THE EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF LIFE WRITING

VOLUME X (2021) BB84-BB101

Stranger spaces:
Embodiment, space and language in the collaborative life writing novel *The Fortune Finder*

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Abstract

The present study takes *The Fortune Finder* (2008) by Edward van de Vendel and Anoush Elman as a case in point to demonstrate how interactions between material bodies, space and power constitute some characters as strangers or, in other words, as bodies deemed out-of-place. The novel is an example of collaborative life writing and describes how a young, Afghan refugee and his family flee the Taliban regime and seek asylum in the Netherlands. Building on Sara Ahmed's work (2000), I demonstrate how their bodies are recognised as stranger bodies through a demarcation of social spaces, which involves including or excluding particular bodies based on matters of normativity and deviance. Protagonist Hamayun and his family are implicated in shifting relationships with power and space that cause their bodies to be recognised as out-of-place in various ways, dependent on their circumstances. The notion of dwelling takes centre stage in these dynamics. It denotes the actual spaces that Hamayun and his family (are allowed to) inhabit, but it also features in a metaphor that links friendship with spaces of belonging. An implied lack thereof suggests how Hamayun eventually seems to perceive himself as a kind of stranger.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, dual authorship, embodiment, strangers

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https://doi.org/10.21827/ejlw.10.38164

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Samenvatting

De gelukvinder (2008) van Edward van de Vendel en Anoush Elman is een auto-fictionele samenwerking tussen een gevestigde schrijver en een jongvolwassen informant, en beschrijft hoe een Afghaanse jongen en zijn familie vluchten voor de Taliban en in Nederland asiel aanvragen. Het boek staat in deze studie centraal om aan te tonen hoe machtsrelaties, (publieke) ruimte en fysieke lichamen interageren en hoe sommige lichamen aangemerkt worden als vreemder dan andere op basis van die interactie. Normativiteit speelt hierbij een belangrijke rol. Het al dan niet voldoen aan bepaalde normen kan beïnvloeden wie zich vrij kan bewegen en wie niet. Er wordt betoogd dat Hamayun en zijn familie onder wisselende omstandigheden steeds opnieuw gezien worden als vreemdelingen, op basis van hun belichaming, en er wordt aangetoond dat die perceptie implicaties heeft voor hun bewegingsvrijheid. Het (niet) hebben van een (t)huis blijkt zowel in materiële als in metaforische zin essentieel voor de manier waarop Hamayun zichzelf uiteindelijk ook in zekere mate als vreemdeling gaat beschouwen.

Trefwoorden: Cognitive linguistics, dual authorship, embodiment, vreemden

Introduction

'I am eight years old and we are suddenly moving houses.'[1] This is the first sentence of the second chapter of the collaborative life writing novel *De gelukvinder* (2008) – henceforth *The Fortune Finder* – by Edward van de Vendel and Anoush Elman. It can also be said to mark the actual beginning of the story, which details the experience of a young, Afghan boy and his family fleeing the Taliban regime. The move turns out to be the first of many. In the course of the narrative, the family is smuggled across parts of Asia and Europe before ultimately seeking asylum in the Netherlands. Because of his young age, protagonist Hamayun is initially kept ignorant of their reason to relocate from Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul. Only later, his older brother reveals to him that it was not entirely voluntarily:

> Why do you think we moved? Padar reads books, Padar has no love for the Taliban, do you think they do not know? In Mazar, it became increasingly more dangerous for Padar. Did you not hear uncle Aaron? He wanted us to move. He thought it would be better here. Well, it is not. (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 36)

Their father, Padar, has been marked by the Taliban as a dissident, an outsider to the regime, for he exhibits a more liberal way of thinking than the regime allows for. Evidently, this has significant spatial implications. Not only does the family feel compelled to move from their home in Mazar-e-Sharif to Kabul, eventually they are forced to leave Afghanistan, for fear of Padar's life. Through surveillance and threat, the Taliban seem to exert control over who are allowed to reside in certain spaces and who, by contrast, are expelled. In this article, I analyse how the material bodies of Hamayun and his family are implicated in this interplay between power and space. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work, I demonstrate how they are allegedly considered strangers as suggested by the spaces they are (not) allowed to inhabit.

