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Refugee Precarity and Collective Transformation: Ongoing Struggles for a Liberatory Praxis in Urban South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa is a significant destination for forced migrants fleeing conflict and seeking better futures. Although South Africa is a signatory on international refugee conventions and protocols, in practice, asylum seekers face bureaucratic delays, uncertainty, and obstacles in obtaining refugee status or residency permits, which creates challenges in accessing employment, accommodation, and other forms of social inclusion. In response, many forced migrants network with kin and neighbours, self-organise, and connect to various migrant associations, faith-based groups, and supportive social spaces. Within these spaces of migrant solidarity, this article focuses on the transformative potential of refugee-led collective organisation, political action, alliance building, refugee research, and everyday forms of welcome within forced migrant communities. Through a review of literature alongside examples from our research in Cape Town, the article explores some of the opportunities and obstacles to building solidarity in refugee collective worlds. We refer to this potential for a liberatory praxis as an ongoing struggle. On the one hand, forced migrant precarity, mistrust, and trauma create obstacles to their participation in community organising or engaged academic research. However, while forced migrants experience waiting and exclusion, they also create possibilities of hope through what Gramsci (1971) referred to as "renovating and making critical already existing activities" of their lived experiences. Overall, the article concludes with reflections on how theorising and building deeper alliances with academic and community spaces may generate a more liberatory praxis *with* and *for* forced migrants in urban South Africa.

Keywords

civic solidarity; forced migrants; liberatory praxis; refugee-led organisations; social inclusion; South Africa

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1. Introduction

Jean Claude is a 40-year-old taxi driver and Rwandan refugee living in the urban neighbourhood of Parow in Cape Town. In November 2019, he met Mukafuku, this article's co-author, who is also a Rwandan refugee, to discuss his experiences in South Africa. Like many of his fellow Rwandan refugees living in the suburbs of Parow and Bellville, he had a university degree. He had studied law in South Africa yet faced multiple rejections when he tried to find employment. Although he was grateful for his current job, he shared: "Working as a taxi driver with a master's degree in law is already a big challenge. You know how painful it is to apply for jobs more than ten times without being given any opportunity?" Some of his friends with university degrees worked in the informal sector and another worked as a car guard in shopping centre parking lots. Many forced migrants like Jean Claude struggle with income insecurity in South Africa and feel dependent on friends and other networks for survival, seeking hospitality from their church or other informal groups in the community. Jean Claude shared how his fellow Rwandan friends had set up a church space in a rented house, where they would meet and try to collectively understand their circumstances and way forward. They would regularly share food and speak their language together, to "make us feel at home," he said.

Around the same time as this research interaction, a refugee-led collective protest was taking place in Cape Town. In October 2019, more than 700 forced migrants from the Great Lakes Region and other parts of Africa commenced a "sit-in" outside the Cape Town UNHCR office to protest xenophobia and the inability to secure visas and permits, with many requesting resettlement in a third country. Widely reported in the South African media, the protest involved refugees, including women and children, sleeping on the streets in the central city location next to protest signs. One woman, "Mary," described the actions of the protesters: "Each and every one was explaining what we are facing here in South Africa." Mary narrated that refugee leaders gave speeches, and described how an official came to address them, saying they would attend to their concerns. But the protesters responded: "We are still going to remain here until you give us a solution," she recounted. She continued:

> We are human beings. There are so many people who are not working anymore. When you are not working, how are you going to pay for the rent, how are you going to put food on the table, how are children going to go to school?...They must fix it; they must fix papers. They must give people their rights.

These two narratives from our respective research engagements share examples of different refugee-led solidaristic strategies and collective activities in response to common concerns of forced migrants in South Africa: not getting needed visa permits, xenophobia, and anxiety about the future. As a response to the struggle of not being able to gain employment from his law degree, Jean-Claude shared his experience in the welcoming social spaces of the church. Mary and her companions, guided by informal refugee leaders, turned to protesting their circumstances to international and government bodies. While much research on the forced migrant predicament in South Africa has described their precarity, this article explores refugee-led and other migrant solidarity initiatives in response to this precarity, as well as the potential opportunities for, and obstacles to, a liberatory and transformative praxis emerging from refugee collective organisation in South Africa. By liberatory praxis we refer to the description by hooks (1994, p. 67) who articulates the need for "theories rooted in an attempt to understand both the nature of our contemporary predicament and the means by which we might collectively engage in resistance that would transform our current reality."

Alongside examples from our research in Cape Town with forced migrants, the article reviews discussions in the literature on refugee-led organisation and action and civil society organisation for forced migrant support, to think through and conceptualise some of the complexities arising in refugee collective initiatives. We hope this might shed light on how to more intentionally navigate future academically engaged research with formal and informal refugee community organisations and collectives for transformative change.

