Social Inclusion
2024 • Volume 12 • Article 8541
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8541

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Open Access Journal

Co-Creating Sensuous Knowledge Through Food Practices With Women and LGBTQI+ Migrants in South Africa

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Submitted: 29 April 2024 **Accepted:** 22 July 2024 **Published:** 5 September 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Theorizing as a Liberatory Practice? The Emancipatory Promise of Knowledge Co-Creation With (Forced) Migrants" edited by Halleh Ghorashi (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and Maria Charlotte Rast (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i408

Abstract

African feminisms have always been informed by activism, but the development of Western-style separation between thought and action influenced by colonial and apartheid legacies has compromised the scholarly connection between intellectual work and political action. African feminists have thus developed contextualized and critical approaches to mending the relationship between knowledge and power-in-action, necessitating meaningful and reciprocal collaboration with communities that experience marginalisation and oppression. African migrants in South Africa represent one of these communities, as they face xenophobic, racist, homo- and transphobic discourses and practices in their daily lives, pushing them to the margins of society. At the intersection of African feminisms and the socio-economic and political discrimination of migrants, we open a dialogue between two PhD projects, both working with women and LGBTQI+ migrants in South Africa. We discuss how our different feminist research approaches (re)centre the lived experiences of women and LGBTQI+ migrants of different national backgrounds, focusing on their bodily and psychological capacities for sensing and sharing pleasure through food practices. We show that the co-creation of "sensuous knowledge" with migrant research participants enables us to unsettle the oppressive forces that marginalise such communities. Paying close attention to where power is contested, we analyse not only the complexity of how African feminisms translate into liberatory participatory research practices, but also how migrants—through their (re)creation of pleasure and joy through food—challenge and expand how feminisms can be applied across the African continent.

Keywords

African feminisms; food; knowledge; LGBTQI+; migration; pleasure; sensuous; women

1. Introduction

In her analysis of what it means to be an African feminist, Mama (2011) stated that an underlying assumption of the critical form of scholarship is the way it "bring[s] the ideas and practices of feminists working inside universities into closer dialogue with those working outside them" in order to "strengthen and reradicalize both feminist theory and feminist practice" (p. 9). This quote illustrates our analytical point of departure, namely that different forms of feminism exist across the African continent, which we will refer to as African feminisms in the plural. These are not only inseparable from everyday struggles for justice, but the fact is that understanding the complex lived experiences of oppressed communities is fundamental to being able to contest, renew, and accurately define feminism(s) today. Moreover, we recognise that "African" is not a monolithic term, and many scholars and community leaders have previously critiqued the idea of a single definition of African feminisms, pointing out the many variations in ethnic, religious, socio-political, and regional influences across the continent (e.g., Decker & Baderoon, 2018; Kolawole, 2004). Exploring the multiplicity of African feminisms in detail, however, goes beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, we generalise our analysis here in reference to Mama's quote and other references made throughout this article.

For example, we are informed by scholars including, but not limited to, Lewis (2002, 2016), Mbilinyi (2015), and Tamale (2006, 2020) who have emphasized that African feminisms are to a large extent a response not only to patriarchy but also to colonial, apartheid, and capitalist systems of oppression. As many black women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) communities across the continent experience subjugation first-hand or passed down through their families, intertwined with struggles of class, ethnicity, nationality, ableism, and others, their approach to feminism is "rooted in activist or practice-oriented working environments and life experiences" (Lewis, 2002, p. 18). By interweaving activism and scholarship, African feminisms successfully "challenge multi-level power imbalances and link theoretical practice to practical practice" (Thiam, 1978, as cited in Dieng, 2023, p. 2). Further, Ahikire (2014) describes how concrete feminist struggles have "imbued and shaped societal visions, leading to new imaginings of African identities—whether on the continent or in the diaspora" (p. 9). Nnaemeka (2004) also describes African women's work as "boundary work," creating a third space on the boundary of the academy and lived experience that "allows for the simultaneous gesture of theorising practice and practicing theory" (p. 377).

Added to these definitions, Mama (2011) and Ahikire (2014) highlight how since the 1990s, radical feminist scholars have approached Africa's historical context and traditions, (re)centering local/indigenous worldviews while unpacking gender issues and making relevant and internationally resonant theoretical contributions to feminisms and African studies. African feminists have also called for methods that give "voice to women" through encouraging the articulation of previously unavailable narratives through "storytelling, oral histories, biographies, and life stories that reflect awareness of the limits of the androcentric archive and the colonial and postcolonial information systems that have silenced women and suppressed their perspectives" (Mama, 2011, p. 13). To this insight, we would include LGBTQI+ communities, who are often marginalised and discriminated against in society, and whose experiences importantly shape and provide nuance to understanding the diversity of African experiences.

