6. Towards a Changed Discourse?

"Discourses are not closed systems. A discourse draws on elements in other discourses, binding them into its own network of meanings" (Hall 2018, 202). The museum discourse is intertwined with the media discourse, the political discourse and the public discourse; its linguistic mode (whether visual or textual) is affected by these discourses, but it affects these discourses in turn. According to Laurajane Smith, the term discourse refers to a social practice, in which

> social meanings, forms of knowledge and expertise, power relations and ideologies are embedded and reproduced via language. The discourses through which we frame certain concepts, issues or debates have an effect in so far as they constitute, construct, mediate and regulate understanding and debate (Smith 2006, 4).

Through museums' discursive practices on forced migration, the institutions propose a way of framing and understanding the ongoing debate.

As mentioned at the outset of this study, the refugee protection crisis was framed in the media and public discourse by way of a crisis narrative (Bock and Macdonald 2019, 2). Regardless of how the museum responds to this discourse, it necessarily relates to these dominant narratives by confirming or challenging them. The projects studied here constructed a discourse in the museum that responded to the ongoing discussion. Many of the museum directors and practitioners interviewed for this study emphasised that their projects and exhibitions sought to make a positive contribution to the public discourse. Applying a participatory approach, the museums hoped to put forward alternative narratives to those presented in the media, as well as offering a historical perspective on forced migration (Baur and Bluche 2017). As suggested by Katja Pelsmaekers and Tom van Hout, the museum discourses can be understood as a response to the ongoing debate, which

they describe as a "post-normalization or counter-discourse […] designed to generate empathy and positive attitudes to human mobility" (2020, 2). The exhibitions and other project outputs that were developed as a result of the collaborative work established a discourse intended to challenge the dominant understanding of forced migration.

In all of the cases discussed in this book, an exhibition was one of the project outputs; whether in the form of an addition to an existing exhibition or an exhibition created through the participatory process. These exhibitions (or the additions to pre-existing exhibitions) construct a discourse by means of language, juxtapositions, contextualisation and the relation to other (external) discourses. The narratives developed extended to the online realm, facilitating discussions with people who did not necessarily visit the museum (as discussed in Chapter 5). Museums intended for the projects' various discursive outputs to place forced migration within a broader contextual framework, and to contest labels and other negative depictions of forced migrants.

This chapter will look at the exhibitions through an analysis of the language they used and their semiotic approach to exhibiting forced migration. It will discuss the political urgency and challenges faced by these projects, consider the selected exhibition themes and the historical contextualisation of migration as a potential means of intervening in the public discourse. As this research did not include a visitor study, this chapter does not address whether or not the museums actually managed to change visitors' minds about welcoming forced migrants. Despite what can be learned from the conversations that took place online, it is hard to find direct connections between the museum's work and the potential to shift in people's perspectives.[1] Rather, it evaluates the narratives produced and their contribution to the understanding of the 'refugee' as the 'other'. According to Smith,

> heritage and the identities and understandings of both the past and the present it creates do not simply exist internally to the group or other collective that has created them – they do work, or have a consequence, in wider social, cultural, economic and political networks. They have a

1 Finding such connections would require in-depth visitor and user research, which goes beyond the scope of this study.

> consequence for, and in, the day-to-day lives of individuals beyond the provision of a sense of self or collective identity. (2006, 276)

In this chapter, I focus on the discourses developed with participants, in order to assess the consequences they might have for the participants during the project, and how they affected them afterwards. To this end, I examine the museums' attempts to contextualise forced migration, and analyse the museological representations of forced migrants following the different participatory projects.

6.1 Contextualising forced migration in the museum

The potential role of museums in making positive contributions to public discourse has been the subject of extensive discussion, especially concerning the discourse on migrants and migration (Porsché 2018; Bock and Macdonald 2019; Whitehead et al. 2015). Two of my interviewees referred to the importance of the museum in shaping public opinion, for which they pointed to the role of the institution in contributing to social justice (see Labadi 2018). Framed by the discourse of the museum and responses in the media, the museum's practices seem to promote the institution's inclusivity. But to what extent did they positively contribute to the ongoing debate?

In this sub-chapter, I outline how forced migration is contextualised through the museum's practices. Firstly, I focus on the museum's role in the political debate and discuss how this was communicated with the participants. In participatory projects, museums start constructing a discourse long before the participants become involved. This begins with the museum's decision to take part in the political debate, but extends to the framing of the project and the invitation processes used to involve forced migrants. The political implications of the museum were further emphasised by Yannik Porsché, who addressed how museum visitors most likely perceive this: "since a museum audience frequently understands a single exhibit as a prototypical example of a more general phenomenon or a political position, this, particularly in the case of immigration, implies political recognition" (2018, 28). The impact of this political recognition is not unequivocally positive.

Secondly, I interrogate the focus on forced migration and the potential outcome of actively placing the debate in a historical context. In the

aforementioned book by Whitehead et al., the idea of historicising migration is put forward as a way to counter xenophobic attitudes (2015, 55). I look at whether this contextualisation does indeed have a positive effect on how forced migration is represented, or whether there are certain obstacles to drawing these comparisons, and how these affect the experiences and consequences of these projects for forced migrants.

6.1.1 Taking part in a political debate

Public discourse on migration is political. The current debates regarding migration shape political decisions on border control and access, and political parties with explicitly anti-immigration policies have grown in popularity in recent years. With an increased interest in migration-related narratives in museums and the opening of several migration museums over the last few years (see Chapter 1), the political weight of this particular topic needs to be addressed. Despite museums often claiming to be neutral institutions (as addressed in the introduction), they are also seen as institutions with a social responsibility (Janes and Sandell 2019; Janes 2007). In this role, and with respect to their attempts to engage with the topic of migration, museums constitute part of the discourse that defines the political debate. This section evaluates the museum's role with respect to topical sociopolitical issues, as well as how the museum dealt with the urgency and personal relevance of the debate to the forced migrants who were part of the projects.

