Theorizing as a Liberatory Practice? The Emancipatory Promise of Knowledge Co-Creation With (Forced) Migrants

Edited by Halleh Ghorashi and Maria Charlotte Rast

cogitatio

Volume 12

2024

Academic Editors

Halleh Ghorashi (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
Maria Charlotte Rast (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/socialinclusion

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Cogitatio

EDITORIAL

Theorizing as a Liberatory Practice? The Emancipatory Promise of Knowledge Co-Creation With (Forced) Migrants

Halleh Ghorashi and **Maria Charlotte Rast**

Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Halleh Ghorashi (h.ghorashi@vu.nl)

Abstract

This thematic issue consists of empirical and theoretical contributions from South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands that address how academic theorizing is co-created by and co-creates processes of emancipation and transformation for differently positioned and impacted individuals and collectivities. We invited knowledge co-creators (both inside and outside academia) aiming to improve social inclusion and justice for refugees/forced migrants to engage with the question of how theory and practice are co-created as an engaged, collaborative, reflective, and critical act between scholars and social movements, activists, artists, societal partners, and other individuals or communities. The contributions in this thematic issue highlight (1) how transformative co-creation allows for a plurality of perspectives, stories, and experiences to be acknowledged in the creation of knowledge and solutions, (2) how the creation of more diverse, inclusive, and transformative knowledge and solutions challenges exclusionary, reductive or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants, and (3) what the conditions are for transformative co-creation.

1. Introduction

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (hooks, 1991, p. 1)

> To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire, 1970, p. 47)

> Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systematic politicized practices of teaching and learning. (Mohanty, 1990, p. 185)

Theorizing is often considered a privileged act reserved for academics. However, knowledge is rarely a product of an individual "genius"; instead, it is grounded in and fueled by lived experiences and narratives of resistance, transformation, and hope. Knowledge emerges from engagement with collective sources, through collaborations with others. This thematic issue engages with the transformative, emancipatory potential of critical theory for differently positioned individuals, communities, collectives, and organizations. Many people have addressed how social theorizing can be a liberatory practice, a tool for healing (hooks, 1991). Throughout history, activists, students, scholars, politicians, and marginalized and oppressed communities have contributed to and utilized socio-political theorizing and writing to understand how their personal biographies are conditioned by their socio-structural, historical positionings (Wright Mills, 1959). This understanding, or "sociological imagination" (Wright Mills, 1959), can help to rethink the role of academia in relation to other societal actors by focusing on situational, everyday, place-based practices as opportunities for emancipations from below. This shift in focus creates the possibility to see new horizontal alliances in which deeper forms of solidarity coalitions are taking place based on reciprocal caring and learning relationships. It thereby recognizes the necessity of micro/meso alliances for resistance against processes and practices of social inequality, marginalization, and stigmatization that are embedded in socio-political macro-structures and are sustained and legitimated by normalized discursive practices.

This thematic issue consists of empirical and theoretical contributions from South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands that address how academic theorizing is co-created by and co-creates processes of emancipation and transformation for differently positioned and impacted individuals and collectivities. We invited knowledge co-creators (both inside and outside academia) who aim to improve social inclusion and justice for refugees/forced migrants to engage with the question of how theory and practice are co-created as an engaged, collaborative, reflective, and critical act between scholars and social movements, activists, artists, societal partners, and other individuals or communities. This thematic issue's understanding of knowledge co-creation is rooted in an engaged, relational, reciprocal approach that recognizes the mutual interdependence of theory and practice. Through co-creative research, in which scholars create knowledge with and for, instead of about, people, different actors seek to contribute to addressing people's struggles, needs, interests, and desires (Tuck, 2009). This entails acknowledging how these actors learn, work with, resist, transform, and even reproduce (hegemonic) theories and practices.

2. Overview of Contributions

2.1. Co-Creation as a Transformative Approach

In this thematic issue, Drop et al. (2024), Hamzah and Aparna (2024), Ocadiz Arriaga and Dyer-Williams (2024), and van Houte and Rast (2024) highlight how co-creation, and especially the use of unconventional/creative methods, allows for a plurality of voices, perspectives, stories, and experiences to emerge and be acknowledged in the production of transformative knowledge and solutions.

Drop et al. (2024) examine how creative co-creation in education and research can help transcend the "us versus them" divide that refugee students face, especially in educational contexts. They argue that play, storytelling, and constructing artifacts enable "alterity," that is, approaching the other from the other's perspective, and that connecting and shifting positions creates sameness while allowing space for difference. The authors stress creative co-creation in education and research can promote joy, sharing, reflection, agency, responsivity, and community building.

Hamzah and Aparna (2024) call for creating space for their writing selves to lead the way in unpacking the various forms of oppression they encounter in everyday life. They emphasize the importance of honoring knowledge in stories, thus challenging the fear that their experiences might be fragmented in analysis. By writing in conversation as a liberatory practice, these authors weave their experiences in a relational manner, building a coalition against multiple forms of oppression, while resisting fitting in with standards and norms that erase their epistemic and epistemological plurality. In doing so, they aim to bring attention to hidden forms of daily violence and paradoxes, challenging emancipatory practices within spaces that are open to, but not inclusive towards, diverse students, scholars, scholarships, and knowledges.

Ocadiz Arriaga and Dyer-Williams (2024) deepen feminist approaches to pleasure by showing the importance of co-creating "sensuous knowledge" (see also Salami, 2020). They argue for the importance of building safe(r) spaces to cook, eat, and share stories with migrant communities to unsettle the oppressive forces that marginalize such communities. They further rely on African feminists who have "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" (Ocadiz Arriaga & Dyer-Williams, 2024, p. 1). The authors show how this positioning enabled them to (re)center the lived experiences of women and LGBTQI+ migrants of different national backgrounds, paying particular attention to their bodily and psychological capacities for sensing and sharing pleasure through food practices.

Van Houte and Rast (2024) explore how applied theatre can serve as a co-creative method for knowledge production in refugee-receiving societies. The authors argue that understanding relational processes of living together and interrogating structural mechanisms of exclusion necessitate a shift toward relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in other words, convivial—methods of knowledge production. They conclude that this kind of knowledge co-creation requires researchers to "hold space" for unique voices to come forward to then negotiate knowledge together.

2.2. Conditions for Transformative Co-Creation

León et al. (2024), Freedman et al. (2024), Koskimaki and Mukafuku (2024), and Idrees et al. (2024) engage with conditions that are necessary for transformative co-creation.

León et al. (2024) elaborate on their experiences of engaging with (as authors and/or editors of) an anthology centering undocumented scholars' work with undocumented communities. They argue that, guided by a politics of care (Valenzuela, 2017), an agentic use of time is essential to facilitate liberatory research practices in the face of pressing academic timelines and institutionalized ethics. Slowing time is a necessary condition in the process of theorizing the wounds caused by the harmful experiences of being an

undocumented migrant. In addition, the authors highlight undocumented scholars' ethical and responsive approach to working with undocumented communities to elevate their shared commitment in their liberatory engagement.

Freedman et al. (2024) reflect on the potential of and conditions for co-producing knowledge in the face of the challenges that academic and funding structures bring as well as those due to hierarchical relations both within their team and between themselves as researchers and young refugee women. They highlight the potential of knowledge co-creation in the "interstices," the unexpected moments of mutual learning that arise during the research process. Consequently, they advocate for taking a more flexible and organic approach to knowledge co-creation, allowing space for "interstices" and mutual learning.

Koskimaki and Mukafuku (2024) reflect on how theorizing and building deeper alliances with academic and community spaces may generate a more liberatory praxis with and for forced migrants in urban South Africa. According to the authors, this necessitates acknowledging the challenges forced migrants face both within the community and the academy. Precarity, distrust, and trauma may hinder forced migrants' participation in both community organization and engaged academic research. However, the authors also emphasize the agency and hope that forced migrants display by creating opportunities for transformative change, often through everyday practices of solidarity.

Idrees et al. (2024) examine the transformative potential of body mapping, especially in research with marginalized groups such as forced migrants. They acknowledge the critique that body mapping, when applied without cultural sensitivity and deep contextual learning, risks reinforcing rather than dismantling existing power dynamics. The authors therefore held a workshop in South Africa, where the method originated, creating a space for intercultural exchange and knowledge co-creation with local experts to refine the method. They argue that body mapping, when contextually grounded and sensitive to marginalized populations, can be a powerful tool through which bodies, spaces, and emotions interact to reshape power dynamics between researchers and participants, thereby promoting knowledge co-creation, shared learning, collective healing, and relational resistance.

2.3. Challenging Exclusionary Notions

Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024), Cairo et al. (2024), and Kisubi Mbasalaki and Kizito (2024) discuss how co-creation contributes to the creation of knowledge and solutions that challenge exclusionary, reductive, or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants. By highlighting refugees' agency, resilience, and complex experiences, co-creation advances more diverse, inclusive, and transformative understandings.

Lê Espiritu and Vang (2024) elaborate on how the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC) collaborates with refugee partners to theorize and co-create knowledge that is grounded in the lived experiences of refugees and that challenges the roles historically assigned to refugees solely through a lens of precarity and gratitude. The authors introduce the concepts of refugee "livability," referring to mundane, creative, and fearless expressions of agency despite the challenges of forced migration, and "ungratefulness," challenging the expectation that refugees should feel grateful for the aid they receive. They argue that these examples of "epistemic disobedience" challenge the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees, illustrating the liberatory and transformative potential of theoretical work co-created through sustained engagement with refugee partners.

Cairo et al. (2024) reflect on their explorative journey as researchers who ended up becoming part of the communities they researched. On the basis of their experiences, they criticize normative liberal approaches to solidarity. Instead, they advocate thinking about *solidarity otherwise*: "holding space" for diverse stories of solidarity and acknowledging the plurality of expressions of relationality and reciprocity as well as the multiplicity of spaces and temporalities in which these expressions take place.

Kisubi Mbasalaki and Kizito (2024) reflect on the potential of centering forced African migrants' voices in a documentary film as a process of knowledge co-creation. They show how such an approach empowers migrants by providing space for their perspectives and thereby countering biases and misconceptions perpetuated by xenophobic discourses. Such an approach also helps to highlight the complex lived experiences of forced migrants, which might entail facing challenges and dangers and exposing structural injustices as well as having diverse narratives of home, belonging, and identity. In this way, a co-creative approach can destabilize singular, reductive, and dehumanizing images of forced African migrants.

3. Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions in this thematic issue highlight how co-creation as a transformative approach allows for a plurality of perspectives, stories, and experiences to be acknowledged in the creation of knowledge and solutions, how the creation of more diverse, inclusive, and transformative knowledge and solutions challenges exclusionary, reductive or singular notions about refugees/forced migrants, and what the conditions are for transformative co-creation.

References
Cairo, A., Gronemeier, L.-M., Icaza, R., Salim, U., Thrivikraman, J., & Vicherat Mattar, D. (2024). "When someone gets sick, we run to them, not from them": Holding space for solidarity otherwise and the city in times of Covid-19. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8542. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8542

Drop, H., Hendriks, P., Barry, O., & Abdulsattar, R. (2024). Leaving the crow's nest: How creative co-creation transcends "us-versus-them" experiences of Dutch refugee students. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8477. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8477

Freedman, J., Crankshaw, T. L., Yasmin, R., & Mutambara, V. M. (2024). "But we just need money": (Im)possibilities of co-producing knowledge with those in vulnerable situations. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8818. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8818

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Hamzah, S., & Aparna, K. (2024). Moving margins: Writing in relation as liberatory practice. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8534. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8534

hooks, B. (1991). Theory as liberatory practice. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, *4*(1).

Idrees, S. S., Hannes, K., & de Andrade, M. (2024). Seeking refuge in South Africa: Navigating power, healing,

and co-creation in body-mapping processes. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 9013. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.9013

Kisubi Mbasalaki, P., & Kizito, K. (2024). Forced migrant counter cultural (co)productions. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8719. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8719

Koskimaki, L., & Mukafuku, C. (2024). Refugee precarity and collective transformation: Ongoing struggles for a liberatory praxis in urban South Africa. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8858. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8858

Lê Espiritu, Y., & Vang, M. (2024). "Livability" and "ungratefulness": A refugee critique of the law and humanitarianism. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8604. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8604

León, L., Abrego, L. J., & Negrón-Gonzales, G. (2024). Cultivating ethical and politically rooted research practices with undocumented migrants. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8555. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8555

Mohanty, C. T. (1990). On race and voice: Challenges for liberal education in the 1990s. *Cultural Critique*, *14*, 179–208. https://doi.org/10.2307/1354297

Ocadiz Arriaga, M. A., & Dyer-Williams, N. (2024). Co-creating sensuous knowledge through food practices with women and LGBTQI+ migrants in South Africa. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8541. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8541

Salami, M. (2020). *Sensuous knowledge: A black feminist approach for everyone*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(3), 409–427. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15

Valenzuela, A. (2017). Academia cuauhtli: (Re)locating the spiritual, if crooked, path to social justice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *30*(10), 906–911. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312610

van Houte, M., & Rast, M. C. (2024). Applied theatre as a co-creative methodology for more convivial knowledge production in refugee-receiving communities. *Social Inclusion*, *12*, Article 8464. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8464

Wright Mills, C. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.

