



## Teaching in the Field as Participant Observation: Anthropology and the Ethics of Education in Nickerie, Western Suriname

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### Abstract

Teaching during fieldwork is not a common anthropological research method. In this paper, I will share my involvement with a local non-governmental initiative of setting up and teaching at the Volkshogeschool (a school for adult education) during my fieldwork in Nickerie, Western Suriname. By reflecting on some of the ethical and methodological challenges involved in teaching during anthropological fieldwork, I will show the potential of teaching in the field as a form of empowerment both in terms of responding to educational and other social needs of members of the local community *and* to those of the fieldworker. While being aware that education for all is not a universally held value, or good, I suggest that deliberately changing a part of the field during the research is not necessarily unethical. Indeed, to intervene more drastically in people's lives than simply by being there, through actively stimulating education, may in some cases be a more ethical choice than not to intervene. I will argue that if we understand fieldwork to be a dialogical interaction of teaching and learning, teaching in the field can be considered a form of participant observation. In my experience with the Volkshogeschool in Nickerie, teaching in the field was an inextricable part of the fieldwork endeavour.

### Introduction

In the opening text of their editorial introduction to *Teaching Anthropology* David Mills and Dimitrina Spencer ask the question:

What do teaching and anthropological research share in common? Both call for a sensitivity to meaning-making, learning, relationships, power, and emotions. Both cultivate the skills of observation and reflection. And at their best, both inculcate an awareness of the reciprocity and interdependence that shape pedagogical relationships as well as anthropological ones (Mills and Spencer 2011: 1).

This is an interesting premise, which reflects my experience with the Volkshogeschool Nickerie, a school for adult education, which I engaged with during my anthropological fieldwork on configurations of ethnicity and mixed-heritage in Nickerie, Western Suriname. My role in stimulating the creation of this school, and developing and teaching its English language course, was marked by relationships of “reciprocity and interdependence” (ibid.) not unlike the “anthropological” relationships I had been building up in the field prior to getting involved with this school. Yet rather than understanding these as parallel experiences, my experience in Nickerie suggests that teaching and learning are virtually indistinguishable if the dialogical relationship between the fieldworker and the field is acknowledged.

If “the social processes involved in constructing, acquiring, and transforming knowledge” (Pelissier 1991: 75), can satisfy a definition of teaching and learning, then one of the overlapping fields between teaching and anthropological fieldwork is methodological. Teaching can be interpreted as “a form of participant observation” because of “the lived engagement between students and teachers, reminding us how teaching is also a process of

learning” (Mills and Spencer 2011: 1). “Lived engagement” is a key element of anthropological fieldwork as well, as it lies at the heart of the dialogical interaction of the anthropologist and the field (Crapanzano 1980). Neutrality or scientific objectivity, presuming a detached relation between a researcher and who or what is researched, is hardly a realistic determination of anthropology these days, if it ever was (Pels 1999; but see D’Andrade (1995) for a defence of objectivity in anthropology). It is increasingly recognized in anthropology that doing fieldwork is not about pretending to be the proverbial fly on the wall, but that it incorporates a reflexive awareness of the political and cultural role of the fieldworker in generating ethnographic “data”; it incorporates what Barbara Tedlock called an “observation of participation” (1991: 69).

Observing one’s own conduct seems to have been warranted particularly through anthropologists involved in various types of advocacy, or action research (Wade 1996). As a form of applied anthropology, advocacy explicitly aims to change (aspects of) “the field” and emanates from a moral commitment to solve human problems (Layton 1996). Nancy Scheper-Hughes for instance, argues for a “politically committed and morally engaged anthropology” (1995: 409, 419). If anthropologists used to be involved in the ills of European colonialism (Asad 1973; Barnard 2000; Bennett 1996), critical and politically engaged anthropologists nowadays seek to redress some of the social injustices from the colonial project and engage publicly with unequal power relations (Low and Merry 2010). Although a new educational “intervention” raises political and ethical questions, in my involvement with the Volkshogeschool I did not explicitly aim to change the field in a way comparable to anthropologists concerned with for example the rights of refugees (e.g. see MacKenzie et al 2007; Lammers 2005), indigenous land rights (e.g. see Hale 2006) or the wellbeing of street children (e.g. see Panter-Brick 2002).

Most anthropologists are “engaged” researchers in one way or another. In their introduction to *Current Anthropology*’s Supplement 2 following from a Wenner-Gren symposium titled “The Anthropologist as Social Critic: Working toward a More Engaged Anthropology” held in January 2008 (Aiello 2010), Low and Merry (2010) outlined a range of types of engagement that anthropologists now get involved in. In distinguishing between six forms of engagement amongst which “social critique,” “collaboration,” “advocacy” and “activism,” they identified “teaching and public education” as an engaged activity, and they further listed “sharing and support.” If “sharing and support,” understood as “everyday practices of sharing, support, and personal interaction” (ibid.: S207) is a form of engagement then we may wonder whether any fieldwork can meaningfully be carried out if it is not engaged.

Yet there are several ways of engagement, influenced both by the complexities of the field and by the moral commitments of the anthropologist. During my fieldwork in Northern Uganda in 2005, I questioned the local legitimacy of (inter)national justice frameworks in the context of the Lord’s Resistance Army conflict (see Marchand 2005; Oomen and Marchand 2007). As I increasingly realised during and following this fieldwork one of the ethical dilemmas of advocacy is *who* and *what* the anthropologist engages with, or “shares and supports.” Every field tends to contain power imbalances regardless of the anthropologist’s action, or even presence. In this regard, fields marked by war and violence as in my experience of Northern Uganda, are different from fields in which an educational intervention is deemed to be empowering, as in the case of Nickerie (see below).

Just as, say, the militant approach of Scheper-Hughes (1995), teaching in the field presents its own specific ethical and methodological dilemmas. Arguably, militancy may not classify as a “research method,” because its emotional bias of justice countering perceived injustice not only seeks to alter the field, but to *impose* rather than *negotiate* the fieldworker’s own alternative commitment. In other words, actions by the researcher may not proceed on dialogical terms, thereby underrating the importance of *interacting* with the field. Teaching may present similar dilemmas if it is conveyed as a teacher-pupil hierarchy marked by power imbalances in knowledge exchange. Yet my experience of teaching in the field can be explained not only as advocacy but also as participant observation. I suggest that regardless of whether methodological and ethical issues in the case of my experience with the Volkshogeschool can be justified, they can be seen as an inextricable part of the fieldwork endeavour.

