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Long, Jennifer

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Moving Through the City: Walking in the Shoes of an Ethnographer

Jennifer Long

I spent the last year from September 2009 until late August 2010 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands conducting ethnographic field research for my Ph.D in Anthropology. My project goal was to understand how right-wing anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant rhetoric influenced the ways in which individuals use neighborhood spaces and interact with one another in everyday life. The themes of power, contestation, the creation of meaningful places, and spaces of belonging became more and more important as I asked questions, conducted interviews, and walked the streets of Rotterdam with my eyes open, my camera in my purse, and my recorder close-at-hand.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this research was my own journey as a researcher and an outsider who was finding her way in a new city while meeting its inhabitants. I conducted my research in the Netherlands because it was my mother's birthplace and was a place that had always intrigued me. Although the Netherlands have seen many changes since the 1950s when my mother immigrated with her family to Canada, my background provided me with an interesting and unique perspective from which to conduct this research. In addition to providing more information about the relationships among native and non-native inhabitants, my project provided me with a deeper understanding of how my own immigrant experience touched and diverged from the experiences of those with whom I worked.

Below you'll find excerpts from a blog that I kept during my fieldwork. The purpose of this blog was to chronicle my experiences in the field and foster further discussion concerning place and space related issues as they relate to the contemporary Dutch situation and other city and neighbourhood-based dialogues. The importance of keeping a blog was to allow my participants, the majority of who were fluent in English, insight into my research and a special view into my own experiences as a visitor to their city. It also provided me with another way to communicate to those living in Rotterdam and back home, in Canada. Although I include one or two posts below that focus on interesting space-related examples, the majority detail my attempts to navigate a space that was foreign to me in many ways; whether it be through the physically unknown aspects of the city or my lack of knowledge when traversing particular places at particular times; for example, in the beginning, I was limited in what I could do by my inability to communicate in Dutch.

All posts are available at: <http://riotousrotterdam.blogspot.com/>

Velocity is building, Inertia will soon take over... - Posted on Sunday, August 23rd, 2009

The purpose of this blog is to chronicle my time as a Canadian PhD student conducting ethnographic research in Rotterdam, Netherlands. My adventure starts on September 9th, 2009 and will end roughly about a year later. The countdown to lift off is on and I'm starting to pack and organise for my year away! The question is...it considered unprofessional to allot space in my suitcase to shoes instead of textbooks?

Flatmates...The Unsung Heroes of Ethnographic Fieldwork – Posted on Thursday September 10th, 2009

I have arrived in Rotterdam! Much to my body's chagrin...all travel and no sleep makes Ms. Long a loopy girl. (Jack said it better but hell, I'm tired)

After tying myself up in knots for the better part of two weeks I've finally flown the coop and ended up at my destination. I spent 6 hours and 59 minutes sitting in a cramped A-310 Air Transat flight next to some very lovely husband-wife couple, who were Dutch-Canadians. Their life stories included the husband Tom, who had just been sprung from a two and a half month hospital stay, who recently walked home with a new metal hip for all his trouble. I learned about their foray into providing a group home for young boys/men (apparently for financial reasons although that wouldn't be the first thing that comes to my mind). Accordingly I also learned about two of their residents, both in prison only one on death row. They sweetly reminisced about how one of the boys originally came to them as a 12-year-old male prostitute in downtown Toronto and unfortunately had not ended up much better off (currently awaiting transfer to the Kingston penitentiary because his status as a sex offender was leaked to the general population). The other mentionable, was a young man who is currently sitting on death row for his 22nd year (or something close) in Alabama. 'This man is alright' my Dutch companion said, "He's found Jesus. When we visit him I have to take off my bra and show them that I have nothing in the under wire. We get into this underground room where we meet our 'boy' and there we pray and sing with him, he likes to say grace over the only food we're really allowed down there, potato chips." I'm thinking, who is looking at this sweet bird-like lady, 77 years old in skin, eyes, movement and intentions and thinking...maybe she's got a *shive* in there somewhere...

Anyway, I arrived, claimed all 35 kgs of my luggage and wheel (and warbled) over to the train. Catching the train was relatively easy minus a few brief heart attacks when I suddenly thought that I wasn't going in the right direction. Having showed up in Rotterdam Central (Station) I proceeded to wait for 1 hour for my roommate Pdot to come pick me up.

Pdot doesn't know me from a hole in the wall. I found his want ad for a roommate on an Americanized or rather Canadianized website (justlanded.ca) entitled PhD/exchange student. I thought...well of course, that's me. Anyway, Paulo came to the station to pick me up, helped me buy a tram card (I still have to figure out if it's good for other things as well), lifted my huge-ass suitcase into and out of the tram and MOST importantly up the 4 flights of stairs to the flat. The man is a saint. After a brief tea, he was off for the day, but not before showing me my spotless room (a room that use to be his but which he has acquiesced), and a tour of the 2 bedroom flat. It's more than I could have hoped for. P. is really very nice. He's already got a bike lined up for me and I'm off to find a cell phone tomorrow. Although I arrived alone here, P. and P.'s apartment has solidified my resolution for being here.

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But Pdot was off for first day duties at the uni so I wrestled with my suitcase, unpacking the many rolled clothes into my newly acquired closet, and setting up my webcam so that I could promptly call QueenB (my fellow PhD researcher in the field). Although we had technical difficulties it was wonderful to talk to her. I showed her my room, the place, etc. We made another phone date for tomorrow morning. I also phoned my partner when he got up this morning in Canada for work. It was wonderful to see him although his service provider (satellite internet) made our web cameras continually freeze. Funny faces sometimes and really frightening ones at other times. After signing off again (I'm sure saying goodbye will become easier at some point for me) I tried desperately not to have a nap and lost horrendously.

An hour later I was back in action walking down the street to buy groceries. Quite a feat considering that I am not at all comfortable with the language. The man checking me out said he didn't know English and then tried to explain some free movie ticket plan to me. I didn't understand it, he gave up after trying - poor guy, he was really trying to help me, and I just wasn't with it I don't think. Left there and came back to my flat, which I found after only one wrong turn. That's not bad! But lost the battle to sleep again. As I write this I'm slowing drifting again.

So there is more to tell but it'll have to wait for later.