The various museums studied here sought to take part in the ongoing political debate. In conversation with several practitioners, this was emphasised as an important reason for carrying out their respective projects. The exhibitions manager at the Tropenmuseum, for example, mentioned the urgency of the topic as a motivation for the *Aleppo* exhibition. They said:

> Besides the fact that it really fit our mission to be doing something with Aleppo and Syria, right, it was a highly topical issue, even then. So that is one of the pillars at which we look: does it fit with our mission to provide the public, the museum public, with a wider view of society and make them better world citizens? So the topic of Syria and Aleppo is – we thought it was a very good fit. (T-A06)

In this statement, the exhibitions manager reflects on the museum's official mission statement, which promotes the idea of creating a global community. The focus on an urgent theme – such as the theme of Aleppo right after

many of the city's inhabitants had sought refuge in Europe – helps audiences engage with topics to which they would otherwise struggle to relate. Through the exhibition, the museum confronted its visitors with the war in Syria, possibly generating empathetic responses; while the additional contributions from the guides amplified this outcome. One participant in the *Aleppo* project was motivated to join because it presented an opportunity to portray a more positive view of the city to the proposed exhibition (T-A04). They felt their contribution was important to counter the images – which focused on the war – selected for the exhibition by the (external) project curator, who was contracted by the museum for this project (T-A04). The participant stated that the project was a way for them to help break the stereotype of Syrian people as immigrants who take money from the government and do nothing. They wanted to actively change this stereotype through meeting Dutch citizens and showing them "the good side of Syrian people" (T-A04). They were quite familiar with such projects and with these types of encounters, because they had also worked as a volunteer for the Dutch Council for Refugees. In this role, they visited schools and offices to provide a chance for encounters to occur, and to talk about forced migration with people who have never before met anyone with personal experience of forced migration (T-A04).

The museum director of the MEK pointed to a similar motivation when referring to the museum's urge to take part in this contemporary debate:

> When the so-called refugee crisis hit in 2015, we said: "we have to do something", even though we had already addressed the issue much earlier in our permanent exhibition *Cultural Contacts – Living in Europe*, which we opened in 2011. That was when we came up with the theme. What kind of Europe is it here? How do we see Europe? Are we able to create European living environments together? I'm not talking about the EU now, but about Europe in general, and we [the museum practitioners] don't give an answer to this question. We are only demonstrating […] the contradiction, [that] on the one hand, Europe is always criticised – a real case of Europe-bashing – and on the other hand, [Europeans] say: "no, we cannot take in others from outside, this is our Europe, 'Fortress Europe'". (MEK-D01)

The museum director identified the presence of two main political tendencies towards the idea of Europe, or rather, toward the EU. Though the EU is often criticised as a political body, European citizens are glad to see (relatively) unified EU policies that aim to keep people out. Political and public opinion

shape the debate on migration, which forms a motivation for museums to address this within the framework of their institution.

At the Leicester Art Museum & Gallery, the community engagement officer suggested museums were failing the forced migrants arriving in the country. Especially because of "the media and the, you know, the [negative] propaganda around it all" (LM-MT02). Though the staff member did not directly state that this should be part of the museum's mission, they did indicate that the museum has a strong position in addressing or challenging the narratives put forward in the media. Similarly, Museum Friedland intended to contribute to the political debate through its exhibitions and the accompanying catalogue. This was outlined in said catalogue featuring the photographs from the participatory project, which stated that the museum hoped to counter the panic-mongering in the media through contributing a critical and nuanced perspective on historical and contemporary migration (Baur and Bluche 2017, 17). However, the project curator mentioned that they were unsure what the participants would choose to photograph, and what their motivations and inspiration might be (MF-S01). The direction of the project – and whether or not it would indeed be able to challenge the dominant discourse in media and politics – remained unclear until after the workshops. If or how the participants of *So sehe ich das…* experienced the political aspects of the project is unclear; whilst for *Museum Takeover*, none of the participants mentioned their role in the political debate as a distinct part of the project.

As many practitioners described, the projects were born out of the ambition to challenge the predominantly negative discourses about forced migration and persistent stereotypes of forced migrants. One participant indicated this was an important part of the project for them too, as they wanted to help counter the stereotypes about forced migrants. About the *daHEIM* project, a participant pointed out that they were invited to be part of a debate that they knew nothing about prior to their arrival in Germany and their participation in the project (MEK-D08). They described how "the racism debate and the immigration debate and the policy of the museums" was something they were unaware of throughout the participatory project (MEK-D08). It is only now, several years later, that this participant and several others I spoke to came to realise that they had unknowingly taken part in this debate about their own fate. Though these are individual examples, they show that the participants could have used this project as a means of changing stereotypes themselves. This would have changed the dynamics

of the projects, but could have affected the participants' reflections on the project, which have shifted as a result of their experiences of stereotyping and discrimination in their everyday lives.

In the aforementioned chapter by Lynch, considering museums' potential role in processes of empowerment, she asks: "Why should migrants not similarly be engaged in the major issues and debates that we all face in this troubled world?" (2017a, 240). And with this question, she introduces one of the main problems of these projects, which is the lack of engagement of migrant voices in discussions that move beyond the focus on migration and actually discuss the way they are being perceived, as well as transparency about which debates the participants are part of because of their history. This section pointed to the role of museums in ongoing political debates, and to the need to inform participants about the debates they will be part of in the planned project. The next section will identify how history might play a role in contextualising this debate.

6.1.2 History repeats itself?

With a view to addressing the 'normality' of forced migration as a defining factor in shaping populations worldwide, recent exhibitions on this topic have often included historical perspectives. This aspect of the discourse is a direct response to the way that the media has framed the arrival of many forced migrants in Europe in 2015 as a new phenomenon; referring to 'waves' of people to describe the overwhelming, unexpected and unprecedented number of refugees (Ramsay 2022; Faist 2017). However, this phenomenon was in fact nothing new, and museums wanted to highlight this. Some of the projects studied here used this approach, often as a means to give shape to the museum's role in the participatory process, but predominantly in order to confront people with forced migration as a common experience that could affect anyone. Such a historicisation is a means of placing migration movements within a broader context and building empathetic connections (Rein 2019; Whitehead et al. 2015, 54). The director of the MEK outlined the museum's motivation for historicising the debate, claiming that it was:

> very important, because people looked directly at it and said: "oh yes, look here, that happened back then, it's not so different from what happened today". We also wanted to put the whole situation in perspective. That's incredibly important, to put it in perspective, and not to say that this now

> is exceptional, that this is something special. […] Because you can explain a lot with history. There were completely different refugee movements, right? So, from that point of view, it was a very important aspect, and that was our only condition for this exhibition, that we were involved in that [historical part]. (MEK-D01)

The ways in which this shared heritage – both historically and in contemporary political debates – contributes to the discourse on forced migration is discussed in this section.