The article is organised as follows. It first provides a background to the forced migrant context in South Africa, and then explains both authors' positionality in this research space. The article then explores literature on civic, autonomous, and other forms of migrant solidarity in global contexts and South Africa. We then illustrate both the transformative potential and complexities of collective refugee-led transformation in South Africa through the example of the refugee-led sit-in protest and other experiences of sharing and hospitality. We link this to a discussion of the connection between solidarity and everyday liberatory practice and conclude by returning to the potential role of academia in co-theorising with refugee community spaces. Hence, the article overall aims to thread together refugee organising and participation, migrant solidarity and engaged community research through weaving examples, experiences, and stories from literature and our own work.

2. Forced Migrant Context in South Africa

South Africa remains a significant destination for forced migrants fleeing conflict and seeking better futures, with a majority arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe. Those who arrive seeking asylum are required to apply for refugee status at refugee reception centre offices soon after arrival, but the Department of Home Affairs turns down many such applications (Amit & Kriger, 2014). Section 22 of the Refugee Act grants a temporary asylum-seeker permit, which must be renewed every six months at the Refugee Reception Office until refugee status is granted, creating cycles of renewal until they become illegalised by bureaucratic systems, leading to precarity and job loss (Khan et al., 2021; Moyo & Botha, 2022). As Khan et al. (2021, p. 56) summarise: "The state does little to ensure safe and timely integration." Hoag's (2010) ethnography of waiting at Home Affairs describes long lines, challenges with bureaucratic systems, and seemingly random decision-making, all processes which render the asylum-seeking process as "illegible." If and once asylum seekers receive refugee status, they are granted legal protection by the Refugees Act (Kavuro, 2022), but still face exclusion, as it "is not harmonised with the municipal laws (that is, by-laws) that are aimed at promoting socio-economic development at a local level" (Kavuro, 2022, p. 59). Moyo and Zanker (2022, p. 254) have demonstrated the "deliberate collapsing of the distinction between refugees and labor migrants by the South African government at a legislative, policy and narrative level." Even having a Permanent Residency permit has been deemed "useless" by many forced migrants in our research, as they still express feeling othered by their name, accent, or simply as an outsider. South Africa does not have an encampment policy, and refugees struggle to self-integrate into the community. Post-apartheid, Cape Town and other cities in South Africa still face challenges of inequality and poverty, high unemployment, crime and lack of service delivery, especially in marginalised townships and low-income neighbourhoods. This poses additional challenges for refugee livelihoods and creates situations for further victimisation, as they are responsible for their own means of survival in a space of hostility and bureaucracy (Kavuro, 2022). Overall, this vulnerability underlies the complexities of social transformation and participation of forced migrants in society. As we review below, many turn to their own networks for support, often feeling mistrust in government and NGOs.

3. Positionality and Methodology

The data and arguments presented in this article pull together multiple academic, research, community, and lived experiences of the authors. Koskimaki is an anthropologist academic who is coordinating an interdisciplinary collective for research and community engagement in migration and mobilities at a historically under-resourced university in South Africa. Mukafuku is a refugee PhD student from Rwanda who has lived in South Africa for many years and has conducted research in Cape Town with the forced migrant community from Rwanda and other countries from the Great Lakes region.

The review of literature for this article arose out of a developing research interest of both authors around the questions posed in this thematic issue regarding the opportunities and barriers to fostering allied and refugee participatory spaces. We conducted a literature review on civic and autonomous solidarity, community support initiatives, and refugee-led community associations in South Africa, which included research articles, postgraduate theses, and news media. We also draw from conversations and discussions amongst community-based organisations for migrant support and with migration researchers and academics regarding the need for more alliance-building with differently placed actors.

Some of the illustrative data presented here are drawn from Mukafuku's previous master's research project, which involved 20 in-depth interviews with Rwandan forced migrants on informal social protection initiatives within churches in Cape Town in 2019, and from her ongoing PhD research with forced migrants on practices of civic solidarity and social cohesion. While the master's research was not explicitly designed as engaged, it involved refugee participation and dialogue with her as a fellow refugee researcher, which shaped meaningful research questions. Mukafuku's research has developed through her continuous negotiation of her identity and belonging, her own experiences of exclusion, and consideration of how first-hand knowledge shapes academic theorising about the diversity of refugee experiences. Navigating this positionality may help to bridge the gap between theoretical constructs and the lived realities of refugees (Tewolde, 2023).

The narrative and descriptions of the protest are partly drawn from a focus group interview with "Mary" and two other refugee women who had participated in the protest. The interview was co-conducted by Koskimaki with Mustapha Kazadi, a Congolese forced migrant PhD student whose own research focuses on Congolese refugee political activities. Other reflections arose out of Koskimaki's ongoing ethnographic research on migrant solidarity and precarity with South Asian migrants and asylum seekers in Cape Town, who have shared their feelings of mistrust in civil society organisations. This research was not designed as co-created; many forced migrants in the research were overwhelmed, traumatised, working for their survival, or were undocumented, and did not express interest in engaging more deeply in the research. This motivated our intention to improve our knowledge of the needs of diverse forced migrants and the opportunities and obstacles to potential co-creation and engagement.