In *Strange Encounters* (2000), Ahmed argues that strangers are not simply those we do not know, 'but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place' (21; italics in original). This means that it is not so much an absence of knowledge that produces the figure of the stranger; rather, the stranger is already perceived – *known* – as such. Ahmed characterises this moment of recognition as an encounter, a meeting of bodies in which those bodies are read and valued relative to one another. These encounters are highly embodied processes, not in the least because differentiating between oneself and others 'involves ways of *seeing the difference* between familiar and strange others as they are (re)presented to the subject' (Ahmed 2000, 4; italics in original). For example, in *The Fortune Finder*, Hamayun distinguishes between himself and some beggars close to his school in Kabul, whose embodied differences seemingly fascinate him. As he notices them sitting on small wooden boards and cloths, he recounts: 'We *smell* their stinking clothes and most of the time, a leg, or an arm, or an ear, or an eye is *missing from their bodies*' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 26; my italics). The beggars' bodies are described as incomplete and the absence of limbs marks them as different from Hamayun's own, intact body. By coming (too) close to them, Hamayun becomes aware of the relative strangeness of their bodies through his own senses: he can see as well as smell them.

As suggested, such acts of categorisation are largely dependent upon our embodiment, that is, our experience of living as (or being) a body that thinks. This is a central premise of cognitive linguistics, which holds that 'all thought (both conscious and unconscious) is embodied, and all thought depends on categorizations that are influenced by that embodiment' (Trites 2014, 15). Consequently, the language we use to structure those thoughts influences how we perceive the world around us: 'language use is embodied, and culturally-inflected language use affects how we think about things or *conceptualize*' (ibidem; italics in original). Cognitive linguistics thus proposes a strong interrelationship between embodiment, thought and language. For

the main part of this article, I rely on this triad to show how some bodies are considered strangers in their interactions with space and power, and how language use is involved in the designation of some bodies as stranger bodies. Before I turn to that, however, I briefly explore some implications of embodied language use in relation to *The Fortune Finder*'s dual authorship.

Embodied voices in collaborative life writing

The close interrelationship between language, thought and embodiment is especially intriguing in light of *The Fortune Finder*'s production process. The book is an example of collaborative life writing, which refers to a particular kind of writing process that involves two people producing the life story of one of them (Smith and Watson 2001). *The Fortune Finder* is the first book in the so-called Slash series, initiated by Edward van de Vendel and published in the Netherlands by Querido. Characteristic of the series is the books' dual authorship. Each of the stories is based on young people's lived experiences and drawn up by accomplished, well-known Dutch authors. Primarily, they are works of fiction, Van de Vendel explains, though with a clear reference to the lived realities of actual people (Van den Hoven 2008). In this case, Anoush Elman is the informant, whose story is mediated through author Van de Vendel writing it down. That means that there are essentially two bodies involved in writing the book, and I am interested in whether their particular embodiments leave linguistic traces in the narrative, following the assumption offered by cognitive linguistics that language use and embodiment are so deeply intertwined. At this point, I briefly note that I do not claim to determine any fixed relationships between specific forms of embodiment and language. Merely, I am curious as to how language use in *The Fortune Finder* might allude to the authors' particular embodiments.

Van de Vendel himself describes the Slash project in general, and his collaboration with Elman in particular, as a 'mingling of breaths' (Van de Vendel 2006, 128). Significantly, this figure of speech illustrates one of the ways in which embodiment informs language use. In *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth* (2014), Roberta Trites explains the concept of the embodied metaphor as a natural result of the intimate relationship between embodiment, thought and language. She notes how 'we rely on linguistic concepts to help represent the knowledge we have gained cognitively from living as embodied beings' (Trites 2014, 16). So, we can understand a metaphorical mingling of breaths in terms of physical proximity to others. If we associate breathing with living, the metaphor calls to mind a coming together of different lives (that is,

people), which in turn refers symbolically to the social rapprochement between adult writers and young people that Van de Vendel aspires to achieve with the Slash series (Van de Vendel 2006). In this particular collaboration, it also pertains to a rapprochement between different cultures, as embodied by Elman and Van de Vendel respectively.

For this reason, I propose to view the authors' collaboration as a kind of encounter as outlined above, that is, a coming together of bodies which presumes a certain degree of difference. This is supported by Elman's motive for participating in the project, as he hoped that sharing his story would foster awareness and bring Dutch people and migrants closer together (Van Lierop-Debrauwer and Steels 2021). This suggests a gap in lived experience between these groups, which also informs Elman's and Van de Vendel's specific encounter – the first being an adolescent, Afghan refugee and the latter an adult, Dutch citizen. As such, multiple embodiments and cultural perspectives are involved in the creation of this story.