African feminists' have also critically centred the relationship between power and knowledge by generating bottom-up theories and critical research methodologies with the involvement of marginalised groups, historically oppressed through systems including colonialism and apartheid. To add to this important praxis,

through our research findings, we highlight the utility of employing Salami's (2020) definition of "sensuous knowledge" by introducing the idea that generating knowledge involves our entire beings; our bodies with its visceral capacities to feel emotions, to combine the gut and the mind, nourishing a process of knowledge cultivation as "a creative project, something that grows and advances—a human activity, an artwork" (p. 21).

Intending to address and unsettle power relationships with/in knowledge production, both authors have engaged with African feminists' approach to sensuous knowledge to cultivate the co-creation of research with African women and LGBTQI+ migrants (Werner et al., 2017). Through comparing our two PhD projects that use African feminist, intersectional frameworks and creative/participatory methodologies to engage with women and LGBTQI+ migrant communities in South Africa, this article attempts to unpack Salami's "sensuous knowledge" by showing our approach to knowledge co-creation through facilitating spaces for migrants to engage their minds and bodies in group cooking, eating and shared storytelling activities, highlighting pleasure as a manifestation of agency and resilience (Lewis, 2016). The first author developed two projects co-created with communities to centre their lived experiences. The first one was Food for Change, an online initiative where eight migrant women living in Gqeberha, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, shared cooking recipes via WhatsApp. The second project was the Chakalaka Sessions, a series of cooking sessions facilitated in collaboration with the Fruit Basket, a non-profit organisation led by and for LGBTQI+ migrants in Johannesburg. The second author employed a mixed ethnographic and participatory, comparative, intersectional approach with two groups of Congolese and Zimbabwean women living in densely populated migrant suburbs, Yeoville in Johannesburg, South Africa and Brixton in London, UK. Combining interviews and observations with a series of facilitated cooking, eating and storytelling sessions, situated around two large pan-African food markets in each site, enabled her to compare these two groups and contexts in parallel, unearthing findings from their similarities and differences.

Both PhD projects were guided by African feminist approaches to unsettle historical knowledge-creation and dissemination processes through engaging with practices that bridge connections between theoretical research and participatory, creative, and activist research (Gqola, 2001). These methods merge creativity with critical thinking to insightfully examine how knowledge creation in migration may contribute to centering migrant voices. In South Africa, up until the collapse of apartheid in the late 1990s, migrants were mostly studied using a top-down, colonial approach that reproduced xenophobic discourses positioning black, working-class migrants from nearby countries as a "threat" (Naicker, 2016). In response, African feminists brought in an intersectional approach to scholarship and activism, considering the impact of multiple layers of oppressions experienced by migrants. As a result, feminists in Africa have raised questions about identity, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, and more; challenging the stereotype of migrants as a homogenous, faceless mass of vulnerable people (Stasiulis et al., 2020). Other African scholars working in South Africa have also critically foregrounded the agency of migrants within migration studies (e.g., Kihato, 2013), centering their capacities to navigate different forms of oppression, in turn nourishing the correlation between knowledge cultivation and activism.

Our PhD projects build upon the call to co-produce critical knowledge on migration as a strategy to counteract rampant xenophobic, racist, and sexist violence in South Africa, including an increase in political and civilian anti-migrant discourse and practice. Violence targeting black, African, and working-class migrants has been ongoing since the country's transition to democracy and is rooted in the dehumanizing "Othering" conducted by colonial and apartheid systems (Mpofu, 2020). African feminisms target these same

hierarchies of superiority that sustain imbalances of power and place migrants at a significant disadvantage. By recognizing anti-migrant discourses and practices as manifestations of structural oppressions, we explore the potential of African feminisms to respect and enhance the agency of African women and LGBTQI+ migrants, through critical and creative approaches to knowledge cultivation.

Our arguments are also shaped by our research and societal positionalities in South Africa. One of us comes from Latin America, where she was involved in South-South struggles against racism and inequality that led her to work in the African continent. The other author comes from the UK, though lived and worked in South Africa for years as well as across the African continent. However, as authors researching in South Africa, we experienced different realities and privileges compared with the majority black South African and migrant population, including our participants. We grappled with these situations throughout each research process, addressing some of the issues we faced in this article as well as the strategies we employed to tackle these legitimate concerns thoughtfully and usefully for participants and the research outcomes. In both PhD trajectories, oral and/or written consent was granted by all participants, and names and any identifying factors of their identities have been pseudonymised to protect their privacy. Most participants wanted to be referred to by a human name, so in most cases, they chose the pseudonyms applied to them as part of the co-creation process.