The descriptions of collective action at the introduction create an entry point for further discussion and our intentions to better consider the role of refugee-led collective organising and networks in approaching and fostering engaged and transformative scholarship. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) draw on Paolo Freire's work to argue for transformative praxis in refugee research, with a focus on "reflexivity, community-engaged research, reciprocity, and action." In Freire's 1993 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he critiques a focus on mere

verbalism or activism: "There is no transformation without action," he writes, and yet, "action for action's sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible" (Freire, 1993, pp. 87–88). Ghorashi (2021, p. 50) described that in engaged research, forced migrants "play an active role through engagement at the boundaries of theory and practice." To elaborate, hooks (1994, p. 61) has written: "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice." We borrow again from Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p. 6) who foreground that theory "requires engagement with questions that the community one works with seeks to explore" and that "practice refers to the capabilities, services researchers may offer particular communities." However, we needed to explore what recovery, reciprocity and action look like, for example, in these challenging urban and sensitive research spaces. As we explored ideas for future engaged research with forced migrants, we found that this praxis needs critical examination and review. The next section of this article explores literature on the possibilities and challenges for refugee-led initiatives, participation and alliance building in urban South Africa. Our aim in the remaining sections is to explain these challenges between solidarity and everyday liberatory practice as a basis for developing future engaged research.

4. Migrant Solidarity in Context

In this section, we describe various complexities of forced migrant solidarity. We first introduce some of the ways civic and autonomous solidarity (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019) and refugee inclusion have been defined and enacted in the migrant solidarity literature in the Global North as well as in South Africa. We discuss some of the potential for building alliances between civil society, citizens, and refugees themselves, and describe some of the refugee-led associations that have worked in South African contexts. The section then discusses how solidarity initiatives have been problematised and some challenges arising in refugee transformation that may emerge in these contexts, such as negative portrayals, vulnerabilities, and power dynamics.

Recent research on migrant solidarity has focused on the "sanctuary city" or urban scale as a space of refuge for forced and irregular migrants, where they can access diverse networks of welcome and support (Bauder, 2017, 2020, 2021; Darling, 2021; Lacroix, 2022). Migrant solidarity often involves local urban actors (Bauder, 2021) and "pro-migrant" initiatives at the local level (Ataç et al., 2024) which "re-negotiate and bypass national and supranational borders" (Ataç & Schwiertz, 2024 p. 715). This "multiplicity of actors" may include "local governments, welfare associations, churches, private entrepreneurs, nonprofits, volunteers, activists and forced migrants themselves" (Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021, p. 980). In 2019, analysing migrant solidarity in response to the European "refugee crisis," Agustín and Jørgensen argue that solidarity generates "collective identities" and "alliance building" between diverse actors (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 125). These alliances can emerge between class or ethnic groups, for example, or between "labor unions, social justice groups, refugee justice groups, [and] poverty advocates" (p. 32). They use the term "civic solidarity" to describe the inclusion of refugees in civil society, community and activist organisations for migrant support (p. 4), which has the power to construct new social relations and "the expansion of rights with the shaping of we-ness" (p. 41). Jørgensen (2024, pp. 720–721) argues that mere "sympathy" with migrants is not enough—that to "enable solidarity as effective praxis" and that being transformative requires "practical action through movements or organisations." Refugees and migrants are "political actors" who mobilise networks and engage with notions of citizenship (Ataç et al., 2016, p. 540), "constituting themselves as political subjects" in the city through "grassroots practices" (Bauder, 2017, p. 8) to advocate for rights and inclusion. However, as we explain further, for these "solidarity" structures to be transformative, a reflection

on power dynamics between different actors in relation to refugee advocates is required (Rast et al., 2020; Younes et al., 2021). Agustín and Jørgensen (2016, p. 225) draw from a Gramscian perspective to argue that solidarity "acquires a political dimension among equal actors rather than reflecting an asymmetry between those who 'possess' the ability to be solidary and those who need their solidarity."

Government and municipal support are minimal and under-resourced in South Africa (Landau et al., 2011), and (forced) migrants remain on "the margins of policies and the local government's programs" (Ruiters et al., 2020, p. 42). In this absence of government programmes and protection in South Africa, (forced) migrants engage with a variety of actors, such as those working in community-based organisations for migrant support. Given their challenges with paperwork, xenophobia, and access to employment and services, forced migrant groups must "strategically use resources and opportunities: social capital, social networks, humanitarian aid, legal rights, external and internal resources" (Bolzoni, 2009, p. 148). A review of literature (Koskimaki & Mazani, in press) has shown how various NGOs, unions, legal clinics, and associations in South Africa have extended solidarity to assist forced migrants with legal aid, language courses, social cohesion programmes, and overall support (as examples see Hlatshwayo, 2011; Okbandrias, 2023; Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018; Vanyoro, 2024).

