Embodiment, Performance and Healing
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Introduction
Embodiment, performance and healing are concepts that cover vast and plural fields for research, and they can by no means be fully discussed in this one chapter. I will narrow down the discussion by focusing on certain intersections between these concepts with the aim to illuminate our understanding of the human self as it is related to experiences of illness and well-being. Taking this approach, the chapter argues self to be embodied and constituted within, across and between diverse cultural and social life-worlds that structure and direct individuals’ everyday life experiences (see Grønseth 2013). This position reflects how I explore senses of self and personhood less as culturally established concepts and more as experiences of actual behaviour and negotiations of interactions in peoples’ everyday lives, thus linking the building of personhood and the sense of self to the realm of embodiment and sensorial experiences (see also Strathern and Stewart 2011:393). Furthermore, this approach arises out of my study on Tamil refugees as they visit Norwegian health-care centres with various illnesses and diffuse bodily pains such as headaches, stomach pain, dizziness, fevers, fatigue and sleeplessness (Grønseth 2010a). While the study starts out from a medical model focusing on illnesses within the context of doctor–patient relations, it has turned to a client-centred model including the wider context of Tamil social relations and experiences of not only pain, but also pleasure and well-being. Through this move I have become attuned to embodied tensions in everyday life, including performance and ritual practices within a quest for health and well-being. When paying attention to performative practices, I further came to recognize the impact of relations between humans and non-humans, as the latter includes gods, material objects and visual images that are seen to interact in the human experiences of self, illness and well-being (Grønseth 2012).

As will appear, my approach to illness and well-being as embodied experiences of social life includes a concern for the human creation of meaning and knowledge. The link to the creation of meaning and knowledge comes from recognizing how suffering and pain can open up a complex agency that emerges in intersubjective spaces between self and other(s), humans or non-humans. In such agentive and intersubjective moments, the sense of self can be re-formed and find new meanings and knowledge about everyday social life. Sometimes the new sense of self and its being in the world can heal moral and social ruptures and tie together fractures into a new meaningful wholeness that supplies well-being and pleasure. Of course, the opposite may also occur, as the new or diminished sense of self can struggle with ruptures and conflicts that may lead to pain, illness and destruction.

In this view, I see the process of healing to include the whole person – body and mind – with physical, social, spiritual and moral components (see also Strathern and Stewart
1999:7). Thus, healing is understood to differ from curing, which is seen as successfully treating a specific condition (Strathern and Stewart 1999:7), or other diseases understood as biological or biochemical malfunctions (Finkler 1994:5). In this view disease differs from illness, as the latter refers to the patient’s own perception of an impaired function (for more on the distinction between disease and illness, see Fabrega 1974; Kleinman 1980; Finkler 1994 and others). As Strathern and Stewart (1999:7) point out, we can see how healing and curing to some extent matches the distinction between disease and illness. However, there are overlaps that are in a more or less well-balanced relationship depending on the specific context. In various contexts both approaches can be included, while often one of them will have the stronger emphasis. Generally, there is a tendency for the non-biomedical or ‘non-Western’ systems to be stronger on healing than curing (Foster and Anderson 1978). Moreover, the difference refers to how curing and healing resonates with the underlying distinction between body and mind. Just as my study of Tamil illness argues for a need to reach beyond the distinction between body and mind by employing the holistic term ‘embodiment’, so it is also necessary to breach the differences between healing and curing, as they sometimes depend on each other. As Strathern and Stewart observe, curing may depend on emotional states, healing on physical states (1999:8).

While recognizing the need for multiple approaches in dealing with human suffering and pain, disease and illness, this chapter further sees healing as linked to Tamils’ illnesses which are often expressed in bodily pains (mentioned above) and also feelings like ‘lost and alone’, ‘no peace at heart’, ‘loss of self’ and ‘not worthy’ as fully social persons. The Tamils dealt with such experiences through everyday ritual performances in which relations to Hindu gods, images and other objects interact in significant ways. In this context, I propose the perspective of ritualization (Bell 1992, 1997) and performance to be fruitful, as they sometimes highlight the sensory aspects of experience and are understood to occur on many different occasions and in many different kinds.

Performance can be seen to cover a continuum of human actions like rituals, play, sports, theatre, dance, music, the everyday enacting of social, professional, gender, race and class roles, and engagement in media and the Internet (Schechner and Brady 2013), as well as different actions of healing or curing. Many performances can belong to more than one category along such a continuum. As Schechner and Brady point out: ‘The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance’ (2013:2). The concept of performance opens up the study of text, architecture, visual arts or other objects, not as what they are in themselves, but as interactors in ongoing relationships. This is an approach in which one does not ‘read’ the ritual, act, event, picture or object as a text (see Geertz 1973). Rather, one examines how the ‘thing’, the object of inquiry, interacts with those present and how ‘it’ changes over time. In this way, even though the thing in itself is relative stable, it is the thing’s ‘liveliness’ which is at issue (Schechner and Brady 2013:2), how it is part of, enacts in and creates behaviours, practices, feelings and sensations.

This approach encourages how I suggest that objects and images are interactors in everyday Tamil practices, senses of self and quests for well-being (Grønseth 2012). Experiences of personhood and self are constantly reconstituted by bodily sensory perceptions of social relations and the environment. Here, I draw inspiration from theories of ‘embodiment’ (Csordas 1994, 2002) and ‘being-in-the-world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]) emphasizing that emotions and feelings do not originate in a biological and pre-cultural domain, but arise in an existential experience that transcends the dichotomies of mind/body and culture/nature. Thus feelings and emotions are seen to originate from the interplay between bodily perceptions and sensations, as well as cognitive processes of language and discourses. In this view embodiment is understood as patterns of behaviour inscribed in or enacted in
the body, thus linking the body as a source of perception to the realms of agency, practices, emotions and meanings.

Underscoring how embodiment and sensory experiences of one’s surroundings support memory and can transform a person over time, embodiment is seen as highly related to our senses of self, and thus they affect an individual’s understanding and experience of their personhood (see Strathern and Stewart 2011). As Strathern and Stewart observe, this implies that ‘… embodiment does not simply refer to the body as a bounded entity but rather to the body, and the person, in their surrounding environment’ (2011:393). Moreover, this view highlights how individual senses of self can vary and change in relation to which sensory experiences are being felt, understood or chosen as important in a particular context. In this perspective it becomes pivotal to recognize emotions as being formed by and contributing to the formation of local, national and international politics and structures. Exploring the embodied and tacit, I propose, allows me to examine how objects and items interplay with Tamil senses of illness, well-being and identity. Furthermore, this approach permits me to access domains of experience and intersubjectivity which facilitate an exploration of illness and well-being as this can be seen as results of an interactive process between the human body and its social, cultural and material environments.