About the Authors

Halleh Ghorashi is full professor of Diversity and Integration in the Department of Sociology at the VU (Vrije Universiteit) Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She combines a multidisciplinary background in social sciences (anthropology, sociology, gender studies, (political) philosophy and organization studies) with a critical approach in diversity and refugee/migration studies with narrative co-creative methodology. She is the member of KNAW (The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences) and the State Committee against discrimination and racism. www.hallehghorashi.com

Maria Charlotte Rast (PhD) is a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Sociology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In her research, she focuses on the challenges, opportunities, and conditions of co-creative endeavors between scholars, professionals, volunteers, civil society players, and other individuals and communities with and without refugee background. Her work shows how such endeavors are conditioned by, navigate within, and transform exclusionary academic and societal structures.

Leaving the Crow's Nest: How Creative Co-Creation Transcends "Us-Versus-Them" Experiences of Dutch Refugee Students

Hanke Drop [1] , **Peter Hendriks** [2], **Oumar Barry** [3], **and Rania Abdulsattar** [4]

[1] Research Group Value-Oriented Professionalisation, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands
[2] Research Group Living and Wellbeing, Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands
[3] University of Utrecht, The Netherlands
[4] Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Hanke Drop (hanke.drop@hu.nl)

Abstract

This article is based on five years of longitudinal participatory action research on how former pre-bachelor programme students with a refugee background experience finding their way into Dutch higher education and society. The four-member research team and authors (two of which were former refugees), found that refugee students face a significant barrier of "us-versus-them," especially in an educational context. We explored how creative co-creation contributed to rethinking difference and sameness in higher education by breaking through or transcending this divide. Creative co-creation through play, storytelling, or constructing artefacts enables "alterity," approaching the other from the other's position. Movement and action help to shape the world around us: Connecting and shifting positions creates sameness while leaving space for difference. Creative co-creation during our research process included making co-creation artefacts and activities, thus involving outreach to broader audiences for engagement. In the research process, it became clear that successful participation matters to all students and provides more opportunities for all, not just refugee students. A new notion of "we" in Dutch higher education and society that does not perpetuate the divide between "us" and "them" requires a shared responsibility. Higher education needs the university authorities and the teachers to make room for student stories and should provide spaces for dialogue and community development.

Keywords

agency; social justice; community development; creative co-creation; higher education; refugee students; us-versus-them divide

1. Introduction

Our longitudinal research from 2018 to 2023 was inspired by refugee students' experiences when switching from the Utrecht University of Applied Science (UUAS) tailor-made, pre-bachelor programme for refugees to a regular study programme. The pre-bachelor programme was a preparation year for Dutch higher education consisting of Dutch language mastery, understanding the Dutch study climate, support to choose a future study programme, and an introduction to Dutch society. The programme included creative co-creation, an embodied pedagogical-didactic approach that fosters both community development and students "becoming persons" through play, storytelling, dance, and making artefacts (Macrine & Fugate, 2022). For this part of the programme, regular social work students were also invited to participate. These creative co-creation lessons offered not only opportunities for joy and sharing, but also for developing more responsivity and improvisation to get a better grip on the world around them.

The pre-bachelor programme was designed mainly based on the teaching experiences of the teachers involved, who had been working with (forced) migrant students in regular bachelor and master programmes for years. Within the pre-bachelor programme the teaching staff had tried to partially remove some of the possible barriers of regular study programmes, which seem to harm refugee students more than regular students: such as the predominantly cognitive approach, a lack of attention to the teacher–student relationship and to students' past and present experiences, participatory student initiatives during classes, community building, and the value of difference. These efforts to make the pre-bachelor study programme more inclusive than regular study programmes had at the same time inadvertently raised false expectations. The former pre-bachelor programme students experienced the first year of their regular higher education study programme as very difficult. They were excluded from collaborative groups and felt isolated and "othered," as Ghorashi (2018) identifies this phenomenon. Suddenly they became aware of an "us-versus-them" divide and most continued to feel excluded during their entire higher educational careers. In part, this had to do with the educational didactic approaches (such as competence-based education), and suddenly having to relate as a minority to the majority of regular students. In the pre-bachelor programme, these students had been in a majority and attention was paid to their stories and experiences, thus they had gained the confidence to speak up more freely and slowly chart a new path for their studies and lives. Although standing out and speaking out can be complicated for people who have grown up in a dictatorship, the pre-bachelor programme students felt motivated to identify and seize chances to do so and ask for help when necessary. Their peer community, built during the pre-bachelor programme, remained intact over the years.

The refugee students' experiences of exclusion during their regular study careers sparked the idea to start a participatory, creative co-creation research project with a group of 14 former pre-bachelor programme students over five years. After all, while former pre-bachelor programme students' experiential knowledge had been lacking in the pre-bachelor programme's design process, these emic insights could be important for teachers, fellow students, and the authorities in regular higher education. The project research team—referred to here as "we"—included the four authors of this article. Two researchers were former pre-bachelor programme students with a refugee background and two were involved as teachers in the pre-bachelor's programme at the same time. Over the research project's five-year timeline, the two researchers with a refugee background finished their regular study programmes in social work and French language teacher education, respectively. The two non-refugee researchers have a background in social work (PhD) and

Arabic studies (MA). The student–teacher relationship within the research team naturally impacted the power dynamics in the team and the research process viz à viz differences in ethnicity, colour, age, and experiential knowledge related to forced migration. We consistently made these differences an explicit topic during reflections on our experiences during the research project and our investigations into how these differences may have affected our perceptions, decisions, and writing. For example, we chose to do all the in-depth interviews with our respondents (from now "students") in mixed pairs, one professional male researcher without a refugee background and one female researcher with a refugee background and vice versa. The research took place in the context of the Social Innovation Knowledge Institute (KSI) at the UUAS and was based on the Institute's set of core values we also used as the departure point for our research. The KSI Research Centre for Social Innovation aims to strengthen better living together with a focus on promoting social equity. The quality of living together is seen as the result of social innovations in practice and is defined by three mission values: inclusion, equity, and security.

We chose participatory research since this research methodology facilitates listening, learning, and reflexivity in collaborative ways (Lenette, 2022). In this thoughtful and meaningful qualitative research methodology, process and research findings are intertwined and not hierarchically related to one another, which was of great importance to our team. Creative co-creation fits seamlessly into this research methodology, although the creative co-creation artefacts and activities that emerged from the research process (see Table 1) differed in material terms from those the students had been working on in the pre-bachelor programme. However, the essence of creative co-creation as a way of giving shape to the world around us and developing one's agency is the same.

Our participatory research on how former pre-bachelor programme students experienced finding their way into Dutch higher education and Dutch society, showed that they experienced several educational barriers and the main barrier was the "us-versus-them" divide. Our article describes how creative co-creation contributes to rethinking difference and sameness in Dutch higher education by breaking through or transcending this divide by fostering the students to reshape their world.

The first section of our article examines the critical literature on refugee students in higher education, the "us-versus-them" divide, social inclusion, and research as a participatory process with creative co-creation. We then describe how creative co-creation can contribute to rethinking difference and sameness based on highlighting the process from data collection to creative output and dialogue with multiple, public audiences. Finally, we draw conclusions and identify future research possibilities.

2. Resources

2.1. Becoming a Person

Refugee students often have complex life experiences and confront unexpected changes in their life plans. These students are frequently required to reshape their lives scarred by loss and reconstruct their identities (Morrice, 2012). The reshaping and reconstructing of learning processes are part of revising their world, and this does not always have a positive outcome. The situation nuances the general view that learning is a positive process bringing benefits to individual students, and stimulating personal growth (Morrice, 2012). We argue that education as a whole is not a positive (or a negative) process, or necessarily focused on

stimulating personal growth (Biesta, 2010). Of the three (ideally integrated) educational orientations of qualification, socialisation, and becoming a person (what Biesta, 2010, calls "subjectification"), it is becoming a person that is pedagogically speaking the main goal of education (Biesta, 2022). By pointing at the world, a teacher can invite students to become persons. In the pedagogical sense, becoming a person takes place between isolated self-destruction and world destruction. Like Hannah Arendt wrote:

> Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. (Arendt, 1954/2006, p. 196)

Teachers' invitations and solicitations can make students aware of both their freedom to answer the teacher's appeal to contribute to the world, or not, including the consequences of their choice. Becoming a person is a delicate, sometimes rather frictional matter for both teachers and students. For refugee students, becoming a person might include complexities and frictions related to their unusual life experiences often intertwined with negotiating confusing and adopted refugee identities (Hack-Polay et al., 2021). The magnitude of these students' identity crisis is more pronounced in comparison with other students, given their spatial, demographic, temporal, economic, and cultural relocation after being uprooted (Hack-Polay et al., 2021).

The pre-bachelor programme teachers were aware that becoming a person should therefore take place in the context of attempting to navigate new experiences with fellow Dutch students and regular higher education teachers. Embracing, rejecting, or juggling new identities is part of this transition (Hack-Polay, 2020). For fellow students and regular higher education teachers, it is important to understand and recognise refugee students' motives for shifting identities and positions (Chu et al., 2020). For this reason, the creative co-creation lessons in the pre-bachelor programme used to take place in mixed groups with fellow students from the regular social work study programme and sometimes regular higher education teachers. An artist-teacher invited students, and occasionally teachers, to co-create by telling stories, dancing, playing, and making community arts using embodied pedagogy and didactics (Drop & Mesker, 2024). This embodied approach can improve individual and peer learning practices for all students (Macrine & Fugate, 2022). Students are approached as whole persons situated in an environment instead of individuals with independent bodies and brains to be addressed separately. Students and teachers bring their own lived bodies into the room including their past and present experiences. Experience, movement, and action underlying creative co-creation forms like dancing and playing help shape the world around us (Alibali & Nathan, 2018; Drop & Mesker, 2024). In addition, creative co-creation enables "alterity," which involves approaching the other from the other's position (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001, as cited in Ghorashi & Sabelis, 2013, p. 83). By connecting and shifting positions, sameness is created while leaving space for difference. Ghorashi and Sabelis (2013) call this "juggling with difference and sameness." The body and embodiment also have a critical role in the development of social-emotional learning since motion and emotion are connected through expressions (Flach et al., 2010). Emotions include embodied interaction with the environment (Drop & Mesker, 2024). Through co-creation, the refugee and regular students and teachers started to better understand the moods, drives, backgrounds, talents, and enjoyment happening in the classroom. They developed insights into each other's often invisible sociocultural codes. For the teachers, creative co-creation enabled a recognition of the material conditions and struggles in refugee students' lives. Mojab and Carpenter (2011) stress the importance of social recognition processes in

education based on mutuality for refugees. They draw on the concept of "learning by dispossession" when education is restricted to an abstract cognitive experience. This concept entails the understanding that learning involves a complex mediation of social experiences (war, occupation, poverty, becoming an asylum seeker and then a refugee, and social exclusion) and meaning-making in dealing with the new sociocultural context from which refugee students should not be "dispossessed." As mentioned in the introduction, former UUAS pre-bachelor programme students reported such bad, what we could call "dispossessing" experiences in the regular study programmes they had joined after completing the pre-bachelor programme. This sparked our idea to start a participatory, creative co-creation longitudinal research project with a group of these former pre-bachelor programme students.

2.2. Stop Stealing Our Stories

Our research was influenced by the "stop stealing our stories" critical movement (Pittaway et al., 2010), originating from refugee interviewees and other vulnerable groups involved in research. This movement considers the challenges and opportunities of integrating participatory methods into human rights-based research. Power imbalances between researchers and participants raise complex ethical issues and a new approach to research ethics is proposed "moving beyond the dominant principles of harm minimization to an emphasis on negotiated reciprocal benefit that challenges researchers to justify their projects with reference to the benefits delivered to the vulnerable group themselves" (Pittaway et al., 2010, p. 248). The ethical challenge for researchers is to add value to the lives of the people they are researching, thus recognising them as subjects in the process and not simply as sources of data (Hugman, 2005). The departure point of our research was to recognise that refugees have agency, as well as the right to determine if, how, and when they share their stories. Agency refers to the human capacity to act, shaped by (non)available possibilities and resources within the world and attendant discourses and practices (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). Empowering refugees does not have to come through emphasising their heart-breaking stories. The pressure of storytelling can leave refugees feeling tokenised and disempowered (Tammas, 2019). In addition, asking for stories as a one-sided research question can easily lead to othering and dividing refugees as "them" when bringing themselves in while telling their stories, and researchers as "us" when listening to the poignant stories of these poor victims and simultaneously holding ourselves back. Victimising refugees is problematic because it reproduces social hierarchies (Ghorashi, 2018). In other words, victimising, or focusing on vulnerabilities, reproduces and reinforces hegemonic perceptions of refugees as dependent, unimaginative, deviant, and deficient.