Most of the projects studied tended to historicise forced migration, whether in the curated project outputs, additional narratives, or their communications on social media. Other projects did not draw these comparisons directly, like *So sehe ich das…* at Museum Friedland, though this museum is founded on the very principle of presenting the continuity of forced migration via the camp. The exhibition's introductory text does not refer to past experiences, but states that most photographs of the camp "reinforce established images of the transit camp in Friedland and the people it houses" (wall text, *So sehe ich das…*, Museum Friedland). It refers to the place as it has been represented throughout time, and notes that the images that are often used to show the camp in the press neglect the stories of individuals.

The exhibition *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* at the MEK also contained a series of historical stories. The museum curator gathered these stories and added them to the exhibition as a separate, yet well-integrated narrative. In the exhibition's introductory text, this section is described as follows:

> A similar fate was suffered by people who had to flee within, to and from Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Biographies from those times show that there has always been immigration due to flight – that people leave, flee, arrive, stay, master their lives. (Wall text, *daHEIM*, MEK, emphasis in original)

These biographies were introduced to emphasise parallels between current forced migration and a history of forced migration with which people in Germany are more familiar: the stories of forced migration and exile that resulted from WWII. It is clear that these stories were deployed to spark empathetic responses as suggested by Rein (2019), and they definitely achieved this through the museum's digital practices via its social media campaign.

The historical aspect informed the exhibition's most interactive post on the MEK's Facebook page. A single post addressed the parallels between past and present experiences of forced migration, and this post led to many comments and critical responses. The post included a picture of people waiting outside a train station, and the accompanying text read:

> During and after the Second World War, millions of Germans had to flee or were expelled. In their new homeland, amongst their own countrymen, they were not welcome: "Every plague, every offence was blamed on the expellees. They had brought vermin with them, they were suspected if something had been stolen. They were also blamed for the increase in venereal diseases and illegitimate births," writes Andreas Kossert in the book 'Kalte Heimat'.
>
> The dispossessed Germans after the war were not welcomed by their compatriots. (MEK Facebook post 2016, originally in English)[2]

The post goes beyond a simple acknowledgement of the phenomenon of forced migration repeating itself in different contexts. Instead, it points out that, similar to today, forced migrants who were forced to flee during WWII were not welcomed in their new home countries. The post posits a direct connection, and calls upon its readers to be understanding of the difficulties faced by forced migrants in Germany today. It was shared 186 times and received 181 comments. Though Facebook is typically used by museums as a mere marketing tool, in this instance, it functioned as a platform for discussion, in line with the platform's original function. Many of the comments did not proclaim an understanding of the current situation, but instead were expressions of anger about the comparison that was drawn. A comment reads: "Not another smart-ass…who wants to compare this with today's so-called refugees. He should inform himself a little better about history, then he'd realise that they have almost nothing in common." And another one: "They are trying to force Islam on us. Hopefully, they won't achieve it. We are living in the end times. We will see the real enemies hopefully destroyed."[3] In response to these comments, different Facebook

2 Facebook post by the MEK on 5 October 2016.

3 These comments were made by various Facebook users as a direct response to the aforementioned post. The posts are translated from German, retaining the original punctuation.

users respond to agree and others engage in the debate and contradict some of these statements. On only one occasion did the external PR firm respond to a comment to clarify the parallels being drawn and elaborate on the quote used in their post. The discussion ran its course, with many Islamophobic comments as well as criticisms of East German citizens, all of which are still visible on the museum's Facebook page. These parts of the exhibition remain accessible even after the project ended.

Without wanting to support these comments in any way, there is a valid question as to whether these historical and contemporary experiences can be compared. It is precisely the Islamophobic nature of these comments that points towards the difference between people's experiences of flight then and now. The forced migrants who arrived in Germany in 2015 were predominantly from Syria and Iran, and their experiences often include aggressive acts of racism and religion-based discrimination. The museum should not simplify or neglect these experiences in the discourse it represents. Though the historicisation supports the fact that forced migration has affected European countries (and countries elsewhere) for much longer, it neglects the complexity of the debate around forced migration in 2015.

6.2 The forced migrant as the 'other'

As pointed out in the previous sections of this chapter, the wide-ranging political debates about migration have helped to shape stereotypes of forced migrants and led to a form of segregation between new arrivals and local populations. In an article that focuses on the museum's political position, Simon Knell discusses the exploitation of different aspects of the border. He describes it as

> a form of defense that can be moralized, and a violent act of 'Othering' that deploys the dehumanizing and depersonalizing language of objectification and threat, in such words as 'migrant' and 'swarm' (BBC 2015), to render certain individuals beyond the compassion of the state (Knell 2021, 70).

All of the case studies intended to shift conceptions of forced migration as an unidentified incoming mass to seeing forced migration as individually distinct experiences. In light of the current war in Ukraine and the forced migration of civilians from that country, the differences in public perspectives on the migration of Black and People of Colour compared to views on White

migrants become all too clear. Discriminatory views about the "orientalised other' (see Said [1978] 2007) inform political decisions and public opinion, as is clear from the EU's commitment to hosting forced migrants from Ukraine.[4]

Following Teun van Dijk, discourse can be understood as the "main interface between the social and the cognitive dimensions of racism" (2012, 16). This has been reiterated by Porsché, who claims that "the act of representing involves more than merely describing differences. Instead, it (re)produces differences and thereby performs processes of inclusion and exclusion" (2018, 29–30). Porsché describes these processes as political consequences of representation through the constructed discourse (2018, 29). Ethnographic museums reproduce encounters with people perceived as 'others' through discourses that apply linguistic and stylistic strategies to create a greater distance between the cultures (Riegel, 1996, 88). In contemporary museums, these encounters take different forms, of which the case studies in this project are good examples.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the collections manager of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam referred to the colonial history of the museum to explain how the *Aleppo* project was different (T-A06). Rather than putting BIPoC on the spot to talk about their culture to Dutch museum visitors who would otherwise never learn from or about this heritage and history, this project allowed for a dialogue with people who are now fellow citizens. "I understood it as an exchange about experiences, and about culture, with recipes and what not being exchanged [between participants and visitors]" (T-A06). The discourses developed through these encounters will be discussed in more detail later, with particular attention being paid to the ways in which the museum's infrastructures rather continue to support the reproduction of stereotypes.

