

# To Be or Not to Be: That is the Question

By: Marisca van der Mark, Erell Smith, Saskia Soelaksana, Julia van Tilborg, Thessa Verwolf, Chantal van der Zanden, Stan Reiner van Zon  
Erasmus + Utrecht University

Unquestionably Shakespeare's most famous lines, "to be or not to be; that is the question", are the start of a soliloquy exploring the meaning of life itself. However, nowadays this quotation has taken on a life of its own as it is used for various situations and interpretations. The integration of refugees in the Netherlands can provide new answers to this well-known question, as we explore in the following four instances, in Utrecht and beyond.

## 1 We will Be



In 2015, The Guardian shared a video of thousands of Syrian refugees travelling through Hungary. Young and old, men and women, travelled the endless road to Austria. They were forced to live on the streets for weeks. The injustice they had suffered and their hope for a better life fueled their perseverance. The man on the bottom right echoed that. While he walked on his wife's loafers, which were too small, so she could have his much sturdier sneakers, he told the cameraman **with a bright smile**: "To be or not to be, that is the question." He then added resolutely: "We will be".

## 2 To Be or Not to Be Bright

In his new production, "The Bright Side of Life", Bright O. Richards opens with his own brief rendition of "To be or not to be".

He tells how he was a famous actor in his homeland, Liberia. How his character in a popular series was Johnny, a confident man. Bright tells the tale of how he got his name: "When I was born, the sun began to shine." His name and his profession make up most of his identity. When civil war breaks out in Liberia, his popularity as 'Johnny' initially allows him to stay detached from the conflict. However, when the horror catches up with him, he decides to flee. The KLM was the only airline that accepted his forged passport, and so he arrives in the Netherlands.

There, his identity, his work, his fame, **his brightness**, as he calls it, are taken away. He is called vluchteling (refugee), immigrant (immigrant), allochtoon (alien citizen), and buitenlander (foreigner). Many use these as derogatory terms. They strip Bright of his identity. He is told he has to act traumatized to get his papers.

Shakespeare, like few others, always seems aware of the importance of names. For example, in *Othello* he demonstrates the vexation some feel while having Othello in their midst. They call him the Moor, the thief, and refuse to call him by his name. They distinguish him by his African features, mock his appearance and refer to him as "an old black ram". Othello is dehumanized and isolated.



**Bright** finds himself dehumanized and isolated too. As he tells the audience, he and his family lost their human status in the war, as they had to bury their deceased quickly before the fighting started again. Burying out of love and respect became second to fear.

In the Netherlands, he finds another battle. He feels like he is in a boxing match with the Dutch bureaucracy. He ends up living on the streets. When he takes on the role of a traumatized refugee, he finally succeeds. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to achieve this and many end up undocumented. This is where shelters like Villa Vrede come in.



## 3 A Place to Be

Villa Vrede (Villa Peace) is a project by various NGO's based in the city of Utrecht to provide residence for undocumented refugees. We met with Marieke Sillevs Smit, pastor at the shelter. She describes Villa Vrede to us as a place where the undocumented can regain their humanity.

There are various shelters for the homeless in Utrecht, but the undocumented constitute a special group amongst these. The homeless with Dutch citizenship or residence are often dealing with mental health issues or addiction as well. To most undocumented, their issue is simply that they are refused access to the system. Though they still need to find places to sleep, **Villa Vrede offers them daytime residence, a place to be.**



The core of Villa Vrede's mission is not just to work for the undocumented, but with them. Volunteers are paired into teams where native or resident volunteers work together with volunteers from the undocumented themselves.

Tara Scally from Groenlinks, a green, left-wing party from the Netherlands, sparked a discussion on undocumented citizens in the Netherlands. They cannot work because they are illegal and business owners who would want to risk a massive fine. They have no right to education or shelter. According to Scally, it is a waste of valuable human capital. Pastor Marieke Sillevs Smit agrees with Scally. Shelter Villa Vrede tries to give undocumented citizens a future by teaching them the Dutch language and helping them develop other useful skills. Marieke is taken aback every time one of the inhabitants of Villa Vrede is rejected by the government when trying to get their papers. **"Weirdly enough, the mindset seems to be to reject first, and then perhaps make an exception for some people, rather than the other way around,"** Marieke says.

Dutch natives are not always that open-minded either. **"We have been negatively portrayed on social media, because people go for the first thing they see on Google."** Villa Vrede is criticized as unsafe, but critics do not visit the shelter. This makes it hard to showcase all the positives, such as the strong bond the refugees have or their motivation for learning.

Marieke hopes that this attitude will change and that we will no longer turn our backs to those in need – to the approximately ten thousand undocumented citizens, invisible to some, but not to Villa Vrede.

## 4 To Be InclUUded

InclUUtion is an organisation within Utrecht University which offers registered refugees the chance to attend courses at the university to continue their education and integrate into society. Since the start of this programme in 2016, InclUUtion has inspired several other universities to start education programmes for refugee students. InclUUtion has also launched a voluntary buddy system to promote social contact and give support to newcomers. The refugees explain that this program helps them **detach themselves from the "migrant label"** and find time for learning and socialising. Moreover, the Utrecht University community also gains more perspectives and diversity. In classes, teachers and students declare that "InclUUtion students bring in another non-Western point of view, which gives the courses more angles and depth".

This fits in perfectly with the University's motto: **Sol Iustitiae Illustra Nos - Sun of Righteousness, Shine Upon Us**, to make our and their lives a little **brighter.**