In this paper, I reflect on this merger of my anthropological fieldwork in Nickerie with the experience of teaching and involvement with the Volkshogeschool Nickerie. I also address some of the methodological and ethical challenges I encountered along the way. In the first part, I will introduce my fieldwork in Nickerie and how I got engaged with the Volkshogeschool. The second part of the paper addresses methodological challenges, considering my experience with the Volkshogeschool and the English language class both as a form of empowerment and as a form of participant observation. In the third part, I will address ethical challenges by considering some of the effects of this educational intervention, or how the Volkshogeschool was received by

the Nickerians I lived and worked with. I will conclude the paper with an “emotionally reflexive” (Spencer 2011) recap of my argument that teaching in the field can be considered an anthropological research method, and that whether or not an anthropologist intends to “actively engage,” the anthropological presence in the field itself and the choices made in relation to the people in the field are never neutral but a dialogic, “lived engagement.”

### Living in Nickerie: My Fieldwork, My Family, and the Volkshogeschool Nickerie

According to Armand Snijders (2000), no country in the world has so few inhabitants of so many different origins as Suriname. With its brutal slave trade and its subsequent policy of indentured labour, the European colonial plantation economy from the seventeenth up till the twentieth century has rewritten the demographic map of Nickerie, as it did in the other districts of Suriname and in the Caribbean more generally (Oostindie 2000). Over the last five hundred years Suriname’s population has changed markedly from being primarily Amerindian to what nowadays tends to be called multicultural. The colonial administrations swept away most of the indigenous populations and in need of labour for their “plantocracy” they imported large numbers of slaves from Africa and indentured labourers Asia, most notably from India, Indonesia and China. Furthermore, the colony had, amongst others, Dutch, British, Portuguese, Syrians/Lebanese and, more recently, relatively large groups of Brazilians and new waves of Chinese people immigrating to Suriname (Oostindie 2000; Snijders 2000; Tjon Sie Fat 2009).

Suriname, situated on the Northern coast of South America, presently has a population of fewer than half a million people, half of which resides in the capital Paramaribo and around 36,500 in the Western district of Nickerie (ABS 2005). The country’s current four largest ethnic groups are Hindustani, Creole, Javanese and Maroons.<sup>1</sup> During my fieldwork period in Nickerie, I lived most closely with the first three groups and with Hindustani people in particular; there were not many Maroons in Nickerie, most of them lived in the country’s interior or in Paramaribo. Furthermore, Nickerie’s close proximity to Guyana has also attracted many Guyanese, of which mostly East Indians, to cross the Corantyne river settling in Nickerie either temporarily or more permanently, causing many Nickerians to have family members on both sides of the Corantyne river. “East Indian” is the ethnic name identifying Hindustani people from Guyana and other formerly British colonies in the West Indies (the Caribbean) used both by members within these formerly colonized countries and by scholars writing about them, although in Nickerie they are usually called by their national name, Guyanese.<sup>2</sup>

In this multicultural locality, my ethnographic study explored the current configurations of ethnicity and mixed-heritage in Nickerie by looking at political behaviour, at ideas of kinship, at perceptions of the human body and at religious practices and beliefs as locally held by and about *doglas*. *Doglas* are “mixed” people usually defined as having one parent who is a descendent of Suriname’s former African slave population and the other parent a descendent of its former indentured labourers from Asia. Initially my fieldwork went quite smooth. I acquainted and befriended quite a few people in the field, including people identifying themselves as *doglas*, and I had started to feel quite comfortable if not reassured that I was learning very interesting details about the complexities of racial fixities and blurred boundaries in Nickerie. But I had one problem, which was big or at least noticeable: the colouring on the pregnancy test strip a couple of months before my Scottish partner Stuart and I flew to Suriname had not been telling a lie. I had not foreseen how that would impact on my fieldwork.

I had been in the field for about six months when I got a flat tyre on a dusty road in the Corantijnpolder, miles away from the Hindustani neighbourhood where Stuart and I resided. The dry season sun was scorching hot and I was well over eight months pregnant. Looking around for help I ended up spending the rest of the day at Devaya’s family while her brothers fixed my bicycle. Devaya was a young Hindustani girl with thick velvety hair strung in a long plait. Out of the many surprises occurring that afternoon was Devaya’s mother warning me that I had been about to step over “something very dangerous.” Expecting at least something like a foot-thick Boa constructor crawling past my feet, I looked down. A vegetable strand. All I could see between me and the other end of the family’s courtyard was a long strand of a pumpkin. Dangerous? “Do not cut the pumpkin”, came a low-voiced but loud message from Devaya’s grandfather. Why would it be dangerous for me to step over the strand or cut a pumpkin, I pondered? Was there no harm for them? “Of course not, because we are not pregnant”, Devaya’s mother said. “But why?” I tried, clumsily rustling the plastic bag with the cut of pumpkin they had given me. “Don’t you dare tying a knot in that plastic bag!” A long and deep sigh passed slowly through grandfather’s thin lips. “Listen, if you had stepped over that strand you would have caused the umbilical cord to get twisted. You could have killed your baby in the womb by strangling it. Everyone knows that.”

Something else everyone knew, I learned, is that it was not just pumpkin, but that I should not cut watermelon either, nor papaya, not even *boullanger* (eggplant). No big fruits. A pregnant woman cutting a big fruit or vegetable is painfully disturbing the bond she will have with her child after it is born. She would be putting herself and her child opposite each other in life; two sliced halves falling apart. And if I had closed the plastic bag, or any plastic bags for that matter, I would have deprived my baby from getting sufficient air during labour. Other examples of local knowledge related to pregnancy were that eating pineapple would cause premature breaking of the amniotic fluid, that eating okra was said to ease the passage of the baby during labour, and that pregnant women should not be outside during thunder and lightning because this would bring evil into the heart of the unborn. One of the most widespread local beliefs following pregnancy was in something harmful the Nickerians call *ogri ai* (evil eye). It was believed that people cannot be trusted if they compliment a baby or young child; by saying how beautiful or lovely it is they cast the *ogri ai*, shaped by jealousy, on the child.

Of course evil eye beliefs are not unique to Nickerie, but it was a belief that made me feel increasingly worried about my purpose of being in Nickerie. I felt reluctant, if not angry, about the social pressure to follow the local precautions against the evil of which everyone knew. In order to protect our baby daughter Yasmin Rhea from *ogri ai* we were told, amongst various other things, to put a black-and-white beaded bracelet on her wrist, to paint black dots on her forehead, in her hand palms and under her feet, to put an iron nail under her cot and a *lemmetje*<sup>3</sup> in her bed, and to bathe her in *blauwse*<sup>4</sup>. Stuart and I agreed to take Yasmin's baby clothes off the laundry line before dusk, out of respect, or out of politeness, to my neighbours, without pretending that we shared their belief that evil spirits would otherwise inhabit these clothes and cause all sorts of harm. But when we were further urged to shave off Yasmin's baby hair because it was "womb hair," I started to lose patience with what I at the time interpreted to be sheer superstition rather than local knowledge.