Furthermore, refugee-led activism, organisations, and informal collectives are important spaces for forced migrants to engage with issues important to themselves. In Global South contexts, Awumbila et al. (2023, p. 720) write that more research is needed on how migrants build their own networks of solidarity through "meso-level organising" to "fight their exploitation and oppression" by exercising agency and engaging in collective action. By "meso-level resistance" they refer to migrant "collectives" that are "neither private nor public" (Awumbila et al., 2023, p. 726, drawing from the work of Pande, 2012). Examples of how these may create more transformative forms of resistance will be discussed in later sections. Here we highlight how in South collective action emerges in the way that many forced migrants have created their own informal inter-migrant support structures (Makanda, 2021a; Rugunanan, 2022), friendships (Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023), and both formal and informal organisations (Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018; Vanyoro, 2024). As described in the introduction, faith-based groups and churches play a role in fostering solidarity amongst and for (forced) migrants in South Africa (Koskimaki & Mazani, in press; Mazani, 2023; Mpofu, 2018; Mukafuku, 2021; Nzayabino, 2010). Congolese asylum seeker women in Cape Town during Covid-19 collectively turned to prayer as a form of agency and hope in navigating their insecurity (H. Nyamnjoh et al., 2022). Formal and informal migrant community networks and refugee-led organisations (Uwimpuhwe, 2015) have played diverse and important roles in migrant solidarity and transformation in South Africa. One example is SARLN, The South Africa Refugee-Led Network, which "fill gaps left by formal humanitarian and development actors" in South Africa, and aims to "improve the interactions between refugees, refugee leaders, refugee serving networks/organisations and the state institutions" and "engagements with local, provincial, and national actors" at a grass root level (Zihindula et al., 2023, pp. 16–17). Collective refugee organisations among Somalis, Congolese and Rwandans in Cape Town include hometown associations, heritage associations, cultural groups, and NGOs, within which forced migrants engage in a "network-creating collective process that shapes how individual migrants and their families construct social relationships and get organised" (Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018, p. 1133). Leadership structures in various refugee-led organisations in South Africa advocate for their own communities (Dinbabo et al., 2021). Some organisations within the Congolese community in South Africa regularly organise protests and other political marches (Mpeiwa, 2018).

However, tensions can arise within civic solidarity and community organising. "Community infrastructures" can also "reproduce dynamics of exclusion" (Pascucci, 2017, p. 342). Furthermore, hierarchical relations may emerge between "non-refugees engaging in civic initiatives" as givers and "refugees needing support" as receivers (Younes et al., 2021, p. 224). Rast et al. (2020) caution that refugee reception and solidarity may lead to decreased state support, reproduction of unequal power relations through "paternalism," or the portrayal of refugees as victims (Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017, as cited in Rast et al., 2020). Civil society organisations for migrant support in South Africa face challenges and have been described as fragmented due to "the politicization and instrumentalization of these migrants' vulnerability, in a climate of limited resources for NGOs" (Vanyoro, 2024, p. 3). NGOs are often reliant on donors and hence susceptible to what Landau (2019b) has termed a northern focus on "containment development" to curb African mobility (Vanyoro, 2024). Civil society organisations in South Africa have to devote their energy to playing a litigation role towards the government in enforcing policies and practices toward the rights of refugee and asylum seekers (Hoag, 2010; Johnson, 2022; Masuku & Rama, 2020; Moyo & Zanker, 2020; Okbandrias, 2023; Rugunanan & Smit, 2011). Migrants also tend to avoid formal structures. Hlatshwayo (2019) has shown that Zimbabwean precarious workers are "scared" to join South African worker unions due to fear of rejection and deportation.

As the above literature reviewed demonstrates, forced migrants conscientize and engage with one another in informal and formal settings such as political protest, church and other religious networks, as well as with civil society and refugee-led associations. However, refugee participation in solidarity and collective spaces also has its challenges, which is why we describe it as an ongoing struggle. Negative portrayals may emerge in media and host societies around refugee agency and self-organisation. Refugees are labelled as victims while residing in camps, "yet, as soon as they show more 'entrepreneurial' agency by choosing to leave the camp…they become suspect, labelled as 'illegal migrants' or 'bogus asylum seekers'" (Erdal & Oeppen, 2017, p. 984). An emphasis on "self-reliance" also echoes neoliberal approaches (Doyel, 2022). In South Africa, after a wave of xenophobic violence in 2008, Robins (2009) reported that when forced migrants "began to assert themselves through press statements and protests that challenged the government, camp management, and UNHCR," through "increasing levels of political organization and assertiveness of the refugee leadership and their NGO allies," government discourse on refugees shifted from presenting them as victims of xenophobia to being "illegal, criminal, troublesome" (p. 641).