In the following sections, we analyse how pleasure manifests through research using food practices in these projects: fleshing out aspects of memory and connection with issues of positionality and power imbalances. To this discourse, we add a temporal analysis, related to how living as LGBTQI+ and woman migrants in an environment marked by intersectional discriminations helps to generate embodied experiences of nostalgia and other complex feelings and connections to the ideas of 'home' and 'place.' We will then unpack the juxtaposition of pleasure, knowledge, and, importantly, power. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the ways that migrants' capacities to experience joy and pleasure through food practices can potentially challenge and enrich African feminisms. First, however, we explore our co-creation approaches and research findings.

2. Experiences of Pleasure Mediated by Food

For both authors, our academic, professional, and personal trajectories have been driven by an effort to upend power imbalances and contribute to efforts to achieve equity, equality and justice for the marginalised groups that we work with. At the same time, our positions as scholars from Global North institutions were problematic. For example, there were times when African feminists challenged our research as we explore later in this article, arguing that our institutional affiliations and in the second author's case her whiteness risked the legitimacy of the work. This pushed us not only to question and hold on to the uncomfortable sense of being challenged, but to take responsibility and action for these power imbalances in the design and implementation of our PhD trajectories. We translated these critical viewpoints into concrete creative projects that centred food practices as a means to unpack and unsettle power relations in knowledge production. These had the intention of honouring and applying the contributions of multiple African feminisms in migration studies, while also being open to the possible pitfalls and limitations of this wide-ranging scholarship.

Aware and transparent of our privilege compared with our participants, our central aim was not to impose or dictate what feminism(s) should look like in (South) Africa. Instead, we made positionality a tool of reflexivity

and openness, from which we could delve into nuanced intersections of knowledge and power. For example, there were times when it was necessary to acknowledge our resources, immigration status, and so on to our participants and directly discuss with them our privileges in South Africa's unequal society, exploring the identities we shared and diverged from. Simultaneously, we also reflected privately or with trusted advisors/collaborators on our positionalities in the design and implementation of the work, making sure to centre the voices and experiences of participants in the research space.

In terms of co-creation, both researchers aimed to engage the participants in each stage of the research process, from design to analysis. In the case of the first author, she developed Food for Change with eight forced migrant women she met through a former NGO in Gqeberha (see Ocadiz Arriaga, 2023). Soon after they held a group meeting to explore collaboration, the Covid-19 pandemic started and the women suggested a collaborative approach focused on food, as this was a key priority for them during the pandemic. The women and the first author started a WhatsApp project where they used text, photos, videos, and audios to share a total of thirty-four recipes. Individual and group conversations were organised via WhatsApp, involving the migrant women in designing the research process, selecting ingredients and dishes that would be cooked and shared, and discussing how to disseminate the results. The process of co-creation led to published blogs and peer-reviewed articles, along with a recipe book (PE ladies & Ocadiz, 2024) in which migrant women contributed to the context and design, so that their voices were properly reflected.

Food for Change enabled the first author to develop a second project working closely with The Fruit Basket, an organisation led by and for LGBTQI+ migrants, including some sex workers, to support beneficiaries' sense of connectivity and wellbeing. As measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic were lifted, it was possible to build a collaboration where the author gathered ingredients, cooked, and ate together with seventeen LGBTQI+ migrants as part of a project entitled the Chakalaka Sessions. Participants were involved in writing the project's proposal, managing the budget, coordinating each session, as well as co-curating academic papers, public presentations, and a podcast. Both projects aimed to not only centre migrants' voices, but also to support their wellbeing by fostering caring and responsive relationships both within and outside the research space where possible.

The second author allowed for adaptive development of creative and ethnographic methods and data production over time (initially a period of four months in each place, but then during follow-up and return sessions throughout the pandemic years and beyond), testing different approaches and observing and consulting participants about the design and content. This led to creative outputs that participants took away with them, including visual recipe/storyboards, photos, and illustrative posters added to the new recipes and cooking skills they gained. Return visits allowed for a review of findings and analysis with participants, amendments, and exploration of further ways to disseminate their stories and areas where they needed more support. The women were recruited using a mix of snowball sampling based on the second author's previous MSc research in Yeoville, using research assistants with contacts to migrant women and working through civil society organisations that support African migrants, and particularly women, in both locations. Each group in each site consisted of fifteen Congolese and Zimbabwean migrant women, thirty women in total, with whom the second author engaged in individual and group sessions over four years, between 2019 and 2023.