In light of this, I consider the collaborative life writing process of *The Fortune Finder* an act of cultural translation. Ahmed (2000, 58; italics in original) understands cultural translation as a process of 'making the strange appear *within* the familial as clearly as possible'. It involves presenting particular (cultural) elements into another target culture. To analyse this practice, I draw on two concepts from translation studies, namely domestication and foreignization (Venuti 1995). These refer to two distinct approaches translators can adopt when translating an alien text to the sociolinguistic context of a given target culture. Domestication, Venuti (1995, 20) explains, encompasses an 'ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values'. This means that culturally-specific aspects are explained in the context of the target culture. Foreignization, by contrast, is an 'ethnodeviant pressure on (the target-language cultural AK) values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text' (ibidem). A foreignizing approach thus preserves those aspects typical to the alien culture and accentuates the cultural situatedness of the story. Though I do not apply them to a translated text, I find Venuti's tandem concepts applicable to this case, because they allow for an exploration of how specific forms of language use might point to the authors' cultural embodiments (that is, Dutch and Afghan).

My argument is that *The Fortune Finder* exhibits a combination of foreignization and domestication that underlines the book's dual authorship. As the text is published in the Netherlands and originally written in Dutch, it presumably aims at a general audience of Dutch-speaking young people. As such, a domesticating approach likely corresponds to a Dutch cultural perspective, whereas a foreignizing approach would maintain an Afghan point of view. An example of domestication is presenting

particular Afghan words in italics, making them stand out, and providing either a translation or an explanation to an implied Dutch audience that might not be familiar with these terms yet. The first mention of the word '*sharia*', for instance, is followed by a short clarification: 'the holy rules implemented by the Taliban' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 23; italics in original). To give a few other examples, '*[b]atsjem*' is subsequently translated to 'my son' (idem, 16; italics in original) and the slogan '*Zenda bad Taliban*' to 'Long live the Taliban' (idem, 58; italics in original). Significantly, Afghan words are not actually replaced with a Dutch equivalent in the course of the narrative. Rather, they are mostly clarified only the first time they appear, so the narrative caters to an intended Dutch audience to some extent, but expects them to learn the words as well. It relies on the readers' memory to incorporate the words as part of their own linguistic knowledge.

By contrast, some Afghan words are seemingly left unexplained, demonstrating a foreignizing approach. Instead, their meaning can often be deduced from the context in which they appear. An example is the honorific '*sahib*', meaning 'sir' (idem, 24; italics in original). The text does not explicitly provide this definition, but because Hamayun is addressing his teacher this way, it can nevertheless be assumed to be a kind of title. Such an approach invites an implied Dutch readership to put some cognitive effort in discovering the words' meanings. Another type of foreignization evident in the novel invites the assumed Dutch-speaking audience to take a step back and consider the particularities of their (native) language. It occurs when Hamayun is having difficulty grasping the meaning of certain words: 'In the meantime, words like "if" drive me mad. I hear it in every third Dutch sentence. If. What is "if"?' (idem, 185). Hamayun's questioning of linguistic specificities is part of his translation process from Afghan to Dutch, whereby the narrative encourages the intended readers to share Hamayun's point of view. It emphasises a different culturally embodied position than that of the presumed target audience.

To conclude this brief analysis, I interpret the confluence between domestication and foreignization as a linguistic representation of the authors' 'mingling of breaths', as Van de Vendel (2006, 128) describes the Slash project. As mentioned, I consider this to be a mingling not just between adult authors and young storytellers, like Van de Vendel envisioned, but particularly in terms of different cultural embodiments. The acts of domestication and foreignization illustrate and encourage a coming together of Dutch and Afghan cultures through the exchange and acquisition of linguistic knowledge. I have confined my exploration to the narrative itself, focusing in particular on culturally-inflected language use as one domain that might hint at the authors' specific embodiments. A more detailed inquiry into how the authors'

embodied voices have intermingled to construct the narrative and its representation of embodiment, and what other acts of cultural translation might have taken place, requires more insight into the novel's production process. That is, however, not within the scope of this study.

Recognising strangers in *The Fortune Finder*

For the remainder of this article, I turn to the role of embodiment in the demarcation of social spaces within the fictional world presented in *The Fortune Finder*. Specifically, I examine how the characters' bodies are implicated in shifting relationships with power that affect what spaces they are (not) allowed to inhabit. As the narrative progresses, Hamayun and his family find themselves in various countries: from their home in Afghanistan, they flee through unspecified 'no man's land' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 127) before ultimately arriving in the Netherlands. I analyse how each setting involves a particular correlation between material bodies, power and space to demonstrate various implications of being deemed strangers.