Strangers who are Less than Strange – Posted on Sunday, September 27th, 2009

During the last 17 days of living here in the Netherlands, I am often surprised at the number of times I have flouted one of my mother's most sacred rules that she bestowed on me as a child. That rule was: Never Talk to Strangers! Yet, I find myself searching the Internet for them, handing out my contact information, and setting up dates to meet them at places that I've never been to before. This is not to say that I'm meeting up just any Joep, Toon, or Albert (good Dutch names!) in dark alleys at quarter past midnight, no. Instead, I've most recently set up a meeting with persons who have the same needs as I do - the need to learn a language!

Yesterday, I had my first meeting with Bun (I call her Bun because she has a bun in the oven). Bun works for a bank and would like to widen her English vocabulary and improve her ability to converse quickly. Her capabilities at English greatly outweigh my own at speaking Dutch however, we met over coffee and spent the first hour speaking in Dutch (most of the time I spent sweating...apparently the part in my brain used to speak a foreign language is connected to my perspiration glands), and the next hour in English. While we've only met once we've agreed to meet again this coming week and will do so until we find ourselves fluent, or more likely, until she has her baby.

I have to say, that overall, those people with whom I've met in person, only after conversing over email, have all turned out to be really positive encounters. This includes some of the odd meetings on the streets and happenstances that occur with no preconceived plan (like the Welkom Bag neighbour in the last entry). And although at times these meetings feel like a shot in the dark and were not a part of my originally proposed methodology, they have been more than valuable to my overall time here in Rotterdam. As the ever-wise QueenB said to me the other day, If you're not up for meeting strangers (every once and a while), then you shouldn't be doing fieldwork, and I agree. Strangers don't always have to be strange but don't worry mom, I'll still use the ol' common sense!

A Proper Viewing – Posted on Friday, October 2nd, 2009

This past Tuesday, I had the "pleasure" of having my interview with the Immigration and Naturalisation Department (IND). My appointment took place at Rotterdam's city hall

building, which is a gorgeous construction of pre-war architecture in Rotterdam as this was one of the few buildings to survive the bombardment that devastated the centre of Rotterdam during the war. I would have liked to enjoy the beautiful vaulted ceilings, stain glass windows, and ornate woodwork if it had not been for the nerves and bureaucracy that sullied my experience of the view and kept my stomach in knots. The following is the schedule of my morning:

8:00 am - get up, jump out of bed (I know right now everyone who works a 9-5 is scoffing at my 8am wake up time. Note that I fully acknowledge that I am spoiled to be able to sleep so late), have coffee and toast; admit to Pdot that I'm nervous.

8:35 am - confirm my nerves by pacing the apartment and being indecisive about what outfit to wear for the interview...something with a collar to look professional, pair it with jeans to look like a student...???

9:00 am - leave house by bike to meet Pdot at the Centraal Station

9:15 am - realise that I've gone the wrong way because I'm not paying attention to where I'm going, turn around and meet Pdot at Centraal Station, a little more sweat but overall not in too bad of a shape.

9:30 am - walk into social housing office (Pdot's landlords) and officially register with them as a leaser of the apartment (a requirement of my immigration application). Take stamped and signed sheet with me.

9:45 am - walk bike over to City Hall building and in doing so see the huge building looming before me, tell Pdot that from my position, this is a metaphor of my feelings toward my impending interview. I believe Pdot said something about me being melodramatic but I can't be too sure, the morning is a bit of a haze now

10:00 am - Pdot comes with me and into the City Hall to make sure that there are no problems with the residence part of my application and is as usual, very helpful, as he selects a choice for me and takes a number while we sit down and wait for our number to be called

* Side note * As you walk into the city hall you're greeted by a huge room, a mass of people and a cacophony of noise. In front of you are 3 computers on stands where you are to choose the purpose for your visit that day (people use the city hall to get parking permits, acquire drivers licences, pay fines, or have interviews with the IND). Once you have your number you sit in one of four large bench sections (maybe about 250 seats in total?) and wait among the masses for your number to be called. I should mention two things that kind of turned me off of this process: first, the computer choices are only available in Dutch (thank you once again Pdot for being there to save the day); second, the constant dinging of the bell which notifies people when one of the 40 desks is ready for the next customer. This dinging sound is almost constant and its pace is further emphasised by the people who sometimes have to cross half the length of the football field (I kid you not) to get to their appointed desk (that's if you started at one end and had to go to the other). It appeared that no one wanted to miss their call as you'd be put at the back of the line again and who knows when you'd surface again next....

10:20 am - our number is called and we reach our desk in time (Pdot who has been there before knows to wait in the middle so that you can actually get to your desk in a reasonable amount of time without having to trot like a horse) when we are told that we're waiting in the wrong area, that we should instead be at desk 20 or 21 and that we do not have to wait in line or have a ticket number

10:30 am - wait for the woman in front of us to be done with her business at desk 20 (there is no one manning the station at 21) and approach. We are in fact helped right

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away and spend the next 30 minutes officially registering with the City Hall (not the same as registering with the social housing group)

10:35 am - our attendant found a problem with the second authentication of my long-form birth certificate and suggested that I send my birth certificate back to Ottawa to have it stamped again...not conducive to my interview which is in less than three-quarters of an hour. I protest, she goes to ask someone else.

10:45 am - our attendant comes back and has determined that my second authentication is indeed okay and that I am now official registered with the City Hall. I need to go to the cashier and find out if they take cash, which they don't, so I have to go and get my fee of 41 Euros out so that I can pay the IND people when I have my appointment

10:50 am - wandering outside for a bank machine, ING does not work with Canadian bank cards for everyone's information, find a bank, get money, walk back to the city hall

11:00 am - Pdot searches through the computers at the front of the hall again and finds me the correct appointment listing. He leaves to get to the stuff he needs to do, and I sit down and wait to be called in the dinging, noisy, crowded set of benches at the very back of the hall.

11:01 am - waiting for my appointment

11:02 am - waiting for my number to be called

11:03 am - waiting for my number to be called, made hairy eyeballs at the crying child next to me

11:04 am - you get the picture...