For both authors, co-creation meant implementing flexible research approaches that adapted to migrants' concerns, needs, and perspectives, including slowing down the knowledge-making process to match the tempo of participants. This meant that the research space became a place in which to cultivate caring and ethical relationships of trust as well as gather narratives. Our aim was to make co-creation into a process in which participants could explore their appetites for nourishment in mind and body, connectivity, and community, while also unsettling the power imbalances inherent between researchers and participants, that we highlighted earlier.

In both PhDs, migrants' experiences of eating and cooking soon generated narratives that went beyond the functionality of food as "fuel." Lewis (2016) argues that food, because it is so quotidian, provides bodily requirements for survival, while also linking feelings, emotions, and imaginations that open possibilities to sense and share pleasure. Indeed, the women and LGBTQI+ migrant participants were vocal about the multiple, and often overlapping, ways in which food enacted satisfaction, fulfillment, and joy beyond physical stimulus. For example, migrants drew connections between food and joyful memories by choosing to cook and share dishes that they knew from their home countries, towns, and families. In the Chakalaka Sessions, the first author encountered Onika, a trans Nigerian woman who shared a recipe of fufu (a starch meal found across different African countries, made of cassava, maize, plantain, or sweet potato) with egusi soup (a mixture of ground melon seeds, with meats such as dry fish or beef, palm oil, broth, and vegetables like tomatoes, spinach, and aubergine), that she learned from her father. She shared that cooking an elaborate dish allowed her to spend quality time with him, bonding around the fact that she was capable and willing to prepare an iconic Nigerian dish. For Onika, engaging with this specific dish brought her back to times in Lagos when her father showed her love, dedication, and appreciation, evoking a sensation of joy and connectedness.

For the second author, a similar example was presented by a Zimbabwean heterosexual woman, Thandeka, who cooked Mopane worms, a Southern African caterpillar that is a staple part of the rural Zimbabwean diet and considered a delicacy in some areas. Thandeka took charge of frying the worms with chili and wanted to serve them with some sauce and rice but agreed to eat them alongside a Congolese stew called fumbwa (made with spinach, tomatoes, smoked fish, peanuts and palm oil) and fufu. Thandeka shared that her mum used to make mopane worms at home when she was a child and she and her three siblings would compete to see how many they could eat. She said:

> Whenever I eat mopane worms, I think of me and my siblings laughing so hard around the table because we were all trying to see who could eat the most, while my mum told us to stop being stupid. But I know she loved having us all at home. (Personal communication, August 2, 2019)

The worms remind her not only of her childhood home, but of her homeland and her family, all of who are far away and yet close in her mind.

These examples align with the work of Nyamnjoh (2007), who argues that for migrant communities, food works as a symbolic expression of their sociality, allowing them to remember home while also interacting with their new host country to (re)create their identities. As eating and cooking involve all the senses, pleasure can be expanded by providing "an imagination of place, community, identity, and time" which allows food to "provide a means through which people…connect or reconnect with self and place" (Choo, 2004, p. 209, as

cited in Nyamnjoh, 2007, p. 32). This means that the pleasure evoked by food, often in relation to memories of loved ones, was not only individual, but also shared, connecting individual experiences within the communal acts of eating and cooking together. For instance, for the second author, discussions about food also connected with romance. When discussing favourite dishes to cook, Fernanda, a Congolese woman, shared a particular dish that she always cooked for her husband in the early days of their relationship in Kinshasa:

> He used to come and see me after work. We weren't married yet, though we were engaged, but it was still a bit secret. I made him my special pondu [a dish of cassava leaves with spices, palm oil, onions, scallions, and aubergine] and added fish which he loved. It kept him coming back. (Personal communication, June 22, 2019)

All the women laughed and smiled in approval at Fernanda, generating their own memories of food connected with love and intimacy, some of which they shared with the group. Building on this anecdote, Fernanda also shared the challenges that she and her husband have faced since migrating, such as not being able to find secure work or a safe place to call home. She said this story reminded her of the joy between them, how cooking certain foods reconnected her to their love for each other, even though daily life has become extremely hard and put pressure on their relationship. In this way, stories linked to food helped Fernanda and others connect memories to the kitchen and dining table, exploring connectedness and conviviality through memories of pleasure.