What I got particularly annoyed about was that these "superstitions" had managed to increasingly dominate the conversations I had with the people in the field I lived with. When I wanted to discuss something written in the daily newspaper, they answered with my dietary do's and don'ts because I was breastfeeding. When I asked about the Miss India elections in Paramaribo, I was told that the reason why Yasmin had cried during the night was because the ground on which the house was built had not been purified by a pundit. It was at this stage that I became nervous about my fieldwork, about what it was I had come to the field for in the first place, and whether I still wanted to be in the field. In other words, because I refused to "go native" (particularly because it was not *my* hair, or *my* bathwater, but our daughter's), I no longer perceived my fieldwork to be a dialogical, or mutual interaction.

In their prologue to *People Studying People: The Human Element in Fieldwork*, Robert Georges and Michael Jones noted that:

However else they may identify themselves and each other, fieldworker and subject are first and foremost human beings. It is this shared identity that makes fieldwork, with both its problems and its accomplishments, a meaningful mode of *mutual* learning. (1980: 3; my emphasis)

But if there was no dialogue, no "meaningful mode of mutual learning" between me and my neighbours, then what was I actually doing in the field? Of course, "[c]oping with problems created by feeling of loneliness, alienation, and frustration" (ibid.: 2-3) in itself was part of my fieldwork, and I was not unaware of this at the time. Besides, part of me actually found these "superstitious" beliefs a fascinating research area. I was even playing with the idea that perhaps I could write some interesting ethnography about it at some point in my life, or that I would at least come to appreciate the memory. Yet on another personal level I was looking for a distraction from "the field" becoming so closely enmeshed with my own family life, with Yasmin and Stuart. Perhaps it all came down to a confusion of power relations, to the who and what determining the questions and answers of the field(work).

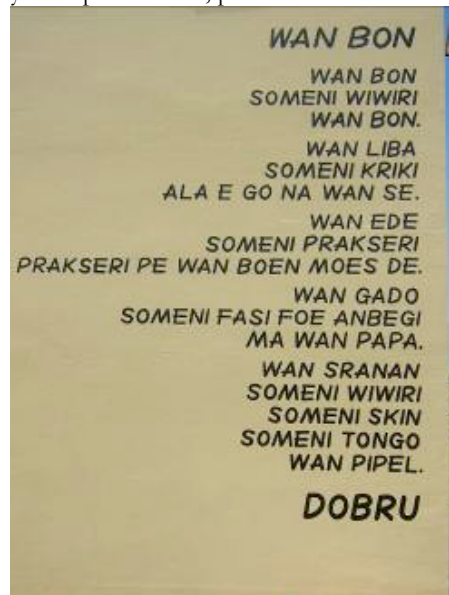
It was in this context that I started to get actively involved with the Volkshogeschool. To say that I simply "agreed" to take up our Dutch friend Rob's offer to join his initiative is an understatement: I was very eager. It gave me the hope that perhaps the daily, ordinary fieldwork conversations would resume if I changed my role in the field; it appealed to me as an opportunity to regain a sense of what I believed to be my purpose in the field. At the same time, however, it felt as if I was cheating on my commitment to participant observation by selfishly choosing an active move "away" from the field. I later realised that my involvement with the Volkshogeschool Nickerie and the English language classes paradoxically had the effect of allowing me to "return" to the field, or

the part of the field I had set out to study. Or perhaps it was all part of the same field. As I will show below, the creation of this adult school as an educational “intervention” in Nickerie’s daily life had as its primary goal the empowerment of people that were to a certain extent – and not (only) in an educational sense – socially excluded from Nickerie’s public life. It empowered my fieldwork too.

### The Volkshogeschool, the English Language Class, and the Empowerment of Learning and Teaching

In the final stages of getting the Volkshogeschool’s building on the CCN (Cultural Centre Nickerie) terrain ready for classes, a text of the local poet Dobru was painted on the wall at the main entrance to the school, functioning as a symbolic message of the school’s ideology, see Figure 1.

Figure 1: Poem ‘Wan bon’ by local poet Dobru, painted on one of the walls of the Volkshogeschool



Source: picture taken by Iris, December 2009

One tree  
So many leaves  
One tree.

One river  
So many streams  
All go to one sea.

One head  
So many thoughts  
Thoughts that must bring something good.

One god  
So many ways of worship  
But one god.

One Suriname  
So many leaves  
So many bodies  
So many languages  
One people.

(my translation)

Dobru’s poem is a message which unifies cultural differences into “one people.” The text reflects Suriname’s political idea of *Eenheid in Verscheidenheid* (“Unity in Diversity”) according to which national unity is achieved through the celebration of ethnic difference (cf. Adhin ([1957] 1998). Conforming to Jñan Hansdew Adhin’s plea

for religious tolerance, for instance, a much photographed and cited feature in Paramaribo is the peaceful coexistence of the capital's main mosque and synagogue, located in close proximity to each other (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mosque and Synagogue in Paramaribo



Source: Picture taken by Stuart, June 2010

How exactly a unity is achieved, or what it is that embraces cultural differences, however, was open to various interpretations. The interpretation of the Volkshogeschool was that everyone has a right to educational development, regardless of personal and cultural background. This was explicitly noted in the Volkshogeschool's introduction to its course programme 2010 (my translation):

Welcome to the Volkshogeschool, the adult education school in Nickerie, Western Suriname!

The Volkshogeschool offers all adults the opportunity to further development and further education in languages, culture, human & society, and creativity. The courses are not aimed at obtaining a degree but at meaningfully using your spare time. The Volkshogeschool is open to everyone, regardless of previous education, gender, religion or political background. Surprise yourself by looking at our broad offer of courses, seminars and workshops. Come to the Volkshogeschool and experience the joy of life long learning!

The Volkshogeschool was a joint project of two non-profit organisations based in Nickerie. One of these is Stichting Sari, a local foundation set up and run by Krishna Bajnath-Jagan, a socially concerned and well-regarded Hindustani lady in and beyond Nickerie. Stichting Sari aimed at the social well-being of poor and neglected women in Nickerie through stimulating economic self-activities and organising cultural workshops. The other non-profit organisation behind the creation of the Volkshogeschool is the WIN (Welfare Institute Nickerie) group, a locally based NGO (non-governmental organisation) tied in with and largely funded by Dutch NGOs.

The WIN group was Nickerie's largest organisation stimulating the districts social development and the recognition and betterment of Nickerie's most socially vulnerable members, such as children with a physical or mental impairment. Among some of its vast array of aid activities were a counselling course and psychosocial help programmes aimed, amongst other things, at preventing people to fall victim to Nickerie's astonishing cases of suicides. By drinking pesticides, most notably the locally widely available and extremely toxic herbicide called *Gramoxone*, or, less frequently, through means of hanging, the Regional Hospital Nickerie (*Streekziekenhuis Nickerie*, SZN), and morgue, saw many cases of people trying to commit suicide.<sup>5</sup> The Dutch psychologist Dr Tobi Graafsma, project leader of the Suicide Prevention Programme in Nickerie, confirmed that the social and statistical significance of suicide rates in Nickerie was extreme compared to the suicide figures noted elsewhere in the world (see also Graafsma et al 1996).