Central in this article is the "us-versus-them" divide and this refers to various dimensions, such as thinking of otherness and (the participative dimension of) social inclusion. Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("us," self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("them," other) by stigmatising a difference—real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination (Staszak, 2009). "The normalising power of othering is present in the prominence of hegemonic norms constituted of gender, racial, and cultural hierarchies of difference that reproduce structures of inequality in everyday practices" (Young, 2007, p. 104). The binary classification "us-versus-them" accepts a classified reality and imposed differences while also implying a position of power and feeling of moral superiority.

2.3. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion can be defined as breaking down the barriers that prevent full participation (Caidi & Allard, 2005). Gidley et al. (2010) discern three dimensions of social inclusion: access, participation, and empowerment. Access refers to groups that require deficit-based interventions (e.g., scholarships or income support, additional teaching assistance, or translation). Participation is a more inclusive interpretation of social inclusion embedded in social justice principles, such as human dignity. Nunan et al. (2000, p. 65) argue that this type of inclusion is concerned with "successful participation which generates greater options for all." Empowerment includes "strength-based and value difference and diversity as an important resource or source of social transformation" (Kilpatrick & Johns, 2014, p. 30). Providing opportunities for multiple voices to be heard at various levels of decision-making, facilitating dialogue between competing interests, prioritising underrepresented groups at an institutional level, designing pathways to facilitate hope for target groups, and organising cultural festivals for people to express their values in their own ways are examples of intervention goals for empowerment (Gidley et al., 2010).

2.4. Participatory Process

A source of inspiration for us was thinking about action research as a participatory process for developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). This approach seeks to bring together action and reflection, and practice and theory in participation with others. Practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people can be reached, and more generally, allow individual persons and their communities to flourish (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In action research, it is important to involve the participants, organisations, and other stakeholders in the research processes through co-creation. The development of shared opinions then forms the basis of the results (Kemmis, 2009). Lenette (2022) speaks of "meaningful" participation in the context of participatory action research and gives examples of research practices that can create rich relationships experienced as a learning experience wherein researchers have a sense of humility and genuine willingness to listen, even when things are hurtful to hear. The researchers come with a genuine interest in their co-researchers and really want to see change; they are not just conducting the research to add a project to their CVs, what characterises colonial research, according to Lenette (2022). Actively engaging students in decisions and participatory and democratic processes is suggested as an important step towards change to promote social justice in inclusive educational practices (Kraus, 2008; Liasidou, 2014). Co-creation entails collaborative processes and active involvement of communities and citizens as stakeholders in decisions affecting their lives (Brandsen et al., 2018). We consciously opted for co-creation and participatory research "that [both] typically seek to balance interests, benefits and responsibilities between the relevant stakeholders, focus attention on user needs, and make the whole process—from planning to implementation—transparent and inclusive" (World Health Organisation, 2011). Next, we explain how we perceive our participatory research approach as an especially *creative* co-creation.

2.5. Creative Co-Creation

Space and time matter significantly in relation to co-creation, which is expressed through concepts such as in-betweenness, liminality, unfolding over time, unpredictability, uncertainty, temporal suspension of norms and behaviours, and simultaneous awareness of self and collaborators. Most of these notions are explicit in the

context of *creative* co-creation. The adjective "creative" could point to an open indeterminacy in a collaborative process with only an underlying orientation. Both collaborator actions and the substance of the work are open for spontaneous improvisation and emerging interaction. The space where this open creative co-creation takes place is referred to by various terms, indicating the dynamic power relations: "in-betweenness" (Benjamin, 2017), "a space in-between" (Arendt, 1951/1994), "a liminal space" (Holle et al., 2021), "a third space/third area" (Bhabha, 2006, as cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; see also Meloni et al., 2015), or "a place for what we cannot envision to emerge" (Carteret, 2008). In-betweenness is characterised by what Benjamin (2017) calls "where both can live," instead of "where only one can live" due to power imbalances.

In the creativity of the co-creation process, (community) artistic expression is at stake, e.g., theatre, dance, visual arts, creative writing, playing with ideas and thoughts, or poetry. We argue with Holle (2020) that even though there may be feelings of isolation and anxiety in the state of in-betweenness (Beech, 2011), it can be a space for transformations (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). Such transformative processes relate to Paulo Freire's term "conscientization," describing the awakening and empowering processes occurring in groups working together (Freire, 2020). Zimmerman (2000) distinguishes between empowering processes and empowering outcomes. Collaborating with others, sharing responsibilities, decision-making, and leadership are empowering processes, while experiencing control and obtaining critical awareness are empowerment outcomes. As such, this study views co-creation as including both empowering processes and empowering outcomes.

In recent publications, creative co-creation has been proposed to be "distributed between audiences, materials, embodied actions, and the historico-socio-cultural affordances of the creative activity and environment, thus expanding the potentialities of creative collaboration beyond instances of direct human interaction and engagement" (Barrett et al., 2021). Here we see both processes and outcomes of creativity included, as well as a highlighted public involvement and engagement through what de Jaegher (2015) calls "the creative embodied actions of the collaborators." Turner (1979) argues that arts are a form of plural reflexivity, affecting and informing the viewer. Thus, the public becomes involved in the creative co-creation, resulting in knowledge and reflexivity. Public engagement is crucial since according to various authors the underlying orientation of creative co-creation can be conceived as transformative change (Holle, 2020, pp. 56–57), collaborative learning (Barrett et al., 2021, p. 2), and/or (more politically contextualised) as the deconstruction of social hegemonies (Holle et al., 2021, pp. 13–14). At this point, creative co-creation can become rather influential in a political, socio-cultural sense.

2.6. Involving Audiences

Researchers who seek to attract audiences involved in exploring complex issues, where awareness can be developed and social hegemonies unsettled, may choose creative co-creation research methods. This kind of participatory research is inextricable from the process. Renold and Ivinson (2022) speak of "entangled research." Creative co-creation participatory research with forced migrants is a good example of entangled research. Both the creative collaborative process between the researchers and forced migrants (as co-researchers), as well as the process with public involvement, are the goal. The researchers' activism lies in promoting equitable research forms of mutuality and thereby challenging systems of discrimination and exclusion. Creative co-creation research seeks to provide a context-specific, bottom-up understanding from the forced migrants' perspectives (Tracy, 2013), and thus attempts to foster the agency of all involved.

Agency has transformative qualities because it challenges and resists existing oppressive structures in a creative and (sometimes) even unintentional way (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). This research approach is emancipatory since the objectification of forced migrants is reduced, agency development is central, and situated knowledge based on lived experience is valued (Mahn et al., 2019). This contrasts with more "standard" research approaches that usually create methodological crows' nests from which to look down from a distance on the research objects (MacLure, 2006), and are often based on hierarchies between researchers and participants in favour of the first. The latter are often seen as informants instead of collaborative sensemaking co-intellectuals. Thus, standard research methods can reproduce existing harmful insights about forced migrants and the frequent framing of who "we" and "they" are.

In our research project, the methods, research process, and outcomes are not always well distinguished. How our participatory action research approach and our creative co-creation came into being was part of the research process and outcomes at the same time.

3. Illustration

The research team included two former pre-bachelor programme students and two researchers of the UUAS. The research was subsidised by a private foundation with co-financing from the UUAS; all researchers were paid. There were two rounds of in-depth interviews (approximately two hours per interview and all recorded) with 14 former pre-bachelor programme students. Participants in both rounds were asked for informed consent. The research received ethical approval from the UUAS.

The students' former home countries were Syria, Iran and Somalia. The first interview round took place in the academic year 2019–2020. The second round was postponed due to the ensuing global pandemic. During the pandemic, we as researchers phoned all the students involved in the research and met with those who were willing to speak in person. We did not record these conversations. In the second interview round (academic year 2022–2023), many students referred to the pandemic. The in-depth interviews were conducted by two pairs of researchers mixed as follows: one male and one female, including one researcher with a refugee background and one without. Within the research team we had ten long reflection meetings of approximately three hours each.

3.1. Creative Co-Creation Validation During the Research Process

At specific moments throughout the research process, we shared outcomes from the in-depth interviews (see Table 1). Our research data informed the process of creative co-creation artefacts-making. Two fictional films were made by one of the interviewed former pre-bachelor programme students who in the meantime had studied audio-visual media. The first film premiere was accompanied by a well-attended (online due to the pandemic) round table conducted by former pre-bachelor programme students. Approximately 70 UUAS teachers and stakeholders attended. The second film premiere was an even larger event with 120 participants (see Table 1, step 9). This film was made in collaboration with Utrecht University of the Arts. Our research team and three performing artists from Utrecht University of the Arts (two had a refugee background) had developed a theatrical form together, *Playing With Identities*, which was informed by our research as well. A book, *Niet meer (slechts) een vluchteling* (*Not (just) a refugee anymore*), was also published (Abdulsattar et al., 2023). After the book's publication, a podcast about it was released (see Table 1, step 10). With this validation

Table 1. Step-by-step process from data collection to creative output and dialogue.

Step 1	Researcher interviews with each other
Step 2	In-depth interviews with former pre-bachelor programme students
Step 3	Labelling transcribed interviews
Step 4	Research team reflection on outcomes
Step 5	Meetings with the filmmaker and first film premiere
Step 6	Round table with a broader audience
Step 7	Second round of in-depth interviews with former pre-bachelor programme students
Step 8	Transforming outcomes into artefacts (second film, theatrical form)
Step 9	Public discussion after the premiere of the second film
Step 10	(Public) dissemination of theatrical form and podcast

of our work in the form of various artefacts during the research process, we reached and engaged in a dialogue with broader audiences. By regularly inviting teachers, other students, and stakeholders to our activities, we intended to raise awareness about the significantly increasing Dutch societal "us-versus-them" divide.

3.2. Intertwined Team Collaboration, Data Collection, and Creative Output and Dialogue

In this section, we show that the process from data collection to creative output and dialogue was strongly intertwined with the collaboration within the research team. Two examples are highlighted. First, we elucidate how the "us-versus-them" divide was eloquently expressed both in our reflective sessions within the research team as well as in a round table discussion following the first film. Secondly, we show how the recurring theme of identity led to the work form of "Playing with identities" for the benefit of higher education.

3.3. "Us-Versus-Them" in team Collaboration, First Film, and Round Table

In our research team, we started by interviewing one another (see Table 1, step 1). We experienced how vulnerable it could feel to be interviewed, then read transcribed interviews and discussed these among ourselves. By doing this, reciprocity came to the fore and proved to be a dominant theme. One of us (a non-refugee researcher) put it as follows:

> The first in-depth interviews we had were conversations with each other. Everyone carries their own story with them, their own "backpack." By sharing this with each other, mutual appreciation and safety emerged. It is in my opinion important to expose yourself when exploring such a topic, in order to acknowledge your own prejudices, weaknesses and other human traits.

In our researcher collaboration, we tried to minimise but not deny the differences among us:

> We work together, but we don't, for example, write reports. Yet I never feel you are better, or above me, and there are other things you can do but I cannot. Surely that is normal! (Quote from one of the researchers with a refugee past)

On the one hand, we realised that our lives as researchers are completely dissimilar. On the other hand, all the important questions about searches in life are pertinent to all of us even as "us-versus-them" differences exist in society as a whole. Exemplary questions here were as follows. Could someone without a refugee history empathise with a refugee's story at all? How far can you go in probing the other's life story? One researcher thought probing in this situation was connected to a superior role and thus to a power imbalance.

Based on our research question and the first researcher interviews with each other, we developed a topic list and started a series of open in-depth interviews with the former pre-bachelor programme students (see Table 1, step 2). We then analysed the transcribed interviews by labelling quotes and eventually grouping them into several main themes, using "content analysis" (see Table 1, step 3). In doing so, we explicitly decided that each research pair would only analyse the other pair's interviews. We presented and discussed the (more than 175) labels with corresponding quotations and our interpretations to each other within the team (see Table 1, step 4), and eventually nine umbrella themes remained. The nine are as follows: "the past as a paradox," "changing identities," "being different and discrimination," "language skills and meaningfulness," "barriers in education," "culture, religion and values," "the us-versus-them divide," "the big changes during the first years," and "playing with identities." Within our research team we further reflected on these nine themes. We did this by each alternately preparing relevant questions for the other three researchers, thus seeking more understanding and confirmation of the themes from our own cultural, biographical, and linguistic perspectives. We also wanted to understand if and how we thought the themes were (at least partly) interrelated. In addition, one could also state that these themes are universal life themes of young people starting their studies and going into a new, uncertain future. Thus, the potential interrelations and the major differences between the lives of the refugee students and their non-refugee peers, were important to explore thoroughly.