This process of embodied knowledge co-creation also has a temporal aspect. Evoking memories of "home" and the places that migrants come from through the process of shared cooking and eating dishes from home, acts as a balm of nostalgia. This includes a mix of pleasure and pain associated with the lives, identities, and relationships they once had and a way to continue them in their new context. It makes the kitchen an important site of memory (Meah & Jackson, 2016) and is necessary to help them deal with their current reality of living in a place that is politically, socially, and economically unwelcome to them. This nostalgia can be seen as part of a multi-faceted theoretical framework called "layered time" that the second author develops in her PhD thesis. This framework presents a transnational, temporal range of experiences generated through migrants' experience of navigating two (or more) worlds, exacerbated by everyday hostility, discrimination, waiting and a sense of "stuckness" (Griffiths, 2014), that they face in their host context. The first author approaches the capacity of food to nourish this nostalgia through the idea of a rhizomatic thinking body (Probyn, 2003). This illustrates a visceral approach in which food stimulates sensations, moods, and internal experiences that allow the body to sustain complex networks of connections and ruptures without a clear end or beginning, allowing migrants' bodies to mediate multiple nodes of (dis)connection between their motherlands and other locations (Ocadiz Arriaga, 2023). In this way, food generates "sensuous knowledge" because migrants remain attached to their places of origin, while also adapting to their social realities in South Africa, nourishing a sense of connectivity and belonging within a predominantly anti-migrant environment.

3. Sensuous Knowledge in Migrants' Food Practices

Exploring the ways that certain dishes (re)created pleasure through memory and connectedness, we also notice how sensuous knowledge co-creation took place. Returning to Salami's (2020) definitions, the sensuous means not just the senses, stimulated by cooking and eating, but also the entire being: mind, body, and soul. Food practices of collective cooking and eating are sensuous in the way migrants weave known

facts (e.g., nutritious properties of ingredients), physical practices (e.g., using hands to grind spices, peel vegetables, and grill meat), and ideas (e.g., creative solutions to adapt recipes) with emotions (e.g., love and lust). This aligns with Salami's call to see knowledge through a "kaleidoscope" in which "the mind exists with and within the body, reason with and within emotion" (p. 21). We notice sensuousness in the way that migrants channel their experiences of pleasure to connect and share different parts of themselves through exploring the taste of different foods in the cooking and eating process. They do this by unpacking their lived experiences, reflecting on their own stories, and listening and commenting on the stories of others, also co-generating knowledge for themselves and the research.

Onika demonstrates how this process was embodied. When cooking fufu with egusi soup, Onika merged her memories of her father with clothing, music, and smells to bring different elements of herself into the kitchen as the proud daughter of an Igbo man, but also as a trans woman, a tomboy, a rapper, and a skilled cook. These performative elements in her food practices illustrate how "creative energy" works (Lorde, 1993), as her capacity to sense and share pleasure through cooking this dish allowed her to unfold and share her complex, overlapping identity. By enjoying cooking and eating, Onika tapped into her sensuous self to perform and reflect on who she is. The fact that she (re)connected elements within herself that may seem disconnected or incompatible, for example following ethnic traditions while also describing herself as a "trans diva," showed that she not only used food practices to affirm her identity, but in doing so imagined forms of existing beyond fixed categories of gender, sexuality, and nationality.

We see these reaffirmations and reflections on the self, including exploring temporal experiences and connecting with contradictory emotions, as acts of political resistance, in response to the violence and isolation that migrants face in South Africa. Representing themselves through food practices unsettles the fixed categories of migrants as falling behind, instead highlighting their resilience resourcefulness and capabilities, in the face of daily hardship (Lewis, 2016). Mama Yoyotte, for instance, when asked in Food for Change to give an introduction, described herself as "a self-made woman who likes distinction in everything I do. I detest humiliation, and this is why I give my best in everything…to be there, among the best!" (personal communication, June 18, 2020; see also PE ladies & Ocadiz, 2024). In her aspiration to reject any kind of humiliation, we locate a knowledge (of the self) that is sensuous, because it advances, adapts, and links to imaginaries of hope. Similarly, a Zimbabwean woman in London, Vanessa says: "I just want to be independent! I want to earn my own living, pay for my food, bills, clothes and life. I don't want them paying for me!" (personal communication, February 23, 2020). The capacities of migrants to cultivate sensuous knowledge thus becomes a source to "identify needed political, economic, cultural and social change" (Salami, 2020, p. 41) manifesting in migrants' calls to (re)create pleasure beyond the experience of oppression.