This view links to the idea that the experience of ‘things’ is in itself a meaningful encounter (Henare et al. 2007:4). ‘Things’ are not defined or categorized beforehand by the researcher, but present themselves heuristically within a particular field of identified phenomena. Thus, things can be seen not only as ‘matters of fact’ but as ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2004; see also Grønseth 2012). Looking at things as a ‘matter of concern’ aims to transcend the dualism of objects and subjects. What matters is not human bodies or material forms, but rather the relations between them (Miller 2005). Moreover, attention is drawn not to the dialectics between subject and object, but to the nature of agency (Latour 1999; Gell 1998; Strathern 1988; see also Miller 2005). This view fits with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological understanding of the human body as not only perceptive, but also as active and as intentionally creating meaning, a view that contributes to an understanding of many Tamil refugees’ experiences of illness and stigma, as well as well-being and comfort (Grønseth 2010a).

A perspective based on performance and materiality deals with embodiment and agency interculturally, as it recognizes that cultures are always interacting while also profoundly different and often at play in asymmetrical and hegemonic relations of power. When examining Tamils’ illness and well-being in Norway, these overarching perspectives come into play in the contexts of othering, stigmatization and producing second-class citizens, which have profound implications for experiences of self and well-being (Grønseth 2010a, 2010c). Thus, the chapter suggests embodiment, performance and healing to be a fruitful approach for investigations of experiences of personhood and senses of self.

In the following I will first briefly depict the background to the Sri Lanka civil war, describe how Tamil refugees re-settled along the Arctic coast of Norway, where they found well-paid jobs in the fishing industry and a safe place to live, and show why they then moved on to Silver Forest outside the capital city of Oslo. Secondly, I present the story of Amara and Murukan, which illustrates how many Tamils experienced feelings of ‘aloneness’ and of having ‘no peace at heart’ together with fatigue, dizziness and bodily pains which brought them to the local health-care centre to consult a doctor and intensify ritual performances. Thirdly, the chapter discusses embodiment and intentionality as Tamils’ pain and suffering are understood as a response to tensions in ongoing social relations. Fourthly, the discussion includes a perspective on performance and artefacts, as these highlight a crucial dimension in Tamils’ negotiations of self and identity. The fifth section looks at how processes of healing and belonging are interrelated and give direction to creating new imageries of social life. Lastly, and by way of concluding, I highlight how the employed perspectives
of embodiment, performance and healing call for an understanding of the creation of knowledge as fundamentally partial and as related to how we deal with each other and comprehend the complexity in relations that characterize it.

Tamil Refugees Negotiating Place and Identity: From Arctic Harbour to Silver Forest

Though to describe the Sri Lankan conflict itself is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will briefly mention the context of the civil war for Tamil refugees in Norway (for a more thorough background, see Tambiah 1991; Hoole et al. 1992; Fuglerud 1999; Grønseth 2010a and others). The convolutions of inter-ethnic conflict and civil war in Sri Lanka are as vast as they are heart-breaking and horrendous for those who have experienced it as part of their daily lives. The Tamil minority situation has been a political issue since Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948. Political tensions and discrimination increased when, in 1956, Sinhalese was declared to be the official language of the island. In June 1983 there were upheavals in which many were killed and others had to flee their homes. Among different political and guerrilla movements, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) were the most aggressive and led the opposition fighting for an independent state of Tamil Eelam. The traditional Tamil majority areas in the north and eastern Sri Lanka were declared war zones, and most Tamil people now live in exile or as refugees in their own country. Following the end of the war in May 2009, the LTTE dropped its demands for a separate state in favour of a federal solution. Since the civil war ended the Tamil diaspora has continued to protest against the war by urging governments to undertake investigations of war crimes in Sri Lanka.

While acknowledging the tensions and complexities of the civil war and ultimate declaration of peace, the focus of the present chapter is on Tamils from Sri Lanka who are living in Norway as refugees in the diaspora. According to Statistics Norway, on 1 January 2011, 13.1 per cent of Norway’s total population consisted of around 460,000 immigrants and their descendants from 219 different countries and self-governed regions (for more on Norway’s immigrant populations, see Henriksen et al. 2010). At that time, 157,692 immigrants had refugee backgrounds, of whom 114,760 were refugees themselves and a further 42,932 had arrived as family members to be reunited with them. This total represents about 3.2 per cent of Norway’s total population. Of this population, 14,293 have a Sri Lankan background. According to figures from 1 January 2012, a year later, 8,816 individuals were first-generation immigrants and 5,477 had been born in Norway of parents both of whom came from Sri Lanka. Virtually all the Sri Lankans are Tamils.

Being a refugee implies a sense of being forced to escape from life-threatening circumstances, such as political persecution and war; it often implies sudden departures and a need to travel at great risk, together with great uncertainty about one’s destination and future prospects (Malkki 1995; Daniel and Knudsen 1995; Jenkins 1996; Sideris 2003; Hammond 2004; Zmegac 2007; Migliorino 2008). The refugee experience can generally be divided into four phases (Desjarlais et al. 1995:140): the pre-flight period, in which the pressure of the situation increases and a decision to leave is reached, the escape of migrating from one place to another, and the reception period that passes before the person returns to his or her home region, or settles in the asylum country or in some third location in the fourth phase.

This investigation looks into the fourth period of resettlement and long-term residence, with a focus on the daily efforts to adapt and the quest for well-being on the part of Tamil refugees in their new environment (see also Grønseth 2010a). The present study confirms how research on refugees generally discusses problems related to cultural differences,
acculturation and social ties, and suggests that refugees have a better chance of retaining their psychosocial health if they maintain strong social and community ties and a sense of cultural identity (Desjarlais et al. 1995:143). Difficulties in obtaining appropriate employment can provide an additional long-term stress factor and may threaten one’s sense of self-esteem, as well as one’s standard of living. However, while not disputing such general features, this chapter explores how embodied social suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997) can also be seen as granting access to an existential agency in forming new senses of identity, self and well-being.

In 1975, Norway closed its borders to immigration. Since then, not only immigration laws but also refugee policies have become ever more restrictive. In addition to the annual UN quota of refugees of about 700–1,000, individual asylum-seekers also arrive. In Norway, asylum-seekers are the responsibility of the government. While waiting for their cases to be concluded, they live in special refugee reception centres (asylmottak), spread throughout the country. The few asylum-seekers that are either granted refugee status or residence on humanitarian grounds are relocated to municipal settlements (kommunal bosetting). The time spent in reception centres may vary from a few months to more than a year (see Lauritzen and Berg 1999). Norwegian refugee policy shows little sensitivity to the difficult and often urgent situation for many asylum-seekers. As a consequence, there is a steady increase of people who avoid applying for asylum, or disappear from the refugee centres and become illegal or non-existent residents.