Reliance on church spaces also is not without its own internal complexities (Koskimaki & Mazani, in press) such as limiting social capital (Mpofu, 2018), internal hierarchies around the ability to give donations (Nishimwe, 2022), or "exclusionary boundaries" towards migrants (Hankela, 2015). Landau (2014, p. 372) argues that African migrant churches in South Africa are often fragmented by a "diversity of competing claims for religion and belonging" creating obstacles of collective solidarity. Refugee-led organisations in South Africa face financial challenges, staff turnover and have to navigate "patriarchal culture" in some of the refugee organisations (Zihindula et al., 2023). Refugee participation therefore requires ongoing reflection on personal assumptions and should be situated within "larger social and historically embedded structures" (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018, p. 196).

Vulnerability within forced migrant spaces in Cape Town may also pose obstacles to participation in collective organisations. This vulnerability emerges because of xenophobia, the lack of documentation and secure employment (Zihindula et al., 2023), negative portrayals in the media due to their activism, language barriers, gender dynamics, traumatic memories, and historical and ethnic conflict from the homeland

(Vuninga, 2021), mental health challenges, mistrust in NGOs, avoidance of obligations or visibility (Landau, 2019a), and the lack of time and energy to organise. For example, in the research of Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters (2018, p. 1124), Rwandan refugees have shared experiences of "'bad reception from one's countrymen,'" revealing the divisions that may emerge when "carrying conflicts from their home countries to the host country." In the next section we return to the refugee sit-in to illustrate the complexity of these challenges within autonomous refugee participation and transformation.

5. Refugee Spaces: A Fragmented Collective?

This section returns to the refugee protest introduced at the beginning of this article to highlight some of the complexities of refugee-led transformation on the intersection of liberatory praxis, precarity, solidarity, and violence in South Africa. The protest is an example of potential autonomous and civic solidarity, and brought visibility to the plight of refugees. However, it was fragmented by police violence, lack of public support, internal divisions and hierarchies, misplaced intentions and mistrust. As solidarity practices are not without "various tensions, antagonisms, and contradictions" (Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021, p. 980), unpacking these might allow for reflection on new ways forward.

As Mary described in the introduction, she participated in a refugee sit-in protest in October 2019 at the UNHCR offices near the Walford Arcade shopping centre and the Greenmarket square in the city centre of Cape Town, which was widely reported on in the city's news media (Washinyira, 2019). This protest was led and organised by informal community leaders who were well-known men amongst Congolese refugees. Hundreds of asylum seekers, refugee, and illegalised migrants, mostly from the DRC and Burundi, as well as Somalia, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and other countries, met at the space near the UNHCR office to request resettlement in a third country, where they hoped could offer better support and safety to asylum seekers after a recent spate of xenophobic attacks. They protested the delays in getting and renewing permits, which affected their ability to access employment, and hung banners about the ongoing xenophobia in South Africa, such as: "As refugees we are not safe in SA." They spent days in the streets chanting: "Our rights—we are not criminals."

However, on the 30th of October, police arrived and aggressively removed protestors, traumatising many protesting refugees including women and children (Frank, 2023; Nowicki, 2020). Media and personal videos shared with Koskimaki by the refugee protesters, showed police dragging protesting refugees, including a half-clothed disoriented woman, and placing them in a police transport van. One man was lying on the ground unconscious. Mary described the violence they experienced during the removal:

> When they come to chase us, they come with law enforcement and police. They didn't even mind about children, and they were fighting with women, taking children by force, putting them into the van. They was thinking maybe it was going to be a solution for them, so people would run away and be afraid. It's not about fighting; we didn't go there because we want to fight...

Mary described the trauma inflicted by the police:

> Even law enforcement—they fighting—you know them, they have big sticks and guns, and those spray. To spray some people, you can lose sight...when they spray you in your eye you can't even see what is going on. You can't even feel...

Many refugees were offered space and sanctuary in the nearby Methodist church to continue their protest. Mary narrated:

> I remember that the priest of the church—the Methodist church—was there....When he sees other children was crying, laying down on the floor and they was crying with hunger, they just open the church and people start running inside the church. When the police and the law enforcement wanted to enter that church, he locked the door and he say, "no, stop, you don't have the right to come inside the church. You can chase them there, but not inside the church."

Hundreds stayed in the church in what soon became overcrowded and unsanitary conditions during the South African summer. The protest had fragmented based on disagreements about the way forward, and due to many issues explained below, the group was eventually asked to leave the church. In March, the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Based on the lockdown regulations, the refugees were then moved to two encampment sites, where many of the refugee women experienced renewed trauma and stress (Frank, 2023). Some were offered to go back to their home countries or to receive a small monetary amount to resettle back into the community. A few are still living in the encampment area, years later.