These examples illustrate migrants' generation of self-knowledge that improves their sense of self, wellbeing and helps to build feelings of belonging and connection. As these take place in a context where oppressive systems make them feel excluded and unwanted on a daily basis, we argue that sensuous knowledge informs "agencies and pleasures that extend our conventional understandings of the dimensions of freedoms" (Lewis, 2016, p. 7), destabilizing racist and classist discourses of victimhood, xenophobia, transphobia, and homophobia. Equally, we acknowledge that, naturally, participants' capacity to experience pleasure and generate self-knowledge happens not only in research spaces but in their everyday lives. It is in these moments of daily pleasure and joy generated through research and everyday spaces, situated within

complex, hostile, structurally discriminatory spaces, that the work of African feminists is salient to help us theorise and understand the complexities of pleasure. In the next section, we start by exploring these African feminist definitions of pleasure for those living in contexts of oppression before applying them to our work, highlighting our contributions to these theories as well as noting their limitations.

4. At the Crossroads of Pleasure, Power, and Knowledge

In the urge to close the gap between academic spaces and marginalised communities, African feminists began dialogues on how oppression and pleasure are not mutually exclusive (Tamale, 2011). Instead, the definition of pleasure has been expanded beyond a satisfying and enjoyable experience, to becoming a social phenomenon entangled within systems of power distribution that sustain oppression (Lewis, 2016). Exploring pleasure in research with marginalised women and LGBTQI+ migrants means embracing ideas of eroticism, sensuality, intimacy, and imagination that highlight people's agency; and at the same time ensuring that a focus on pleasure "does not erase or negate our question for social justice, equity, economic rights, political access, and participation; nor does it put an end to domination and oppression in all its guises" (Bakare-Yusuf, 2013, p. 35, as cited in Marais, 2019, p. 89). On the contrary, Lorde (1993) highlights the human capacity for "an internal sense of satisfaction" (p. 2) that is simultaneously a site of oppression and contestation. Because women and LGBTQI+ communities have historically endured the oppression of their capacities to stimulate, for themselves and others, feelings, emotions, and experiences of pleasure, Lorde makes a call to tap into those same experiences as a source of power.

Building upon Lorde's work, Lewis (2007) approaches the "zone of pleasure," from which to imagine (im)possible ways to disrupt the status quo and challenge all forms of repressive power (p. 37). Here, Lewis uses the imagination as a path along which to transcend thought, knowledge, and ideas, expand intellectual capacities, and engage with diverse, often silenced, perspectives and voices. Imagination is not a lack of reasoning, nor a fantasy, but rather a commitment "to create new possibilities that link what is desired with what is known, that will shape the content of knowledge production and its potential uses" (Pereira, 2002, p. 1). For African feminists, the imagination has been embraced as thinking and acting otherwise, moving beyond taken-for-granted discourses and categories that reproduce, even if unintentionally, oppressive hierarchies and conceptualizations. In doing so, these feminists are arguing that pleasure and imagination can push the boundaries of the contest between pleasure and power, as we demonstrated for instance in the way that Onika challenged gendered categories as a transwoman who cooks or how Vanessa rejected ideas imposed upon her of being a "powerless" migrant.

Salami's (2020) notion of "sensuous knowledge" speaks back to Lorde's (1993, p. 3) read of pleasure, and the sense that the human capacities to feel, sense, and be satisfied are regarded as a source of "creative energy" from which knowledge blooms, flourishes, and flows. Sensuous knowledge as a manifestation of pleasure is also deeply political, as it is complicated by "different layers and forms of power and agency" that take pleasure as a force from which to "transcend heteronormative scripts, social sanctions, societal taboos, injustice and inequality" (Lewis, 2007, p. 27). Salami (2020) also challenges us to reimagine the narrative power away from Europatriarchal, gendered knowledge, towards one that includes "all life; that which is immeasurable, embodied, sentient, fertile, indigenous, non-Eurocentric, decolonial and feminist" (p. 149). While we resonate with these definitions, we were also led by our research participants in acknowledging in in both PhD projects that the participants did not always recognise or embrace their ability to generate

sensuous knowledge, or to subvert and challenge their experiences of oppression through stimulating feelings of joy and pleasure. We do believe that migrants' abilities to create and generate joy and pleasure demonstrates a way to transform and transcend the daily grind of their experiences of oppression, but also recognise that these pressures persist and carry weight in their lives on a day-to-day basis in South Africa.