'Passing' strangers

The first part of the novel is set in Afghanistan, at the end of the twentieth century. The Taliban are presented as in control, exerting power over people's lives through their interpretation of the sharia, the Islamic legislative system. The sharia entangles the material bodies of the Afghan population in discursive regulations that affect their physical appearances. For example, it dictates that men wear their facial hair long and the hair on their head short. Perhaps partly because it is required but also because she believes in the religious validity of the rule, Hamayun's grandmother cuts her grandsons' hair every second Thursday. She declares: 'A man has short hair […] So the Prophet tells us' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 57). Importantly, such physical characteristics appear to be a distinctive factor for Hamayun to recognise those in control. At a glance, he identifies members of the Taliban law enforcement: 'All are wearing a turban. All wear their beards long. Taliban police' (idem, 43).

Likewise, the Hazaras, an ethnic group in Afghanistan, are singled out based on their embodiment, with significant material consequences. The dominant social perception of the Hazaras influences Hamayun's encounter with a member of this group, named Morteza, whom he describes as follows: 'He has a round face and slanted, Asian eyes. He must be a Hazara. The Hazaras are treated extra badly in Afghanistan. Many people, and especially the Taliban, consider the Hazaras an

inferior people' (idem, 127). Just by looking at the man's face, Hamayun classifies him as a member of this particular ethnic-cultural group. Moreover, he associates Morteza's embodiment with a presumed notion of inferiority, though he does not act on this prejudice. Nevertheless, the Hazaras' material bodies are clearly incriminated in a discourse of deficiency. Even before the Taliban regime was installed, the Hazaras had been discriminated against, partially because of their faith and their distinctive ethnic origins, which are presumably Mongolian. The Hazaras are well-known for their poetry and music, cultural traditions that have been passed down for generations, mostly orally (Minority Rights Group International, n.d.). Morteza is, in fact, a professional singer. However, singing is prohibited by the Taliban (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 23). As such, bodies are controlled in their expression of emotions and Morteza is not only denied his profession, but also part of his cultural heritage.

The material aspect of embodiment makes it quite easy to notice those who do not (want to) correspond to the norms enforced by the Taliban. At one point, Hamayun's best friend Faisal is fascinated by the American film *Titanic* and decides to wear his hair long, like leading actor Leonardo DiCaprio. This is not tolerated by agents of a special Taliban police force, the vice squad, who patrol the streets to check whether the rules for outward appearance are being followed. Out of the blue, they violently intercept Faisal and Hamayun. The patrol roughly cuts the left side of Faisal's hair and demands that his father cuts the other half. For fear of future reprimands, Faisal resolves never to grow his hair again. The passage shows how Faisal is temporarily considered an outsider to the norm, because of his hairstyle. For the Taliban, Faisal's body – as it looks like before the arrest – does apparently not belong in public space.

What this scene aptly demonstrates is that (fear of) surveillance and punishment are primary means by which those in power can regulate particular bodies in space. Michel Foucault (1975) asserts that systems of punishment involve a 'political economy' (25) of the body, which means that it is always the body that is at stake in power relations. It can be controlled by various means, as Foucault explains:

> This subjection is not only obtained through the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order. (Foucault 1975, 26)

Foucault thus identifies two particular manners of subjection: violent versus non-violent. I discuss the latter option in reference to the Dutch political system, in which Hamayun and his family end up in the last part of the novel. The Taliban regime, on the other hand, exemplifies the more violent way of subjection that Foucault describes. In Afghanistan, deviant bodies are dominated through corporeal punishment, as the narrative suggests. In what follows, I discuss characters' embodied reactions to such power play, specifically in terms of (lack of) voice.

The Fortune Finder describes how the Taliban regime sometimes publicly executes criminals in a soccer arena. People can come and watch as if they were spectators at a sports event. One day, Hamayun and his classmates are forced to attend such an execution. When he understands what he is about to witness, Hamayun suddenly feels cold. His reaction is physical and inspired by fear. So, not only does the regime discipline its criminals in a corporeal way, it also instils fear in its subjects in a material fashion. Faisal's response is equally embodied, albeit differently. As a psychological defence mechanism, Faisal hums a song from his and Hamayun's beloved Bollywood film *Taqdeerwala* during the execution. He even makes the accompanying dance moves with his hands. On the way home, his humming grows into soft singing. Singing is forbidden under Taliban rule, as is watching foreign films. Faisal thus rejects the Taliban's power display he just witnessed by subtly, but deliberately, defying their rules.