Various challenges arose in this refugee-led movement. While alliances between different migrant groups and civil society groups are useful for building solidarity, often the political differences between different actors are complex and can lead to conflicts, confusion, or mistrust, which can stall a movement. Autonomous solidarity movements, as defined earlier, require horizontal engagement, which Agustín and Jørgensen (2019, p. 40) explain as forms of "direct democracy and assemblies to invigorate the equality among their members" and community making that disrupts power structures. In the case of the refugee protest, refugee leaders emerged with different agendas and challenges, disagreeing on solutions and a way forward, reducing the potential for more equal decision-making. As Mary described in reference to the conflict between protest leadership: "They must leave people to do their own choice." One leader wanted to remain firm in a demand for resettlement, while other leaders wanted to take a modest package of funding to return to the community. While residing in the Methodist church, one key protest leader rejected help from a humanitarian association, reportedly harassed and attacked a worker from a major refugee rights NGO, as well as intimidated church leaders (Kiewit, 2019). Disagreements and distrust of humanitarian assistance as well as in the leadership affected the organisational structure. Mental and physical health issues and lack of proper food and sanitation posed challenges in maintaining the protest. After some violence had broken out in the church, the Pastor then requested they leave. He also appealed to Home Affairs to find solutions to renewing their permits (Nowicki, 2020). It was argued that protesters were manipulated by the leaders into hoping to be resettled elsewhere, which was something the UNHCR could not do.

The refugee protesters mobilised human rights language to try to get support, similar to what Stierl et al. (2015, p. 8) describe in the European context, where refugee activists "have discovered the language of human rights for themselves, due to their experiences in transnational spaces." As Mary stated, they are human beings, and they need a solution; they were aware that they were not treated according to refugee protocols. While we have described some challenges, this reflection on refugee agency brings us to our next section on opportunities and hope in locating forced migrant solidarity.

6. Liberatory Praxis and Solidarity

We begin this discussion of theory and praxis by reflecting on the way the forced migrants in our research have referred to solidarity themselves, through articulating their rights and shared humanity. In 2010, Landau and Freemantle (pp. 380–381) described African migrant references to "pan-Africanism, South African human rights rhetoric, religion and the language of global elites" and "other liberation philosophies" as a form of agency and "tactical cosmopolitanism." To summarise this notion, they argue that migrants in South Africa tactically "draw on a variegated language of belonging that makes claims to the city while positioning them in an ephemeral, superior, and unrooted condition where they can escape localised social and political obligations" (Landau & Freemantle, 2010, p. 380). They state that migrants' use of this discourse is not cohesive, as often migrant groups are "fragmented by language, religion, legal status and mutual enmity." This discourse, they argue "is not a coherent or self-conscious collective philosophy or set of tactics," but rather a means to achieve "specific practical goals" (Landau & Freemantle, 2010, p. 381). While agreeing that migrants employ the languages of solidarity and human rights to meet certain ends, we diverge with the authors' claims around migrants' ephemeral positioning. We argue that forced migrant-led organising, engagement, and elaborations of theory and praxis are more collective and more diverse than can account for such explanations. We find the notion of "tactical" cosmopolitanism less useful as it risks reducing migrant collective engagement to mere individual interest or what Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters (2018) critique as "methodological individualism."

Baban and Rygiel's (2020, p. 15) notion of radical or transgressive cosmopolitanism is perhaps more helpful for considering the transformative potential of "living together in difference" (see also Baban & Rygiel, 2017). Research in South Africa has focused on these "socialities of living together as part of the everyday practices" (Maringira & Vuninga, 2022, p. 147). Owen et al. (2024, p. 2163) argue that these migrant "solidarity networks" can "overshadow the state's attempt to locate them categorically as non-citizens." Hence collective migrant organising, Awumbila et al. (2023, p. 726) argue, "serves as the beginnings of what could become powerful acts of resistance against the domination they face." Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters's (2018) research with refugee associations in Cape Town argues against what they call a "bias" concerning studying "collectives" due to the "idea that migrants are transient, take a short-term view and are too vulnerable to organise protests" (p. 1121). Maringira and Vuninga (2022, pp. 146–147) argue that "it is important to note that migrants do not seek and or have a desire to 'tactically' belong to South Africa, rather the sense of belonging is real and is characterised by the realities of co-existing in South Africa, especially among black African migrants." F. B. Nyamnjoh's (2022, p. 597) has described this conviviality as "a living-togetherness that takes seriously the reality of interconnections and interdependencies." Chekero's (2023, p. 379) research on refugee livelihoods in Cape Town argues that this conviviality "encourages migrants and refugees to experiment with new ways of thinking, living socially, connecting, reconciling, and networking, with the aim of responding to problems and mediating their subjective experience of city life." Hence migrant solidarity in South Africa can be built through mutual engagement and (demands for) recognition of one's humanity and friendship between migrant groups and others, in economic and social spaces (Chekero, 2023; Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023). Further, migrants employ liberatory terminology to build solidarity. Masuku and Rama (2020, p. 4) reported an emphasis on theology in refugee solidarity in Durban: They quote their participant as describing workshops and presenters "who talk about the theology of strangers, the theology of migration that all humans are in the image of God regardless of nationality, race, etc." Although complexities arise in collective and solidaristic actions, forced migrants and citizens are

involved in intellectual, academic, social, political, and other kinds of care and community work in their everyday lives, even while navigating their precarity.