Next, we started talks with a filmmaker (a former pre-bachelor programme student) about making the first film (see Table 1, step 5) about the gap and the differences our students (former refugees) had reported having to overcome in their education compared to regular students. As researchers, we stepped into a new role and became the filmmaker's client. Together we decided that a film on this topic had to be recognisable, empathetic, and poetic about the former students' educational experiences in the Netherlands. After the first film's premiere ("The Letter"), we as a research team organised an online round table discussion (see Table 1, step 6) between (former pre-bachelor programme) students with a refugee background, participating teachers, and other stakeholders. In this meeting, the "us-versus-them" divide came up most forcefully. In this divide, refugees are dehumanised and human dignity is violated. The isolation of refugee students proved to be particularly concerning. The students were outraged at the lack of solidarity from fellow regular students and regular higher education teachers who had abandoned them to their fate, as well as the shortcomings of the UUAS organisation. Student group formation in general seemed to be left to the students, and this worked out badly for refugee students. Teachers often appealed to the refugee students' adult behaviour and expected they would be able to practise inclusive group formation, or at least learn to do so. This fits the dominant meritocratic Dutch way of passing the baton directly to refugees and other migrants in general to take responsibility for their integration in society. The Dutch idea is that equal opportunities in education are best realised when students are treated equally. We recognised during the round table discussion that refugee students in general try very hard to fit in but are rarely accepted in student groups in higher education in the Netherlands. This is a difficult situation and reinforces their feeling of "being different." One former pre-bachelor programme student said that no one wanted to work with him

until he became a high-performing student. The risks of being excluded in higher education are reinforced for refugee students when education is mainly directed towards individualised, personalised, and flexible learning pathways and not towards community development. The question was raised whether teachers also should not take more responsibility to create inclusive classroom spaces to address student differences and possible transformation (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). This would start with the teachers' efforts to personally relate to all students, and so learn what is going on in the class and among the students, particularly those with a background as a refugee.

The round table was hosted by five former pre-bachelor programme students (three of whom were also our respondents). This exercise served as a meaningful participant validation member check (McKim, 2023). These students provided more structured and public feedback on several of our coded nine themes, e.g., "barriers in education," "the us-versus-them divide," and "being different and discrimination."

3.4. Creating Space for Differences

Identity was a dominant and recurring theme in the former pre-bachelor programme students' in-depth interviews and in our research team's conversations. Being able to deal flexibly with one's identity, or partial identities, seemed to be an important condition when entering a new society. In the team, we discussed the following questions:

1. How does a new situation or your new life here affect your own identity?
2. Is it difficult to form a new identity? What makes it difficult?
3. Do you need to change your mind to live or cope with the new society?
4. Imagine you want to keep your old habits, traditions, and thoughts, how would you cope with a new society?
5. Is it dangerous to play with your identity? Is there any risk of losing your "true" identity?

The final nine coded themes that emerged flowed together. The theme of identity also addressed the "us-versus-them" divide, thus we concluded that bridging differences does not require refugee students to give up their identities. What is relevant is creating space for diversity and recognising and valuing distinct perspectives. We recognised a certain power imbalance among ourselves as researchers with and without a refugee background and felt the urge to not brush away these differences. What mattered most was that we regularly took time to talk to one another thus creating a slow process. This approach also made us experiment with the theatrical work form of "Playing with identities" (see Table 1, step 8). This form opens an interactive narrative in which the players can identify with an introducer's life story scene, thus fostering understanding and even empathising with the introducer's experiences. The introducer can feel recognised due to their re-enacted life scene, and/or can come to new insights about their own life by seeing what the players experience. As part of the research process, we elaborated our theatrical form and offered it to Dutch higher education teachers (see Table 1, step 10):

> It was very moving for me to see how someone with a refugee past, from another generation, from another world, could completely believably empathise with my life story. (Quote from one of the non-refugee researchers)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our original longitudinal research key question was: "How do former pre-bachelor programme students experience finding their way into Dutch higher education and society?" In the in-depth interviews with these refugee students, the feeling of isolation came up frequently and again in a most painful way during the round table discussion.

The refugee students reported that they had been excluded from collaborating with other students and felt "othered" by their regular higher education teachers. Barriers to full class participation were sometimes erected rather than broken down. It appeared that the teachers believed that the benefits of the successful participation of refugee students was as an investment in which only the refugee students stood to gain. Moreover, there was a strong teacher perception that extra attention to refugee students would not be fair to the non-refugee students, and like all students, refugee students should stand up for themselves. This fits the dominant meritocratic Dutch way of passing the baton directly to refugees and other migrants in general to take responsibility for their integration in society. The Dutch idea is that equal opportunities in education are best realised when students are treated equally. In the round table discussion, however, it became very clear that successful participation matters to all students, not just refugee students. A new notion of "we" in Dutch higher education and society that does not perpetuate the divide between "us" and "them" requires a shared responsibility. Education needs room for stories and should provide space for dialogue and community development (Drop & Mesker, 2024) from which refugee students may also gain a great deal. This kind of creative co-creation in education does not only offer opportunities for joy and sharing but also for developing more responsivity and improvisation to enable students to shape their world (Alibali & Nathan, 2018; Drop & Mesker, 2024). This is the objective we as researchers tried to realise within our research process with the creative output. We aimed to raise awareness about the importance of community building from which refugee students in particular would benefit. In addition, we promoted an embodied way of teaching (Macrine & Fugate, 2022) in which *all* students are supported to integrate and invited to experience becoming persons who contribute to each other's wellbeing, Dutch society and the world. With the essence of creative co-creation as a way of giving shape to the world around us, students can develop their agency (Björkdahl & Selimovic, 2015). Teachers have a responsibility to create inclusive classroom spaces for student differences and possible transformation (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2013). This starts with relating to all students and learning about each student's struggles. Teachers, educators, and university authorities need to acknowledge students' backgrounds, which includes being inclusive of differences and addressing the desired social outcomes of education (Nunan et al., 2000).

The process from data collection to creative output and dialogue relied heavily on our collaboration within the research team. Participative research and creative co-creation went hand in hand in our research. As researchers, we tried to listen and learn from the refugee students' experiences. We chose participatory research because this research methodology facilitates listening, learning, and reflexivity in collaborative ways (Lenette, 2022). In this thoughtful and meaningful qualitative research methodology, process and research findings are intertwined and not hierarchically related to one another, which was of great importance to us. The intensive collaboration in our research team gave all opportunities for an emic understanding of the forced migrant perspective. Research with refugees is still a unique practice (Kara & Pickering, 2017). Our effort provided room for transformations and in-betweenness, especially because of the dynamic power relations. During the moments when we as researchers engaged with public audiences,

we saw how creative co-creation can result in a cumulation of knowledge and reflexivity (Turner, 1979). We saw the danger of being too focused on our research team itself, for this could be interpreted as self-praise about doing collaborative research with refugees. In addition, by leaving the crow's nest (MacLure, 2006) our research runs the risk of not being taken seriously, although knowledge co-creation contributing to social inclusion and social justice for refugees is of utmost importance. With our plea for room for stories, participatory student initiatives, and community development in education, we did not want to simply describe the do's and don'ts of education for refugee students. Instead, we hope to foster understanding and recognition of refugee students' search in finding their way into Dutch higher education and Dutch society and give insights to educational authorities, teachers, and fellow students about how refugee students perceive the educational support they need to succeed in their search for integration.

4.1. Further Research

Other longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate whether the benefits of creative co-creation and participatory approaches persist over time and lead to sustained improvements in integration and success for refugee students in higher education. More studies are also needed to understand the educational challenges and opportunities to facilitate inclusive, embodied pedagogical-didactic approaches, such as creative co-creation, and how this can contribute to the full participation of students who are refugees and other students. Ongoing investigation is needed to discover how teachers, educators, and university authorities can acknowledge *all* students' backgrounds, thus creating a diverse yet whole community. Further research into refugee students' change agent role is needed in the Netherlands. Although this is not a new perspective, it has been signalled in the education literature for more than a decade (Hendriks & van Ewijk, 2017), thus, further investigation is needed to determine why the educational praxis proves to be so recalcitrant.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abdulsattar, R., Barry, O., Hendriks, P., & Drop, H. (2023). *Niet meer (slechts) een vluchteling*. Hogeschool Utrecht.

Alibali, M. W., & Nathan, M. J. (2018). Embodied cognition in learning and teaching: Action, observation, and imagination. In F. Fischer, C. E. Hmelo-Silver, S. R. Goldman, & P. Reimann (Eds.), *International handbook of the learning sciences* (pp. 75–85). Routledge.

Anzaldúa, G., & Keaton, A. (2013). *This bridge we call home*. Routledge.

Arendt, H. (1994). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Harcourt. (Original work published 1951)

Arendt, H. (2006). *Between past and future*. Penguin. (Original work published 1954)

Barrett, M. S., Creech, A., & Zhukov, K. (2021). Creative collaboration and collaborative creativity: A systematic literature review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *12*, Article 713445. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.713445

Beech, N. (2011). Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction. *Human Relations*, *64*(2), 285–302.

Benjamin, J. (2017). *Beyond doer and done to. Recognition theory, intersubjectivity and the third.* Routledge.

Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement. Ethics, politics, democracy.* Paradigm Publishers.

Biesta, G. (2022). *World-centered education: A view for the present.* Routledge.

Björkdahl, A., & Selimovic, J. M. (2015). Gendering agency in transitional justice. *Security Dialogue, 46,* 165–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552547

Brandsen, T., Steen, T., & Verschuere, B. (2018). *Co-production and co-creation: Engaging citizens in public services.* Taylor & Francis.

Caidi, N., & Allard, D. (2005). Social inclusion of newcomers to Canada: An information problem? *Library & Information Science Research, 27*(3), 302–324. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2005.04.003

Chu, E., White F. A., & Verrelli, S. (2020). Biculturalism amongst ethnic minorities: Its impact for individuals and intergroup relations. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 69*(4), 229–236.

de Carteret, P. (2008). Storytelling as research praxis, and conversations that enabled it to emerge. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 21*(3), 235–249.

de Jaegher, H. (2015). How we affect each other. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 22*(1/2), 112–132.

Drop, H., & Mesker, P. (2024). Bildung-making as a key for inclusive education. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2024.2361036

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (Ed.). (2020). *Refuge in a moving world: Tracing refugee and migrant journeys across disciplines.* UCL Press.

Flach, S., Margulies, D., & Söffner, J. (2010). *Habitus in habitat: Emotion and motion.* International Academic Publishers.

Freire, P. (2020). *Pedagogy of the oppressed. Toward a sociology of education.* Routledge.

Ghorashi, H. (2018). Decolonizing the Islamic other: The changed conditions of critical thinking. In M. F. Weiner & A. C. Báez (Eds.), *Smash the pillars: Decoloniality and the imaginary of color in the Dutch kingdom* (pp. 185–197). Lexington Books.

Ghorashi, H., & Sabelis, I. (2013). Juggling difference and sameness: Rethinking strategies for diversity in organizations. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 29*(1), 78–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2012.11.002

Gidley, J. M., Hampson, G. P., Wheeler, L., & Bereded-Samuel, E. (2010). From access to success: An integrated approach to quality higher education informed by social inclusion theory and practice. *Higher Education Policy, 23*(1), 123–147. https://doi.org/10.1057/hep. 2009.24

Hack-Polay, D. (2020). Global South expatriates, homesickness and adjustment approaches. *Public Health Reviews, 41*(1), Article 11.

Hack-Polay, D., Mahmoud, A. B., Kordowicz, M., Madziva, R., & Kivunja, C. (2021). "Let us define ourselves": Forced migrants' use of multiple identities as a tactic for social navigation. *BMC Psychology, 9,* Article 125. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-021-00630-6

Hendriks, P., & van Ewijk, H. (2017). Finding common ground: how superdiversity is unsettling social work education. *European Journal of Social work, 22*(1), 158–170. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1366431

Holle, F. (2020). *Queer creations between a rock and a hard place* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Holle, F., Rast, M. C., & Ghorashi, H. (2021). Exilic (art) narratives of queer refugees challenging dominant hegemonies. *Frontiers in Sociology, 6,* Article 641630. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.641630

Hugman, R. (2005). *New approaches in ethics for the caring professions.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Kara, H., & Pickering, L. (2017). New directions in qualitative research ethics. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 20*(3), 239–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2017.1287869

Kemmis, S. (2009). Action research as a practice-based practice. *Educational Action Research, 17*(3), 463–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790903093284

Kilpatrick, S., & Johns, S. (2014). Institutional responses to social inclusion in Australian higher education: Responsible citizenship or political pragmatism? *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 16*(2), 27–45. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.16.2.27

Kraus, A. (2008). *The sociopolitical construction of identity: A multidimensional model of disability*. The University of Arizona.

Lenette, C. (2022). *Participatory action research. Ethics and decolonization*. Oxford University Press.

Liasidou, A. (2014). Critical disability studies and socially just change in higher education. *British Journal of Special Education, 41*(2), 120–135. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12063

MacLure, M. (2006). The bone in the throat: Some uncertain thoughts on baroque method. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19*(6), 729–745.

Macrine, S. L., & Fugate, J. M. B. (2022). Embodied cognition and its educational significance. In S. L. Macrine & J. M. B. Fugate (Eds.), *Movement matters: How embodied cognition informs teaching and learning* (pp. 13–25). MIT Press.