Hamayun, on the other hand, finds himself incapable of voicing his resistance. When the Taliban raid Hamayun's house in search of his father, he narrates:

> My jaws start to tremble. I put my hands to my mouth, I fear I am going to scream. But I make no sound. My hands are shaking along with the lower part of my face. I am going to explode, I am sure, I am going to explode completely. (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 41)

As the Taliban return once more that same night, he adds: 'I want to scream again, and yet again I cannot' (ibidem). Hamayun's voice fails him in a similar manner when Faisal is arrested. Because the ability to speak – and being heard – is often linked to issues of power and agency (Byrd and Rothberg 2011 and Nikolajeva 2010), his loss of voice signals a certain degree of powerlessness. Hamayun has no control over the situation and, by analogy, loses control over his shaking body.

The Taliban invading Hamayun's home demonstrates how their authority extends from the public domain into the private sphere. In the introduction, I mentioned how Padar has been recognised by the Taliban as an outsider to the regime. Even though

the family takes care to meet the norms regarding outward appearances, it is Padar's way of thinking that effectively renders him a stranger in the eyes of the Taliban. Padar is a so-called 'free thinker' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 36), which means that he trusts his ratio more than religious discourse. Free thinking can be considered an embodied metaphor (Trites 2014). We understand what it means for our bodies to be free, to go wherever one pleases, as opposed to being unfree or restricted in one's movements. Likewise, free thinking suggests that our minds can wander freely – thus, that one can think whatever one wants.

However, the Taliban seem to regard such free ways of thinking as an anomaly, a potential threat to their authority. For instance, Padar's ideas have spatial implications for other bodies. He is a teacher and thus has a considerable influence on young minds. Padar disagrees with the Taliban refusing girls an education, teaching them anyway and allowing girls' bodies a space in the classroom that they are otherwise denied. In doing so, he knowingly violates the Taliban's rules. Padar is consequently banned from teaching – expelled from the classroom – and even feels compelled to leave Mazar-e-Sharif and eventually Afghanistan for fear of his own life. Similarly, the family's free way of thinking is the reason the eldest son leaves Afghanistan ahead of the rest, as he explains to Hamayun why he has to go: '"Because I have to," he says, "otherwise, they take me." "Do you think freely, then?" I ask. "Of course I think freely. We all think freely. So do you"' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 45). According to Ahmed (2000, 52), 'The subject who can act and move in the world with ease […] does so through expelling those other beings from his zone of living'. In the novel, the Taliban ascertain their own powerful position by removing dissidents through threats of imprisonment and death, displacing those who decide to flee. Remarkably, a reverse effect of embodiment also applies. For Hamayun's grandmothers and baby brother, the physical implications of their age determine that they stay in Afghanistan, for they would slow the family down: 'Fleeing requires choosing the fastest route. In the least amount of time. And so we leave our grandmothers' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 95).

Foucault (1975, 25) writes that 'the body is […] directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it'. The Taliban appear to exert a certain degree of control over people's bodies – dictating how they should look, for instance. However, people's minds are not so easily changed as one's hairstyle. For a while, Hamayun's family can *pass* as citizens who abide by the Taliban's account of the sharia. Eventually, though, it is the cognitive part of their embodiment that renders them strangers to the Taliban. They are recognised as those who do not meet the Taliban's ideological norms. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed proposes that

> A norm is something that can be inhabited. I think of a norm as rather like a room or a dwelling: as giving residence to bodies. […] Not to inhabit a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside. You might be asked questions; you might be made to feel questionable so that you come to feel that you do not belong in the places you live, the places you experience as home; you might turn up and not be allowed in or find it too uncomfortable to stay. (115)

Hamayun's and his family's free way of thinking does not correspond to the norms set by the Taliban. As a result, they (are made to) feel uncomfortable – unsafe even – because of their embodiment and consequently (feel) forced to leave. For the Taliban, theirs are the bodies that do not belong in their zones of living, stranger bodies. As this first part of the analysis shows, the recognition of so-perceived strangers does not necessarily involve a crossing of borders. Ahmed (2000, 6) notes that the stranger is not just the 'one who leaves home and moves to a different place'. Such an approach would mean overlooking how the stranger 'comes into being through the marking out of inhabitable spaces, bodies and terrains of knowledge' (idem, 79). Still, the family does cross borders and so, the following paragraph delves into the ways in which their bodies are still constituted as stranger bodies, though in different dynamics of power and space.