As one can see, the process of applying for asylum or residence is time-consuming and strenuous, as the Norwegian authorities are steadily becoming sterner in their acceptance of refugees. Upon arrival in Norway, Tamil refugees felt they were being treated with suspicion and mistrust and find that they occupy the lower end of the Norwegian social hierarchy. These experiences influence how many refugees and Tamils perceive their being part of Norway as being marginalized as an evolving ‘underclass’ (Myrdal 1963; Wikan 1995; Grønseth 2010c), and as being excluded from Norwegian social life (Grønseth 2010a, 2011).

Arctic Harbour

Arctic Harbour was one of several fishing communities along the northern coast of Norway where there was a substantial settlement of Tamils – about 200 out of a total of approximately 2,500 inhabitants in the period 1999–2000. The numbers vary as the population as a whole is shifting, mostly according to fluctuations in the need for labour in the fishing industry. From national and political perspectives, the fishing communities in Finnmark are regarded as isolated, marginal and dependent on the whims of nature and the fishing industry. Nevertheless, the settlements are considered to be of great importance to the national economy and social structure (Brox 1987), a fact that provides arguments for national subsidies to the fishing industry, the establishment of a modern infrastructure and a minimum of social welfare.

Arctic Harbour lies inland in a small fjord near the Barents Sea and the open ocean stretching to the North Pole. The buildings and houses of Arctic Harbour surround the interior of the fjord and mainly stretch along one main road and down several side streets. The village extends for approximately three kilometres. The great, windswept mountains rise along the shore behind the settlements leading to the Finnmarksvidda plateau.¹ There is

¹ The inhabitants of Finnmarksvidda are mostly the indigenous Sami populations that traditionally make a living as reindeer (caribou) herdsmen. Along the coast there is a more mixed population consisting of Sami peoples combining fishing and reindeer-keeping and non-Sami Norwegian inhabitants.
not a tree in sight, only a few bushes firmly secured between cracks providing shelter from the storms, which sweep the area. On a lovely summer’s day the temperature is still below 20˚C, and the air may be thick with swarms of mosquitoes. The sun shines both day and night, never dipping below the horizon from May until July. Then, between November and February, the sun gradually descends and disappears altogether. During the winter blizzards, the roads are closed and covered by snow and ice. There are also times when even the small aircraft, especially built for the tough climate and short airstrips, are grounded. In such periods, people in Arctic Harbour are rather isolated; in emergency situations, there is no transportation to hospital services.

In Arctic Harbour four fishing plants provide the community with work and a good economy. In the mid-1980s Arctic Harbour experienced a dramatic shortage of labour. Knowing that Tamil refugees needed a community to settle in, the municipality made a request to the Governmental Refugee Secretary (GRS) to use refugee labour in the fishing industry. In 1987, after some negotiations, an agreement was reached, and five married couples and a single young man were sent to Arctic Harbour. Each Tamil family and the young single man were designated a host-family who introduced them to Norwegian local ways of life which included hiking, fishing and local foods and dishes. Since then, Tamils have been invited to Arctic Harbour as wage workers in the fishing industry and have proved to be necessary resources for the local economy. Not only in Arctic Harbour but also in most of Finnmark’s fishing villages, Tamils have settled and found work in fish plants. The mayor of one community emphasized their dependence on Tamil labour, stating in a national newspaper: ‘Without the Tamils, our community would cease to exist’. The Tamil labour force in the community is highly valued, but the work itself is not. The local population traditionally regards ‘cutting’ as low-status women’s work. Even though the Tamil population is well integrated into the local (and national) economy, they are socially and culturally segregated. They rarely mix with the locals. Nevertheless, some Tamils express a wish to live in small places such as Arctic Harbour because these places offer well-paid jobs, a close network of Tamils and a local Tamil association providing the experience of social security and cultural continuity.

When living in exile without the traditional social organization regulated by kin, caste, temple and neighbourhood, the Tamils experienced living outside order and struggled to find trust and confidence in each other. Having been torn apart from village and kin (akam), being thrown together with others in a radically different place produced a strong sense of chaos (puram), insecurity and loneliness (tanimai tosam). In particular, issues of illness (particularly mental illness), politics and caste were carefully avoided so as not to expose themselves to additional social and emotional tensions arising from gossip, shame and stigmatization. For many, the close but still incomplete local Tamil community combined with the monotonous work at the fish plant constitutes a difficult life. They find little (or no) opportunity for other kinds of work, which leaves them with scarce hopes of social mobility within the local community. Furthermore, Tamils experience being forced to be with other Tamils whom they do not consider ‘proper to be with’. Lacking a more coherent community, the Tamils are forced to relate to unknown and sometimes inappropriate Tamils. This causes uncertainty, mistrust and discomfort about Tamil social relations. Another source of discomfort for many Tamils is a lack of opportunities to practice Hindu rituals.

To my knowledge, there exist two different accounts of how the first Tamils actually settled in Arctic Harbour. The one presented here bears an official status as it refers to a verbal account by the local refugee consultant employed at the time. An owner of one of the fish plants told me a slightly different story. He stated that he himself contacted GRS, which resulted in some Tamils arriving before the municipality organized a settlement schedule. Both accounts nevertheless mention GRS’s initial refusal to send refugees to the cold outskirts and the ensuing dispute.
and participate in religious life. There is no Hindu temple, Hindu priest or any other crucial religious component in the local community.

Tamils look to Oslo to ensure higher education opportunities for their children, which are lacking altogether in Arctic Harbour and are severely limited within Finnmark County. Since many Tamils succeed in financial matters, they make plans to move farther south in Norway, mostly to the capital, Oslo. In Oslo there is a Tamil Hindu temple, Tamil Hindu priest and larger and more complete Tamil community (though not without factions and tensions). Furthermore, Oslo offers a broad range of schools, colleges and a university, as well as more varied job options (although they are still low-status jobs).

During my one year of fieldwork, most of the roughly 65 families residing in Arctic Harbour told me of their plans to move to Oslo sometime in the near future. A few families moved during my fieldwork, more followed in the summer of 2000, and since then there has been a continuous stream of people to the southern parts of Norway and Oslo. This picture pertains not only to Arctic Harbour but by and large to all Tamil settlements in the fishing villages of Finnmark. While the Tamils gradually moved from Finnmark, they were largely replaced above all with Russians (as a response to a Russian-Norwegian agreement in fisheries development and for wider cooperation in the Barent Region), and to some extent a Finnish labour force (see Grønseth 2011). However, today (2014) unfortunately many of the fish plants along the northernmost coast of Finnmark have been closed down (and more are under the threat of closure) due to global, national and local structural changes that together have adversely affected the fisheries market and policy. This has reduced the need for a labour force, which leaves many of the fishing villages with a threat to their existence. When I in 2007, contacted some of the families who had moved from Arctic Harbour to Oslo, it appeared that many of them had settled in the same area, in Silver Forest.