11:15 am - called for my appointment to a girl sitting behind a desk who is much, much younger than myself. She asks for one or two documents while she begins to type things into her computer and insists on calling me 'Miss'. I will take this not to be an insult (as I am older than she by about 8 years) but a glitch in translation. Whether intentional or not, the label makes me feel a bit annoyed and aware of the power imbalances present in this entire process. The whole 'interview' had little to no discussion except for when she had a problem with my not having a return ticket to Canada. When I tried to explain that I had instead printed out my bank statements proving that I could afford a ticket home (yes, I promise to leave the county!) and that I only didn't have one at this point because I couldn't buy a ticket that far ahead she stated that not all of my print outs had my name on them. "Yes", I said, "for security reasons (I had already noticed this fact and worried about it) I'm sure but if you'd let me pull up my account on your computer right now, I can prove it to you". She looked at me, sighed, and said that she would accept it now but that 'they' might have a problem with it and that 'they' will contact me in that event, AND that this ruling could take up to 6 months as they were legally afforded this much time to make their decision. "Okay", I said...and left it at that since I didn't have much choice in the matter anyway.

11:45 am - walking out of the building with my temporary resident's permit affixed to the inside of my passport. Although I'm allowed to stay and work once I receive my So-Fi number, the temporary status reminds me that the bureaucracy is not yet over. As a Western migrant I got off easy I'd say. Just imagine if I was from somewhere that necessitated me to have tuberculosis shots, among other things!

I want to stress however that I find the Dutch immigration procedures to be no worse than those of the surrounding countries and probably much nicer/easier than some of

the experiences that I could have had elsewhere. I would also assume that any and all experiences of immigration are difficult in that they make the migrant feel uncomfortable and powerless in some way.

What I do know however is that I must go back to the City Hall on a different occasion for a proper viewing when I can actually notice and appreciate my surroundings.

Wanted: Lessons from Mary Poppins/Lance Armstrong – Posted on Tuesday, October 6th, 2009

As I biked through the rain today, I tried to pretend like all the other Rotterdammers on the road that it was not in fact raining and that I was warm and dry instead of freezing and wet. Actually, I wasn't really freezing until I stopped to take pictures of my destination since when I bike I work up a sweat (I was trying to get my errand done as quickly as possible and get back home to dry clothes)!

As I've guessed, and read about, been told, and now experienced, riding a bike is second nature for many city dwellers here in Rotterdam. I've seen riders cycle along nonchalantly with no hands on the handlebars, while texting friends, and weaving in and out of traffic with an astute knowledge of the bike/car/pedestrian laws on the roads here. There are of course no helmets worn here and no safety gear besides blinking lights that are mandatory after dark (and heavily enforced by local police officers). Not everyone might know this but the Dutch are forced (well maybe forced is too strong a word) anyway, they take a bicycling test at the age of 12 years old to ensure that they are safely able to traverse the roadways (at least this is what I've read). However, this special knowledge evades me and as little 8 year-olds ride circles around me (not literally of course) I'm often envious of their bicycling wisdom that appears to be doled out at birth in Dutch delivery rooms.

Of course, riding on a bike with no hands, while talking on your cell phone, balancing your parcels on the back of your bike, and baking a cherry pie, all at the same time is no match for the Dutch here in Rotterdam. Yet, it is truly humbling to see them cycle when it's raining. In addition to the death defying acts mentioned above, the cyclists here will also ride while holding an umbrella... while talking on the phone, weaving around parked and swerving cars, etc. etc. etc. So it is no wonder that I've put out an ad for riding lessons from Mary Poppins/Lance Armstrong. I could go for the less classy option of riding in the front of a 'Babboe Bakfiets', which is a bike sold here in the Netherlands with a large wooden bucket/seat contraption on the front for children to sit in. The only problem then would be how to convince Pdot to agree to ride around on this bike with me in the front basket. Here is the link so that envisioning me in this contraption will be easier: <http://www.babboe.nl/>

The next time it rains, I think I'll wait by the phone for Julie or Lance to call or leave the cycling up to the professionals and take the tram :)

Spatial Patterns of Birthday Parties – Posted on Friday, October 23rd, 2009

I was lucky enough to be invited to the birthday party of one of my relatives here in the Netherlands. My family here has been so nice, wonderful, and welcoming since I've arrived. I will always be so thankful for this.

Birthday parties with my immediate family (I'm talking about the family living back in Canada now) are really quite...how should I say this...loud. The following is a typical birthday event at my home in Canada: the siblings and their significant others converge on my parent's house which is located in the suburbs of our childhood home. I think we're one of the few families who remained in the same household during our entire

youth (both my parents still live there now). The dinner begins at about 3 pm with a fight over appetizers (typically the fare is shrimp and warmed brie cheese and red pepper jelly over crackers). Usually my older sister brings a dish (always very delectable), which she makes in our relatively small kitchen during the time that my mother is attempting to finish up the night's main dishes (which my mother loves, by the way). We chat, have a couple drinks, and get caught up on one another's lives in either the appropriately named 'family room' or in the back porch if it's warm enough. My mother calls (just like when we were young) and the troupe march over to the dining room where we begin the feast (my mom used to be a short-order cook for the army...at least that's what one would think if they sit down at one of our tables). The whole meal takes about an hour. There is much teasing, laughing, and teasing...did I mention teasing? After the meal, we clean up a bit and bring out the cake. We sing not one, but two birthday songs (one in English, the other in Dutch - thanks to our Dutch roots) cut the pie/cake/tart and serve. Presents are distributed, opened, and the thanks doled. From there, it is tea time and everyone moves back into the family room for games, a bit of TV watching (if there is a game on) and then around 11pm, those Toronto-bound revellers say their good-byes and leave the sleepy hollow.

I experienced a different type of event at the Dutch birthday party that I attended this past Wednesday.

I arrive at the house at approximately 5:45 and am greeted by the immediate family (including the mother, father, and brother of my aunt). I speak Dutch for most of the night (poorly) as my family is helping me learn (it's tough love and I need it!). I think I sweat a bit because I find speaking in another language quite hard but the audience is wonderfully receptive and encouraging (well, besides Malt - my cousin - who continues to laugh at my accent - ha!). From there we sit around the table, serve dinner and converse about this or that. Both my aunt and my uncle (whose birthday it was) wait until everyone else has served themselves and have begun to eat before they turn to their own plates. Throughout the entire meal, both my aunt and uncle are getting up to serve us more wine, water or anything else we might desire - talk about being put to work! After the table is cleared and the dishes are washed by my cousins (a very efficient process) we are all served ice cream and mousse (homemade by Oma). The entire affair was delicious!