Considering the potential for "collective theorisation" of these solidarity practices, Batisai (2022, p. 19) writes against xenophobia to promote the potential for Pan African and other kinds of connected dialogue in Global South contexts, in particular to "connectedness and commonalities amongst blacks" which "brings Africa together and reinforces the spirit of solidarity." She argues that such theorisation may allow us to recognise diversity "without perpetuating the same colonial gaze and the global matrices of power" (Batisai, 2022, p. 19). We also locate such collective theorising as a shared struggle. These shared struggles inform the praxis and the everyday participation of refugees in community organisations, churches, and other faith-based community structures, academic spaces, refugee-led associations, and informal shared spaces, where disagreements may occur, but from which new ideas and hope may emerge. We follow Makanda's (2021b, p. 133) argument that:

> Recognizing the voice of migrants on how they make-meaning, negotiate and construct their socio-political identities allows one to see that there are levels of subaltern agency as a response to being forcibly uprooted, including having legitimate opinions on what is happening in South Africa and back home.

In their article, Uwimpuhwe and Ruiters (2018) argue that "having a diversity of voices" amongst refugee leaders "is not necessarily a weakness and need not be characterised as fragmentary" (p. 1133) and that many of the key leaders they met "spoke of pan-africanism and black solidarity" (p. 1134). Stierl et al. (2015, p. 4) show that refugee activism and "self-organisation" can also help to forge "the social network, the alliances and the innumerable personal connections based on friendship and solidarity."

The themes of hope and being "human" also emerged in our research spaces, and we identify these as part of this liberatory praxis. The sit-in protest we described earlier, despite fragmentation, still generated hope and created a visible shared space for articulating and demanding human rights. As Mary repeated in her recounting of the sit-in, "we are not animals, we are human beings," drawing on her own experience. We connect this as well to Mukafuku's 2019 academic research in terms of everyday forms of mutual support and solidarity, especially in the networks built in the spaces of church gatherings, showing that solidarity is not charity, but rather can create a feeling of home and sharing. Forced migrants have shared challenges amongst each other but have also expressed to Mukafuku that they still cannot live without one another. Recently, in 2024, Mukafuku met a research participant from Burundi, who talked about arriving in South Africa with limited resources and no social network and feeling lost and overwhelmed. However, the local church near his temporary accommodation quickly became what he called a "beacon of hope." He explained: "The church members did not know me, but they treated me like family." They provided him with food, clothing, and even helped him navigate the complex asylum application process. One memory that stood out for him is that a church member invited him to her home for a Sunday meal. He explained that it was the first time in months that he "felt like a human being again, not just a refugee." He shared that it reminded him of the communal meals back home in Burundi and gave him a sense of normalcy that he had desperately missed. Mukafuku also had an experience during her research where she invited one refugee woman from the sit-in protest to her home to get paid for braiding Mukafuku's hair, after which Mukafuku cooked food for the woman's children. She offered this connection and support due to her positionality as a fellow forced migrant, blurring the spaces of researcher and refugee community member.

Despite fragmentation, we draw from hooks (1994) who explains that theory from one's own lived experiences can be liberatory, meaningful, and connected to hope. Theory created thusly can be a form of solidarity and an entry to collective transformation. Again, this is not to discount the power dynamics that exist on multiple levels, including between the researcher and those they speak with. It does not eliminate mistrust, realities of xenophobia, challenges in documentation, and other stresses for refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. Rather, we highlight formal and informal refugee spaces as playing an important role in the production of knowledge. Given this review, in our final section, we reflect on the potential role of academia in co-fostering this praxis in South Africa.

7. Academic and Community Theorising

The above examples show that collective organising among refugees is important for solidarity. This section then connects this with the potential of knowledge co-creation and forced migrant-led and/or participation in research, and theoretical interventions in academic spaces. As Koskimaki and Tyhali (2024) argue elsewhere, the space of the university in South Africa has an important potential as an institution in extending and fostering solidarity both amongst the forced migrant academic community, as well as through research that is involved in community engagement with forced migrant organisations. Refugee-led collective spaces and associations, both formal and informal, are important for engagement, dialogue, research, and knowledge creation.