Silver Forest

Silver Forest is situated in a rather flat landscape previously used for agriculture. It is located about 40 kilometres north of Oslo, and among Norwegians is not considered an attractive place to live, thus offering comparatively low housing costs. Most Norwegians see Silver Forest as being on the ‘wrong side of Oslo’ and being a ‘nowhere place’. The more attractive and high-cost suburbs are traditionally and currently located south and west of Oslo, offering a more varied and hilly landscape, access to the Oslo fjord and an old and stable infrastructure of work, education, health care, cultural entertainment and activities, as well as other much appreciated public and private services, organizations and institutions. However, the Tamils sensed a potential future for themselves in Silver Forest, as it promised opportunities they appreciated in terms of both current and planned new investments in the area.

Living in Silver Forest, the Tamils felt less prone to stigma from Norwegians and felt a greater sense of belonging to the Tamil community, as well as to the larger community of immigrants. This was explained with reference to the many other immigrant groups of colour living in areas in Oslo, who made the Tamils a less visible and identifiable group. The Tamils said they felt ‘mixed into a multicultural population’, which gave them a sense of ‘freedom and opportunity’ (see also Grønseth 2013). Many Tamil adolescents stated that they preferred the larger Tamil community, as it gave them a sizeable social milieu in which to make friends and acquaintances. They also felt they had ‘come closer to Norwegian ways’, since there was a greater degree of interaction, as well as exchanges and flows of knowledge, between distinct groups of youths. However, none of the Tamil youth I spoke to engaged in any close friendships with Norwegians. Both boys and girls stressed that
they lacked the time for friendship with either Tamils or Norwegians, as they felt the heavy demands on them to fulfil their parents’ expectations to maintain the Tamil language and cultural identity. Some felt ‘overloaded’, as they needed to learn both Norwegian and Tamil language and culture, and they had little free time at their disposal after doing Norwegian schoolwork and taking part in Tamil activities.

Looking to the future, the Tamils thought of Silver Forest as offering a place where their children could complete senior high school within the municipality and eventually go on to higher education at college or university in Oslo, still within a relatively short distance. The Tamils pointed out that the municipality was enjoying a period of economic growth, expanding its welfare services, and they referred to on-going constructions of roads, terminal buildings, an already established large hospital and homes for the elderly, which together offered many varied and new jobs and prospects. And importantly, the Tamils perceived Silver Forest as being placed on the ‘right side’ of Oslo, as it is only about 20 kilometres from the international airport, which makes international flights easily available. This facilitates significant visits to kin and ‘good Tamil Hindu temples’ (mostly in Tamil Nadu, India), as well as Ayurvedic and other healing experts for various illnesses and misfortunes.

In both periods of fieldwork (1997–2000 in Arctic Harbour, and 2007 in Silver Forest) the Tamils demonstrated a profound concern with maintaining Tamil relations locally and in a worldwide diaspora. As was repeated in different settings, they felt ‘not having anyone to confide in’, being ‘all alone’, ‘insecure’, having ‘deep worries’, and a sense of ‘losing oneself’. In their quest for ‘peace at heart’ and well-being, Tamils sought to maintain crucial religious and social relations through daily worship of Hindu gods, use of the Tamil language, food and culture, and networking with diasporic kinship relations. Such commitment included expensive and time-consuming visits to kin and vital Tamil Hindu temples in other parts of the world. Furthermore, Tamils engaged in the worldwide circulation of home-made videos and CD productions depicting family events and ritual congregations.

Being with the Tamils and sharing experiences in everyday life, I strongly sensed, and was told by Tamils, that they did not feel confidence and trust in relations with Norwegians and other Tamil refugees in the local community. Rather, it appeared that certain practices, rituals and objects became significant in supplying them with a minimum of comfort in the present and hope for the future. Such practices and items were commonly related to religion, but also to kin ties, family members and specific places. Exploring such links, embodiment, performance, rituals and objects can be understood as having the power to connect Tamils to significant relations and places from the familiar past, to provide precarious feelings of protection, well-being, and ‘peace at heart’ in the present and new place of re-settlement, and to offer hope for a prosperous future. As stressed earlier, embodiment, performance and objects may also lead to the opposite: rupture in relations and places of the past, insecurity, illness and no peace at heart in the here and now, and a sense of despair for the future. However, by engaging and embodying practices of aesthetics, and by repeating and appropriating the familiar in new and improvised ways, I suggest that Tamils overall succeeded in creating continuity, but also new senses of identity and well-being, within the new social and cultural context of Norway.

In the following, I introduce the case of Amara, a Tamil woman in her early thirties, and her husband Murukan, together with their two children. The case study is based on one specific woman and her family, though it is here presented with some central changes to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Thus, any resemblance to any particular person or family is only coincidental. By changing some easily identifiable information, the story is not only Amara’s and her family’s, but also carries what many Tamils expressed.
Case Study of Amara: ‘I feel proud to be Tamil; Tamil in Norway’

Amara married her husband Murukan in Colombo about a year before she moved to Arctic Harbour through a grant of family re-unification, with prospects of establishing a family and bettering her life. Shortly after her arrival in 1991 she took work as a cutter in the fishing industry. When I met the family in 1999, Amara and Murukan were doing fairly well. They had a daughter, Thillay, about six years old, and a son, Navilan, about four years old. They were renting a reasonably good house and had their own car. However, Amara was concerned about Murukan, who was suffering from bodily pain, fatigue and withdrawal. Murukan had visited the local medical doctor, who carried out examinations and blood tests, though these did not enable any diagnosis to be made or explain Murukan’s condition. When speaking with Murukan about his consultations with the doctor, he said he felt that the doctor did not understand his pain. He said ‘The doctors do not listen. They care only about my body, not about me. There is no help to get from the doctors.’ This broadly expresses what many other Tamil men and women felt, as strikingly captured by another Tamil man’s phrase: ‘the doctors treat me as an organ, not as a person’ (see Grønseth 2010a).

Amara explained how Murukan used to be helpful in household chores and would play with the children. Early in their time together he had laughed and engaged with the other Tamils, as well as some Norwegians at work. Murukan spoke more Norwegian than most other Tamils. Now, about nine years later, he avoided Norwegians and had forgotten most of the language. Murukan said he felt degraded by the Norwegians: ‘I have been with Norwegians. They only see my dark face and treat me like shit.’ These days he tended to grumble about his pain and watch TV, while demanding that Amara cook time-consuming Tamil dishes, keep the house, and care for the children. In the late evening Amara often gave Murukan massages, as she tried to ease his pain and offer some comfort. Amara felt quite exhausted and suffered from headaches, dizziness and fevers at night.