Although not explicitly mentioned in its course programme, the Volkshogeschool had a specific target: as a local empowerment intervention it was seeking to attract socially neglected or "voiceless" community members of specific cultures and genders – most notably Hindustani women. According to a Dutch social work research on suicide in Nickerie in the period 2008 to 2011, the main category of victims was Hindustani (70 to 90 per cent of all cases) and the motivation was primarily out of family and relationship problems (Mungra 2012). In her presentation of this report, the chair of the Union of Surinamese Women (*De Unie van Surinaamse Vrouwen*, USV) Asha Mungra noted that suicide attempts in Nickerie were often "a cry for help" (*ibid.*), as a means to expose the

difficulties in families in which women held a subordinate position and in which men were pressured to assure the honour of the family conduct, both in terms of socio-economic performance and in terms of abiding to “proper” Hindustani rules of kinship.

The main goal of the Volkshogeschool Nickerie was not suicide prevention, but more generally the empowerment of people through education understood in the widest sense as the social exchange of knowledge. “Empowerment” has become a common term both in academic and (other) public circles, most notably in studies and policies concerning development and human rights. Generally the term is associated with actions intended to adjust power imbalances to the advantage of people who are perceived “powerless” in relation to who are (or what is) perceived to be “powerful.” Unlike the many discussions in the academic literature about power itself, the idea of empowerment has not (yet) been problematised to the same extent. The term deserves more attention, for instance because it assumes that power can change and expand (Page and Szuba 1999).<sup>6</sup>

Although certainly not limited to (see the Volkshogeschool’s introduction to the course programme quoted above), an important target group as part of the Volkshogeschool’s aim of empowerment was Hindustani women who otherwise spent much of their lives restricted to the household with all its family politics and power imbalances, without many opportunities to public engagement with the community. According to Sharina, the wife of our dear friend Soerinder, the expansion of activities of Hindustani women is a necessary move towards empowerment.<sup>7</sup> To be able to talk to other women and share experiences of joy and hardship outside the family sphere, she said, is a first step to change the unequal gender relations in Hindustani households. Being able to have time out of the household has empowered herself, Sharina told me, and she conveyed her appreciation for Soerinder’s understanding and support for how the changes within herself had started to affect their family roles.

As an educational “intervention,” the Volkshogeschool hoped to contribute to the (self)empowerment of certain groups of women and other socially vulnerable people in Nickerie through their public engagement in knowledge exchange. In the first year of its existence from January 2010, the Volkshogeschool offered around thirty courses, ranging from computer courses to cooking classes, from first aid to fashion design, from yoga to photography, from art to psychology, from draping saris to folding *angisa* headscarves.<sup>8</sup> There were also several language courses, such as Hindi, Sranantongo, Portuguese and English.<sup>9</sup> Despite the relatively late distribution of the course programmes in December 2009, most courses attracted interest and we saw an unexpectedly large (but of course much welcomed) number of people signing up for classes.

While initially only being involved during the organisational period of trying to set up the Volkshogeschool (I also got Stuart involved: he designed the school’s logo of Nickerie’s red ibis), I eventually also ended up taking on the English language course because the teacher we had found pulled out last minute. At first, without having any previous teaching experience and with English not being my first language, I was not overly confident that I would be able to take up this responsibility. However, doing the course actually turned out to be great fun, and also an invaluable experience of the interdependence of teaching and learning as a simultaneous and shared process, which I will discuss below. Apart from being educational in the sense that people were given an opportunity to improve their English vocabulary and grammar, the fun was what most of the classes also were about, as well as us gradually learning from each other’s personal (hi)stories while referring to a topic all of us, to a certain or lesser extent, could relate to, such as land use, shelter, family, superstition, ethnic celebrations and remembrance days, and Nickerie’s relation to the wider world.

The people taking the English classes were mostly Hindustani, Javanese and Creole women who worked in health care and local governmental positions, hence not directly the most “vulnerable” people. However, that did not make the course less socially transforming. While most people seemed hesitant or shy during the first meetings, as the course developed most of them were increasingly enthusiastic, eager and engaging when they realised that there was a rather “democratic” atmosphere in the class rather than the “don’t disagree with the teacher” attitude they said they had been used to in Suriname’s formal education system inherited from the Dutch colonial administration. See in this context Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) – with reference to Lodge (2005) – for an argument “toward more democratic classrooms”:

By making students active participants in their learning, including their voices as part of an ongoing discussion of teaching and learning, and ensuring that listening and speaking are the twin responsibilities of all parties (Lodge 2005), it is possible to change the traditionally hierarchical relationships among faculty and students (ibid.: 50)

While in the English language classroom the conceptual distinction between teacher and pupil became



increasingly blurred, I could not escape another, perhaps unavoidable field distinction: that classical pre-“cultural-critique” (cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986) distinction between “me” and “them.” Being a *bakera* (a white (Dutch) person) from *bakerakondre* (the Netherlands) affected perceived power relations not only in the class but in the field more generally – no matter how hard I would try, and despite the fact that I was born after the country’s independence from the Netherlands and had never personally known any *bakera* who had been involved in the colonial project, I would not be able to escape an identification with Suriname’s colonial history.

Despite this colonial burden, in my role of language teacher I acquired an interactive function in the Nickerie society which felt markedly different from my time there before “having a purpose of being there.” My neighbours had wondered why I had come to live in Nickerie for such a length of time, “to learn about us.” They were used to Dutch psychology and social work students, often investigating the alarming rate of local suicides in Nickerie, but these students usually had proper questionnaires and did not “hang around everywhere.” The apparent distinction, as locally perceived, between the “non-purpose” of participant observation and the “purpose” of teaching was stressed also by other people in the town. As my Creole friends Josh and Ricky said:

Now we understand why you came here. It is nice to have your company, but we really found it so odd that before setting up the school, your work simply seemed to be to live here. Now that you joined that organizing with the school building and getting teachers and stuff and also actually being a teacher yourself, yes, now we can see why you are here.

Initially I did not recognize my involvement with the Volkshogeschool to be part of fieldwork because in my mind I had categorized teaching as separate from anthropological research. When I started getting involved with the Volkshogeschool I had nonetheless structured a certain divide between them along the lines of “giving” versus “taking” information: The people in the field were “giving” me anthropological data and “taking” an English language class, whereas I was “giving” the English language training and “taking” anthropological data. Through the English language class I realised the illogic of such conceptual distinctions, because both anthropology and teaching are “gift relationship[s]” themselves, both are “practice[s] of reciprocity and indebtedness” (Mills and Spencer 2011: 2). Furthermore, I suggest that at least with respect to my experience in Nickerie, anthropology and teaching can be understood as *the same practice* of reciprocity and indebtedness. Teaching in the field, I suggest, is as much part of participant observation as anthropology is part of education.