In this sub-chapter, the focus on forced migration is explored through a study of the selected exhibition themes and the narratives developed as part

4 On 24 February 2022, Ukraine was invaded and attacked by Russian forces led by Vladimir Putin. Following the outbreak of this war, the EU announced on 8 March 2022 that it would provide support to countries outside of the EU hosting refugees, in addition to hosting people within different EU countries. The political response in different countries has revealed the divergent treatment of refugees from Ukraine today when compared to the treatment of refugees from Middle-Eastern and African countries in and since 2015. The ruling party of the Netherlands, for example, tweeted that refugees currently in camps in the Netherlands should leave to make place for "real refugees" from Ukraine (VVD Twitter, 2022).

of these exhibitions, of the labels employed, and of the use or challenging of specific stereotypes. The first section focuses on the exhibition themes, which originated at the point of inviting 'communities' (discussed in Chapter 3) and inevitably led to projects that were bound to construct a discourse revolving around the 'migrant identity' of the participants. In the second section, I address how the projects attempted to counter labels and stereotypes of forced migrants through linguistic choices. The final section explores the separation between the different elements of the exhibition, and how these may or may not have contributed to a dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them'. Applying a critical lens to the discourse and the responses from participants and practitioners to the created content, the following sections point towards both positive and negative outcomes of the represented exhibition themes and stereotypes.

6.2.1 Exhibition themes

In the participatory projects analysed in this study and many others related to forced migration (such as those mentioned in Chapter 1), there was often a focus on flight as the main theme of the exhibition or project. Experiences of migration, the journey and arrival were often at the centre of the narrative. At the MEK, the project co-curator, who supported the facilitator for the participatory work, stated that this focus is important, as it helps visitors – or, the predominantly White museum audience (Den Oudsten 2020) – understand people's motivations for leaving their homelands, and to learn about their experiences of 'arrival'. In explaining the relevance of presenting these stories, they referred to questions visitors might have:

> What do they [the forced migrants] actually want? Why did they flee anyway? That is a very, very major thing for the others – because the visitors […] want to understand why someone is fleeing. Why did you actually flee, why didn't you stay at home and keep fighting or something? And that has to be explained. You have to show that. With the routes, with the paths you have taken. What does flight mean? What does it mean to live in another country, to start with no money? Being dependent on the state and so on. These are all simple things that we – or something I think I felt myself, that we have to show that. [That's] what we wanted to show with these people [the forced migrants involved in the project]. (MEK-D05)

These questions formed the motivations for the project facilitator to initiate the project, with the project co-curator suggesting that visitors need to know

the entire story in order to be able to empathise with forced migrants (MEK-D05). However, Ian McShane points out that "a focus on the journey can sometimes isolate that particular experience from the rest of the individual's life and diminish a sense of personal agency […] If the journey is given sole emphasis, migrants remain stubbornly migrants" (2001, 129). This idea was echoed by one of the participants of the *daHEIM* project, who noted that it was a shame that their personal experiences and knowledge should be limited to their experiences of flight (MEK-D04). The issue with many of these projects, they stated, is that they refer to stereotypes and reduce migrants to their biographies and their experiences of migration (MEK-D04). The focus on experiences of forced migration was manifested, for example, in the personal migration routes drawn on the wall. The exhibition brought up stereotypical representations of migration with its references to crossing the Mediterranean, a display of worn-out shoes, and the bunk beds commonly used in refugee shelters. This thematic focus was further symbolised by the introduction text to the exhibition, which mentioned "strenuous flight, dangerous sea, drowning people" (*daHEIM* wall text).[5] These symbols of the refugee protection crisis of 2015 were in line with the exhibition's theme, but they also essentialised this part of the participants' identity, disregarding other aspects of their lives. This calls to mind the previously addressed problem of understanding migrants as 'communities' (central to Chapter 3). Despite the fact that the experience of migration is just one aspect of the lives of forced migrants, this aspect is the only one that is formally and informally provided a stage within cultural institutions.

This example shows that it is important to consider the themes of a participatory project in which museums (aim to) engage forced migrants. It highlights stereotypical experiences of forced migration that generalise people's personal narratives. For example, one participant in the *Aleppo* project mentioned that "it is true that some people fled by boat, but my luck was that I went by plane" (T-A04). While the stories presented at the MEK would certainly evoke an empathetic response, they perpetuated a discourse of the forced migrants as 'victims' and as a 'group' with the same experiences. Sergi, whose work I cited earlier, proposes that museums should carefully include counter-narratives of "unconditional acts of hospitality emerging across the

5 This is taken from the introductory text to the exhibition *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives*, which was made available by the museum for this research project, but can also still be found inside the virtual exhibition on Google Arts & Culture.

continent" (2021, 148). Though he claims this might contribute to a shift from understanding forced migration as deeply cultural to understanding it as deeply human (Sergi 2021, 148), this thematic focus is likely to promote a 'white saviour complex' which presents forced migrants as 'victims' who need to be saved by White people. Instead of this, I propose that museums can build on this theme to address the larger political issues of ongoing colonial violence and structural inequalities experienced by forced migrants. Rather than referring to 'drowning people' as a phenomenon that forms a natural part of forced migration, practitioners should only describe such tragedies in relation to the EU's border control policies. Likewise, museums should acknowledge that forced migration does not begin at Europe's borders, nor do migrants only exist after crossing these borders (see Ramsay 2022, 46). In these ways, museums might actually help to shape the ongoing political debate.

The other projects did not foreground forced migration in their outputs. However, that does not mean the museums steered clear of stereotypical depictions or references that limited the potential contribution of the participants. *Museum Takeover*, for example, applied a completely different approach to the MEK, as it did not address one topic specifically but invited participants to make contributions on objects and artworks already on display. Despite forced migration not forming the focus of the project, the contribution was thematically framed by events such as Refugee Week (in June 2018) and the Journeys Festival International (for the project's second edition in August 2018). In line with this framing, the museum outlines this and other projects on the website within a section dedicated specifically to their work with forced migrants.[6] On the one hand, this shows the museum's dedication to an ongoing engagement with forced migrants, but on the other hand, it pigeonholes the participants as forced migrants and does not allow for engagement outside of this scope. The labels created as part of *Museum Takeover* supported this framing by describing the places people are from. This geographical reference pointed to the participants' 'otherness', but at the same time, it acknowledged the expertise of the participants about the particular objects. The participants' knowledge about some of the museum

6 The museum recently completely revamped its website, which now includes a separate section on 'Work with Refugees and Asylum Seekers', located within the 'Community Engagement' section: https://www.leicestermuseums.org/learning-engagement/community-engagement/work-with-refugees-and-asylum-seekers/

objects translated to a description of how the object is used based on first-hand experience.