Late one evening after supper, Amara and I were in the small kitchen preparing tomorrow’s supper. She talked about her daughter Thillay. Amara said she was worried. She had received a letter from the municipal pedagogic services with an appointment to do tests related to Thillay’s memory functions. Amara said that the kindergarten staff had already suggested that Thillay might have some difficulties, as she did not seem to pick up on messages issued and some of the social interactions among the children. Amara had been to several meetings with various municipal health-care workers and felt very uncertain about what was going on. She showed me the latest letter she had received, and said she did not know why they wanted to examine Thillay’s memory: ‘I am very uncertain. What do they mean?’ Amara said she had no one to discuss the issue with. She did not want the

3 During the 1980s and 1990s the municipality of Arctic Harbour offered Tamils courses in Norwegian. However, the Tamils generally tended to put a priority on wage work at the fish plant and attended the courses only occasionally. The Tamils saw a greater need to earn money so as to repay debts, support kin in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, and establish home and family, while acknowledging the difficulties they encountered from not achieving fluency in Norwegian. At the courses they were taught the standardized written Norwegian language, Bokmål (book-language), while during classes and in ordinary everyday life the Tamils heard and spoke the local North Norwegian dialect. The differences between the written language and the local dialect were not brought up as a difficult issue. The Tamils in Finnmark and Arctic Harbour all spoke, although most not very fluently, the same local dialect as the local Norwegians. Generally, those who speak different Norwegian dialects have no difficulties in communication or only minor ones.

4 While generally avoiding Norwegians, he had given his approval to my visits to his home and to my being with his wife and family. He was friendly to me and spoke to me with the help of Amara, who interpreted between us when needed. At an early stage of my fieldwork I also conducted an interview with him using the local Tamil interpreter.
other Tamils to be aware of the issue, as she was concerned about protecting her family from the possible stigma of ‘something being wrong’ with her daughter. Amara described Thillay as a good child; she sang and played with her toys, liked to draw, watch Norwegian television and loved to look at the albums with photographs of kin and family. However, once in a while, Amara said, Thillay had angry fits. She would get angry over small matters and simply stamp her feet and scream. Usually Amara let her scream herself out, and then it was over. Murukan, Amara said, found it more disturbing and tended to scold Amara for not dealing with Thillay. Amara said:

* Murukan worries too much. It will help when we move to Oslo. Murukan has plans for us to move. It will give us more opportunities. He will find some other work. We won’t be so different. There will be other Tamils and other people with dark faces around us. Our children will have good prospects for education. We can go to the Tamil Temple in Oslo and seek help and support from the gods. We can visit family in Paris and London. We will have a better life. I am sure. I do puja and pray to the gods. But, my home altar is not enough. I find no peace at heart. I need to visit the temple, it has more force.

Amara, like other Tamil women, felt responsible for the family’s health, safety and well-being in terms of offering prayers and interacting with the gods. Living in northern Norway, they were cut off from habituated Tamil tradition and practices, of which temple visits were of particular importance when dealing with issues of illness and well-being. There were no Hindu temples in the north of Norway. Not being able to visit a temple, the Tamils, especially the women, could only perform daily worship and puja in their homes. Most Tamil homes had an altar, typically situated in a bedroom or small spare room on a shelf (often behind a curtain) designated for the Hindu gods and offerings. Colourful images of different gods were displayed, together with incense, powders, oil lamps, blessed strings and other significant items, such as small figures and images of holy men or women, different saints such as the Virgin Mary, and bottles of holy water and amulets. The items required for the altar were obtained in different ways. Many, especially women, brought with them an oil lamp (or two), small bowls for ritual food, a picture of their favourite deity, and amulets given to them on different ritual occasions before they left Sri Lanka. Further artefacts were constantly purchased, as some of their fellow Tamils were in Oslo or other places where they could buy deity images, frames, powders, incense and suchlike. Maybe most important of all, kin and family sent items which were acquired in relation to particular issues of concern, which in a sense held the power and blessings with which the items were endowed by temple priests or other holy healers. Such items were commonly various amulets and blessed strings for protection against evil forces, and simultaneously vital for enhancing prosperity and good health.

Amara, like other Tamil women, did puja and prayed to the gods. However, as Amara said, the private puja, offerings and home altar with the images on the shelf were not felt to be sufficient to ensure the well-being of their families or give them peace at heart. Amara said:

* My heart cries, I find no peace. I pray to the gods. They must protect my children and help me to keep my family together. We are so alone.

Amara, like many other Tamil women, committed herself and intensified her relationship with the deities. She made vows to the gods and went on a restrictive diet, with extensive purification and daily worship. However, in dealing with everyday life experiences and issues concerning the family’s well-being, Amara expressed a sincere longing for kin and Tamil Hindu temples.
After close to 10 years living in Arctic Harbour, Amara and Murukan succeeded in moving to Oslo. When, during the autumn of 2007, I visited Amara and her family and other Tamils who had moved, I was curious to know how they were doing, and if the move had proved fruitful.

Like many other Tamils who had moved from Finnmark, Amara and her family experienced a greater variety of opportunities for making a life of their own. Murukan had found two cleaning jobs that paid well and did not feel the constant discomforting gaze of other Norwegian colleagues as he had done at the fish plant in Arctic Harbour. He had early morning working hours, which gave him an opportunity to take part more in household chores throughout the day. Amara said he was less grumpy and bad-tempered, though he still felt bodily pains, which she tried to comfort with, for instance, massages. Amara said that there had been no further examinations of Thillay after they moved to Oslo. Amara was very relieved that while Thillay, now about 13 years old, was a bit shy at school and had some problems in learning proper Norwegian and other subjects, she was otherwise a girl with much song and laughter. Thillay told me she was doing courses in Tamil dancing, and she liked to draw and watch Tamil movies. Thillay was proud to tell me that before the summer they had celebrated her puberty. Many relatives had come from Europe for the ceremony together with friends from the time in Arctic Harbour and some new Tamil neighbours in Oslo. She said that her family was discussing the prospects of finding her a suitable husband, although she was not going to marry for many years yet. She first had to finish her education and find a job.

After moving to Oslo, Amara had engaged more in Norwegian social life. She had succeeded in getting a job at one of the local kiosks. Thus, she was engaging more with other Norwegians, though only sporadically and as part of her job. She engaged in conversation with some of the regular customers. Amara explained that she tried to talk with the customers so as to improve her Norwegian, and she felt that she was learning more about Norwegian people. Working in the kiosk, she also met the parents of her children’s schoolmates, which made her feel more attuned to her children. Amara and Murukan had discussed how to deal with their children’s desires to be out with their schoolmates. While being in agreement with the Tamil practice of laying down strict limits (especially for the girls) for social interaction outside the home, they had nevertheless agreed to challenge their own customs and let Thillay and Navilan engage more freely. They felt it important to let their children do some of the things their classmates did, though still within limits. Amara said she had noticed how some Tamils disapproved of their more liberal line by not greeting and turning their back on her when she accompanied Thillay to Tamil dancing classes or Navilan to English football training. She felt that her identity as a ‘proper Tamil’ was at stake among some of the Tamils. Amara sighed and confessed that, even though things were generally better, she still felt deeply insecure and suffered from headaches and a sense of dizziness, and went to bed at night with slight fevers.