Mahn, C., Milne, E., Guzman, M., & Ahmed, F. (2019). Negotiating space for queer-identifying young people in a refugee organization: Viability, complexities and tensions. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 34*(2), 1477–1493. https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez101

McKim, C. (2023). Meaningful member-checking: A structured approach to member-checking. *American Journal of Qualitative Research, 7*(2), 41–52. https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12973

Meloni, F., Vanthuyne, K., & Rousseau, C. (2015). Towards a relational ethics: Rethinking ethics, agency and dependency in research with children and youth. *Anthropological Theory, 15*(1), 106–123.

Mojab, S., & Carpenter, S. (2011). Learning by dispossession: Democracy promotion and civic engagement in Iraq and the United States. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 30*, 549–563.

Morrice, L. (2012). Learning and refugees: Recognizing the darker side of transformative learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 63*(3), 251–271.

Nunan, T., George, R., & McCausland, H. (2000). Inclusive education in universities: Why it is important and how it might be achieved. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 4*(1), 63–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/136031100284920

Pittaway, E., Bartolomei, L., & Hugman, R. (2010). "Stop stealing our stories": The ethics of research with vulnerable groups. *Journal of Human Rights* Practice, *2*(2), 229–35.

Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *The Sage handbook of action research, participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Renold, E., & Ivinson, G. (2022). Posthuman co-production: Becoming response-able with what matters. *Qualitative Research Journal, 22*(1), 108–128. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-01-2021-0005

Staszak, J. (2009). Other/otherness. In R. Kitchin & N. Thrift (Eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* (pp. 43–47). https://www.sciencedirect.com/referencework/9780080449104/international-encyclopedia-of-human-geography

Tammas, R. (2019, November 1). Refugee stories could do more harm than good. *Open Democracy*. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/refugee-stories-could-do-more-harm-good

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Wiley.

Turner, V. (1979). Frame, flow and reflection: Ritual and drama as public liminality. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 6*(4), 465–499.

World Health Organisation. (2011). *Indigenous Peoples and participatory health research*. https://www.mcgill.ca/cine/files/cine/partreresearch_english.pdf

Young, I. M. (2007). Structural injustice and the politics of difference. In I. M. Young (Ed.), *Justice, governance, cosmopolitanism, and the politics of difference: Reconfigurations in a transnational world* (pp. 79–116). Humboldt University.

Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). Empowerment theory. Psychological, organizational and community levels of analysis. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 43–63). Kluwer Academic; Plenum Publishers.

About the Authors

Hanke Drop works as a senior teacher-researcher at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (UUAS) in the art therapy bachelor programme and in two research groups: Value-Oriented Professionalisation and Sustainable Communities. In the UUAS pre-bachelor programme for refugee students, she used to work as the coordinator and was one of the teachers. Currently, she prepares a PhD on creative co-creation, Bildung-making, and teacher artistry as keys to inclusive education.

Peter Hendriks (PhD) works as a senior lecturer in social work and as a researcher at the Research Center for Social Innovation at UUAS. His research is focused on the impact of increasing diversity on social work education and practice. In his PhD research, he explored the experiences of newly started Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch female professionals in social work. His main interest was in methods of participatory research.

Oumar Barry was born in Guinee in West-Africa, where he studied Islamic studies before he had to flee the country. After a few years teaching French at a Dutch secondary school, he became a politician at the local level of the Dutch city of Utrecht. Meanwhile, he completed a Master of intercultural communication at the University of Utrecht. His extensive knowledge and own experiences with migration (research), different cultures, and languages make him an integration expert.

Rania Abdulsattar worked as a teacher in Syria before she and her family had to leave the country. In the Netherlands, she completed an intensive teacher's study programme in Dutch as a second language, as well as a social work study. Currently, she works as a professional in both domains, in which her research qualities are of great benefit. She seeks to make a difference together with clients in the social domain, as well as with Dutch as a second language learners.

cogitatio

ARTICLE

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

Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga [1] and **Natasha Dyer-Williams** [2]

[1] Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[2] School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK

Correspondence: Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga (m.a.ocadizarriaga@vu.nl)

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.

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.

References

AFROntera Collective. (2021, May 31). AFROntera manifesto. *Terremoto*. https://terremoto.mx/en/revista/manifiesto-afrontera

Ahikire, J. (2014). African feminism in context. *Feminist Africa*, *19*, 7–23.

Decker, A. C., & Baderoon, G. (2018). African feminisms: Cartographies for the twenty-first century. *Meridians*, *17*(2), 219–231.

Dieng, R. S. (2023). Speaking out, talking back? African feminist politics and decolonial poetics of knowing, organising and loving. *Review of African Political Economy*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2023.2284524

Drullard, M. (2023, March 31). No quiero visibilidad, quiero una vida vivible: Reflexiones sobre prótesis travestis y políticas de transición desde el cuerpo de una mujer negra trans. *Volcánicas*. https://volcanicas.com/no-quiero-visibilidad-quiero-una-vida-vivible-reflexiones-sobre-protesis-y-politicas-de-transicion-desde-el-cuerpo-de-una-mujer-negra-trans

Emejulu, A., & Sobande, F. (2023). Intersectional vulnerabilities and the banality of harm: The dangerous desires of women of color activists. *Meridians*, *22*(1), 76–93.

Gqola, P. (2001). Defining people: Analysing power, language and representation in metaphors of the New South Africa. *Transformation*, *47*, 94–106. https://n2t.net/ark:/85335/m56q1wm26

Griffiths, M. (2014). Out of time: The temporal uncertainties of refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *40*(12), 1991–2009. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.907737

Kihato, C. (2013). *Migrant women of Johannesburg: Everyday life in an in-between city*. Springer.

Kolawole, M. (2004). Re-conceptualizing African gender theory: Feminism, womanism and the Arere metaphor. In S. Arnfred (Ed.), *Re-thinking sexualities in Africa* (pp. 251–266). Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Lewis, D. (2002). *African feminist studies: 1980–2002. A review essay for the African Gender Institute's "Strengthening Gender and Women's Studies for Africa's Social Transformation" project* (Working Paper). https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21537.71523

Lewis, D. (2007). Feminism and the radical imagination. *Agenda*, *21*(72), 18–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2007.9674832

Lewis, D. (2016). Bodies, matter and feminist freedoms: Revisiting the politics of food. *Agenda*, *30*(4), 6–16.

Lorde, A. (1993). The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. In H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, & D. M. Halperin (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay studies reader* (pp. 339–343). Routledge.

Mama, A. (2011). What does it mean to do feminist research in African contexts? *Feminist Review*, *98* (Suppl. 1), e4–e20.

Marais, K. (2019). Calls for pleasure: How African feminists are challenging and unsilencing women's sexualities. *Agenda*, *33*(3), 87–95. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2019.1644960

Mbilinyi, M. (2015). Transformative feminism in Tanzania. In R. Baksh & W. Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of transnational feminist movements* (pp. 507–528). https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199943494.013.026

Meah, A., & Jackson, P. (2016). Re-imagining the kitchen as a site of memory. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *17*(4), 511–532. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2015.1089587

Mpofu, W. (2020). Xenophobia as racism: The colonial underside of nationalism in South Africa. *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies*, *3*(2), 33–52. https://doi.org/10.13169/intecritdivestud.3.2.0033

Mukumbang, F. C., Ambe, A. N., & Adebiyi, B. O. (2020). Unspoken inequality: How Covid-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities of asylum-seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants in South Africa. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, *19*(1), Article 141. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-020-01259-4

Naicker, C. (2016). The languages of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa: Reviewing migrancy, foreignness, and solidarity. *Agenda*, *30*(2), 46–60.

Nnaemeka, O. (2004). Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *29*(2), 357–385. https://doi.org/10.1086/378553

Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2007). From bounded to flexible citizenship: Lessons from Africa. *Citizenship Studies*, *11*(1), 73–82.

Ocadiz Arriaga, M. A. (2023). 'Loboko Ya Mama': Homemade recipes of belonging. *Agenda*, *37*(1), 27–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2023.2179410

PE ladies, & Ocadiz, M. (2024). *Loboko ya mama. African homemade recipes in times of pandemic*. Langaa. https://www.africanbookscollective.com/books/loboko-ya-mama

Pereira, C. (2002). Between knowing and imagining. *Feminist Africa*, *1*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48726056

Probyn, E. (2003). *Carnal appetites: Food sex identities*. Routledge.

Salami, M. (2020). *Sensuous knowledge: A black feminist approach for everyone*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Stasiulis, D., Jinnah, Z., & Rutherford, B. (2020). Migration, intersectionality and social justice—Guest editors' introduction. *Studies in Social Justice*, *14*(1), 1–12.

Tamale, S. (2006). African feminism: How should we change? *Development*, *49*(1), 38–41.

Tamale, S. (2011). Researching and theorising sexualities in Africa. *African Sexualities: A reader*, *14*(3), 11–36.

Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and Afro-feminism*. Daraja Press.

Werner, M., Strauss, K., Parker, B., Orzeck, R., Derickson, K., & Bonds, A. (2017). Feminist political economy in geography: Why now, what is different, and what for? *Geoforum*, *79*, 1–4.

About the Authors

Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga is a creative writer and multidisciplinary scholar. She has recently concluded a PhD within the project Engaged Scholarship Narratives of Change at the Vrije University Amsterdam, where she analysed the role of academia in contributing to the societal inclusion of forced migrants in South Africa. Her work focuses on South-South mobility from a decolonial perspective, addressing the intersections of migration, gender, and everyday manifestations of resistance.

Natasha Dyer-Williams is a research, communications and partnerships professional, who has worked in international development, peace, and gender work for almost fifteen years. She recently completed an interdisciplinary PhD in international development exploring the intersectional lived experiences of African migrant women navigating xenophobia, racial capitalism and "layered time" in Johannesburg and London. She is based in Berlin and is a trained mediator and creative storytelling facilitator.

cogitatio

"But We Just Need Money": (Im)Possibilities of Co-Producing Knowledge With Those in Vulnerable Situations

Jane Freedman [1] 🔗, **Tamaryn L. Crankshaw** [2] 🔗, **Yasmin Rajah** [3], and **Victoria Marcia Mutambara** [4]

[1] Université Paris 8, France
[2] HEARD, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa
[3] Refugee Social Services, South Africa
[4] Jesuit Refugee Services, South Africa

Correspondence: Jane Freedman (jane.freedman@cnrs.fr)

Abstract

This article is based on the experience of carrying out research with young refugee women in Durban, South Africa. We reflect on the possibilities of co-producing knowledge in a situation of widely asymmetrical power relations where the young women with whom we were interacting were located in situations of economic, legal, and social vulnerability, and when their major concern was to find money for basic survival. The premise behind our research was to produce data and knowledge that could be used to improve services for these young refugee women and to lobby for change in policies that would also improve their life situations. Our article reflects on this ambition and the possibilities of co-producing knowledge that could improve these young women's lives, our interactions with the young refugee women, and with the CSO that offers them support and with whom we partnered to organize our data collection. We also analyse the different positionalities of various members of the research team and how these impacted the data collection and knowledge production processes. The article aims to provide a critical assessment of the ways in which knowledge production may or may not be a liberatory practice and the conditions within which true co-production of knowledge is possible. We ask whether it is, in fact, possible to co-produce knowledge when working with people in vulnerable situations such as the women refugees in our project. As academics, how may we learn from our failures to try and move forward with more truly inclusive and equitable research that challenges epistemic oppression?

Keywords

co-production; gender; refugees; South Africa

---

1. Introduction

"But we just need money!" These words, spoken by a young Congolese refugee woman in a restitution meeting organized in the context of our research, sum up in many ways the impossibilities of using research/knowledge production as a means of transforming inequalities that are so firmly ingrained in existing systems of power and domination. Whilst we had framed our project with these young women as producing knowledge that could be used to somehow improve their lives (albeit in a small way), we understood that the situations of vulnerability in which they found themselves were so extreme in many cases, that the only thing that would really improve their lives was a massive change in their legal and economic situation, which our research and knowledge production clearly could not provide. Under these circumstances, we asked ourselves whether or not our research had made any contribution, and whether we could have proceeded differently to have a more positive impact. As feminist researchers who are keenly aware of intersectional structures of inequality and domination, we clearly wish to pursue research that will contribute towards a reduction in these inequalities. But we also had to recognize that various factors, including our own positionalities and the way in which research projects and funding are structured within academia, provide serious barriers to the possibilities of co-created knowledge and liberatory knowledge production. In this article, we discuss the ambitions and limits of our research and our interactions with the young refugee women participating in the project to provide a critical assessment of the ways in which knowledge production may or may not be a "liberatory practice."