Similar to the project in Leicester, the Tropenmuseum referenced forced migration indirectly rather than drawing a direct connection between the participants and the exhibition theme. The exhibition focused on the city of Aleppo rather than on stories of forced migration, and as such, it primarily addressed the war and its consequences for the city and its inhabitants. The museum practitioners had been inspired by an old scale model of the city, but the curator and exhibitions manager struggled to find photographs or objects depicting Aleppo before the war (T-A06). Displaying photographs of the city, the exhibition was to guide the visitor through the city's past, present and future (T-A06). Despite there being no intention to develop an exhibition that would focus mainly on the destruction of the city, most of the pictures showcased precisely this aspect. The exhibition contained several chapters in which other themes were brought in to provide a more nuanced perspective. These included, for example, references to the city's traditional soap production. This additional narrative proposed an alternative to the story of war. One of the participants remarked that the prominence of the images of the war disappointed them, as they would have liked to see a more positive perspective on the city. They said:

> I wanted fewer of those pictures, and more of . . . 'cause there were also a lot of videos, all about the terror, only violent images, women with weapons and that kind of thing. It is indeed part of Aleppo, but with a large title like *Aleppo* in a big museum, you'd expect to also see the nice and beautiful Aleppo. And not just war and weapons and those kinds of things. (T-A04)

This comment reveals that they had particular expectations of the exhibition that were not met by the museum. Their associations with the city were scarcely represented in this curated narrative on Aleppo. As discussed in the two former chapters, the museum practitioners were not willing or able to change this narrative.

At Museum Friedland, neither the participatory project nor the resulting exhibition directly addressed the topic of migration, instead taking the site of their arrival – Friedland – as a focal point. During the conversation about the photographs taken by the participants, their stories of migration were discussed, but this was not integrated as a central aspect of the exhibition. The project curator stated that the project "was about the transit camp, about how the people see and experience this place" (MF-S01). They added that the

focus on forced migration, which informs the museum and its permanent exhibition, is of no interest to forced migrants who have just arrived in Friedland (MF-S01). Though this is particularly true of Museum Friedland, whose closest potential visitors are in fact people staying in the transit camp, their idea can be extended to practices with forced migrants elsewhere. These exhibitions focusing on forced migration are *not* made for forced migrants, but rather cater to an audience that is intrigued by, or interested in, forced migration *from the outside*. Though this focus may spark empathy in visitors, it is unlikely that visitors who choose to go to such an exhibition were not already sympathetic to this issue before visiting the museum.

It is therefore important for the museum to consider how they might engage with the forced migrants to create an exhibition that is (also) meaningful to them. This is most relevant for museums like Museum Friedland, which has a focus on migration due to its position and its connection to its local histories. However, in considering the effects and consequences of this particular output – the discourse constructed through the participatory project – it is important to note that the discourse positively affected the lives of the locally based migrants. Following *So sehe ich das…*, the exhibition developed from the photographs taken by people temporarily housed at the transit camp became a tool for discussing experiences of Friedland with people who subsequently arrived there. The museum educator described the importance of the exhibition for their engagement and support work with people in Friedland:

> So later the exhibition itself gave me a rich environment, a rich learning environment. And people were really so happy to have it. And when they started with learning *Deutsch*, most of the young generation, they one day come to Nissenhütte and they read the first two sentences. Because the first two sentences are 'Ich bin…' 'Ich komme aus…' [I am; I come from], so they used it, and they were so happy. And also it was a good chance to explain the idea of *spätaussiedler*, because it was difficult for refugees [from] Somalia and from Syria and from Iraq [to understand] why these blonde, blue-eyed people are also refugees. So it was a good chance for me to give certain information before taking them to the museum. (MF-S02)

The narratives developed were perhaps not very meaningful for the people who moved away after the project, but the exhibition sparked conversation about the transit camp and the different migrants residing there. In this regard, the project's thematic focus on the experience of the transit camp

provides a highly sustainable outcome for the people the museum is hoping to engage. The case studies examined here show that the thematic focus on forced migration may be helpful for creating empathy among the broader public, but such a direct and stereotypical approach provides a limited perspective that is unhelpful to the participants, and neglects the underlying, more urgent issues that define forced migration. At the same time, as the next section will point out, it is difficult to find alternative ways of presenting forced migration, and to avoid common labels and associations.

6.2.2 (Un-)labelling 'refugees'

In many of the conversations, practitioners and project organisers referred to language as an important aspect of their work. "Museum cultural programmes can also present opportunities to subvert stereotypes around refugees [...] However, there is a risk that museums exacerbate structural inequalities imposed upon refugees from other sectors of society" (Sergi 2021, 55). That stereotypes were and still are prominent in public discourse is made evident by the response of forced migrants themselves to 'their' labels, and by the museums' intentions to avoid or challenge common labels and stereotypes. In the guide *Words Matter*, which looks at language used in ethnological museums, Guno Jones suggested that "perhaps a starting point, at least for museums, is to acknowledge how categories can reinforce notions of difference, and, together with the diverse groups, expand these categories to create new and more inclusive possibilities" (2021, 61). This section assesses the alternative labels and signifying language used to describe forced migrants. It describes ways in which the museums attempted to break with the stereotypes attached to the word 'refugee', and highlights the limitations of these attempts in practice.

Regardless of whether they were fully aware of the sociopolitical situation in their host country, many participants had soon become aware of the stigma attached to their 'label'. The participants – either during the interviews or in conversation with project facilitators – discussed their experiences of consistently being labelled 'refugees', and how this came with expectations to share their story of migration. Though not all participants considered the label problematic, acknowledging their experiences of being labelled a 'refugee' is important for understanding the consequences it had for them. The workshop facilitator from *Museum Takeover* recounted: "I have people who told me: 'I hate this word. I hate the word asylum seeker. I hate the word refugee.' And

I had people who told me: 'don't call us refugees', you know?" (LM-MT04). The need to consider words carefully was also described by Sergi, who stated that "museums have also a moral responsibility to question the language used and labels employed in their work with forced migrants" (2021, 56). Aware of the difficulties of the most commonly used label for people who have been forced to flee their homeland, those involved in the projects proposed various alternatives to describe (the role of) the participants.