Expanding on the notion of generating sensuous knowledge through pleasure-focused activities can also feel incongruous within the study of migration and migrant lives in the post-apartheid South African context of rampant xenophobic violence and discourse towards migrants, and its increase since the Covid-19 pandemic (Mukumbang et al., 2020). Given this, we have asked ourselves if it is possible, or ethical, to focus on and theorise pleasure with communities that experience high levels of exclusion and oppression. To answer this, we have found it necessary to problematise the questions. For example, just because we know about the pressures of existing as a migrant, and the intersectional pressures of existing as a black, LGBTQI+, woman, does that mean we must only focus on the hardship they face and not explore their capacity for joy, pleasure, and connection? Have academics such as Lorde (1993) not already unearthed how struggle, solidarity, and joy go hand in hand? How do the experiences of pleasure exist within the experiences of daily struggle and for better rights and a better life? In their study of women of colour activists in Europe, Emejulu and Sobande (2023) for example highlight how, alongside experiencing issues of precarity, exhaustion, and burnout, the women also experienced pleasure, joy, and solidarity being in community with others. Acknowledging such critiques and delving into the complex and multifaceted lives and experiences of our participants, we searched for approaches that challenged systemic and structural inequalities, while simultaneously centering the experiences and positionalities of marginalised groups of women and LGBTQI+ migrants. This path brought us to further unpack and complicate the meaning and relevance of African feminisms.

5. Complicating Feminist Approaches to Pleasure

Using African feminisms as a framework for researching pleasure through cooking, eating, and storytelling did not shield us from issues of conflict and discomfort, and the limitations and challenges of our projects. Both authors strived to build safe(r) spaces to cook, eat, and share with participants, by consulting them as to their needs, concerns, and risks, doing their own risk assessment beforehand. The second author also recruited co-facilitators (both African and western) with experience in building safe spaces with marginalised people and relevant skills (e.g., cooking, healing, and illustration). We contributed towards participants' daily needs using both research budgets and our own resources where possible, while also acknowledging that what participants most often need is help with legal support in the face of immigration challenges, rent, school fees, and healthcare, which we were unable to help with in a meaningful or sustained way, due to ethical research boundaries and our own financial limitations. We also notice that, for these LGBTQI+ and women migrants living in everyday xenophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic spaces, it is impossible to build an entirely safe space for them. We therefore had to accept that an attempt to build safe(r) spaces and to implement a co-creative methodological approach could never fully protect or alleviate participants' daily challenges. As researchers inspired by African feminisms, however, we made a commitment to do what we could to make those spaces safe(r) and welcoming, while acknowledging limitations and discussing the risks with participants to ensure they could make their own decisions about being involved. In cases where they were not in a position to make their own choice, we always prioritized their safety regarding their involvement. There were also challenges created by the power imbalances of conducting research funded by Global North institutions and working with marginalised migrants based in South Africa. For example, when the second

author sourced a second-hand sewing machine for participants to collectively use to help them start a business as some had expressed interest in, one participant rejected the idea as she felt she could not use it, due to complex dynamics of competition and ownership, preferring to have one of her own. This forced the author to reevaluate her attempts to help participants and recognise that she could not meet everyone's needs or provide a solution that would suit the entire group.

There were similar dilemmas including challenges from the participants as to the utility of our research, academia, and African feminisms for their lives. The first author, for example, encountered Tariro, a Zimbabwean, sex worker, lesbian migrant who told her that researchers often "get so caught in these words like intersectionality, feminism" (personal communication, March 12, 2022). Tariro described academia as problematic as it often reinforces discourses and practices of victimhood that fixate migrants' as "powerless agents." She was particularly critical of feminist scholarships, as she often felt unwelcome and silenced in some spaces led by self-defined feminists:

> In feminist circles, where feminism is this really bourgeoisie thing, we find it difficult to understand feminism because there is this hierarchy, where you [academics] are up here, and my reality is not there. (Personal communication, March 12, 2022)

Tariro highlights that feminisms are often used to present more progressive and inclusive scholarship, however, she feels excluded because engaging in feminisms is often confined to elitist spaces, such as the university. Despite feminisms bringing meaningful advances to society and academia in (South) Africa, Tariro's perspective highlights the remaining gaps between theory and lived realities.