Perhaps the most prominent contribution of teaching in the field to the “empowerment” of my fieldwork – or my trust in my research “purpose” – was that through the English course at the Volkshogeschool I was able to get an interethnic group together talking about issues that rarely occurred on the streets and at work. During the later parts of the course the course participants often had disagreements with each other when it concerned ethnic issues such as religion and lifestyle (which people in Nickerie disagreed about also outside of the classroom), but they argued not only in an open but in an *interactive* manner, which was new to me. Although in Nickerie interethnic disagreements were commonly talked about by people when finding themselves in the company of those whom they perceived as ethnic members, when they were in interethnic company references to each other’s behaviour tended to be purposefully avoided, silenced, particularly because, as people told me, they feared the turbulent situation of their Guyanese neighbours who had had serious interethnic riots and violence, especially during elections. I would have had difficulties or simply would not have been able outside the classroom to get an “interethnic focus group” to interactively speak in the way the people in my class have done.

During my fieldwork period in Nickerie before I became involved with the Volkshogeschool, I had been learning about interesting life stories of *doglas*, in which they usually emphasised the arbitrariness and blurred boundaries of ethnic categories and their own role in a society in which “race” was the communicative order of the day. But when I was asking my Hindustani and East Indian friends and neighbours and my Creole and Javanese friends and people in Nickerie more generally about their opinion of their ethnic identity in relation to “other” ethnic identities, and how they regarded the “ethnicity” of *doglas*, I usually received responses in which people placed themselves in rather stark oppositional terms against the others, both in political, religious or family terms and in terms of bodies and visual differences. In public encounters on the street, at the market, at schools and churches, people explicitly referred to each other as *die Hindostaan* (that Hindustani person), *die Creool* (that Creole person), *die Javaan* (that Javanese person) and *die Guyanees* (that Guyanese person). Furthermore, many Surinamese showed a remarkable ease with referring to themselves and others as being different “races,” such as contrasting a Javanese’s “race” with a Maroon’s “race.” This language of classifying people is in many West European countries nowadays considered as politically incorrect, as morally wrong, or as scientifically



invalid. Yet, it was in Europe and particularly amongst anthropologists where the “human race” was created and used to explain people’s colours and cranes until civil rights movements exposed the disasters of apartheid and racial discrimination more generally so the idea of human races was binned. During my fieldwork in early twenty-first century Suriname, however, a “binning” of race-thinking would seem absurd. It was part of everyday life.

Whereas the people in the class initially also distinguished each other in a language of race, they gradually started to discuss the boundaries of ethnic categories and the overlaps of other categorical identities between ethnic groups, such as those of gender and age, and of differences within their ethnic groups, for example in terms of socio-economic class; they started to question their own assumption of ethnic unities. In that sense, their discussions in the classroom were almost like an anthropological development from cultural essentialism to a Barthian argument that it is about “the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff it encloses” (Barth 1969: 15). Whereas I had been academically aware of Barth’s work, the field seemed to present an abundance of definitions of ethnicity as “the cultural stuff it encloses” and a lack of boundary-thinking, particularly in terms of how people were referring to *doglas*. Yet our discussions in the classroom showed a different lens through which to understand how people in Nickerie negotiated their identities, or at least how the people in my English language class *learned* to negotiate their social identities through their interactive interethnic discussions.

The initial lens the field had presented me with after about nine months of being in the field was one of the national ideology of “unity in diversity,” one of a society as made up of separate ethnic groups living their separate cultural traditions, a unity that essentialised ethnic differences to such a permeating extent that it posed complex stresses of unbelonging and unrelatedness to some people classified as mixed, or *dogla*. The lens the English class presented me with, however, was one which showed me that people realised that there was more to Nickerie than ethnicity. Of course, ethnicity was an omnipresent phenomenon of daily life in this society and none of the people in my class denied this, but it was not the only one and perhaps not the most important one. Possibly often obscured because of the dominant ethnic focus of national politics, religion, traditional notions of kinship, the media and “ethnic” films, this lens showed what people in Nickerie shared regardless of their ethnic name.

Having been presented with both lenses in the field has had the epistemological effect of not being able to distinguish between anthropological data and other acquired knowledge about people in the field, such as through teaching (if that were possible in the first place). Teaching had become a method to obtain anthropological data. When opening a random text considering anthropological fieldwork methods, one may find explanations of participant observation, in-depth interviewing and taking fieldnotes. It is unlikely to find teaching listed among them. During my interaction with the people in my classes however, I came to understand teaching in the field and my involvement with the school as part of the fieldwork. Teaching during fieldwork can be considered an anthropological method if we allow teaching and learning to collapse into a unified, dialogical fieldwork experience. If fieldwork is, simply put, about learning to understand “the other” dialogically by being there, then how could I possibly not be a fieldworker in the classroom while being there? Encounters in the classroom, even if not intended, became fieldwork data; they became part of my ethnographic study.

However, what teaching during fieldwork perhaps more explicitly calls for than ordinary anthropological fieldwork methods may be an assessment of the risks and benefits that empowerment interventions such as setting up the Volkshogeschool could impose on the field. The section below will deal with some of these ethical issues by focusing on two ethnographic experiences which may raise doubts about whether teaching as an anthropologist was, in my case of the Volkshogeschool in Nickerie, the “right” decision to make. Of course, the use of the very term “right” holds an ethical question in itself: when, and according to whom, is something right or wrong?

## **Ethical Considerations of Being Involved with the Volkshogeschool**

In the publication of his 2001 Malinowski Memorial Lecture, in which he argues for an anthropology of ethics and freedom, Laidlaw noted that our “morality system” of thinking about and acting upon what we regard as our moral duty “[does] not exhaust how we actually make choices” (Laidlaw 2002: 317). Following Nietzsche and Foucault in particular, Laidlaw expands this epistemological vacuum by concluding that:

Wherever and in so far as people’s conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person,

because it is such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free. And to the extent that they do so with reference to ideals, values, models, practices, relationships, and institutions that are amenable to ethnographic study, to that extent their conduct becomes the subject matter for an anthropology of ethics.

Rather than analyzing the moral conduct of people in the field as “subject matter” for such an anthropology of ethics, I am here more concerned with whether my own conduct with regards to the Volkshogeschool was ethically “right.” Nevertheless, what Laidlaw does show us is the subjectivity of ethical decision making because of its close relation to personhood which, in my view, concerns any moral being.

In this part of the paper, I will address ethical challenges through considering how the Volkshogeschool has been received by the Nickerians I lived and worked with. Whereas the previous part focused on the people in the classroom, I will here narrate two examples of people I lived with in Nickerie who, in the first case, expressed reservations about doing courses and, in the second case, did not support the school at all. Although generally the school was welcomed with great enthusiasm by most of the people I came to know in the field, these two examples should not be ignored because they raise questions about whether the Volkshogeschool project was, after all, a morally right educational intervention or not. These mixed feelings about the school locally, and despite the positive feelings vastly dominating negative ones, presented me with an ethical decision to make: to respond to negative reactions by withdrawing from the school, or to value the positive ones and continue. By focusing here on the first, I will explain why I chose the latter.