After our meal, we move to sit on the couches in the living room area. As we sit down I look around and see that a circle of chairs has been placed out. Just as I'm about to ask Vespa (the girlfriend of my cousin) what the chairs are there for, the doorbell rings. In steps a set of neighbours (it's 7:30). The neighbours say hello to my uncle wish him a happy birthday and then come and greet all of us who are already sitting in the living room with 'feliciteerd' which means congratulations. 'Uh...what do I say back?' I ask Vespa, 'Oh, the same thing', she says, 'feliciteerd'! This ritual happened with each of the 20 to 25 guests that showed up that night. Every single person that came into my aunt and uncle's house greeted everyone in turn and then sat down to join the circle. Very cordial!

After dinner but relatively early in the evening (we were there until 11:30pm) my other cousin Soda (again an amalgamation of her name and area where she lives) came by and asked what kind of cake I wanted. 'Cake?' I said, 'Haven't we already eaten dessert?' 'Oh yes' she said 'but in Holland, you have dessert with dinner and then you have pie when everyone else comes over to celebrate. You can't really say no, it wouldn't look polite' she finished with a grin. Trust me, it didn't take much prodding. I agreed (with both arms twisted behind my back) to a piece of traditional Limburg rice cake. It was scrumptious! Apparently, in Germany, a guest must have 2 or 3 pieces of cake at a

birthday if they do not want to be offensive to the host. As I sat on the couch all night in between Oma and my translator (Vespa) I watched as my aunt and uncle catered to all their guests. I kept finishing my glass of water or wine or whatever and not a minute later, they were there asking, 'Jennifer, can I get you something?' If I said 'oh, no thank you', they'd reply 'not even water?'. Wow! 5 star restaurants would be put to shame in this joint and my uncle was the guest of honour, no less! Vespa told me the secret, 'at Dutch birthday parties, you must keep a little bit of drink in your glass or else you'll be asked if you want something else to drink'. Dually noted. But it wasn't just drinks that were flowing and ever present - food also came from every which way and while I thought I was full (and I was), I decided to try the appetizers...one after another... smoked salmon, *tapas*, crackers, cheese, sausage, you name it.

As the night went on, guests would chat to the individual on either side of them. If someone got up to go somewhere, another person would come to sit down and start a new conversation. When people began to leave, each attendee would make a round around the circle, shake everyone's hand and say 'Tot ziens!' - See you later! Wow!

Wow, because I can't believe that you have to take care of everybody else on YOUR birthday! (QueenB understands this totally) and wow! because I thought our birthdays back in Canada were quite an event!

Thus (put on pompous old professor's accent), although I have observed the 'spatial patterns' of both Nederlanders and Canadians in their natural environments...it has become apparent that while their patterns are of 'flocking' and 'circular' structures, they both know how to party!

A Comedy of Errors – Posted on Tuesday November 10th, 2009

So I was running a bit late leaving for my English teaching lessons tonight. Who me late? Yes, I know - what a shocker. As I was running a bit late, I forgot my map, ran back upstairs to grab it, relocked the door, sky-rocketed back down the 3 flights of stairs, grabbed the other bike and moved it out of the way (at times it feels that I'm working through a life-size jigsaw puzzle trying to figure out which bike of the four stored down below is mine!). After taking the first bike out of the way, I grab my umbrella out of my bag because it has begun to rain very hard, shove my way outside, jump on my bike, and cycle down the street.

For the first time that I can remember I hear a thwap, thwap, thwap. 'What is that?' I think, 'it must be my lock knocking against the tire cover'. Thwap, thwap, thwap. God, that's actually quite loud! I stop take a look; don't see much because it's pouring rain. 'Man, I have to get going!' is all I can think so I hop back on the bike- thwap, thwap, thwap- and stop at the next red light. 'Seriously what is that?', I say to myself and take one more good look at the back tire that has just revealed itself to be ... completely flat.

Oh no.

So I jump off my bike, hop onto the sidewalk and start walking down the road with my limping bike at my side. Plan B, hop on a tram to get to the metro and then it's off to Gramma's house (I am going to English lessons here; I'm just making a reference to Little Red Ridding Hood that you all should have picked up on). The problem with owning a bike does not have to do with the maintenance for upkeep or the possibility of spending an entire morning wearing soaking pants and boots after riding in the rain. The problem is becoming dependent on quick travel times by using your bike in between point A and B. For example, I left at 20 minutes after 6pm to be in Rotterdam Zuid (South) in 40 minutes time. On a bike I can do this no problem. On foot, using the tram, and then the

metro, I cannot. So I make the best of what I can, I lock up my bike to a pole next to the tram stop and wait the 5 minutes for the tram.

The tram goes to central station without issue (I've been on a tram that has dropped us off 2km from the station due to electrical failures) and I think to myself, 'Ah, I'd better top up my travel card (used in buses, trams, metro stations here) because I'm getting low'. I walk past the first booth because both its line-ups are out the door. 'That's a significant amount of people', I think to myself, 'lined up on a Tuesday night after dinner'. I think it will be quicker to go downstairs and use the automatic tellers, and so I go. I arrive downstairs to see a line-up just as long if not longer. 'What is going on here?' I try to squeak through the doors with what I have left on my pass and it's a no-go. So I join the line and then think, 'there has got to be another machine around here'. In fact, there is a huge sign saying 'two other machines located that way'. Hopping out of line I search for the other machines and find both with an out-of-order sign taped to them. I go back to the line where I wait for the next 15 minutes for my turn. It appears that this machine, although working, is only taking coins at the moment and nothing else. No debit, credit cards, large bills, nothing. Just coins. Yet everyone in front of me still has to try regardless so as to determine whether or not the machine will work for them especially or maybe just to prove or disprove what the person in front of them had told them - that the machine wasn't working. Hmmm, wooden shoes, wooden head....

It's finally my turn and I bumble through the buttons and throw in enough coins to get myself to Rotterdam South and back. It's now 7pm on the dot, which is the exact same time that I'm supposed to be walking into class (if not greeting my students looking cheerful and ready to learn). Instead, I am running down the stairs to catch the next train to Slinge that will drop me off at Rijnhaven where I can walk to Afrikaanersplein, which is where the lessons are located. My hair is wet and a mess, the wool scarf I'm wearing has shed more than its share of 'hairs' that are in my mouth and on my wet glasses, my bag is soaked and I'm hoping not my lesson book, but no matter, I'm on the metro! My last method of transportation there!