Bodies-on-the-go

The family's flight to Europe roughly forms the second part of the book. Now, embodiment, power and space interact in ways that construct their bodies as commodities, as goods to be transported from one place to another. The designation of bodies as commodities is reflected in the nickname Hamayun gives to the smugglers. He calls them '*qachaqbar*' in Dari or 'bottendrager' in Dutch, which roughly translates to 'carrier of bones'. As Hamayun explains: 'Similarly to how a dog secretly smuggles a stolen bone from one place to another, this *qachaqbar* will bring us to Europe. He is the dog, we are the bones' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 128; italics in original). The metaphor hints at an objectifying and dehumanising of the refugees' bodies. It implies that they may have been humans once, but now they are no more than remains – objects without volition – to be picked up and carried around.

However, Morteza, the Hazara singer, dismisses this image. He acknowledges to the other refugees that they are contraband, smuggled goods, but that they are still breathing and therefore human nonetheless: 'What we have are stories and jokes and

breath and hope and music. Let me sing some more, and help me with the rhythm' (ibidem). Not unlike Faisal humming during the execution, Morteza uses his voice and his cultural heritage to reject their apparent powerlessness and invites others to join him. Nevertheless, I suggest that this passage can be read in light of an imbalance between speaking and hearing that typically informs a subaltern position. Subalternity refers to a state of subordination as a result of social, cultural, racial, economic and/or linguistic power inequalities.[2] Those power inequalities create a 'gap between the "sender" and "receiver" of messages' (Byrd and Rothberg 2011, 6). Subaltern groups can speak, though they are not (always) heard. In *The Fortune Finder*, subjects like Morteza are silenced by the Taliban's ban on singing. Though he feels free to sing once out of Afghanistan and is actually heard by his fellow refugees, other restricting factors now come into play. The smugglers occasionally forbid the refugee group to make (too much) noise, to prevent them from being heard and found by people living nearby the hiding houses. From time to time, they have to pretend not to exist.

It is important to note the shift in power here. Not the Taliban, but the smugglers – who help the refugees escape from the Taliban in exchange for money – are in charge now. Unlike the Taliban, who exert power from the centre of society, the smugglers have to work in the margins, illegally transporting people using false identity cards and travelling under the cover of dark, out of sight. This is reflected in the spaces they have access to: the refugees are hidden away in decayed houses, far away from society whenever possible and residing in so-called 'no man's land' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 127). They are in-between places, in the sense that they are not yet where they want to be, but neither can they return from whence they came. Even though the Taliban are defeated at this point in the narrative, they have reached a point of no return, as Padar tells his son: '"No Hamayun. We are certainly not going back (to Afghanistan AK)." I nod, because I suddenly realise I do not want to. We really cannot go back anymore. We have walked through too many forests' (idem, 135-136). Spatial distance appears to alienate Hamayun not only from his home country, but also from his sense of self as he contemplates: 'There is so little in the forests and in the faraway houses that reminds me of Kabul. Everything smells different, everything tastes different. Maybe I am not the Hamayun I once was, maybe I am some kind of on-the-go-Hamayun' (idem, 131). I come back to the effect of memory on Hamayun's feeling of in-betweenness in the final paragraph. For now, I want to point out that the cause for their flight and the flight itself seem to leave physical traces in their bodies-on-the-go in the form of (metaphorical) malady.

After hearing that the Taliban have been defeated, Hamayun compares the liberation of the country to the healing of a body: 'It is as if we were ill, all of us, and

as if we are healed by the touch of a large, invisible hand' (idem, 136). However, the imagined illness lingers in the form of actual physical discomfort. After being trapped too tightly in the back of a car during their journey, Hamayun develops asthma. His mother suffers from the same ailment, though she already did before the family left Afghanistan. Like most illnesses, asthma is inherently embodied. It involves having difficulty breathing and can therefore be directly linked to living, as breathing (whether naturally or otherwise) is an essential aspect thereof. In the novel, it is also symbolically associated with notions of freedom and feelings of being in-place. Hamayun strongly ties his asthma to his body-on-the-go: 'that disease is part of being on the go, of dirty houses and having to walk for far too long' (idem, 184). Therefore, he does not understand why his mother suffers another attack after they have arrived in an asylum centre in the Netherlands: 'Madar is having an asthma attack. […] But why does Madar have another attack? We are free now, right? Or not?' (idem, 177).

Arguably, Hamayun believes their arrival in the Netherlands to be the end of their journey. They seem to be free now, for the smugglers have let them go. As the family is assigned rooms in a Dutch asylum centre, Hamayun initially feels in-place: '[…] I want to throw open the windows and roar to the whole of Amersfoort that I am here and that I have my own living space' (idem, 180). However, when their requests for asylum are repeatedly denied and the family faces eviction from the country, Hamayun comes to realise that his journey might not be over yet – that he soon might be on the go again. When the police officers come to take them away, Hamayun's notices how his breath starts to squeak for the first time in years. The prospect of having to move again seemingly triggers his asthma, reinforcing the assumed association with Hamayun feeling out-of-place – a feeling that appears to have been subdued for some time, but never truly gone. Before commenting on the role Hamayun's memory plays in reinforcing this feeling, I now turn to the representation of asylum centres as spaces in which the family's bodies are designated as bodies out-of-place once again.