2. The Research Project

Our research, which was funded through a joint France–South Africa research grant (we will discuss the constraints of this funding in further detail later in the article) sought to understand the experiences of young refugee women in South Africa and the ways in which they become vulnerable to gender-based violence and poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, as well as the barriers to access to services and their own strategies for resilience when faced with these situations of vulnerability. We start from an explicitly feminist perspective where we aim to produce "useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives" (Letherby, 2003, p. 4). We wanted to use feminist methodologies to expose the structures of inequalities that created situations of intersectional vulnerability for these young women, in order to make recommendations both for policymakers and for civil society organisations (CSOs) working with these young women to make changes that would improve their lives. We realized at the outset that these young women with whom we were hoping to do research and produce knowledge were in vulnerable positions, recounting experiences of violence and exploitation, and we were extremely wary of the impacts that our research might have on them. However, following Turton (1996, p. 96), we believed that "research into the suffering of others can only be justified if alleviation of that suffering is an explicit objective." Thus, whilst we realized that our research would expose the ways in which these young women were made vulnerable, and might lead to the production of knowledge concerning their experiences of violence, we kept in mind that the objective would be to create improvements for them and for other refugees, and that it was only with this understanding that we could engage ethically in the research. Indeed, ethical considerations were at the forefront of our thinking, and we were clear that we wanted to go beyond mere "procedural ethics" and a "do-no-harm" approach (Bilotta, 2020; Clark-Kazack, 2021; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003) to produce research that could actively involve partners outside of academia and challenge existing structures and hierarchies of inequality and discrimination.

The concept of vulnerability and the understanding of our different positionalities and thus differing levels of vulnerability were key to our research. We started from an understanding of vulnerability drawing on Fineman's (2010) concept of vulnerability as depending on the particularities of individual embodiment and positions "within webs of economic and institutional relationships" and "the quality and quantity of resources we possess or can command." Within this understanding, vulnerability does not attach itself to a particular pre-defined group, and is not an essential characteristic of some individuals; rather, it is produced through a range of social, economic, legal, and political structures (Reilly et al., 2022). In contrast to this, resilience is produced through the quantity and quality of social resources to which individuals have access within the societal structures where they are located.

Rast et al. (2020, p. 857) discuss the concept of resilience in relation to refugees and argue that resilience cannot be disconnected from their rights and recognition in host societies and that "resilience capacity thus depends on economic as well as cultural and social resources on all societal levels." In the South African context where refugee rights are increasingly restricted, this resilience may appear hard to achieve and support (Kavuro, 2022). So we believed that young refugee women should not be labelled as vulnerable per se, and one of the objectives of our research was to understand how they could be rendered vulnerable, and how we could use our research to support their strategies for resilience. We combined this structural approach to vulnerability with a situated intersectional analysis (Yuval-Davis, 2015), which highlights the need to analyse the complex inequalities and power relations in societies without reducing these to a single social division such as gender, class, etc. Situated intersectionality, therefore, calls for particular attention to be paid to the "geographic, social and temporal locations" (Yuval-Davis, 2015) of the individual and collective actors who we seek to understand. As such it is especially relevant to the study of inequalities and vulnerabilities in contexts of migration. The adoption of a feminist intersectional perspective using Yuval-Davis' (2013) conception of situated intersectionality, we believed, would bring an in-depth understanding of the ever-shifting character of these intersectional axes of inequality, and would be combined with an analysis of mobilities to provide knowledge on dynamic matrices (Hill Collins, 1990) of domination, marginalization, agency, and resilience. A dynamic and situated intersectional approach can, we believe, serve as a "corrective to essentializing identity constructs that homogenize social categories" (Anthias, 2012, p. 107). That is to understand vulnerability as being situated and dependent on spatial, temporal, and social locations, which are dynamic and changing, rather than as based on a social category such as "woman" or "refugee." This understanding of situated intersectional vulnerability allowed us to understand better how young women refugees are made vulnerable but also to situate ourselves within the research teams and understand our different positionalities and potential positions of vulnerability. Understanding that vulnerability depends not on pre-defined categorisations and identities but on locations within a dynamic matrix of power inequalities allowed us to think differently: We as researchers and civil society members could also, in some circumstances, be "vulnerable" and thus detach ourselves from a binary division between researchers and "subjects." It made us reflect more deeply on our different positionalities within structures of power and inequality and how these might also change throughout the research (see our discussion of positionality and power asymmetries particularly in Section 5), and which structures and inequalities had a particular impact on refugee women's positions of vulnerability, including possibly their participation in our research.

3. What Do We Mean By Co-Production?

One of the goals we had at the outset of the project was to engage in co-production of knowledge with young women refugees. The concept of co-production of knowledge has become popular in recent years but is subject to competing interpretations (Thomas-Hughes & McDermont, 2021). The origin of the term is usually traced to Ostrom (1996), who defines it as "the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not 'in' the same organization" (p. 1073). Since this initial definition though, the notion has been taken up and used in widely different circumstances. Co-production in research has generally been developed as a response to the idea that research should be done not "about" but "with" marginalized subjects (Bell & Pahl, 2018). There is a general consensus that co-production should de-centre academia as a site of knowledge production and should acknowledge and involve those outside of academia as equally valid holders and producers of knowledge. In doing so it should create data that is more "representative of community needs" (Thomas-Hughes & McDermont, 2021, p. 292) and also greater opportunities for community engagement and capacity building. This is a particularly valuable approach when the research involves people who are generally marginalized and whose knowledge is overlooked or ignored, such as refugees, or CSOs working with refugees, for example. Co-production can be done through a wide range of research methods (and there is no particular method that is common to all those engaging in co-production) but should involve non-academic partners (CSOs, members of the community to be researched) as active research participants in horizontal partnerships (Lokot & Wake, 2021), where all participants contribute in a non-hierarchical manner to all stages of research—development, data collection, analysis, use of results.

Ideally, as Lokot and Wake (2023, p. 9) argue, co-production should mean research that "tackles unequal power dynamics, challenges existing knowledge production hierarchies, ensures more equal partnerships and shared decision making, emphasises reciprocity, promotes mutual capacity strengthening, ensures greater reflexivity and enables flexible ways of interacting and working across the research cycle." However, co-production is not without its own ethical challenges and should not be used as a way of masking or contributing to the maintenance of existing inequalities and systems of domination. Relations of power are often highly entrenched and also normalized/invisibilised, making them difficult to escape. Turnhout et al. (2020) argue that a dynamic of "depoliticization" in co-produced research can, in fact, lead to a reinforcement rather than a mitigation or reduction of existing power inequalities. Pincock and Bakunzi (2021) point to the specific problems in carrying out co-production and participative research with refugees, arguing that the power relationships between those refugees included in the research (peer researchers) and others are often not addressed. Whilst presenting itself as fully inclusive, co-production can mask real power inequalities leading to symbolic inclusion (Larruina & Ghorashi, 2020). In other words, using token inclusion of those from marginalized groups can occlude the ways in which these groups become marginalized.

The multiplicity of understandings of co-production means that there are many ways of conceiving and putting into practice co-production in research and no common understanding of what co-production should look like in practice (Facer & Enright, 2016; Thomas-Hughes & McDermont, 2021). One of the ways that can be envisaged for engaging in co-production is to create a team of researchers from both within and outside of academia. As Weiss (2016) argues, these "mixed" research teams may be seen as a "panacea for the ethical challenge of ethnography," but may also bring their own challenges. Given the marginalized and vulnerable positions of the young refugee women with whom we were seeking to work, we imagined that it would be

very difficult, and might indeed create harm, to try and engage directly with them; intermediary organisations, which work daily with refugees and thus may understand their positions better than researchers from academic institutions, was vital. However, there are also power asymmetries involved between researchers and civil society activists as we discuss further. Our civil society partner pointed, for example, to the fact that she was constantly solicited by researchers for a "gatekeeper letter," which is a requirement for South African university ethics committees before research can start. She explained that this put her in an awkward position, not wanting to block research projects (and especially those of young researchers) but also not feeling that she was entitled to provide "gatekeeper permission" for researchers to engage with the refugees with whom she worked, without consulting these refugees and asking their opinion.

Our co-production thus required the building of trust as a principle of collaboration between academic institutions and CSOs. However, as we have also found in some of our other research projects, trust in researchers is generally low and CSOs are wary of those seeking just knowledge extraction. These low levels of trust are the result of researchers requiring initial "buy-in" from CSOs and other stakeholders as intermediaries and points of entry into communities of research interest where early introductions and discussions often include commitments from researchers to civil society partners and other stakeholders to collaborate and co-produce knowledge. However, civil society's experience has been that these commitments are often not honoured by researchers as soon as access is granted, and the research becomes distanced or entirely detached from the intermediary institutions. This is a problem that has been noted by other researchers seeking to build partnerships with civil society. As Hattery et al. (2022, p. 513) remark regarding research with communities of colour in the US, "many communities, especially communities of color, have a history of exploitation and abuse that manifests in a deep distrust not only of individual researchers who are external to their communities, but also institutions that employ and fund research." Mistrust goes beyond the personalities and processes of individual research projects and is anchored in the very structures of academic knowledge production which have been shown to construct a system and sense of epistemic entitlement that is often unquestioned by those working within these universities (Thapar-Björkert & Farahani, 2019). As Fraser and Taylor (2016) argue, these processes can be seen to have been reinforced by the neo-liberal marketisation of university research and knowledge (re)production. Universities' continuing contribution to "epistemic oppression" (Dotson, 2012) can be played out in relationships with CSOs and other research partners (including academic institutions and researchers based in the Global North versus those in the Global South), and even when university researchers attempt to escape these structures, mistrust often remains.

We had also hoped that once we had built relationships with CSOs we could include young refugee women themselves as part of the research team. But for various reasons—which we will develop in more detail throughout the article—we found the limits of this strategy for refugee participation.

4. Putting Our Ideas Into Practice

As mentioned above, from the start of the project we realized it was vital to involve colleagues from outside academia, including members of CSOs working with refugees, and the young refugee women themselves. We worked with two CSOs based in Durban, South Africa: a not-for-profit organisation based in the city centre that provides social services primarily for refugees and asylum seekers in the KwaZulu-Natal Province and a non-governmental organisation that provides healthcare services to the marginalized communities in

the city. The involvement of these CSOs was key in understanding the situation and needs of young refugees and working to ensure that the results of the project were valuable to these young women and the CSOs themselves. Working with and through these organisations, we were able to get into contact with young refugee women and organize focus group discussions and interviews with these young women. We carried out four waves of qualitative research in the eThekwini city centre (formerly known as Durban) in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, between June–November 2019 (Freedman et al., 2020), July–October 2020 (Mutambara et al., 2022), September 2021–May 2022 (Crankshaw et al., 2023, 2024) and January–June 2023. We conducted in total five focus group discussions, 90 in-depth interviews with women asylum seekers and refugees living in the city, as well as interviews with key informants from organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees in the city ($N = 4$). Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

5. Positionality

As mentioned above, we are committed to conducting our research using explicitly feminist approaches and as a part of this abandoning the idea of the objectivity of a distant and neutral scientific method, to make explicit our own biases and positionality (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Lokot, 2019). Starting from this position and from the belief that it is impossible to separate "the knower from what he knows" (Smith, 1974, p. 8), we begin here with a reflection on our own positions as researchers/civil society activists and the way that what "we know" and how we can produce knowledge is inseparable from these positions. Reflecting on the possibilities for emancipatory or liberatory knowledge production must thus start from a consideration of our positionalities as researchers/civil society activists, and the ways that our positions within structures of inequality and our asymmetric power relations with the young refugee women (and with each other) impacted on these possibilities. We believe that it is imperative to break the silence around the constitutive inequalities and power asymmetries during any fieldwork (Caretta & Jokinen, 2017), and that even if it is not possible to break down these power inequalities, to work towards reducing their impacts.

There were three of us who participated in the project as researchers affiliated with a university/research institution. The fourth researcher was the leader of a CSO working with asylum seekers and refugees. All of us identify as women, but we were differently positioned in terms of race, nationality, citizenship, and professional status. One "lead" researcher held a permanent position within a European university, identified as white, and was a European citizen. The second "lead" researcher had been employed for more than eight years within a South African research institute, identified as white, and was a South African citizen. The "junior" researcher on the project was a post-doctoral fellow at the same South African research institute, a black woman of Zimbabwean origin, with legal residence status in South Africa. She was also the youngest in the team. All three of us had obtained a PhD qualification but only one of us had achieved a full professor academic position. The final partner was a senior member of a CSO, outside of academia, although she had considerable experience in engaging with academic researchers. She identified as a black South African (with Indian heritage), and had permanent employment within a CSO, although this was precarious due to the crisis in funding for civil society. She had obtained her undergraduate degree but had not completed her post-graduate studies and told us that she at first felt not qualified enough to fully contribute to the research. This feeling of "not being good enough" as a black woman and non-academic persisted for the first period of the research, and it was not until we had spent considerable time (indeed years) talking to each other and building relationships of trust that she said she felt free to express herself fully and contribute fully to the research.