In the communication for the *Aleppo* project at the Tropenmuseum, the museum team carefully considered its language use and avoided stereotypical labels. On the museum's website, social media pages, press releases and in the exhibition texts, the museum refers to the participants not as forced migrants or refugees but as former inhabitants of Aleppo. Rather than describing the participants by addressing their experience of flight, the museum's marketer explained that they would also mention people's passions or interests and their role in the project to describe them (T-A02). For example, one of the participants spoke about Syrian food on the tour through the exhibition and was described on social media as "[participant], who loves Syrian food and would like to tell you about this".[7] They said they attempted in their communication to move beyond a stereotypical representation of the participants as refugees, adding that: "in principle, they are refugees, of course, but certainly at that time there was such a strong cultural understanding that was very stereotypical, that was attached to that word [refugee]. There probably still is now" (T-A02). In line with this understanding, the aforementioned workshop facilitator from *Museum Takeover* suggested that

> it helps if they are not only seen as refugees, but they are seen as what they are, which is people, you know. And not only be labelled as refugees. You know, you kind of have someone who happened to be in the UK because something happened in his country or her country. And they are here, their English is limited. They don't know the culture, but they are people. And they want to learn, and they want to be integrated. And they want also to share their skills, because these people have talents, and they have skills. (LM-MT04)

7 Facebook post by the Tropenmuseum on 20 April 2017.

The words chosen to describe forced migrants within the museum might resonate with the ongoing political debate, amplifying a discourse that generalises and negatively portrays forced migrants. This directly affected the participants, as they had become familiar with the words used to describe them as a group, as well as with the negative connotations attached to the respective labels.

The label of 'refugee' also came up as something to avoid during the interview with the project facilitator of the *daHEIM* project. When I described *daHEIM* as a participatory project with refugees, the project facilitator commented that the project should not be described as such, because "it is a project with people who have fled, who have had to flee, who have left their country, it is not a project with refugees" (MEK-D03). They mentioned that such language influences our thinking, and that for this reason the term 'refugee' (in German *geflüchtete*, or *flüchtling*[8]) does not appear in any of the texts written for the exhibition. The exhibition proposed a focus on humans and human experiences, which is clear from the first sentence of the introductory text for the exhibition *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives*. It reads: "On 4/3/2016 *people* took over these rooms…" (*daHEIM* wall text, emphasis added). The focus aligns with the main vision of the Tropenmuseum, which brands itself as "a museum about people" (see Chapter 2). However, discourses are not constructed purely through language; in most ethnographic, cultural and historical museums, stories are told predominantly through the objects on display. The exhibition *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* may have intended to tell the story of people, but as outlined in the previous section, the exhibition focused very much on their stories of migration. This echoes the view of Jones, who stated that when museums invite people with migrant experiences, the migrants are expected to reflect their 'migrant identity' in their work or contribution (2021, 60). By critically assessing this approach I do not intend to suggest that museums should not provide spaces for such conversations. Rather, I posit that this contributes to stereotypes, and

8 The German term *flüchtling* (refugee) is derived from the word *flucht* (flight, escape). The suffix –ling is used in many nominalisations in German, and while some of these are neutral or even positive (for example *liebling*, 'darling'), many are negative (for example *feigling*, coward). In an effort to counter these negative associations, the term *geflüchtete* has gained prominence in recent years. Derived from the past participle of *flüchten* (to flee), it translates literally to 'one who has fled', and is seen as less essentialising (while having the added advantage of being more gender-neutral).

confines forced migrants to this 'identity', one that they did not choose for themselves.

While aiming to avoid these labels, museums can still remain 'safe spaces' (as addressed in the previous chapter) where stories of migration can be shared by participants, audiences or curatorial staff. Some participants mentioned that it was quite therapeutic to share their stories with people who had gone through similar experiences; while other people said that they were happy to help local inhabitants understand why they had fled their home countries and explain the different ways one might flee. One specific example of a participant's interest in sharing their story can be found in one of the labels written for the *Museum Takeover* project. It reads: "When we left Eritrea, we went to Sudan on foot, we wish we had a horse like this one. But when we left Sudan to go to Libya, we crossed the Sahara Desert by car. That took us 10 days" (*Museum Takeover* catalogue 2018). This personal story originated in the participant's immediate association with the museum object. This object is not a direct representation of flight or migration – it is a small sculpture of a man on a horse – yet the participant saw it as an opportunity to talk about their journey. The two options – of creating a 'safe space' where people can share stories of their journey with others (as described in Chapter 5), and of moving away from a distinct focus on forced migration when involving forced migrants – are not mutually exclusive.

The project at the Tropenmuseum is an example of where these two elements came together. The museum refrained from labelling the former inhabitants of Aleppo 'refugees', and it provided a space where people could share any of their stories (or refrain from sharing highly personal reflections altogether). The discourse that emerged from this provided a broader notion of the city and its history, as well as pointing to the reasons for fleeing and the diversity of the people who decided to leave Aleppo. The education officer who had set up the participatory aspect of the project said they felt that this work changed people's conception of forced migrants, which was previously based on what they had seen in the media (T-A01). In their view, the project contributed to an un-labelling of refugees. Based on their observations during and after the tours, they speculated:

> I think the image people have of a 'refugee', at least during the tours with us, [was] I don't want to say invalidated, but you did get a broader spectrum of images presented to you, so to speak. From someone who completely fits in with the "oh yes I came on a boat and I had to leave my family behind

> and now, during the project, they came over to the Netherlands – they are now happily back together", to someone who left because of their sexual orientation, and who did not choose the Netherlands but was simply placed here, through to young boys who are the only ones in the family who have fled, or [a participant] who came with their whole family. You know, there are so many different ways of coming here, and different people from different levels of education. (T-A01)

As outlined by this practitioner, and addressed by many in preparation for the projects, museums have the potential to shift the ways in which people understand migration and forced migrants. However, there is a fine line between essentialising a person's migrant background and providing a space for them to share their story should they wish to do so.