In dealing with the illnesses, pains, troubles and identity issues in the family’s everyday lives, Amara turned to the Tamil temple. She prayed for her family’s well-being, for the relief of Murukan’s bodily pains and fatigue, for Thillay’s struggles at school, and for her own strength and endurance. However, Amara was disappointed. She found that the temple and its sculptures of the deities did not have sufficient power and force to take on their prayers and provide peace to her heart. As Amara said:

*The temple in Oslo does not carry the spiritual force. The sculptures have not gained strength. I feel it when I stand in front of them. I look and search for community with god, but it remains a statue. I do not trust the power of the temple rituals or the statues to help me. Actually, my home altar serves equally well, or better.*
While it may seem that the home altar and the icons offered Amara a closer connection and relation of intimacy, she continued to visit the Tamil temple in Oslo. As a response to the delicate situation of negotiating her family’s reputation and Tamil identity, Amara saw the visits to the temple in a slightly new light. Visiting the temple became a strategy for upholding Tamil identity and the sense of self and well-being. She enjoyed putting on her sari, the jewellery and pottu, and to engage in the songs and rituals. As she said:

Going to the temple makes me feel close to kin. And, you know, I feel closer to my mother. She used to dress me and bring me to the temple back home. So, I somehow feel a connection to the past and a deeper sense of myself. Also, it is as a way of telling the other Tamils that we [her family] are good Tamils. They cannot question us. However, we cannot live in a Tamil cocoon – we need to expand our views and be Tamils in Norway. I know many feel the same way, but it is difficult. Also, when I go to the temple, dress up and walk the streets, I feel proud to be Tamil, a Tamil in Norway. I hope one day Tamil ways will be accepted as part of Norway, as Norway must become part of us.

Embodiment and Intentionality: Experiencing Social Relations

In the case described above, it appears that interactions and consultations with various health workers leave Amara and Murukan, like many other Tamils, with feelings of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘not being understood’. After consulting the medical doctor about his pains and fatigue, Murukan stated that ‘The doctors do not listen. They care only about my body, not about me. There is no help to get from the doctors.’ Amara said ‘I am very uncertain. What do they mean?’ after meetings with municipal health-care workers and receiving a letter concerning Thillay. I suggest that this sense of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘not being understood’ is related to social and cultural differences in approaches to health and illness, as well as in senses of self and well-being.

The Norwegian doctors generally gave their Tamil patients a biomedical understanding of their suffering which separates body from soul and the individual from its social context. Among Tamils, such distinctions are uncommon and seem to produce uncertainty and confusion about Norwegian health treatment. The confusion is related to Tamils’ familiarity with Ayurvedic medicine and other ways of understanding well-being and sickness, but most Tamils are also accustomed to aspects of biomedicine such as medical prescriptions and treatment. Based on the descriptions of Tamils in Arctic Harbour, many Tamil physicians and healers tend to practice an eclectic approach, which stresses the holism of Ayurveda and includes elements of biomedicine (see also Waxler 1984). Thus, Tamils are familiar with certain biomedical remedies, as they are interwoven and understood within the framework of an Ayurvedic approach.5 While Tamils are familiar with some of the medicines of biomedicine, they are not familiar with the biomedical line of thought and understanding

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5 Ayurvedic theory understands the body as composed of particular channels through which distinct forces, senses, constructive substances and waste products flow. Disease is understood to arise when, for whatever reason, these channels become blocked and thus produce an imbalance in the body as a whole (Trawick 1995:286). Thus, a combination of the notions of humours and their balance provides the basis for a theory of sickness and health, as well as a theory of what comprises the human person (Strathern and Stewart 1999:34). In diagnosing, the patient’s signs and description of symptoms are considered of great importance in addition to physical examinations of temperature, breath, urine and pulse, which together construes the patient’s caste. Treatment
based on strict empirical and direct observations of the individual body. When they are offered biomedical medication accompanied by biomedical examinations and diagnosis and not Ayurvedic medicine, Tamils feel confused and uncertain about the treatment. This is related to how I see Tamils’ frequent visits to the health centre, and not only as a consultant for the cure or improvement of bodily conditions. Rather, I suggest that Tamils also seek a kind of holistic healing that responds to bodily experiences of abrupt crisis in senses of personhood, identity, spirituality and cosmology.

Tamils in Arctic Harbour lived in a situation where they were offered brotherhood and assimilation, as when they were introduced to local Norwegian ways and traditions by the early host families. Simultaneously, they were struck down by a sense of stigma, as when doctors were not able to diagnose their pain the Tamils were seen as having ‘a low pain threshold’, when they received an extra bonus for efficient cutting of the fish they were seen to ‘cheat on the fish line’, and when they carried out lower status work in the fishing industry they were seen as ‘dirty workers’ (for further details see Grønseth 2010a). Being associated with such collective moral stereotypes, the Tamils were not able to emerge from their group stigma as individuals (Bauman 1995). In this situation the Tamils were in an ambivalent position that had not been chosen and over which there was no control.

Living in such confusion, it is plausible that many Tamils developed severe distress, bodily pain and insecurity over their identity. To grasp Tamils’ wider experiences of worry and uncertainty, as well as their creative solutions and inventions, I suggest it would be fruitful to explore the existential dimensions of embodiment and questions of agency and meaning. In this venture, I turn to a psychological and phenomenological approach that understands the person and the self as active self-systems that position and figure themselves in a social and cultural world. Here, it is by the individual’s position and relation to the world and ‘the other’ that the self becomes aware of itself, and thus produces meaning and intentional actions. To grasp further Tamils’ pains as part of social life, I seek an approach that provides a deeper insight into the perceptive and creative body, which in turn also allows for an emphasis on the production of meaning, in addition to practice. This perspective is inspired by Merleau-Ponty (1962 [1945]) and explores the bodily experiences and domains of meaning and perception by collapsing the dichotomy of subject and object.

Following Merleau-Ponty, the body image is not only a set of impressions, it incorporates the ‘project’ or intentions of the subject. As such, the body emerges as an image of ‘incarnate intentionality’ which operates with ‘the world’ as its horizon (Strathern 1999). Merleau-Ponty argues against an understanding of the body as an object and the mechanistic physiology that goes with such a concept, and seeks to go beyond a psychophysical understanding in which we make psychic representations about objective events that occur in our ‘real bodies’. As an example he points to the phenomenon that medical patients who have lost a limb can include prescriptions for diet, exercise (such as yoga), hygiene and sleep, along with a natural medical mixture to rebalance the humours and heat treatment involving hot water or smoke.