However, the unique challenges of forced migrants within the academy and community need to be better recognised at the university for such engaged scholarship to be more fully manifest. Importantly, xenophobia and lack of support for forced migrants, which we contextualised in the earlier section, also continue in South African universities (Maseko & Maweni, 2019; Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2023; Otu, 2017; Sichone, 2006). Limited opportunities also exist for non-South African academics despite the discourse of transformation and decolonisation (Oloruntoba, 2022). Mukafuku shares that as a refugee academic, she has also faced numerous obstacles, including not being eligible for most funding since it was restricted to South African citizens and experiencing joblessness despite having a university degree.

Although refugee-led research on social inclusion such as Mukafuku's requires navigating between academic aspirations, theories, and the lived realities of those around her, it also provides a potential space to advocate for greater inclusivity. Her presence and work also challenge the dominant narratives and stereotypes about refugees, contributing to a more inclusive academic discourse and influencing ideas within the research spaces. In 2023, Tewolde, a refugee living and conducting research in South Africa, explored his reflexivity in research, writing that although he expected to be treated as a foreigner and outsider, many of his participants viewed him as "an African brother and as a fellow human being" (Tewolde, 2023, p. 470).

In considering academic co-creation of knowledge and research with forced migrants in community spaces in South Africa, this article articulates the need to navigate and understand the power dynamics that emerge in community organisations, research, academic spaces, and within refugee groups and movements. At times during our ongoing research, we were concerned that the process of developing more participatory research methodologies would require extra labour for—or draw unwanted attention to—the forced migrant participants. This thought led to reflections around mistrust and access and the need to foster or conceive of different kinds of participatory and transformative engagements in academia. Despite well-meaning

intentions, as we shared earlier, forced migrants may not wish to engage in structured academic projects due to exhaustion, trauma, or a preference to not participate. However, disengagement from certain structures of solidarity does not necessarily mean that they are not engaged in other informal or social networks. Furthermore, we recognise that academic researchers and students—(forced) migrants and citizens—also face numerous precarious realities, creating obstacles in attempting to produce transformative research. Refugee and migrant researchers experience xenophobia and financial precarity within academia as well. Overall, despite this, recognising the continued potential for alliances between academia, civil society, unions, activists and refugee-led associations can open up further informed dialogues about these challenges.

8. Conclusions

A Rwandan refugee in Cape Town expressed:

> We can't see the future…only God knows.

The aim of this article arose out of a need to explore the role of forced migrant collective organising, the complexities of solidarity in building a liberatory praxis in refugee and migrant spaces, and the challenges that we foresee in designing more engaged research with and for forced migrants. Such unpacking can provide a basis for thinking through how to conduct more transformative research with and for refugees in South Africa. By drawing together examples from research and literature on forced migrant experiences, community organisations, and refugee-led organisations, we see many complexities and fragmentations, as well as hopeful spaces and articulations of shared humanity. We argue that refugee-led initiatives for collective transformation, both formal and informal, are potential spaces for conscientization, mediation, and knowledge mobilisation, and therefore play an important role in community engagement in South African academic and research spaces. They are also spaces of conviviality, which Pozzo and Ghorashi (2022, p. 686) describe as "innovative co-creation." The relationship between everyday liberatory praxis and solidarity emerges in the ways these concepts can be mutually reinforcing within participatory spaces for refugees. Given that, the relationship between praxis and solidarity is not just theoretical but lived and experienced, with participatory spaces serving as critical sites where this relationship is continuously negotiated and realized. Thus, solidarity is not merely an abstract ideal but is constructed and sustained through practices such as sit-ins, meetings, and refugee and community research.

Even though refugee organisations and actions may navigate internal divisions, factional leadership, and class and social divides, refugees still work through different alliances and arenas to resist and open potentialities of personal and social transformation. As we have shown, forced migrants experience multiple forms of precarity, and hence are often trapped in cycles of survival that may not always allow for activism or even building and joining community associations. This precarity also creates obstacles to engaging and participating in academic research and spaces. Yet, forced migrant engagement in collective practices can challenge exclusionary structures (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018) and cultivate a sense of solidarity with others who share similar experiences of precarity. By understanding these nuances of migrant solidarity, we can better consider how to develop more informed engaged research and knowledge on how academic spaces can be more inclusive.

We conclude with a note on hope. Solidarity with and for refugee and asylum seekers in South Africa creates the possibility of hope for refugee groups through what Gramsci (as cited in Karriem, 2009, p. 317) referred to as "renovating and making critical already existing activities" from their lived experiences (see also Gramsci, 1971). Karriem (2009, p. 317) describes this Gramscian viewpoint as "a belief in the ability of historical subjects to both understand and change the world around them." However, hope is often connected to waiting and is produced out of a space of liminality and uncertainty for the future. For hope to be fostered, we returned to the possibility of liberatory praxis. As Freire (1992) writes, while hope is not enough, it is a required part of the ongoing struggle.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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