6. Power Asymmetries Within the Research Team

Our different positioning within intersecting structures of inequality and domination clearly had an impact on our ability to engage in co-production and/or liberatory knowledge production. A first set of asymmetries amongst the researchers is important to note, even if these are secondary to the important asymmetries between researchers and refugees. The fact that the two lead researchers in the project were older white women with permanent/more secure employment played a role in their relations with the younger post-doctoral researcher who was on a finite employment contract under the conditions of a post-doctoral position. The post-doctoral researcher was employed specifically to work on this project, and thus, as well as being under the supervision of the senior researchers, her continuing employment in some ways depended on the "success" of this project. Although we attempted to mitigate these asymmetries by creating a supportive relationship and promoting our post-doctoral colleague as far as possible (for example, by making her first author in various publications drawn from the research), it is important not to dismiss these types of power inequalities within academic research teams, as we believe that they have an impact on the ways in which the researchers can engage with partners/participants and with each other.

However, the more marginalized position of our post-doctoral researcher within the academic research team, as well as her age, race, and nationality, also positioned her as closer to the young refugee women with whom we were working and thus enabled her to more fully engage in processes of co-production. The particular historical context of South Africa, and its racial divisions, as well as that of the city of Durban, where there is a very high level of urban violence, shaped our different abilities to participate in research activities with refugees. For the two white researchers, for example, the areas where most of the young refugees lived were viewed by other members of the team as "too dangerous." As white women (and in one case a non-South-African white woman), going into these areas of the city would have put us at real risk of opportunistic crime and/or physical violence, and we were thus discouraged from going there. Our post-doctoral colleague who is a young black woman of Zimbabwean origin was a far less visible target in these areas and it was easier for her to engage with the young refugee women in their own areas where they lived. But even for this colleague, travelling to the areas where the young refugee women lived posed some risks; this meant that she had to take precautions, such as travelling in the company of a peer educator from a civil society partner organisation, dressing casually and not carrying anything valuable with her. Importantly, being closer in age to the young refugee women and being a black woman like them allowed her to develop much closer relationships with these women than the older, white female researchers could. Furthermore, although she did not share the same precarious migration status or social situation as the young refugee women, she had also experienced a migration journey that could situate her closer to the position of these young women. This proximity in age and sharing a migrant experience allowed her to build closer relationships with the young women and keep up constant contact with them as we discuss further below.

Finally, the positioning of our CSO collaborator was complex in that she was placed in a situation where she was the head of the CSO but not officially a leader of the project, as this was not possible within the academic funding structures, as we discuss below. She felt at the start of the project that she was not as legitimate a researcher as the academic partners. But at the same time, the academic researchers were dependent on her and her organisation for support involving young refugee women in the project. This position was also complicated by the CSO need for funding. Indeed, during the duration of the project, the organisation lost some of its core funding and its budgets were constantly under threat. At some point, this

led to tensions concerning costs associated with the research. Our CSO partner remarked that organisations such as hers often "subsidise" research by providing space where researchers and refugees can meet, for example, with no compensation for personnel, rent, telephone call costs, etc. She also remarked that it was hard to ask for greater remuneration as she felt that research is perceived as "noble" and there seems to be an expectation that one should contribute voluntarily and without expecting remuneration because, ultimately, the research is going to add value the CSO programme. The costs involved in being the liaison between the academic research participant and the researchers as a CSO are therefore often hidden. Division of budget is something that is rarely discussed in project methodologies, but both the structure of academic funding and the sometimes-differing priorities of research partners as to how this funding could/should be spent are in our view an obstacle to the success of co-production. This is magnified in the current context where both academic institutions and CSOs are generally suffering from funding cuts and thus budgets are ever more squeezed.

7. Structuring of Academic Research as a Barrier to Co-Production

One of the most immediate and evident barriers to processes of co-production of knowledge is the way that academic research is institutionally structured and funded. As Weiss (2016) argues, one assumption often made by academics is that activists with whom they may work in collaboration are "compromised" by the organisations within which they work. She argues that academics too must recognize the ways in which they are "compromised" by their institutional settings and structures and must engage in reflexivity, but also examinations of the way their own institutions function. Systems of academic promotion based on research output for example, clearly impact how academic researchers engage with their projects and how they collaborate both with fellow academics (in what Lemon, 2018, has named the "academic hunger games") and with non-academic partners.

Further, academic researchers have previously pointed to the ways in which funding systems impose a "top-down" process of knowledge production, where research questions and objectives must be framed by researchers who are recognized within the academic system in order to apply for funding, leading to inequitable relations from the start (Olivier et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2013; Shuayb & Brun, 2021). Only once the grant is received will researchers then have funds to put into place real participation from those outside of academia. In our case, the research project was funded by a joint French-South African funding scheme. This involved making a joint application submitted by two recognized academic institutions—one in France and one in South Africa—and headed by researchers who were engaged full-time within these institutions. This funding structure limited our co-production from the start. We could engage with our civil society partner and inform her that we wished to apply for funding for our project, but our colleague could not be a co-applicant. Further, any time she spent working with us on preparing the research project would be unpaid and without any tangible benefits if the project was not selected for funding. We subsequently had a similar experience working with this same colleague to try and obtain further funding from the European Union: In this case, all the work she put into preparing the application with us was unrewarded as the project was rejected. Spending time preparing research projects for funding applications is usually seen as an integral part of an academic researcher's role, but for colleagues in CSOs, the time spent is seen to be a risk if no funding is forthcoming. In our case, this meant that any real co-production only started after the funding had been obtained and thus the parameters of the research were already, to some degree, set. For our CSO partner, this meant that our initial meetings were to discuss

how to carry out the research in a way that would be beneficial to all, rather than meetings about how to structure the project.

It was also clear that for the CSO partners, research was an "extra" to their everyday core work of supporting refugees. So, all their contribution to the research was on top of their everyday jobs. Our CSO partner said she was happy to be part of the team and felt that it helped her keep abreast of what was going on in research, as well as gain insight into the needs of refugees and how the organisation could better adapt to these. She was particularly interested in the policy briefs produced, which were useful to her organsiation, and also appreciated being invited to co-author research publications. Nonetheless, she was aware that, for the academic researchers, the research itself was their main occupation, whilst for her it was an extra, something she felt at times might be forgotten by her partners. This highlights the problem of the different priorities of academic researchers and CSO/NGO partners, which has already been noted by various researchers (see, e.g., Shuayb & Brun, 2021).

Following on from this question of research funding and an academic structuring of research that limits possibilities for co-production, this also impacted our ability to pay refugee women for their work in the knowledge production process, which provided a real barrier for our project. There is a continuing debate within academia around the ethical implications of paying research participants and how this might influence consent and lead to a "commodification" of research (Hammett & Sporton, 2012; Head, 2009). However, it seems that there is now a general consensus amongst those trying to carry out ethical research with refugees and others in vulnerable situations that this should involve some kind of financial compensation for the time that they take to participate and the material and emotional costs of participation (Warnock et al., 2022). For our research, we realized that the young women refugees would need to take time to participate and talk to us, and that they might also have costs related to transport, childcare, or missed opportunities for other work. It thus seemed vital to give them some kind of remuneration. This, however, was difficult in the context of our funding agreement, and also the university's own financial rules and South African labour law. As many of the young women were also without legal residence status in South Africa, the barriers to payment were complicated, as it is formally illegal to employ those without legal residence status and a work permit. In these circumstances, we offered to reimburse them for travel expenses or packages of necessities/toiletries, but we were well aware that this was not enough, and this was brought back to us as we assessed our research project and its outcomes.

8. Overcoming Asymmetries to Produce Knowledge?

As our research project progressed, we constantly grappled with the questions and problems outlined above, which provided real barriers to the co-production of knowledge. Asymmetries both within the research team and between the research team and the young refugees were constantly made apparent and manifested in various ways. In some circumstances, the different positioning of the academic researchers and CSO partners was also a complicating factor as we talked to the young refugee women. In some of our interviews, for example, it became evident that the young women participating were in some ways unhappy with the services that they were receiving from two CSOs. This created a particularly difficult situation since most discussions were held on the different premises of the CSOs. For the women, their dependence on the CSOs for support clearly created a situation of conflict, and they talked about their grievances reluctantly, obviously afraid of sanctions from the organisation if they complained. They were most forthcoming about

this when the discussions were taking place in French, a language that was common to one of the academic researchers and the refugees, but not to the respective CSO staff members. This kind of discussion revealed power asymmetries and put everyone in an unwanted position vis-à-vis the others: The young women refugees were scared to complain about an organisation that offered them support; the academic researchers felt uncomfortable listening to complaints about their respective research partner organisations and knew they could do nothing, really, to mitigate these complaints—which were generally about the lack of funds available for the refugees; and finally, for the CSOs involved, this situation was extremely difficult because they had limited funds and time available to provide support for all the refugees who were asking for help. In another situation, during a conversation with a refugee woman housed in a temporary shelter run by another CSO, one of the academic researchers was asked to intervene to prolong her stay. However, the researcher was aware that the time limit was one of the central rules that the CSO in question had established for the woman's accommodation; and although the researcher mentioned the situation to the person in charge, it was clear that she could not effect any change to the rules. In addition, the researcher was asked by a CSO staff member to verify that the women being interviewed indeed met the criteria for shelter, which placed the researcher in a highly uncomfortable position even though she voiced her ethical obligation to maintain the confidentiality of all research participants.

The real barrier to co-production, however, was evident in the huge disparities in the economic and legal situations of the research team and the refugees. The researchers made it clear to the refugees that they could not intervene to change their economic and legal situation and to gain residence papers for them. As mentioned above, we were limited by funding and university regulations in the type of financial recompense we could offer to participants. At the end of the study, we held a restitution meeting with refugee women who had participated in our research to provide feedback on the findings as a way to acknowledge and show respect for participants' contributions (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Scholars have found that lack of reciprocity has been viewed by refugee research participants as "an extreme breach of trust and exploitation of privilege" (Mackenzie et al., 2007, p. 306). And although we, at all stages, were careful not to create expectations for longer-term support when we invited women to the meeting, they still came to us with the hope that there might be some financial advantages. One woman had left her young children in paid childcare in order to attend the validation meeting and another had passed up a few hours of financially remunerated work. At the same restitution meeting, when discussing what refugee women participants had gained from the research, the comment "but we just need money" from one of the young women brought this point home clearly. We were aware that the young woman in question had been engaging in transactional sexual relationships for economic survival, and we were powerless to effect any real change in her situation or to offer enough financial recompense to change this in a significant way.

9. Knowledge Production in the Interstices

One of the unexpected findings of our research and one which perhaps led to the most useful form of knowledge production, was that the young women refugees had little or no knowledge of SRH issues. Several of the participants shared, for example, that they did not know how a woman becomes pregnant (Crankshaw et al., 2024). Whilst we had anticipated that lack of access to SRH services was a problem for many young refugee women, we had, as it turned out, overestimated what would be their basic understanding of female reproduction. This finding allowed us to question our assumptions, which we then understood to be based on an epistemology of "white ignorance" (Alinia, 2020; Bowleg et al., 2017; Mills,

2007). However, once we had realized our ignorance, this exchange of knowledge around reproductive health allowed us, and particularly our post-doctoral researcher, to build relationships with the young women where there was a greater degree of reciprocity (Pittaway et al., 2010) and exchange. During conversations, whilst the young women explained their concerns over reproductive health, they were also able to ask questions and gain information that would be useful to them and could improve their reproductive health. Having these long conversations about, for example, how pregnancy occurs, and what are the possible methods of preventing pregnancy, was thus a really useful and tangible outcome of our project, and led to the young women gaining useful knowledge which could give them greater agency in their reproductive choices. Perhaps this was an instance of real co-production of knowledge when all of the researchers and participants learned things that were useful to them and produced knowledge for each other.

10. Conclusion

We start our conclusion with a reflection from two other researchers working on a project of co-production with refugees, who conclude that "co-production is a process where tentative alliances are formed and necessary trade-offs are incurred, and that the value of co-production as touted in theory collides with the realities of power dynamics and the complexities of relationship formation" (Gibbes & Skop, 2020, p. 291).

We have outlined here some of the difficulties with the power dynamics and asymmetries that we experienced during our ongoing research. Despite these barriers, we do hope that we had some positive impact on the young women we engaged with, even if we are keenly aware that this is not enough, especially as the situation for refugees in South Africa becomes increasingly precarious (Mutambara et al., 2023). Within our research team of academic researchers and CSO partners we have, however, made some progress in understanding the pitfalls of co-production and how it might be done better to create real "liberatory practice"; we have used this knowledge to design new projects that will be more inclusive and participatory from the outset and we hope will enable progress in creating knowledge that could have a real positive impact on the situation of young women refugees in South Africa.

Our experience has taught us to understand better the difficulties and limits of co-production and our role within the latter. Perhaps, following on from the previous section where we talked about the most valuable knowledge being produced at the "interstices," what we have learned is to leave more room in our research for these interstices and unexpected moments of knowledge production and to understand that co-production is perhaps most relevant when it is about everyone—researchers, CSOs, refugees—learning from each other, before attempting to produce knowledge for an outside audience. We all have different types and forms of knowledge; the mutual exchange of this knowledge—and *really* taking the time and space to learn from one another—can lead to valuable outcomes for all. We understand the importance of time and of building long-term relationships with all partners to develop the possibilities of co-production and we are pleased that we have been able to engage in ongoing discussion with our CSO partners over future projects.