6 In some cases such experiences may develop a kind of self-hatred that might be captured in Norman’s concept of embodied or ‘inner demons’ (referred to in Bauman 1995:73).

7 This approach was introduced earlier by Hallowell (1955) and marked at that time a turn away from a concern with personality structure. Although Hallowell acknowledged the self as a product of self-reflection and as a self-objectification, his analysis kept to the conventional anthropological concept of the self as constituted in the process of socialization. He did not take a fully phenomenological step in recognizing the pre-objective and pre-reflective experience of the body. Before Hallowell, Mauss (1996 [1938]) explored the concepts of person and self, suggested a universal human sense of spiritual and corporal individuality and stated that the particular social context was associated with qualitative differences in cultural constructions of person. He saw the person as associated with the distinction between the cognitive and material worlds and thus replicated the duality of mind/body and subject/object.

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still often feel it. This must imply that their perceptions are conditioned by their personal, bodily memories.8 This is meant to illustrate how the body ‘is essentially an expressive space’ (Langer 1989:47). Thus, it is through the body that other objects, or expressive spaces, come into existence. In this view, it is possible to see how social and cultural challenges, as well as stigmatization, are inscribed and expressed by individual bodies. Recognizing the body as a perceptive and intentional subject, it appears that Amara and Murukan’s undiagnosed pains and illnesses express, as many other Tamils experience, insecurity and degradation in social relations in everyday life that together challenge their senses of self and well-being. Not finding sufficient support in fellow Tamils or help when consulting the local health-care workers, many Tamils, especially women, turn to performance and ritual interactions with their deities.

Performance and Artefacts: Negotiating Identity

As is illustrated in the case study, Amara, like many Tamil women (and also some men), tended to turn to their deities to seek relief and healing of illnesses and pains in their everyday lives. Considering how illnesses are seen to be related to senses of self and identity, I suggest that performing such rituals can furthermore be understood as a way to negotiate identity and belonging. The case above demonstrates how Amara, like other Tamils, does not simply reproduce a Tamil home world outside their home country, but uses traditional rituals and items to create a sense of identity and belonging. In doing puja and interacting with ritual artefacts, Amara can be seen as repeating the known and familiar, as well as engaging in creative processes of appropriation (Schneider 2006) which include improvisation, negotiations and transformations of values and meanings that inform new identities and senses of well-being. When Tamils move and migrate, traditional rituals and objects are involved in processes of transformation (Svašek and Skrbiš 2004) as they travel and mediate between places and times. Such transformations imply that the rituals and objects included both lose some familiar values and meanings and gain some new ones.

This is illustrated in how Amara experienced her visits to the Oslo Tamil Hindu temple. Re-constructing crucial features of Tamil Hindu temples as they are constructed in their homeland, Amara experienced the temple, its statues of the gods and rituals as not fully supplying the healing, comfort and well-being she had expected and hoped for. In the new context of Oslo, she did not perceive them as offering sufficient strength to provide her with protection and ‘peace at heart’. However, Amara said the temple visits made her experience a deeper sense of herself. When visiting the temple she dressed in her sari and engaged in temple songs and services. Although not experiencing closeness and unity with the gods, it appears that in the context of Oslo the temple offered her a sense of connecting to herself as an individual and to significant relations such as her mother, kin and homeland, to the diaspora, to the local Tamil community and to the wider Norwegian society.

I further suggest that Amara’s connecting illustrates how performance, ritual practices and objects do not carry an essential and static meaning that can be disclosed. Rather, when rituals and objects travel and come into interplay with humans in new contexts,

8 Acknowledging this point, Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the ‘habitual body’ and the ‘present body’ emphasize the historically layered character of the body and also of perception itself. As Strathern (1999) notes, this insight fits and maybe foreshadows the ideas of Bourdieu by ‘recognizing the dialectical movement of our existence … that allows the personal and the cultural to become sedimented in a general anonymous structure’ (Langer 1989:34).
they demonstrate themselves to be living phenomena. They appear as flexible entities and practices that supply motivation and direction for Amara’s and other individuals’ life-projects, senses of self and well-being, as well as shaping new images of community and belonging. In this sense, I suggest that things can be seen to hold a kind of subjectivity (see also Grønseth 2012). When seeing forms and things as taking part in interactive relations, the shapes and objects themselves turn into subjective entities, as they supply content and direction that produce feelings and meanings, and together frame action. Social and religious life, in other words, cannot be distinguished from the material world. Things, like Amara’s sari, the *putto* on her forehead and ritual performance within the religious context – such as being immersed in smoke from the camphor flame and singing Sanskrit temple songs – connects Amara and other Tamils to significant social and religious diasporic and local relations and supplies crucial images of the past, in the here and now, as well as hopes for future prosperity and well-being.

Recognizing ritual performance and objects as flexible and open to shifting meanings as social contexts vary and change, we realize how they interplay in an intersubjective space (Jackson 1989; Grønseth and Davis 2010). In previous writings, I have addressed intersubjectivity understood as shared experiences between self and other of which both parts are human beings (Jackson 1998; Gronseth and Davis 2010; Grønseth 2012). Turning my concern to the interaction between humans, performances and the material world, such as Amara’s ritual performance and interaction with objects, I expand on this view to include subjects and objects (Grønseth 2012). Through this expansion, I suggest that it is possible to capture how agentive processes and moments take place in spaces, rather than in dialectics between subjects and objects (see Strathern 1988; Gell 1998; Latour 1999; see also Miller 2005).

This approach, I suggest, addresses the issue of how we can create knowledge from the subjective, relational and intersubjective, thus transcending the objective and essentialist stable reality such as the old philosophy of Plato’s ideal world or more recent structuralist approaches such as those of Saussure (1955 [1915]), Radcliffe-Brown (1953) and Lévi-Strauss (1968). As I have argued earlier, the crux of subjectivity is to be relating with others, as it implies a reaching beyond and stretching of the self (Grønseth 2010b). Addressing ritual performance and objects, I highlight how the other refers not only to human beings, but also to the material world of things, shapes, items and artefacts. Further, when rituals and objects travel and take on distinct and shifting values and meanings, it is shown how the other, as also the self, are relational and processual units (Gronseth 2010b, 2013). With this recognition, we can capture how Tamils, like many other diasporic groups, experience the interaction with performance and objects as crucial for identity, comfort, health and well-being.