My first ethnographic example tells us something about my friend Minakshi. Minakshi did not do any of the courses in the newly opened school for adult education. During the time when I was involved in the preparation of setting up the school, Minakshi and I had talked about it a lot and she also came with suggestions of which courses we could try to include. When the school finally opened in January 2010, Minakshi had not signed up for any of the courses. When I asked her why, she first replied that they did not have enough money. Money often dictated everyday decisions in Minakshi’s family. Unlike my earlier “gifts” such as helping her with payments for a mobile phone, when I offered to pay a course for her she hesitated, and refused. When I asked why she refused she said it was because she did not have the time to study because she was so busy everyday with growing her vegetables and selling them at the local market. When I offered to help her with her vegetables she hesitated again, longer this time. Eventually, with a shy smile which I was not used to she refused again, saying that instead she would be very happy if I could help her daughter Deepa, who had again failed her primary school assessments, with her homework. While still feeling puzzled given that Minakshi had initially expressed enthusiastic interest in doing a course, I was not sure whether to ask her again about it as I started to feel uncomfortable about perhaps becoming too inquisitive, so I did not and we let it rest.

This conversation had taken place in January 2010. Then, five months later and only a few weeks before me and my family were “leaving” the field<sup>10</sup>, I heard the laughing voice that I had come to love so much: “Eerééés, Eerééés, klop klop!”<sup>11</sup> When Minakshi came over and made herself comfortable in one of the hammocks on our courtyard she first checked if our baby daughter was well, as she usually did, followed by some daily gossip, again as she usually did. Although this day, unlike most days, I felt that there was a particular reason why she had come over, I could not figure out what it was. When she finally got to it, it was to my surprise that it referred back to our conversation about the Volkshogeschool. She said that she had been thinking often about doing a course. She was particularly interested in the computer courses. She said: “Prem [her son] is only ten but he already knows how to use the computers at the Chinese cyber to play games. If I could learn how to use the Internet then I can also go to the cyber, to email you when you are away,” she smiled. The reason why she did not want to do the course was that her mother had always wanted to be a nurse but she is illiterate. The nursing training in Paramaribo involves reading and writing. Hence, so Minakshi told me: “I cannot do a course because of the pain it will cause my mother. We are rural women; we have other duties in life. If I would try to do a course I really want to do, just like my mother really wanted to do the nursing, then I will bring bad luck to the family.”

What this case shows is that doing or not doing a course was not always an individual choice. When Minakshi told me about her mother I realized that the Volkshogeschool, despite its popularity amongst certain segments of Nickerie’s population, would have difficulties in getting all target groups involved. Women such as Minakshi and her mother, people with agricultural livelihoods, were amongst the kind of people who according to the Volkshogeschool’s ideals needed empowerment most, perhaps more so than people employed in hospitals or in governmental sectors such as the general education system. In the context of Nickerie and with the importance of family ties particularly to the Hindustani, a person’s choice often was a family choice. This raised ethical

questions of whether the Volkshogeschool, despite our best intentions, was succeeding in reaching its primary goal of local empowerment. The Volkshogeschool's premise of respecting human agency by posing no social obligations to people with regards to joining or not joining a course stood not only in contrast to the formal primary and secondary school system in Nickerie (which was made compulsory for children during colonialism, although particularly in rural areas many Hindustani and Javanese people had long not been included)<sup>12</sup> but it was apparently also a foreign concept to local families where individual development in terms of educational choices was not normative.

Moreover, and on another, even more gendered cultural level perhaps, not all families agreed with sending their wives and sisters to an education school. As I will show below, the school was not a desired phenomenon at all to some Nickerians stressing the importance of tradition, a tradition which especially among some of Nickerie's orthodox Hindu families dictated the role of the woman as being the wife who is bearing children and running the household. If the woman were to leave this private life, so I was told by some of my Hindustani neighbours, even if it were only to do a knitting course, she would talk to other women and perhaps start questioning her traditional role. It was particularly in the more orthodox Hindu polders where I found people reacting to the school with disapproval.

The illustrative ethnographic example I narrate here is a conversation taking place between Reshma, her daughter Angela and me on a rainy Sunday at the big courtyard next to the barbed wired grounds occupied by Reshma's twenty-odd chickens and *doksen*<sup>13</sup>. In a metal pot on an earthen stove next to Reshma's vegetable and herb garden one of her chickens was currying away to be served with our *roti* lunch. On and off, in short but heavy waves, the tropical rain clattered loudly on the aluminium roof above the courtyard, interrupting our conversations. Reshma's husband was not home. "He is working very hard at our rice field up the road," she explained to me, causing Angela to fire at her mother words like bullets:

What?! Tell her the truth mother! He is never working hard but wasting every day of the week getting drunk! Tell her how he treats you! I am sick of hearing you defend him. How many times have we had to rush you to the hospital because he had been throwing knives at you or throwing hot cooking oil over your body? How many times has he damaged your face or broken your limbs? I still wonder how he managed to get the broom piercing through your thigh last month. We have told you a million times to leave him, for your safety but also for our sake. We hate him, his own children; all four of us hate him. We hardly dare to bring your grandchildren here when he is around. He has no right to hurt you so much.

Reshma's head sank deeply down facing her chest, her big muscled arms disappearing into her lap. The strong bodied woman had suddenly changed into a weak one, having her energy and spirit sucked out. "He always apologizes when he has sobered up," she said, almost without sound.

You do not understand it Angela. Listen to your eldest brother. He knows what I am talking about. He knows that I cannot leave your father because I have a lifelong commitment to his family since we married. I cannot leave his family because they are my family. Without family I will have nobody. Without them I will die alone because nobody would arrange my funeral. The village will not see it as me leaving my husband but as me being deserted by my husband's family, which makes me the wrong person in their eyes. Your brother understands this and his wife also, your good sister in law. She knows that we are her family now. She is a good Hindustani because she knows that she is committed to us for the rest of her life.

Reshma raised her head. A few salt-and-pepper coloured fringe hairs fell over her dark brown forehead. She had tears in her eyes, but appeared to have regained her strength. She watched an angry Angela joining her husband and their son in the hammock at the other end of the courtyard.