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Rijnhaven station. The tram has barely come to a halt and I'm waiting, poised by the doors, pressing incessantly on the 'open' button of the doors. Then suddenly I'm freed and I start on a run down the ramp, out of the stalls, through the doors, across the street, down the way, over the bridge (I'm not kidding), up the lane, across the plein (public plane), into the building, up the stairs, through the glass doors (well not through it but pushing the handle walking into the glass doors...you know what I mean) and home free. At this point I am 18 minutes late.

All this and it's only 7:18. I have two more hours of comedy and fun as the girls and I chat about things in their lives and role-play potential scenarios for when they visit English-speaking countries. Although the money I made tonight will only defray the costs of getting a new tire on my bike, I'm still happy that I made it in one piece with only my bike worse for wear. Besides, I get to learn a new phrase:

Mijn fietsband is plat. Kunt u het alstublieft repareren? (My tire is flat. Can you please repair it? - Thank you Marbles)

Sounding the Alarm – Posted on Monday, December 7th, 2009

On the first Monday of every month, an alarm sounds from towers strategically placed throughout Rotterdam to warn of an impending threat whether it be from a chemical spill in the wharf, the failure of a dike, or an air raid from a neighbouring country (this last reason is of course a bit dated). Now if this alarm happens on the first Monday of

every month then it's just a drill. Schools and related emergency programs get to practice their emergency procedures and life is allowed to return to normal.

For someone who has not been brought up with this knowledge, the siren is frightening! What first came to mind the first Monday in October (I arrived in mid September) was an air raid. I was so confused! Through Second World War movies, I had been trained to recognise this sound (or at least imagine this sound) and as the siren wailed, I walked through the apartment and looked out the windows for the sight of panicking people and flashing lights in the streets. I also began to wonder what the emergency numbers (the 911) of the Netherlands are and why I hadn't thought it important enough as of yet to learn any. I racked my brains about what this alarm was trying to tell me to do, do I run and hide, just run, just hide? Eventually it stopped and after some time I returned to my work convinced the school next door was having a fire drill.

Pdot returned home for a trip yesterday and was home today, the first Monday of the month, when the siren when off. 'That siren! That's it! What does it mean?' I asked. I had tried to describe this siren before to him with no avail. 'Oh that!' he said and started laughing. After explaining the possible threats (see above), he told me in a matter-of-fact way that 'if I hear this sound on another day besides the first Monday of the month that should get inside somewhere, lock the doors, close the windows...and turn on the radio'. He said it just like that. 'The radio?' I thought, turn on the radio as oppose to turning on the computer, television, or mobile phone with Internet capabilities? From my understanding, this siren was created during the Second World War to warn of the very real threat of bombing attacks on Rotterdam (Rotterdam city centre was in fact levelled during WWII) and the procedure continues to be re-enacted and tested today, on the first Monday of every month. Although it has morphed to include other threats such as environmental disasters, its history remains pertinent through how Dutch children are educated about the sirens and of course through the history of the city that one can see in its post-war architecture.

This is just another interesting point to ponder as a stranger living in another country. Past histories are not always lying low waiting to be uncovered but get up in your face and bark loudly. Here's to hoping that a natural disaster (or national emergency) doesn't happen on the first Monday of the month...yet another question unanswered!

Things that make you go...hmmmm – Posted on Thursday, January 14th, 2010

The evening before yesterday, I hopped back on the tram (I really must get my back tire fixed...yes, I have another flat...boo!) to the centre of town for a meeting with a new group called 'Welkom in Rotterdam'. This group is dedicated to bringing 'new' Rotterdammers in touch with 'old' Rotterdammers. In the latter category refers to "enthusiastic people who are already rooted in Rotterdam" (this statement and the following statements in this paragraph are taken from their website and translated by myself - so be warned, there is likely to be a margin of error in the translation!). Whereas 'new' Rotterdammers are local residents who have lived in Rotterdam for a short or long period of time and who want to get to know their city better and to practice Dutch. As the website states, 'new' Rotterdammers are often those people who are following an integration course. Welkom's services wishes to provide an opportunity to practice the Dutch language and to make newbies feel more at home in Rotterdam. The only stipulation is that all new Rotterdammers must have taken at least one-semester language classes before attending any events so that new and old Rotterdammers can communicate with one another.

This beginners group is where I fit in. I showed up last night and probably had the worst level of Dutch in the entire group of Rotterdammers. Since I've moved here, I am

continually impressed by the diverse number of activities available to new inhabitants (or 'new' inhabitants that may have lived here for quite some time) in order to help them feel 'at home' in their new city. As my Dutch teacher, we'll call her 'Coach', has told me, services for inburgering/welcoming has turned into a booming industry here in Rotterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands.

As for last night, I walked in and was greeted by volunteers from the Welkom Rotterdam organisation. I was offered coffee, tea, and sandwiches and asked to take a seat wherever there was a yellow sheet of paper (to denote 'new' Rotterdammer; there were blue sheets for the 'old' Rotterdammers). Another newbie and I sat with two other oldies and chatted away. I listened more than spoke as I'm beginning (very slowly) to understand more of what is said and I continue to struggle with my sentence structures. We chatted until we were told the purpose of the evening was to find a partner who would take us around Rotterdam, 3 times in 3 months. We would meet that partner at a museum, coffee shop, or another place of our liking in Rotterdam to practice our Dutch and get to know our new city better. We were paired up with an oldie of our choice that we choose as a result of 4 minute 'interviews' with one another. I was impressed by the whole process and touched by the fact that there existed individuals who wanted to volunteer their time for us newbies. The oldies ranged in age, life histories, and ideologies, yet all agreed on the fact that making us new Rotterdammers feel at home was an important activity.