Seeing the relation human–object to be a ‘matter of concern’ (Latour 2004) makes it possible to acknowledge how not only the human self, but also the material world has the capacity to hold specific values and meanings, while simultaneously varying from context to context. In recognizing forms and objects as participants in intersubjective and agentive processes, we gain insight into how the rituals and objects are flexible and changeable living phenomena that interplay with and direct individual persons’ healing, affections, feelings and emotions. This is a view that underlines and expands Abu-Lughod and Lutz’s (1990) demonstration of how affect is not an essential aspect of human nature or the individual subject, but culturally embedded in intersubjective relationships. This view fits with my suggestion that it is in the intersubjective space between self and other – being other persons, gods, objects, institutions, ideologies, cosmologies, ideas or imagery – that the experience and senses of self, pain, healing and well-being emerge.
Healing and Belonging: Creating Imageries of Social Life

For Tamil refugees, as for refugees and migrants in general, this open-ended and flexible feature of material culture makes it a precarious but vital instrument in an existential struggle for meaningful relations and practices in new and unfamiliar environments. Rituals and artefacts can confirm old meanings, attachments, relations and practices, while simultaneously being ready to create new ones. In this perspective, it is the interaction, or rather the process taking place between subjects and objects, that generates healing, emotions, sensations and agency. Thus, when Amara and other Tamils interact and engage with significant entities, they can experience a relation that provides agency and the creation of new identities, meanings and healing practices.

Not only do diasporic ritual performances and objects interplay in an intersubjective space for the appropriation, negotiation and creation of meaning, identity, healing and well-being for many Tamils. As appears in the case of Amara and Murukan, Tamils’ engagement with ritual performances and artefacts merge into a larger social and political context as they take place in the course of mundane day-to-day living in Norway. This appears in how Amara took pride in demonstrating her Tamilness when dressing in a sari and walking the streets of Oslo to do puja and temple services in the Tamil Hindu temple, or at home in worship at her altar. Such experiences are understood as an embodied perception, negotiation and expression of values, meaning and feelings which address a kind of aesthetics understood, in agreement with Jacques Rancière, as ‘the forms that life uses to shape itself’ (Rancière 2004:23). It is an aesthetic in which perception and experience of form in themselves are more a mode of being than a way of doing and making.

Thus, by performing and embodying the aesthetics of Tamil Hindu traditional rituals and objects, Amara and the other Tamils are seen to demonstrate a singularity and uniqueness within Norwegian society. Simultaneously, the Tamils’ re-construction and appropriation of Tamil traditional culture can also be seen as challenging the established Norwegian regime of meaning, order and categorization. While embodying, or ‘being’ Tamil aesthetics, Tamils form a distinction that also breaks down the criteria for isolating singularity and uniqueness (Rancière 2004:23). In this view of aesthetics and performance, the Tamil Hindu temple and practices at the home altar are seen as part of a social and political process that distinguishes the distinctiveness but also links it to a global, national and local community with an overall hierarchy of political and social positions. As such, I suggest that the study of illness and well-being, as they express intersubjective and agentive moments taking place between migrating subjects and moving objects, can highlight how performance, rituals and objects are alive and fuel the human imagination of healing and belonging within the power of aesthetics, as well as past, present and future imageries of social life.

This understanding of illness and well-being rests on a view in which identity and belonging are created in the course of social life, rather than being an ‘ethnos’ that is often designated as an indisputable ‘biological fact’ (see Baumann 1997:213). Furthermore, it appreciates how identity is individually and socially created and defined in interaction and performance, rather than being pre-ascribed (see also Amit-Talai 1995:131). However, my focus on the bodily, cognitive and emotional experiences of Tamil refugees further stresses how assertions of fixed and closed identities, communities and categories are, as Rapport argues, ontologically and morally illicit (2013:156). As such, I stress that migration and refuge is often occasioned by the lack of a full human recognition in a ‘home’ milieu and a political desire to achieve recognition and expression elsewhere. However, the focus here is on the more mundane experiences that Amara, Murukan and their fellow Tamils, like other migrants and refugees, face in a variety of contexts, such as when negotiating curing and
healing in medical consultations, work and education opportunities, and senses of well-being and belonging within family and kin relations, as well as larger social networks.

The case study of Amara and Murukan illuminates how consciousness expresses interrelationships between self and other, subject and object, which are pre-conditioned through the intermediary of the body (Jackson 1995:169). As such, a phenomenology of ‘being-in-the-world’ and embodiment stresses social and cultural processes like migration and re-settlement as part of perception, existential experiences and human capacities (see also Grønseth 2010a). The perceptive experience implies a sense of home, of being in the world, as a mobile habitat (Chambers 1994:4). Thus, living and dwelling are conceived as a mobile habitation of time and space, not as fixed and closed structures, but as supplying an opening and movement in what constitutes our sense of identity, place, belonging and well-being.

Striving towards healing and well-being for her family and herself, Amara involved herself in ritual performance and artefacts and connected with others. Through daily improvisation and creativity, she transformed her sense of being ‘so alone’ to include an experience of belonging with the Other as fellow human beings. As such, the case of Amara and Murukan highlights Tamils’ everyday experiences of a ruptured and fragmented social, cultural and material life as it activates a human disposition to connect in everyday life, and to create new senses of identity and belonging, as well as healing and well-being.

Concluding Remarks: Embodying Partial Knowledge

In exploring Tamils’ senses of illness and well-being through perspectives of embodiment, performance and healing, this chapter offers knowledge about refugee and migrant tensions and challenges in the everyday life of re-settlement in radical new social, cultural and material surroundings. Moreover, the chapter also offers insight into the human self by demonstrating the self’s orienting and flexible capacity in creating new meanings, identities and senses of well-being by ways of ritual performance and engagement with the other, both humans as well as non-humans. As such it shows how self is embodied and constituted in intersubjective encounters within, across and between various individual, cultural, material and social life-worlds.

As the study of Tamil illness and well-being moved from a medical model of explanation that looked at the patient–doctor encounter toward a client-centred model that emphasized the significance of sharing experiences and embodying the other, the chapter calls for a mode of knowledge based on contextualized and heartfelt recognition of the Other as equal and mutual human beings. From such a perspective, the creation of knowledge appears as fundamentally related to how we deal with each other and comprehend the complexity in the relations that characterize it. The focus here is turned towards the human experience and the intersections between the subjective and the intersubjective. Appreciating that the subject always has both a personal and a social history and that the intersubjective relations are formative, though not always explicit, I stress that our analysis cannot solely focus on conscious meanings and intentions. When further recognizing the subject as always embodied, it appears that the individuals such as Amara and Murukan have experiences and stories which cannot be fully grasped by language and symbols. Thus, I suggest an approach that recognizes a dynamic space for the embodied, performed, empathic and imaginative creation of knowledge and which can capture senses of self, healing and well-being as they are partially experienced in everyday social life.
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