A naked cat

Stories of Belonging:

“Neighbours cannot be trusted,” Henny confided in me. “They act nice and then they take advantage of you.” Henny knows what he is talking about, he ensures me, they’ve taken advantage of his mental handicap many times. They always make him do things he doesn’t want to. “No, I don’t like neighbours, I know them, I have seen them passing by my house. But I refuse to talk to them. Let them first show that I’m valuable”.

“I just want someone to hold.”

Henny is all by himself. “I’m like that little boy in the mouse Home Alone, you know that one?” He left his parental home when he was 12 years old – “I didn’t want to live with my parents anymore, and they didn’t want to take care of me, so…” – Henny ended up in children’s homes and foster families. He has never felt at home in his whole life. “Don’t even know what that means,” he told me. “When there is no one who loves you or cares for you, you cannot imagine what that must be like.” And that’s exactly why Henny wants to have a naked cat. “Because they are always cold, they are very affectionate.” He wraps his arms around his chest, as if he’s hugging someone. “I just want someone to hold. I have never experienced that. In that sense, I’m as green as grass,” he smiles timidly. “But the problem is,” Henny continues, “if I’m away, I’m away, who would take care of my cat? I can’t ask a neighbour. Neighbours cannot be trusted. They act nice and then they take advantage of you.” Henny knows what he is talking about.

“Creating New Types of Knowledge”

Many of today’s panel sessions include both artistic and scholarly research. At NIAS we believe that arts and science need each other to be able to think beyond boundaries, to push each other outside the disciplinary boxes, and to help understand social and cultural phenomena on the rational, the emotional, the bodily and intuitive level. This is the advantage of bringing various disciplines together;

It enables us - access multiple layers and create new types of knowledge that are necessary to understand and explain the world we live in.

“Push each other outside of the disciplinary boxes.”

When a Country doesn’t Love you Back

In the first keynote speech of the conference, Prof. Gloria Wekker reflects on the emerging field of Studies of Belonging through the lens of race and intersectionality. By highlighting how the topic has been studied in various disciplines and by drawing on her own experiences as one of the very few Black female professors in the Netherlands, she makes the compelling argument that in order to get a meaningful understanding of this subject, we cannot remain colour blind. We have to be race cognisant and understand that although race in a biological sense does not exist, racism is very real, and it informs belonging for people across the globe.

Prof. Wekker shares how her book White Innocence was written out of a sense of justice for the Netherlands. As an act of love. But what happens when that love isn’t reciprocated and when recent research shows that inequality of opportunities in the Netherlands begins the womb? Should we even love our ‘homelands’ and expect them to love us back? ‘Overly emotional relationships between nation-states and citizens might eventually produce exclusion because plagiarism is no longer valued,’ Prof. Wekker points us to the fact that belonging doesn’t have to be exclusive – one can experience it in multiple places. She invites us to examine the notion that the opposite of love is hate doesn’t have to be exclusive – one can experience it in multiple places.

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