The 'Welcome to Rotterdam' websites states that it's activities attempt to build bridges between different people and different cultures and so an event like this, while not linked with a neighbourhood, falls within my area of interest - of understanding how people of different backgrounds come together in Rotterdam. The question as to why any of us chose to participate is also very interesting for me. I chose to participate because this activity was intriguing from a research perspective but also because I wanted an opportunity to speak Dutch, meet new people and learn more about my city from 'an insider'. When I came across this group back in September 2009 (at the Seeds of Change Festival – see earlier blog) I was a bit put off by the fact that there were any requirements at all (i.e. having beginners Dutch) to take part in this service. Isn't enthusiasm enough? But at the time, I hadn't thought through all the specifics yet. I realise now that it is not the job of the oldies to teach newbies the Dutch language (although one improves through interaction alone) and that it would be very difficult to try and matches languages of partners if Dutch was not a requirement.

This activity brings the idea of integration to the forefront. It took me two days to get this post out because there were so many questions that have come to me as I try to understand the processes of integration...so instead of waiting another day (or two) I'll leave it here. What is integration? When is it applied and to whom? Who does it benefit? Who does it not benefit? How does it change? Are there processes in place that allow for 'checks and balances'? Things that make you go...Hmmm.

Fieldtrip!! – Posted on Sunday, February 28th, 2010

This past Thursday I packed my bags and set off for a day trip to Arnhem. Arnhem is a little city 97 kms east of Rotterdam, which takes approximately 2 hours to get to by train. I was in Arnhem because I was fortunate enough to have a meeting with the Director of Volkshuisvesting, which is a housing corporation in Arnhem. How, might you ask, did I land a meeting with the director of a very successful housing corporation? A corporation that has approximately 13,000 units in Arnhem alone? Well, I was lucky enough to have an inside source, we'll call her Bird, who was able to snag me an appointment with the big man, Mr. B, himself.

I arrived in the early afternoon and we began our visit with a short interview. I was especially interested in a project that I know as 'the Mediterranean (housing) project'. This project is quite unique in that these houses were designed with input from women who immigrated to the Netherlands. This project began when an architect connected to volkshuisvesting interviewed a group of women (who would be considered 'allochthonen') in order to learn more about what an ideal family home would look like from their perspective. Why, you ask, would a housing corporation go to such lengths to research/design/build an accommodation for a particular group of individuals in their renting population? It was thought that the preferences of this group in particular had yet to be accommodated for in building house(s) practices. I personally found this project to be unique in its conception and approach (holding numerous focus groups...why it's damn near anthropological (!) although I cannot make any comment on the questions asked at the time since I was not present at the meetings). I also learned that it was only one of many ideas by volkshuisvesting, which sought to create a dialogue between the corporation and its renters for the purpose of what I came to understand as 'better housing practices'. If individuals are happy in their homes and their surrounding neighbourhoods, then they make better renters and a better place or neighbourhood to be. At least, this is my general impression. I was in awe that a housing corporation did not just care about the physical housing. Most of the emphasis was put on the individuals in the houses in addition to their social connections to other renters, to their neighbourhoods and to their city.

But it was not enough to have a chat about these things. Mr. B (in his nice suit and shoes) and I hopped on a pair of bikes and cycled to the neighbourhood where the Mediterranean houses were built. It was interesting to see the buildings and their surroundings as it gave you an idea as to how different they were from the other houses but not in an 'out-of-place' way. The results from the focus groups identified a couple of areas where the design of the house could be changed. These included: a closed separation between the kitchen and living room; creating a larger distance between the main bathroom and the living room; the ability to park one's car close to the house instead of in the street. From this photo you can see that at least one of these suggestions was accounted for (with the possibility that all were accounted for however, we did not go inside). While these were not the only findings from the research, and those that I have provided, are from memory so please take this into account, I found the whole process of taking renters thoughts and preferences into account when building houses, to be very positive.

My fieldtrip to Arnhem is not the only experience that I've had with housing corporations. Housing corporations are becoming important for my research because their housing and neighbourhood projects have quite a significant impact on how people come together in the neighbourhood. Most housing corporations have 'visions' for a particular neighbourhood that could result in a neighbourhood being torn down and rebuilt in a different fashion, or having buildings renovated to change the occupancy or doing something as simple as painting the outside frames of all the windows to make things look nice. It also includes building playgrounds, doing landscaping, creating parks, many things that are possibly outside the scoop of a housing corporation. From what I've heard, experiences with housing corporations are not all positive but depend somewhat on the vision of the neighbourhood held by the corporations and by the other inhabitants. While I came away from volkshuisvesting with quite a positive feeling, I will follow up with housing corporations here in Rotterdam in order to better understand where these moneymaking businesses figure into the scheme of things in the neighbourhood and in between neighbours.

Just as an ending note, I've personally been living in an apartment owned by a social housing corporation here in Rotterdam and have had no issues to date. A very positive personal experience here as well.

Walking the Invisible Line – Posted on Monday, March 22nd, 2010

According to some of the people that I've been speaking with, there is a difference here in the Rotterdam between streets (straat) and lanes (laan). Those that live on the lanes are usually more affluent than those living on a street. I happen to live on a street that comes off of a lane. When comparing the outward appearance of each of these areas, I notice right away that the lane has much more greenery, a diversity of large and diverse housing with more decorative items, as well as higher priced cars and motorised vehicles. Although my street includes a playground there is no grass or trees. Don't get me wrong, there are a few trees on my street but they are small and look quite stark when compared to the aged trunks of the trees that shade the lane in the summertime. This separation apparently also translates into the kinds of shops that are present in streets versus lanes. If you shop in a store on a lane you can expect to have better quality items for a higher price than if you shop at a store located on a street. I asked if this division was something that could still be seen today and indeed, I was told that this tale rings true even now. While I can see the contrast between the outward appearances of the streets versus lanes I'm not sure that my experiences of shops measure up quite the same. However, it is interesting to have understandings of certain places explained to me from someone who has lived here longer than I.

It was also mentioned that there is an invisible barrier separating my neighbourhood from the more affluent area above me. Although geographically very close, the area just across the highway from me has much more expensive housing. What this means is that I'll also find a different group of people living there. That is, there is a possibility that I might not find as many first or second-generation immigrants there and that I may potentially find more double income couples. While our neighbourhoods are very close geographically, our neighbours are very far apart/removed from us. The invisible lines of division and I'm sure at times combination are an interesting area to pursue in my research. I'm also left wondering where 'ways' and 'avenues' are supposed to fit in the mix...