Regardless of whether it labels people as migrants or not, a focus on forced migration will most likely contribute to a stereotypical representation of 'the migrant'. Despite the intentions of museum practitioners to challenge stereotypical views of migrants, the projects demonstrate that labels and language are not easily discarded, nor are new terms and descriptions immediately adopted by the public and the press. This is most problematic when the museum's discourse supports a dichotomy of 'us' vs. 'them', enforcing the idea of the migrant as the 'other' (Meza Torres 2013; Jones 2021). The label 'migrant' does not only evoke ideas about their experience of migration but also, more often than not, elicits mistaken ideas about their country of origin or skin colour. This was pointed out by Jones, who suggested that "the figure of the migrant artist, like the category 'people of migrant descent,' is often a metonym (a euphemism) for **race**. In this use, 'migrant' is not primarily concerned with describing movement from one place to another, but with signifying a notion of 'elsewhere', including ideas about traditional culture or ethnicity" (2021, 59 [emphasis in original]).

This racialised view of the migrant constitutes a dominant aspect of the discourse on migration. One of the participants of *Museum Takeover*, who had moved to the United Kingdom from Zimbabwe, backed up this notion. They referred to conversations with locals who had asked questions about how they could have afforded a flight to the UK and whether people in their home country even had a television or access to the internet (LM-MT03). The participant found these conversations hurtful because they were not based on any knowledge about, or interest in, their home country, but rather departed from a stereotypical idea about African countries and a feeling of

superiority towards countries in the Global South (LM-MT03). In this example, these stereotypes were not included in the exhibition, yet the participant's experience points out the prominent presence of these stereotypes in public discourse.

A similarly racist stereotype appeared as part of the performance *Die Könige* that was organised by the project facilitator at the end of the *daHEIM* project. During the preparation phase and the performance itself, the participants were asked to perform 'riding camels' as a means of addressing these stereotypes, while at the same time reproducing them. The group of performers consisted of several participants from the *daHEIM* project, along with a number of White performers, and all participants were expected to perform 'camel riding' during a segment of the seven-hour long performance. The performance included many stereotypical references to migration, such as the use of emergency blankets and mattresses (MEK-D07), but this particular cliché of 'camel riding' racialised the understanding of the migrant conveyed through the project. One participant mentioned that they and other participants had objected to this performative representation (MEK-D04). Despite their objections and the conversations that followed, the cliché remained part of the public performance in which they took part (MEK-D04). In addressing this problematic use of stereotypes within a museum context, the participant felt that their objections were not taken on board, because the White dancers who facilitated the performance did not personally feel affected by it. According to this participant and two others involved in the performance, the facilitators had not been able to see the matter from the perspective of the participants, who felt pressured to comply and extremely uncomfortable in this situation (MEK-D04; MEK-D07; MEK-D08). The museum director defined the performance as a project that was "too artistic" for the museum to get actively involved in (MEK-D01); stating that they merely provided the spaces for the preparations and the performance itself, and did not learn about the use of stereotypes in the performance until evaluating the project with me during the interview.

Museums need to consider the ethical implications of participatory work with forced migrants, as well as the discourses they produce through these projects. On the surface, these projects may have contributed to the image of the museums as institutions that dared to 'respond to' the refugee protection crisis. But in a more substantial way, these projects have both helped and undermined the people who participated in them, and did more to fuel

the ongoing debate than to challenge it. Regarding the role of museums in challenging stereotypical representations of migrants, Jones elaborated:

> Admittedly, there is no easy solution for how to describe the complex biographies of diverse citizens. Indeed, the inclusive politics of naming has long struggled with the tension between ignoring difference and foregrounding essentialized identities. Yet, holding on to earlier categories without thinking of their contemporary, real life consequences may help perpetuate structural injustice and exclusion, creating hierarchies of citizens. (2021, 58)

Museums need to be aware of such differences and also reconsider how their actions can centralise assigned identities, such as that of the 'forced migrant'. Every aspect of museum practice contributes to the discourse and should be taken into account, not only because of the effects they might have today, but also due to the long-term consequences of these narratives for the participants and other forced migrants.

6.2.3 Additional narratives

For most of the projects, the discourse that emerged from the project was partly determined by the museum and partly evolved over the course of the participatory work. Given that museums continue to adopt an objective tone, presenting information in museum texts without acknowledging the authors (Gesser et al. 2020), these different aspects might not be recognisable within the exhibition. However, in some of the projects, the participatory outputs were separated from the museum's exhibition using other means. In this section, I discuss the ways in which additional narratives were integrated into the exhibition, and underline which aspects may have signified that these should be read as separate. This does not necessarily reflect what museum visitors picked up from the presented discourse, but it addresses the ways in which museums might present a separate or combined narrative, and in particular, how the participants understood this.

As described earlier, the exhibition at the Tropenmuseum was developed before the participants were integrated into the project. The narrative had already been established and there was little room for the participants to influence what would be communicated through the objects and accompanying texts that populated the space. In a conversation with a participant from the *Aleppo* project, they said that they were asked for

photographs and objects to contribute to the exhibition, to create a "personal corner" at the entrance to the exhibition space (T-A04). They referred to the personal objects as a separate part of the exhibition, after which the 'real' exhibition begins. The participant, as such, did not perceive the part of the exhibition with their personal objects as 'real', recognising the visual and contextual division between these two elements within the exhibition (T-A04). According to the museum's exhibition manager, the personal objects provided the exhibition with an additional layer, which contributed contemporary perspectives and connected the city's past and present (T-A06).

In addition to the objects loaned to the museum for the exhibition, the participants provided personal narratives through the guided tours they held on Sundays. Perhaps due to their temporary nature, or due to the fact that they were organised by the education team, these tours were seen as additional, or separate parts of the exhibition, and not as integral to the story that was being told. Upon asking the exhibitions manager whether these personal narratives were necessary for the impact of the exhibition or whether the exhibition could have worked without them, they stated: "I think it would have been a more superficial project, or more detached at least" (T-A06). The personal aspects – both in the objects and the tours provided by the participants – helped to establish a more intimate connection with the visitors of the exhibition. The exhibition curator discussed what this process looked like from their side, recounting the meeting with the participants in which they sought to bring together exhibition and tour (T-A05). The curator was asked to present the concept and narratives to the participants, clarifying that the exhibition was based on their interpretation of the city's history and present (T-A05). In a meeting in which they presented the concept of the exhibition, they addressed the participants, saying: "I'm not from that city, I've never been there, and it's your addition that makes it come alive, so take this story, as I present it here, and make your own story with that. You have to contextualise it yourself. This is the framework, and you tell your story within it" (T-A05). The task for the participants hence became clear; with their stories, they would provide the details, the footnotes, or put a personal touch on the exhibition. The use of tours as an additional narrative is common in museums, and it can form an interesting contribution to what is already on display. Yet in this case, while it seems that the participants' stories were intended to define the content of what was presented in the museum, as Sergi (2021) has described, the curatorial work and interpretation remained under

the control of museum staff (as discussed in an assessment of the curator's role in Chapter 4).