Embodied memories

As discussed, in Afghanistan, the family's embodiment allowed them to pass (momentarily, at least) as central citizens who meet the norms set by the Taliban forces. In the Netherlands, however, their embodiment marks them as strangers from the start. As soon as they arrive, their relative otherness becomes apparent in linguistic terms as Hamayun has to ask a security officer in English: '*Can you tell us where we are? In what country?*' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 155; italics in original). Their

knowledge gap, which is embodied by the choice of language, sets them apart from Dutch residents and shapes the officers' reading of their bodies. They are recognised as refugees and thus sent to a shelter.

Ahmed (2000, 22) notes that 'The recognisability of strangers is determinate in the social demarcation of spaces of belonging'. In *The Fortune Finder*, Hamayun and his family are appointed temporary places to live, pending the outcome of their asylum appeal. They are not quite free to choose themselves, though they exert some influence by requesting (and being granted) permission to stay near their son, Bashir, who left Afghanistan before the others did and now lives in Amersfoort, a city in the centre of the Netherlands. Tellingly, they first arrive in Amersfoort and so, in some way, the family is exactly where it is supposed to be – reunited with their son and brother. However, they are soon sent to shelters and asylum centres, first in Zevenaar and then in Hoogeveen, moving further away from the centre of the country and closer to the border with Germany. When their requests for asylum are repeatedly denied, Hamayun and his family are sent even further into the country's periphery to Ter Apel, a village in the north-east of the Netherlands. At that point, they have exhausted their legal options and have been decisively marked and treated as those who seemingly do not belong in the eyes of the state. Subsequently, they are expelled from – that is, requested to leave – the Netherlands.

As discussed earlier, Foucault (1975) argues that using force is but one way to subject bodies. In my view, the Dutch system of asylum as it is portrayed in *The Fortune Finder* asserts power through forms of surveillance and restriction that are not physically violent, but that still impact considerably on the refugees' material bodies. Upon entering the first shelter they are sent to, the family's bodies are thoroughly searched. Having to undress completely in front of the military police causes Hamayun great embarrassment. Their apparent lack of privacy also becomes apparent in Hamayun's observation that they are continuously being watched: 'But I keep thinking about those security people. Why are they so severe? And why are there cameras everywhere?' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 170). Furthermore, their personal space in the asylum centres can be invaded just as easily, as the police have a spare key of the rooms in case they need to coerce someone to come with them.

Similar to how their embodiment led Hamayun's grandmothers and baby brother to remain in Afghanistan, Bashir's (and potentially Hamayun's) embodiment affects their chances of staying in the Netherlands. Bashir mentions how his age and ethnicity, coupled with him travelling without supervision, meant that he was a single, underage asylum seeker. This combination proved favourable, as it gained him a permit to stay on social grounds. After many denials, Hamayun is at one point asked whether he

would like to detach his asylum request from that of his parents. It is implied that he would stand a better chance if he did. Significantly, the question is asked in reference to his school reports, which show great results. It seems as if Hamayun has somehow proven his merit. Ahmed (2000, 4) maintains that 'some-bodies are already recognised as stranger and more dangerous than other bodies'. Perhaps, Hamayun's intellectual potential as an individual body makes him seem less 'dangerous' than the collective body of his family.

This collective body ostensibly fails to meet the norms set by the immigration services for acquiring a permit to stay. Though they procure several documents stating that Padar's life is in danger upon returning to Afghanistan – including an order for Padar's arrest from one of the rebelling militias – those seemingly do not suffice: 'They want me [Padar AK] to prove that the order for arrest is authentic. But how can I prove that? With the help of the Afghan government, they say. But the government does not authenticate their opponent's papers. Why do they ask this of us?' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 278). There is a certain degree of incommensurability (Byrd and Rothberg 2011) to the demands of the immigration services: Padar is asked to prove something he cannot do for exactly those reasons that led him to flee Afghanistan in the first place. The agency they display in acquiring those necessary documents – sometimes with great risks – is then limited by them being held to unattainable standards.

