, AND then return to his new country of residence. This kind of circular migration is practically impossible due to the current paranoia of states and nation about being overrun by there numbers of anonymous, poor, dark souls.

The Stockholm syndrome (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm_syndrome), hostages identifying with their captors, applies here too. The refused refugees, refusing to accept their refusal. They cannot take no for an answer, because they have no way to go. They will rather drive themselves nuts, wasting their lives, hoping for a miracle, than go back home. And thereby they drive the system nuts too. They keep the state hostage too! This is the sovereign power of the powerless. The sheer act of not-complying (with the order to leave) is actually enough to upset the whole system. In France or in Greece, in Amsterdam or in Las Vegas, in Dubai or Kuala Lumpur, nowhere has the state found the proper key, the solution to the riddle: how can you be human without dehumanizing? The easy answer is that the state has never been designed to be human. Yet most western democracies and even some others, do declare themselves democratic, have signed all sorts of international treaties, etc. Humane is on every politicians' lips, when it concerns refugees, but time and again the absurdity and the cruelty of the regulations comes to light, exposing the inhuman face of the system.

I'll be your mirror.

Coming back to We Are Here, this visible collective of refused, we can wonder what have they gained by their performance, what difference has it made to their fate that they took the stage, what impact have they had on migration politics? And what has changed in their own situation, in their relation to society and the state? And in the interaction with their sisters and brothers supporters? What have we learned from them?

The relation between supporters and refugees should be seen as serious gaming with each other within an economy of care. The supporter is offering something to the refugee (an ear, a meal, some money, love), just like the professional lawyer, doctor or shrink may render a certain service to a client. The refugee may not always make this distinction between (paid) professionals and (paying) volunteers. Their purpose is to stay alive and lead a normal life. But what this normal life means concretely remains highly undefined. My acquired normalcy can differ quite a bit from your dream of it. Yet for both it is absolutely clear that the actual state of affairs is not normal. The challenge for refugees and volunteers alike in this uneven equation is to reach a state of equality and reciprocity. Equality means that the other has the same chance as you to make a life. Reciprocity is a basis for a sustained relation of mutual respect and pleasure. This is not an easy game.

Let us zoom in on the issue of shelter. Squatting normally goes like this: a homeless person comes to the info hour, finds out the way to work, identifies a house, follows the rules of investigation and

comes back with a plan. Then the newborn squatter join forces to squat and secure the place and go on their own way. Squatting is DIY, a way to make yourself a home.

From a WAH members point of view, one could say: this is my shelter. It was opened by the squatters. I will be here as long as possible. It is a place to be, a place to go to. Temporary, not a home, not normal. There is no ownership of the place, of the building. It is not a home. Just a shelter.

The dominant feeling and dilemma for the activist supporters, is that the refs do NOT come forward with great ideas, do NOT stick to the rules of engagement, do NOT show up at the agreed time, etc. "We can't do anything if you don't take the lead, if you are not active." Thereby they declare their own weakness, revealing what? Naive? Hiding behind refugees, avoiding responsibility, denying unequal power relation?

The illegal migrant is not your natural activist. S/he can shy away from taking power by showing empty hands and expressing his manifest lacks of power: no papers, no future, no money, no phone credit, no education, no speak Dutch. What can I do? I am helpless. I need a father or mother to guide me, to feed me. It is the baby speaking. It is my new born son taking my thumb in his little fist. I feel the dynamite. In my experience, it is the most powerful piece of life on earth. This is the power of seduction, running parallel to powerlessness. This power is able to open eyes, to raise tears, to move hearts, to mix minds, to make life.

To understand the power of the outlaw, we must imagine the fear of the lawmaker. His destiny is to keep up the law, updated, respected and all compassing. The true lawmakers lie awake at night, thinking of the ghosts, the zombies he has created. His boat is leaking, the dykes are not dry. Because of these outlaws, Out of control, nothing-to-losers. It hits the DNA of the system, the very soul of the lawmaker. He has created his own denial. His alter alien. It won't go away.

Absence or presence? Active or passive? Individual or collective? Refugee or supporter? Humanitarian or political? There are so many ways to look at We Are Here. We Are Here is about presence, the opposite of absence. People ARE present when they are not hiding. People are WE when they are together. People are HERE when they move together. WE are more. More than refs. More than refs and sups. We are all, here, in Amsterdam. If we want to find hope and make life, we must look around and beyond our own circles. We must find each other, and all others who are willing and able to make a change. That is why I wrote this article, to create space for thinking about a new coalition to make a life in this city.

We Are Here, with its demand for "normal life", is actually claiming equal rights and this is not an empty slogan. We know better than most what it means to NOT have equal rights. Equal rights are part of true democracy. And democracy is being invented, or re-invented as we speak. In many major cities of Europe and in fact around the globe, citizens are not only demanding openness and transparency from the system, but are actually realizing it by creating initiatives, campaigns and platforms that are capable of taking control of the city and making important changes. Barcelona is a good example: it now has a mayor who was before a leader of the movement of renters against eviction. In London, the disaster with the fire in a flat that killed at least 80 people has led to a massive movement for equal rights of all victims (including undocumented migrants) and against the liberal negligence of the politicians that makes these kinds of disasters possible. The Grenfell Tower disaster is a wakeup call and a rallying point for many people. It reminds me of the Schiphol Fire [2005] in the sense that it opened our eyes to the inhumanity of the system.

Equal rights are part of true democracy that starts from the ground, when normal people take up their own destiny and leave the regular politicians, officials and money-mongers behind. The name

of this new phenomenon is Rebel Cities. Also in Amsterdam, people of diverse backgrounds are preparing a similar approach: creating a coalition of civil organizations and social and green activists to change the rules of the game.

We Are Here is one of the most successful political campaigns of this century. It has given hope to many people who sincerely strive for a better world. The refugees have given inspiration, love and a window to see another world as well as offering us a mirror to see ourselves and our society in a different light.

Now, We Are Everywhere.

Amsterdam, August 2017

--

Jo van der Spek is a Dutch journalist and activist, director of the Migrant 2 Migrant Foundation (<http://www.schipholbrand.net/nl/m2m/>) and godfather of the We Are Here movement of refused refugees.