The exhibition that came out of the *daHEIM* project contained both a contemporary section (curated by the invited group of forced migrants), and a historical section (contributed by the museum curators). The curators are needed, according to Whitehead et al., to "do the historicizing" (2015, 53). They argue that the contribution of the curator allows for the representation of conflict and division, which might not be made visible in a collaboratively developed, poly-vocal rendering of this topic (2015, 53). The *daHEIM* project, however, shows that these aspects can complement one another. The exhibition as a whole cleverly combined the historical and contemporary stories: the texts were presented in a similar format, and there was no visual differentiation between these two narratives. What set apart these different parts of the exhibition was the use of objective and subjective language in the labels, which each focus on the life of a particular person. The labels about the participants' lives are written in the first person; they introduced a subjective narrative that is omitted from the introductory text of the exhibition. The texts that form part of the historical section of the exhibition adopted an objective, supposedly neutral voice. This difference suggests the active input of the participants; rather than there being texts speaking about them, the participants introduce themselves through these labels. Despite practical difficulties involved in bringing together the work done by the museum and the work done by the participants (MEK-D02), the historical and contemporary narratives were weaved into the exhibition to complement each other.

Though many participatory projects in museums ultimately lead to an exhibition, there are some that work towards different visual and conceptual outputs. *Museum Takeover* is an example of a project where the goal was not to develop an exhibition, nor was the focus of the project to address forced migration or a 'shared heritage'. Much like co-creative projects that are set up to enhance the museum collection, this project used the museum objects – those on display in the permanent exhibitions – as a starting point for further interpretation. Most of the objects selected by the participants were exhibited in the World Arts Gallery (LM-MT01). Selected due to their direct relation to the participant's heritage or former home, they immediately brought back memories that fed into the stories that appeared on the labels. Other labels, instead, addressed participants' connections to the city of Leicester, or more recent experiences (LM-MT06). The labels were displayed next to

the museum's own labels, providing an alternative narrative (LM-MT01). The *Museum Takeover* logo was featured at the top of each label, so as to distinguish these texts from the ones provided by the museum. The project facilitator pointed out that the museum's labels provided very limited initial information (LM-MT01), explaining:

> they [the participants] could see the labels that were written [by the museum], although at New Walk Museum the labels are very minimal, [...] so the labels at New Walk Museum were basically a few words, sort of like, "this is a pot", and where it comes from, if they had this information (LM-MT01).

This basic information provided by the museum was complemented by the interpretations and stories of the participants. Due to their different format and more extensive text, the labels set themselves apart from the texts provided by the museum, and could therefore easily be recognised by museum visitors as an additional narrative.

The project facilitator confirmed, however, that the intention was not to create competing narratives: "so the idea was that this wasn't going to be about which knowledge is right, and it wasn't going to be a competition in authority" (LM-MT01). Despite this not being the intention, there was some friction between the two narratives on exhibit, especially because of one of the labels contradicted the content of one of the museum labels. The project facilitator explained that after going back and forth between the object and their writing process, one of the participants said they really did not agree with the museum's interpretation (LM-MT01). In their eyes, the museum was wrong about the object, and the project facilitator suggested they could include this in their own text. The label reads:

> I don't agree with the interpretation. In Nigeria, we have North, West, South & East. This tunic or fabric is worn by the Housa, mostly Muslims. It is a traditional kind of tunic worn during special occasions, like marriages, tuban, when a king is [being] crowned. It is worn during festivals too. It is not only worn by the men from the North alone, it is also for women designed in a top and wrapper. The women wear it when selling traditional northern food called fura d'nono in a calabash on their head. It is a seed mixed with cow milk and sugar. (*Museum Takeover* catalogue 2018, 17)

The museum's original labels were not made available to me for my research, but it is clear that the participant considered their interpretation to be incorrect or inadequate. Their label elaborates on the many different uses of the garment, which are most likely omitted by the museum's interpretation. Additionally, the label refers to the relevance of the object for both men and women, due to a concern that this was not made clear in the museum's text about the object. These labels were not collected, nor was their content added into the database after the project was completed. This aspect of the project, however, is central to the next chapter of this book.

6.3 Conclusion

Many museums initiate projects with forced migrants as a way of constructing a discourse that challenges public and media discourses. Museums are keen to take part in the political debate surrounding forced migration, yet they are not fully prepared for the responsibilities towards the participants that go along with such an approach. Participants who have recently arrived in a new country cannot be aware of the ongoing debates there. This chapter confronted the complexities of the discourses presented through participatory projects with forced migrants.

As was revealed in several studies on recent representations of forced migrants in museums (Sergi 2021; Rein 2019; Whitehead et al. 2015), these projects rarely produce a discourse that breaks with stereotypes, but more often than not reproduces them. This chapter highlights how the focus on forced migration can promote the view of forced migrants as the 'other', especially within the context of an ethnographic museum. Despite attempts to eschew the label 'refugees' in an effort to avoid the negative stereotypes attached to this label, the museums essentialised the identities of the participants in other ways, through the thematic focus of the exhibitions and the use of stereotypical discursive elements. It is one thing to avoid stereotypes, but if they are not actively challenged, how can audiences gain a sense of the complexity of these labels? As suggested by Whitehead et al. (2015), historicising the phenomenon of migration – as done in the *daHEIM* project – can positively influence how contemporary narratives are perceived. In adding this historical perspective, museums should be careful not to sideline the participatory outputs in favour of their 'own' narrative. Moreover, in keeping with their quest to expand common narratives on

forced migration, museums could use their spaces as a platform for raising awareness about the role of Western European countries in creating the reasons for (forced) migration; rather than focusing on the journey or arrival of people here, these stories can be presented as part of a much larger political context.