Meanwhile, Hamayun himself finds some agency in language and creative writing. For one, he acts as the family's translator during the journey, as he is the only one who knows English. Later, his (linguistic) knowledge is linked to personal growth as he translates their immigration file for Padar, who cannot read it himself as it is written in Dutch: 'I pretend as if I am older, and stronger, and when we finally reach the final page, I am. […] I have translated every sentence calmly, one by one' (Van de Vendel and Elman 2008, 222). Moreover, at the request of his teacher, Hamayun writes a play about his life, in order to enlighten his peers on the matter of immigration and asylum: 'No one in this school really knows' (idem, 14). Writing the play involves a significant dependence on memory and so, it turns out to be a highly embodied process: '*I saw everything in my mind's eye, and again I became the eight-year-old Hamayun, the ten-year-old, or the eleven-year-old. It was uncomfortable. My thoughts had not been in Afghanistan for so long*' (idem, 98; italics in original). The passage hints at the material effects of remembering; Hamayun describes his memories as having actual spatial and temporal effects on his physical body, not only figuratively but also literally: 'I had been hammering away on my keyboard' (idem, 158).

Memory, writing and identity also intertwine in Hamayun keeping a diary – and especially in sharing that diary with his best friend, Faisal. A diary is quite a personal

act of life writing. In showing it to Faisal, Hamayun opens up to him in a way he cannot do with any of his Dutch friends: '*I still did not have a Dutch house. I had no passport, of course, but I also had not shown my diary to anyone here*' (idem, 299; italics in original). He feels incapable of forging meaningful relationships with anyone in the Netherlands and relates this feeling of lack to forms of dwelling, which can be interpreted both literally and figuratively. At this point, Hamayun and his family are still unsure whether they can stay; they do not have an actual house to call their own (nor in the Netherlands, nor in Afghanistan as their home has been burned down). The absence of a house figures strongly in Hamayun's sense of being out-of-place, as he describes it as follows: 'The feeling that everybody in the whole wide world has houses, and work and friends, roses in the garden and pigeons on the roof. And that we are cut away from that world, deleted. That we float in an unreal in-between life' (idem, 52). His embodied feeling of floating suggests an uprooting, having no steady foundation to build a life in the Netherlands yet. In fact, his memory of Faisal seems to anchor Hamayun to Kabul instead, and to his younger self:

> *Faisal was my eleven-year-old best friend. He was a strong house, a house with thick walls and a good foundation. And no one, not even my own girlfriend, was allowed to go looking for that house. Yes, I thought, that is it. The risk that my life would be cut in half, because anything about Faisal, his friendship, his whereabouts, his age, was different than I remembered, that was a risk I did not dare to take. Because I would not have a house left.* (idem, 299; italics in original)

Faisal thus comes to symbolise a dwelling in which Hamayun feels at home, comfortable and in-place. This dwelling is very much rooted in Afghanistan, grounded by the memories of Faisal, which complicates Hamayun feeling in-place in the Netherlands. Therefore, not only physical forms of housing, but also metaphorical ideas of dwelling impact on the perception of some bodies as stranger bodies (see Ahmed 2017). Arguably, Hamayun might have come to consider himself a kind of stranger in the Netherlands, owing to his perceived lack of dwelling there – both in a literal and in a figurative sense.

Conclusion

The Fortune Finder demonstrates how power, space and embodiment interact in the perception of some bodies as stranger than other bodies. Building on Sara Ahmed's

work (2000, 2017), I have shown how Hamayun's and his family's material bodies are implicated in relationships of power that consequently affect what spaces they (are allowed to) inhabit. In Afghanistan, the family's compliance to the norms maintained by the Taliban is only partial. They cannot inhabit these as comfortably as others can and are consequently recognised as strangers, those that do not belong in that particular space (according to the Taliban). This exemplifies how the figure of the stranger does not simply refer to those who cross borders and enter different nations; instead, some bodies can be recognised as strangers within the boundaries of their home country. During the flight to Europe, power and space interact in a different way to construct the refugees' bodies as contraband, illegal goods smuggled from one place to another. They are seen as objects without voice or agency, though they do attempt to retain some of their identity through songs and stories. Finally, as the family arrives in the Netherlands, they are marked repeatedly as bodies-out-of-place, requested to leave and removed from the centre of the country into its periphery. Throughout the narrative, language and space are intertwined in the notion of dwellings as actual and metaphorical spaces, in which Hamayun and his family (are) never (made to) feel quite comfortable.

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Notes

[1] My translations from Dutch to English throughout.

[2] Retrieved 24 August 2020 from https://www.dukeupress.edu/subalternity-and-representation.