Nevertheless, we argue that migrants' appetites for pleasure have the potential to expand and challenge feminisms in Africa and beyond. When migrants (re)create pleasure for themselves and others, they claim time and space to challenge their marginalised identities, as Onika does in how she weaves different elements of her identity and personal story, including those that may seem contradictory. That sensuous capacity to weave mind, body, and soul, to "listen to our own experience" (Drullard, 2023), following Lorde's (1993) call to eschew the "master's tools," includes imposed discourses that depart from colonial structures that have silenced subaltern existences (Drullard, 2023). This brings us back to Tariro's critique on feminisms, which match with other voices in the Global South that complicate and at times reject feminism. This connection has been made by the first author, whose positionality as a mestiza links her to the work of AFROntera, a collective of young, Afro-Indigenous, trans and non-binary, migrant activists living in Mexico City. Aiming to forge bridges of solidarity between Africa and Latin America she noticed how Tariro's comments reflect AFROntera's statement that feminisms are "not an emancipatory theory" because they "insert themselves into the intimacy of our beds and dictate how, when, and with whom we should sleep" (AFROntera Collective, 2021). These critiques problematise and reject the way that feminisms have become entangled in white supremacy and heteronormative structures, leaving out non-white, non-Western, and non-gender conforming voices, resonating with critiques particularly common among sex workers, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in our projects.

In the face of this critique, while African feminisms helped us to approach and analyse migrants' experiences of pleasure, mediated by food, our findings also stress an ongoing gap between theory and the lived reality of migrants in South Africa. This is a common critique in academia, but it is particularly meaningful for those

working with feminisms, as they are often rooted in activism (Mama, 2011). We asked ourselves: Can the work of self-defined African feminists become obsolete or even oppressive if they do not adapt and respond to the concerns of those they engage with? In our PhD projects, we have aimed to address the potential benefits and pitfalls of African feminisms, noticing that they are not mutually exclusive. We argue that feminisms have made significant advances and contributions to knowledge co-creation and methods in migration studies, guiding us to cultivate (more) caring approaches that (re)centre migrants' voices, opening spaces to analyse pleasure and for the complexity and agency of women and LGBTQI+ people to come to the fore. Paradoxically, our engagement with sensuous knowledge through food practices also at times unsettles academic African feminisms' capacity to fully understand the lived realities of those who are simultaneously migrants, black, working class, African, female, and/or LGBTQI+. We see this not as a problem, but rather as an invitation to widen and improve critical scholarship that seeks to narrow and (hopefully) erase the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, we call for greater listening and immersing ourselves in co-creating sensuous knowledge rooted in pleasure as a way to engage with meaningful manifestations of resistance and existences that critically challenge oppressive structures, even when participants do not self-identify within the wider framework of African feminisms.

6. Conclusion

In creating spaces for shared cooking, eating, and storytelling practices, our two PhD trajectories have analysed how pleasure experienced through creative research can be a process of knowledge creation, and a political act that contests power imbalances, particularly using African feminist approaches. Informed by African feminists, we unpack migrants' capacities to evoke joyful and pleasant sensations for themselves and others, enhancing a sense of connectivity, satisfaction, and belonging. In this way, eating and cooking as a group can become pleasurable acts feeding migrants' creative energies (Lorde, 1993) to reflect on themselves, their communities, and their environments. They do so through exploring their transnational journeys and identities, often weaving sensorial experiences with memories, emotions, and ideas, resulting in sensuous processes of knowledge co-creation because they involve their minds, guts, taste buds, senses, and bodies. Experiencing nostalgia and other temporal experiences as a way of unfolding their complex identities across home and host locations, entangled in histories of oppression and their own migration journeys, means that they not only gain knowledge about themselves, but also (re)affirm their identities, often denied to them by the environments of discrimination in which they live.

Moreover, through exploring the potential of pleasure to affirm the self and unsettle power imbalances, we also encountered critiques of feminisms from our participants. Discussing these limitations, we acknowledge the urge to recognise the contributions of African feminisms to connect academia and activism, while also continuing to problematise and expand the scope and meaning of feminisms in Africa and beyond. The work by renowned scholars across the continent are relevant influences on our projects, as they offered us the theoretical, methodological, and ethical tools that allowed us to build collaboration with women and LGBTQI+ migrants in South Africa in the first place, particularly as scholars based in, and funded by, institutions in the Global North. However, (re)centering the voices of migrants and their critiques of feminisms, revealed that migrants' lived experiences of resistance, including their capacities to sense and share pleasure, cannot be confined to any single theoretical approach, feminist or otherwise. We call for an embrace of such critiques to continually expand, improve upon, and deconstruct the value of African feminisms to open spaces for diverse forms of resistance that may define themselves beyond feminisms.

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to the women and LGBTQI+ migrants who participated in both PhD projects. We also thank the special support of Ntokozo Yingwana for her critical comments and the reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Funding

We would like to thank the Dutch Research Council and the Graduate School of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for funding Food for Change, the Chakalaka Sessions, and the publication of this article, as well as the European Social and Research Council for funding the second author's PhD research.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of some of the information and the need to protect participant privacy as per confidentiality agreements.

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