My daughters have married into families that allow them freedom to develop themselves, to have good jobs and to lead lives independent of their in-laws. But when it concerns my sons, I say no. My sons have to marry good girls, girls that obey our family rules, girls that will look after my husband and me when we get old. This is why I will not accept that stupid child my youngest son wants to live with. Angela said that you are interested in mixed families. Well, I'm not. Maybe a tiny little bit of old mix is not too bad sometimes. Angela's husband is mixed because of his Chinese grandmother. But I want no mixing in *our* family. This child... now that she is pregnant my youngest son wants to stay with her, although he wanted that anyway. She is a foster child, raised by her aunt, a black Christian woman. Her mother was also very black, but she died in childbirth. Her father is from the Amerindians, but her aunt took her away from his family. Do you see what a spoiled mixed thing this child is? We do not want her. Our children and grandchildren have to be Hindustani, not spoiled.

While pointing an angry finger in the direction of Angela in the hammock, Reshma added:

Do you know what is causing this bad behaviour? Her! My daughters! They are educated and they talk too much. They are influencing my young son. They are damaging his future, they are damaging our family. We should have never allowed them to study. Educating girls destroys the family.

Reshma's case was not unique in Nickerie, especially not in the orthodox Hindu areas beyond the centre of Nickerie's main town. What the Volkshogeschool intended to do, then, was changing the field, the field I was studying, and I was contributing to that change by encouraging the school. The difficulty here is that I simply agree with the intention of the school to try to stimulate local empowerment and particularly that of Hindustani women. Coming from a cultural background which has seen waves of emancipation and demands for gender equality specifically in terms of the right to education, the ideals of the Volkshogeschool corresponded neatly with that cultural heritage. Risking ethnocentrism here, and despite being aware of its ethical implications, I thus agree, at least in the case of the Volkshogeschool in Nickerie, with changing a part of the field through introducing a new form of education. Why? I simply do not believe unbiased or value free anthropology to exist. As Sangren noted, "we [anthropologists], too, are socially constituted beings" (2007:13), influenced to a great deal both by our academic training and by our private lives. The anthropologist is as much cultured as those s/he studies. I morally do not agree with the way in which Reshma was treated by her husband and in the way she blamed her educated daughters for destroying an element of "tradition" which in my view needs serious revision.

Of course, as Smart (2010) pointed out with reference to his work on squatter settlements and public housing in Hong Kong, anthropologists need to be careful about critiquing practices in societies of which we are not a member, particularly in the context of a colonial past. I was not a member of Nickerie's Hindustani population, and not even pretending to become one in a cultural sense, as I illustrated earlier with my difficulties of going "native" with their precautions of protecting infants against *ogri ai* and other evil. Yet despite my cultural remoteness perhaps it is not inappropriate or unethical to form a social critique against Reshma's argument about educated daughters if we consider that these educated daughters themselves, who *were* members of Nickerie's Hindustani population, seemed to agree with this critique. Furthermore, to refrain from any opinion may in some contexts actually be less ethical than to voice critique. As "all research is a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgement in context" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:23), I judged as best as I could, and chose, in my view, the most ethical option of continuing my support for the Volkshogeschool.

Education, and learning more generally, implies change, a change in knowing, a change in worldview perhaps, and maybe even a change in behaviour. Such change may be interpreted in the negative as people like Reshma did. However, and I stress it again, doing a course at the Volkshogeschool could also be a positive experience, as with the enthusiastic engagement in the English language class. Furthermore, the support for the Volkshogeschool by other Nickerians more generally provided me with an overwhelming belief that the school was "right." Even Minakshi, despite not doing a course herself, had told me several times that she was convinced that her life would be much enriched if she could do courses, to get more education. Therefore, rather than trying to reach an overly romanticized ideal of trying to please everyone, I suggest that we could instead accept these mixed responses to the school and the courses by acknowledging, simply, that Nickerie is a place, like perhaps any place, of people living together as a community while holding differing opinions about how to live life best.

## Conclusions: Teaching as Participant Observation

The choice of whether or not to teach during fieldwork is not necessarily less ethical and less methodological than other choices anthropologists have to make, because the anthropological presence in the field in relation to the people in the field is a dialogic one. Anthropological fieldwork can be explained as a dialogical process between the ethnographer and the people s/he studies in the sense that it is not solely the voices and behaviours of the people nor simply the writings of the ethnographer, but a joined work (Bakhtin 1986; Geertz 1988; Gunaratnam 2003). As I hope to have shown in this paper, my anthropological fieldwork was a dialogic project of "fieldworker" both in *and* out, both siding with *and* confronting, parts of "the field."

We are *people* studying people; not only the people we study, but we ourselves as well, are people with (dis)interests, convictions, constraints, bodies, emotions, social relations, (re)actions and (lacks of) choices. As Georges and Jones noted, "[i]t is through their shared humanity that fieldworkers and subjects learn from and teach each other" (1980: 155). Our interactions in the field have a transformative effect of continuously

reframing selves and others (Tedlock 1991) and this transformative process also warrants emotional reflexivity (Spencer 2011). Furthermore, as Spencer argues, if we acknowledge the transformative process of fieldwork and its potential for learning and teaching anthropology, and how this affects our “meaning making” and embodied, relational knowledge of the field, our personal conduct and emotions in the field need clear articulation in our writing, “show[ing] how important *emotional reflexivity* is for both theory and method in anthropology” (2011: 68, 69, emphasis in original). In other words, our emotions in the field are part of our knowledge-making of the field and we would do well to account for this in our ethnographic writing.<sup>14</sup>

In this paper I have reflected on some of my emotions during the field that had a transforming effect on the fieldwork process. My emotional reflexivity is perhaps most clearly articulated in my narration of how my choice of joining the Volkshogeschool initiative was related to my frustrations with the cultural *ogri ai* pressures of how to protect our baby daughter from evil. My unease with how my neighbours affected “my field” with their focus on how Stuart and I should raise our child rather than (also) answering my questions about *their* family and why *doglas* were not considered “proper” or “pure” kin, caused me to support an educational intervention which stimulated the empowerment of people who were socially constrained participants in Nickerie’s public life.

Education itself was in Nickerie not unanimously received as an opportunity for empowerment. In Reshma’s case discussed above, and to a certain extent in Minakshi’s case as well, educating women was interpreted as a Western-biased phenomenon “disempowering” traditional notions of family relations in which children were not expected to prioritise individual choices and act upon their personal desires and aspirations. It was my emotional or perhaps culturally-inspired (Western-biased) reaction questioning such traditions that strengthened my belief that the Volkshogeschool was not ethically wrong, but empowering indeed. As I have suggested in this paper, deliberately changing a part of the field in the form of supporting an educational intervention during the research is not necessarily unethical. Indeed, intervention may in some cases be a more ethical choice. Furthermore, not only the learning but also the teaching (if these can be distinguished) was empowering, because in my view it contributed not only to educational and other social needs of members of the local community, but also to my own.