Mind your Manners!! – Posted on Wednesday, April 28th, 2010

I volunteered yesterday in coordination with the 'Week of Good Manners' program that was hosted by one of the local schools here in my neighbourhood. It was my job to sit and wait for 10 different groups of children to come to where I was stationed and upon their arrival, act out a misdemeanour in public space so that they could politely offer advice on how I could act more appropriately in public space. My particular naughty characteristic was speaking too loudly on my cell phone. Fun! So as I ranted and raved about the game last night and how I lost money on a bet, the students got my attention and gave me advice on my behaviour that ranged from very polite to hilarious. In general, I was told that I should be more respectful of my public surroundings because more people than just myself are using it. I also however received such reactions as "There are babies sleeping here! They can hear you!" and "Not everyone wants to hear what you have to say, you know!" and my personal favourite: "Hey lady, you're crazy!" It made for a fun day.

With respect to my research, it was interesting to see which manners were identified as being important enough to highlight by the organizers. While I understand that certain manners were chosen because they could be immediately identified in a public space in

order for the game to work, this kind of activity can provide some idea as to how people should use and how children are taught to comport themselves in public areas.

I was only 1 of 10 volunteers that were placed throughout the immediate area surrounding one of the local neighbourhood centres. Although my character spoke loudly on the phone, the children had to do the following when seeing other asocial behaviours:

1. Telling someone that leaving their dog's poop in the middle of a walking bridge was unacceptable
2. Helping someone who has dropped their groceries pick them up (without laughing at them first - not laughing was actually a requirement!)
3. Stopping someone from littering
4. Stopping someone from crossing the street on a red light
5. Helping someone cross the street who is unsure of how to navigate the bikes, cars, trams, etc.
6. Stopping someone from riding their bike on the sidewalk
7. Stopping someone from vandalising the bus shelter
8. Helping someone who cannot speak Dutch very well
9. Being treated to candy as long as they were able to act nicely and politely greet you

As you can see, the themes of the manners ranged from safety in public streets (crossing the street), to criminal acts (vandalism), to public nuisance (dog poop and speaking too loudly) in addition to helping those who cannot speak the language (I thought maybe I should have requested this one...the role was made for me!). I also noticed some underlying themes such as respecting your elders and helping those who are less fortunate.

From my post I could tell the children had fun and since today is the last day before a two week holiday here I could tell they were super excited to be out in the sunshine. Thus, in addition to working hard at being loud, I also worked on my tan sitting in the beautiful playground next to my place. Just look at my view!

Playing Dirty!! – Posted on Tuesday, May 18th, 2010

I'm sure the inhabitants of Amsterdam are breathing sighs of relief as the streets are cleaned and refuse workers are going back to work after reaching an agreement with their employers. I have to say, I never realised how clean the streets of the major cities in the Netherlands were until, well, they weren't. Walking around last Sunday with QueenB, we literally had to negotiate our way through bags of garbage and refuse strewn everywhere over the streets, sidewalks and bike paths in Amsterdam.

One might think that delayed garbage service is nothing more than a small inconvenience. However, for those who lived through the garbage strikes in Toronto last summer, they know that something like garbage, which we take for granted and can seem invisible in our daily lives, has a way of making its presence known (and smelt!) when things work less than smoothly. This is especially the case in city centres, such as Amsterdam, which is a major trash...oops, I mean tourist hub.

QueenB and I began our stroll through the Red light district since I wanted to show her that the women in the red light district stop for nothing (!) or so I'd heard. This district is well known as one of the hot-spots for tourism all over the world and after a weekend

full of revelling, the small cobble-stone streets were filthy with fast food wrappers, putrefying food scraps (there were many happy birds mind you, it's lucky that there are no raccoons here!), condom wrappers, and general junk. I took pictures of it because it was unbelievable, the difference a couple of days of garbage makes. Note: Refuse collection stopped for 24 hours on Queen's Day and between the 6th and 15th of May.

As we wined our way down toward the floating flower market we walked around a larger van that had just stopped on the side of the road. A man got out of the driver seat, opened up his trunk and began unloading bags of garbage onto the side of this small, out-of-the-way canal road. This didn't strike me as odd at first. I assumed that the man was a shop owner who was unloading his garbage in the appropriate space provided for his shop. Both QueenB and I continued past the car without much thought.

Just then a window slapped open and a man popped his head out from across the road. He began shouting at this man, telling him to "stop leaving your garbage here! I can see you! I'm going to call the police!" His cries brought other neighbours to their windows and out onto their balconies. More than one neighbour made a move to come down to the ground level to see what was going on. The man who was unloading his garbage said one or two things quickly (so I did not catch them) but instead of stopping what he was doing, he proceeded to speed up 'delivery'. By the time QueenB and I were at the bottom of the street the man in his newly lightened truck drove away and the shouting had stopped. This early morning exchange got me thinking about all the small details and services that are necessary for a harmonious existence within city centres, where the roads and pathways are literally crawling with people and the things that they produce (like garbage).

This also had me thinking about the idea of proximity, that is, how closely people live and interact with one another, and how seemingly insignificant processes can influence the interaction of people in large ways. From the exchange above, it appears as though the garbage situation affects inhabitant's living arrangements and the interaction between individuals. One can also see that the demarcation or protection of space differs or is noticeable through such circumstances. In the dirtier parts, I wondered how the local inhabitants were feeling about all the tourists and their production of waste. Can they argue the benefits of tourism for the economy during such delicate times as a garbage strike?

While I did not read about any fistfights or slimy food wars happening in Amsterdam, I wouldn't be surprised if they did. The accumulation of stinking, dirty piles of refuse doesn't put anyone in a good mood and the connections and bonds between inhabitants are most likely strained during this time. Not to mention, as I saw from the trucked in garbage man above, some people are willing to play dirty!!

You Said What? – Posted on Saturday, May 29th, 2010

ust a quick note to say that I've begun conducting interviews in Dutch and funnily enough, am understanding what is being said to me! Don't get me wrong; I am very far still from understanding everything that is said to me and very, very far from being fluent in Dutch. In fact, I spent the larger part of last week being made fun of by my family for my pig-Dutch as I've come to call it!

Yet, despite this, there are certain topics that I am now able to understand, and able to make myself understood. These topics are themes in my research and other related information from people's everyday lives. Get me talking and listening to discussions about gardening or the cosmos and I am NOT your woman! Happily however, I find myself following along on those coffee appointments at my favourite cafe (Cafe Nika in

Oude Noorden), asking questions in response to answers and yes, referring to my dictionary only twice an appointment, instead of twice a sentence.