Through my involvement with the school I increasingly realised that teaching in the field was not an unanthropological thing to do either. Instead, it was an important part of my fieldwork. I have argued in this paper that all knowledge exchanged during the fieldwork experience can be potential anthropological data. As teaching involves intersubjective experiences we cannot simply “delete” parts of these experiences. Why would we treat pupils and teachers in a classroom as a category of people somehow distinctive from other people anthropologists engage with in the field? In other words, the choice of whether or not to teach during fieldwork is not more or less anthropological than other choices the fieldworker has to make. My engagement with the Volkshogeschool and the English language class was both a form of mutual empowerment and a form of participant observation. In my experience with the Volkshogeschool in Nickerie, teaching in the field was as an inextricable part of the fieldwork endeavour.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term Maroon refers to descendants of the runaway slaves settling in the country's interior, whereas Creole refers to descendants of former slaves born in Suriname who stayed with the colonizers and, following the abolition of slavery, mostly settled in the more urban coastal areas. The term "Creole" is somewhat confusing in the case of Suriname. Whereas anthropology tends to use it when referring to mixture, as creolization, the Surinamese use it to address descendants of former slaves born in Suriname that are *not Maroon*, whether mixed or not. In other words, in the Surinamese context the term "Creole" seems to have evolved from denoting a mixture to referring to a group of people seen as a third ethnic category, as "a people", who are in Suriname often seen as a group distinct from the other ethnic groups (including the Maroons, despite their Afro-Surinamese heritage).

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that conceptual distinctions between ethnic and national phenomena are far more complex than I may suggest here (e.g. see Craig Calhoun (1993)) but addressing these complexities falls beyond the scope of this paper. The literature on nationalism and ethnicity is immense and still expanding and I here only briefly refer to its common usage in the context of the Caribbean, and Nickerie in particular.

<sup>3</sup> *Lemmetje*: a small yellow type of lime fruit, often used by *Bonuman* (healer) to fend off black magic.

<sup>4</sup> *Blaumysel* is a blue chalk used to whiten laundry. In Nickerie *blaumysel* is attributed the further property of protecting babies that may be prone to being affected by *ogri ai* (evil eye).

<sup>5</sup> Gramoxone and other harmful chemical substances have also been reported to be used in a curative way by people in Suriname's forested hinterland suffering from a disease locally known as *Bussi Yassi* (biomedical term: *cutaneous leishmaniasis*), spread by sand flies and causing severe skin ulcerations and blistering. Consider for instance an informant in Sahiensshadebie Ramdas' (2012) research on this practice:

"We always have Gramoxone at home, for the grass, but also against mosquitoes. When I saw it, I thought, Gramoxone kills everything. My sore was caused by *Bussi Yassi*; *bussi* means the bush, something of nature. And then I thought, if this [the sore] was caused by something of nature, something that kills everything in nature would probably also kill my sore. (Pista, January, 2010: Dermatological Service)" (Ramdas 2012: 19).



Unlike suicidal Nickerians then, who may resort to drinking Gramoxone to kill their entire body, Pisto and other *Bussi Yassi* affected people in the hinterland applied Gramoxone topically on their skin with the intention to cure their bodies by killing the “nature” believed to cause the skin disease.

<sup>6</sup> I apologise for a lack of critical discussion of these questions here (and therefore my somewhat limited sensitivity to it) because it stretches away from my central argument in this paper of teaching as a form of participant observation.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart was actively involved with Soerinder’s Work and Training Centre of the WIN-group, which intended to give Nickerie youth an alternative to criminal activities through earning money by making stones and timber furniture.

<sup>8</sup> In Nickerie *saris* were usually worn by Hindustani women during religious and other celebrations such as weddings and birthdays and commemoration days. The *angisa* headscarf is part of the traditional Creole *koti* dress. At the Volkshogeschool I learned that both with her choice of the coloured print on the scarf and the way it was folded the Creole woman wearing it was sending a message to the people in her surroundings about how she feels.

<sup>9</sup> Sranantongo, also called “Surinamese,” is a Creole-based lingua franca used informally across the ethnic groups.

Contrasted against Suriname’s official language, which is Dutch, Sranantongo is often understood as a language of the street.

<sup>10</sup> I am putting the word “leaving” in quotation marks here in agreement with Geertz’s (1988) insight that ethnography is not a clear-cut separation between field and desk in the Malinowskian sense, or between being there and leaving there. Ideally, the reader gets a sense of “being there” without having to go there in the sense of booking a plane, passing through the Surinamese airport, and being dropped off in Nickerie by the bus from Paramaribo.

<sup>11</sup> Translation: “Iris, Iris, knock knock!” Most houses did not have a doorbell. As people were usually in their garden or on their veranda, or at least had all their doors and windows open, the Nickerian way of announcing your presence was done by voice rather than knuckles or pushing a button. In the neighbourhood where I lived Hindu families usually greeted each other with “ram ram”, responded by “sita ram”, but as they knew how poor my understanding of their Sarnami language is they usually greeted me with the Dutch “klop klop”.

<sup>12</sup> In the nineteenth century the colonial authorities had started an assimilation or “Dutchification” policy. From 1869 bureaucratic principles were modelled on those of the Netherlands, education was made compulsory for children aged between seven and twelve, and in 1876 Dutch became the official language. This “civilizing” policy, however, was initially only directed at the Creole middle-class in Paramaribo and when the census-based right to vote was lowered in 1901 from Dutch-elite-only to more public democracy, it was only this middle-class that benefited by being allowed to set up electoral associations. Hindustani and Javanese people had not been actively involved in this Dutchification process because they were expected to return to Asia once their contracts of indentured labourship were up (Hoeft 2001). The ethnically selective Dutchification policy had widened the educational gap between middle-class Creoles and other population groups and this gap grew larger still during the administration of Governor Kielstra between 1933 and 1944 (*ibid.*). It had increasingly become apparent that many of the Asian contract labourers chose to stay in Suriname, fearing a future of insecurity and poverty in the “homeland” (largely informed by former contract labourers re-migrating back to Suriname), and eager to instead make use of the free gift of agricultural plots the Dutch colonial authorities offered them instead. To those who stayed Kielstra granted the Hindustani and Javanese relative autonomy in running their agricultural villages and rights to marry according to their own cultural principles. Kielstra was resented by the Creole elite for allowing “Asian laws” as it affected their success and credibility as the new representatives of a “national” Surinamese population (Hoeft 2001; Oostindie 2000).

<sup>13</sup> *Doks*: a large white type of duck.

<sup>14</sup> In acknowledging that “anthropology is engaged in epistemological, ontological and methodological shifts, as is evident from the discussions in Faubion and Marcus (2009), Rabinow et al. (2008) in particular” (Spencer 2011:69), the transformative potential of anthropology itself is asserted here through countering the classic ethnographic idea of keeping personal emotions separate from ethnographic “data”, as Malinowski perhaps attempted with keeping his *Argonauts of the Pacific* (1922) separate from his personal diary (posthumously published in 1989). Following this latter publication Malinowski’s “emotions” can hardly be disassociated from his fieldwork with the Trobriand islanders (Rapport 1990).