It has definitely taken me a bit longer than I had originally planned in my initial outline (!!) but at least I've gotten to this point and still have a couple of weeks left (between 10 and 12 since I haven't yet bought my ticket home) to use my new skills.

Rings of Understanding – Posted on Wednesday, June 2nd, 2010

I've always been fascinated at my own understanding of the city and as a new immigrant, how this knowledge mimics the use of Rotterdam (and Rotterdam Noord) by other new immigrants.

On my second day in the country, I made it my business to go for a walk. I took a walk around 3 blocks. I used the main roads around me because the names of the streets were too long to remember. Although Pdot (remember him? He'll be making a come-back to the blog and the Netherlands around mid July! Very exciting!) had picked up a map of the city centre for me, it did not cover Rotterdam North where I live. I kept to the main roads and low and behold, I found the Islamic University. I walked in, spoke with a couple of people and then walked home. What a fascinating first walk! I said to myself.

At this point, it was extremely hard to make myself leave the house. Why? Because everything was foreign and I felt unsafe! I was learning very quickly that my preparation in the Dutch language was nowhere near good enough and everything I came across was new and confusing. It was exhausting even to go out for bread, milk and eggs although I had no choice. When the cashier asks you if you want your receipt or a bag and you say in your perfected practice Dutch-Canadian garble 'Can you please say that again?' and then you don't understand it the second time, well, it's troubling to say the least. I won't go into details at this point but not being able to speak someone's native language garners different reactions. Some people try and help by switching to English, some people think you are stupid and speak louder to you like you're deaf. There is a wide range; these are only two of the options.

In December when I had my first visitor Luke here, I was able to show him where I liked to go in the city. Although I probably didn't realise it at the time, a lot of these places were Pdot's places that he liked to go because he'd been the one acquainting me with Rotterdam. From this time on however, I slowly began to include some places of my own. By this point in my research, I'd learned about the neighbourhood centre in the neighbouring wijk (neighbourhood), I'd had a couple interviews with the workers from the neighbourhood organisation (one block away from my house but the presence of which was unknown to me for around a month or two), and I'd learned how to navigate the metro system so as to get to my various jobs teaching English. Local shopping districts had become some of my favourite places and I knew where the 'koopgroot' (shopping gutter) in the centre of Rotterdam was in reference to some very interesting museums.

By the time I was making my trip home to Canada in the last weeks of March my rings of understanding in the city had definitely changed. Pdot had been gone for almost two and a half months and my destinations of choice and by design were becoming farther apart and more varied. I typically used my bike because it was faster than using public modes of transportation. My English lessons were now being given in other cities rather than other neighbourhoods of Rotterdam. I'd walked the streets not only to get to a specific destination but on neighbourhood walk-about with groups looking over areas of interest and areas with perceived security issues. Certain places within public spaces

in an around the neighbourhoods where I researched had layers of meaning instead of just an acknowledgement of their existence. The plein (open plane) beside my house was the future spot where we were to hold the 5th of Mei celebration. It was a place run over by children from my street and an area of concern at night for those in the neighbourhood who saw the lack of lighting and the tendency of young teenagers to hang around after night to be a security problem. I cut through this plein every time I was going to a meeting at the local neighbourhood organisation and a place where I could see mothers sitting and talking on benches and heated football competitions playing out.

When I came back from my short trip home to Canada, my knowledge of the space around me grew. I'm no longer afraid to go to the grocery store and I take short cuts to the places I frequent the most. I am recognising people in space and they, me. My last visitors my aunt Peg and uncle Frank were treated to my most knowledgeable tour around Rotterdam yet. Sites of interest included the 'ethnic street' close to my house - Zwart Jan Straat, which is seen by others as a dangerous street but is somewhere where I feel most comfortable. In the city centre we walked by historic buildings, visited interesting architectural phenomena and photographed the crazy art in the city...yes, including the famous Santa Butt-plug sculpture...don't ask.

My rings are moving into fields of understand and the way that I traverse space between places and the means and methods by which I do this are also more diverse and practiced. I'm creating my own sort of topography of the city :).

Relocated (at least physically) – Posted on Wednesday, August 25th, 2010

I'm back in Canada now. It's amazing; I feel as though I'm here for a two-week vacation as I was back in April 2010. I'm sure reality will set in but as of yet, it hasn't.

Coming back to Canada was both a wonderful and sad experience. I never realised how deep the connections I made 'in the field' were until it was time for me to leave. In addition to the genuine life-long friends that I made, the people I met through my research made me realise how my time there affected them. I blame them for 180 Euro surcharge on my suitcases for my return flight, which charged for all the excess weight and baggage. They were wonderful at providing me resource material and Dutch paraphernalia so that "I wouldn't forget them or the Netherlands". Well people, I couldn't if I tried.

Although this blog was originally developed as a field blog, it will now follow my adventures as a thesis writing PhD student in Canada. I will at times include posts from the last couple of months when I was a bit too caught up in life to write (my apologies!). It will also resume its proper role as a field blog when I return to Rotterdam in May 2011. You heard me correctly, I'm returning for about 3 weeks in order to face the music. By facing the music, I mean that I will be giving a very short presentation in Dutch (be still my racing, palpitating heart...speaking Dutch still makes me extremely nervous as I'm sure it will do for many years to come) concerning what I've learned throughout my year in Rotterdam Noord. This is a time where people who participated or who would like to participate in my research can tell me what they think about my ideas and conclusions. I expect to hear a mix of "that's nice but have you thought of this point?" "Wow, I've never thought of it in that way before, I think you're right/wrong/confused/crazy etc." - I expect to hear many different things, many of which will end up, in some form, in my thesis. We'll see how it all works out, but that's the plan anyway.

For now, I sit on my living room floor typing at the computer (we're still in need of some furniture) physically being in Canada and mentally being somewhere half way across the Atlantic.



"Mind Your Manners," Jennifer Long (2010)



“Hup Holland,” Jennifer Long (2010)



“Housing,” Jennifer Long (2010)



“Neighborhood Center,” Jennifer Long (2010)



“Mind Your Manners,” Jennifer Long (2010)

About the author:

Jennifer Long is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.