As Chu et al. (2014) argue long-term partnerships can be seen as key to building more equitable relations. Of course, we also wish to produce knowledge that will have an impact on policies and programmes for refugee women, and thus improve their lives. However, perhaps acknowledging that co-production is an ongoing process that can start from these moments of mutual learning is one of the major lessons of our research. Pahl et al. (2022) sub-titled a recent book on collaborative research "the poetics of letting go."

Perhaps we should take inspiration from this title and aim to create more moments where we "let go" of our pre-defined ideas about collaborative research and co-production and create more room for the emergence of the unknown and more room for us and our various institutions to change. Returning to the title of our article, our project could not provide the economic stability that the young women refugees needed. In acknowledging this we understand the limits of research but also leave open room for other forms of learning and evolving in our understandings and our relationships.

Conflict of Interests
The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Data Availability
Research data is not publicly available due to issues of confidentiality, but certain data may be shared on request.

References
Alinia, M. (2020). White ignorance, race, and feminist politics in Sweden. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *43*(16), 249–267.

Anthias, F. (2012). Transnational mobilities, migration research and intersectionality. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, *2*(2), 102–110.

Bell, D. M., & Pahl, K. (2018). Co-production: Towards a utopian approach. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *21*(1), 105–117.

Bilotta, N. (2020). Anti-oppressive social work research: Prioritising refugee voices in Kakuma refugee camp. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, *14*(4), 397–414.

Bowleg, L., del Río-González, A. M., Holt, S. L., Pérez, C., Massie, J. S., Mandell, J. E., & A. Boone, C. (2017). Intersectional epistemologies of ignorance: How behavioral and social science research shapes what we know, think we know, and don't know about US Black men's sexualities. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *54*(4/5), 577–603.

Brooks, A., & Hesse-Biber, S. N. (2007). An invitation to feminist research. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Feminist research practice: A primer* (pp. 1–24). Sage.

Caretta, M. A., & Jokinen, J. C. (2017). Conflating privilege and vulnerability: A reflexive analysis of emotions and positionality in postgraduate fieldwork. *The Professional Geographer*, *69*(2), 275–283.

Chu, K. M., Jayaraman, S., Kyamanywa, P., & Ntakiyiruta, G. (2014). Building research capacity in Africa: Equity and global health collaborations. *PLoS Medicine*, *11*(3), Article 1001612. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001612

Crankshaw, T. L., Freedman, J., & Mutambara, V. M. (2023). Intergenerational trajectories of inherited vulnerabilities amongst young women refugees in South Africa. *Comparative Migration Studies*, *11*(1), Article 10.

Crankshaw, T. L., Freedman, J., Mutambara, V. M., & Rajah, Y. (2024). "I still don't know how someone gets pregnant": Determinants of poor reproductive health among young female refugees in South Africa. *BMC Women's Health*, *24*(1), Article 10.

Dotson, K. (2012). A cautionary tale: On limiting epistemic oppression. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *33*(1), 24–47.

Facer, K., & Enright, B. (2016). *Creating living knowledge*. University of Bristol.

Fineman, M. A. (2010). The vulnerable subject and the responsive state. *Emory Law Journal*, *60*, 10–130.

Fraser, H., & Taylor, N. (2016). *Neoliberalization, universities and the public intellectual: Species, gender and class and the production of knowledge*. Springer.

Freedman, J., Crankshaw, T. L., & Mutambara, V. M. (2020). Sexual and reproductive health of asylum seeking and refugee women in South Africa: Understanding the determinants of vulnerability. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, *28*(1), Article 1758440.

Gibbes, C., & Skop, E. (2020). The messiness of co-produced research with gatekeepers of resettled refugee communities. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *37*(3), 278–295.

Hammett, D., & Sporton, D. (2012). Paying for interviews? Negotiating ethics, power and expectation. *Area*, *44*, 496–502.

Hattery, A. J., Smith, E., Magnuson, S., Monterrosa, A., Kafonek, K., Shaw, C., Mhonde, R. D., & Kanewske, L. C. (2022). Diversity, equity, and inclusion in research teams: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Race and Justice*, *12*(3), 505–530.

Head, E. (2009). The ethics and implications of paying participants in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *12*(4), 335–344.

Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Jacobsen, K., & Landau, L. B. (2003). The dual imperative in refugee research: Some methodological and ethical considerations in social science research on forced migration. *Disasters*, *27*(3), 185–206.

Kavuro, C. (2022). The disappearance of refugee rights in South Africa. *Obiter*, *43*(1), 49–78.

Larruina, R., & Ghorashi, H. (2020). Box-ticking exercise or real inclusion? Challenges of including refugees' perspectives in EU policy. In E. M. Goździak, I. Main, & B. Suter (Eds.), *Europe and the refugee response* (pp. 128–148). Routledge.

Lemon, N. (2018). I am not playing the academic hunger games: Self-awareness and mindful practices in approaching research collaborations. In N. Lemon & S. McDonough (Eds.), *Mindfulness in the academy: Practices and perspectives from scholars* (pp. 129–154). Springer.

Letherby, G. (2003). *Feminist research in theory and practice*. Open University Press.

Lokot, M. (2019). The space between us: Feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees. *Gender & Development*, *27*(3), 467–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664046

Lokot, M., & Wake, C. (2021). *The co-production of research between academics, NGOs and communities in humanitarian response: A practice guide*. London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Lokot, M., & Wake, C. (2023). NGO–academia research co-production in humanitarian settings: Opportunities and challenges. *Disasters*, *47*(2), 464–481.

Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C., & Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond 'do no harm': The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *20*(2), 299–319.

Mills, C. (2007). White ignorance. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, *247*, 26–31.

Mutambara, V. M., Crankshaw, T. L., & Freedman, J. (2022). Assessing the impacts of COVID-19 on women refugees in South Africa. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *35*(1), 704–721.

Mutambara, V. M., Freedman, J., Crankshaw, T. L., & Rajah, Y. (2023). Gendered insecurities: Exploring the continuum of sexual and gender-based violence experiences of refugee women in South Africa. In J. Freedman, A. Latouche, A. Miranda, N. Sahraoui, G. Santana de Andrade, & E. Tyszler (Eds.), *The gender of borders* (pp. 103–118). Routledge.

Olivier, C., Hunt, M. R., & Ridde, V. (2016). NGO–researcher partnerships in global health research: benefits, challenges, and approaches that promote success. *Development in Practice, 26*(4), 444–455.

Ostrom, E. (1996). Crossing the great divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development. *World Development, 24*(6), 1073–1087.

Pahl, K., Steadman-Jones, R., & Vasudevan, L. (2022). *Collaborative research in theory and practice: The poetics of letting go*. Policy Press.

Phillips, L., Kristiansen, M., Vehviläinen, M., & Gunnarsson, E. (2013). Tackling the tensions of dialogue and participation: Reflexive strategies for collaborative research. In L. Phillips, M. Kristiansen, M. Vehviläinen, & E. Gunnarson (Eds.), *Knowledge and power in collaborative research* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.

Pincock, K., & Bakunzi, W. (2021). Power, participation, and 'peer researchers': Addressing gaps in refugee research ethics guidance. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 34*(2), 2333–2348.

Pittaway, E., Bartolomei, L., & Hugman, R. (2010). 'Stop stealing our stories': The ethics of research with vulnerable groups. *Journal of Human Rights Practice, 2*(2), 229–251.

Rast, M. C., Younes, Y., Smets, P., & Ghorashi, H. (2020). The resilience potential of different refugee reception approaches taken during the 'refugee crisis' in Amsterdam. *Current Sociology, 68*(7), 853–871.

Reilly, N., Bjørnholt, M., & Tastsoglou, E. (2022). Vulnerability, precarity and intersectionality: A critical review of three key concepts for understanding gender-based violence in migration contexts. In J. Freedman, N. Sahraoui, & E. Tastsoglou (Eds.), *Gender-based violence in migration* (pp. 29–56). Palgrave Macmillan.

Shuayb, M., & Brun, C. (2021). Carving out space for equitable collaborative research in protracted displacement. *Journal of Refugee Studies, 34*(3), 2539–2553.

Smith, D. (1974). Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology. *Sociological Inquiry, 44*, 7–13. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.1974.tb00718.x

Thapar-Björkert, S., & Farahani, F. (2019). Epistemic modalities of racialised knowledge production in the Swedish academy. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 42*(16), 214–232.

Thomas-Hughes, H., & McDermont, M. (2021). The ethics of co-production in practice: Reflections. In D. Burns, J. Howard, & S. M. Ospina (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of participatory research and inquiry* (pp. 291–305). Sage.

Turnhout, E., Metze, T., Wyborn, C., Klenk, N., & Louder, E. (2020). The politics of co-production: Participation, power, and transformation. *Current Opinion* in *Environmental Sustainability, 42*, 15–21.

Turton, D. (1996). Migrants and refugees. In T. Allen (Ed.), In *search of cool ground: War, flight and homecoming in Northeast Africa* (pp. 96–123). Africa World Press.

Warnock, R., Taylor, F. M., & Horton, A. (2022). Should we pay research participants? Feminist political economy for ethical practices in precarious times. *Area, 54*(2), 195–202.

Weiss, M. (2016, October 16). "Collaboration: Integration." *Fieldsights*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/collaboration-integration

Yuval-Davis, N. (2013). *A situated intersectional everyday approach to the study of bordering* (Working Paper No. 2). EUBORDERSCAPES.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2015). Situated intersectionality and social inequality. *Raisons politiques, 2015*(2), 91–100.

About the Authors

Jane Freedman is a professor at the Université Paris 8 and Deputy Director of the Paris Centre for Sociological and Political Research (CRESPPA), France. Her research takes a feminist intersectional approach to the study of migration. She has led various international research projects on gender, violence, and migration.

Tamaryn L. Crankshaw is a senior research fellow and leads the Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Programme at the Health Economics and HIV and AIDS Research Division (HEARD) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Her research focusses on the neglected areas of SRHR, including sexual and gender-based violence, amongst underserved adolescent girls and young women in Southern Africa, and aims to understand the intersectional nature of vulnerability to poor SRH outcomes.

Yasmin Rajah is a social worker and the founding director of Refugee Social Services, a Durban based NGO established in 2008. She has developed expertise in forced migration, child protection, and human rights advocacy, and has led initiatives for refugees and migrants in urban settings across KZN. Yasmin has contributed to peer-reviewed publications and presented widely on related issues. She has been recognized by the South African Human Rights Commission for her contributions to the sector.

Victoria Marcia Mutambara holds a PhD in conflict transformation and peace studies from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in international relations and political science from the University of Venda. She was part of the "gender-based violence" research cluster at the Health Economics HIV/AIDS Research Division (HEARD) from 2019–2023, focusing on issues of migration and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR). She is currently working at the Jesuit Refugee Service South Africa as the coordinator for the livelihoods program. Her research interests include gender, human security, migration, and SRHR.

Cogitatio

Applied Theatre as a Co-Creative Methodology for More Convivial Knowledge Production in Refugee-Receiving Communities

Marieke van Houte [1] 🔟 **and Maria Charlotte Rast** [2] 🔟

[1] Department for Anthropology and Development Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Sociology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Marieke van Houte (marieke.vanhoute@ru.nl)

Abstract

This article explores, based on hands-on experience, how applied theatre may serve as a co-creative mutually and actively negotiated—convivial—method of knowledge production in refugee-receiving societies. In this article, we argue that it only makes sense to conceptually understand relational processes of how we manage to live together, and interrogate structural mechanisms of exclusion, if we also embrace a move towards relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in short, convivial—methods of knowledge production (cf. Merlín-Escorza, 2024). However, despite increased interest, examples of methodological innovations and instructions on the how of co-creative knowledge production "are more difficult to locate" (Shea, 2024, p. 2). Based on an applied theatre and research project, we discuss three distinct processes through which we think applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative method. We make a case for creating and holding space for embodied, relational, negotiated knowledges to emerge and discuss conditions that can facilitate this.

Keywords

applied theatre; co-creative methods; conviviality; migrants; refugees

1. Introduction

The exclusion of marginalized groups is not simply caused by individual characteristics of marginalized people but rather by exclusionary structural mechanisms, normalized discourses and images, and power relationships (Ghorashi, 2014). Addressing exclusion thus requires making exclusionary structures more

receptive and adaptive (Varga, 2015) instead of expecting marginalized people to adjust to existing (exclusionary) structures.

One of the most paradoxical structural mechanisms of societal exclusion is that in research on societal exclusion, marginalized people's knowledges are often either *excluded* from dominant frameworks of (academic) knowledge production and thus neglected in the search for solutions (Anderson, 2012; Medina, 2013), or this knowledge is *extracted* as "raw materials" (Merlín-Escorza, 2024, p. 281) from them in ways that are harmful and misrepresent their experiences, knowledges, and claims (Davids et al., 2024; Merlín-Escorza, 2024; Shea, 2024). Through exclusion and/or extraction, this work tends to: (a) reproduce structural mechanisms of exclusion, (b) overemphasize the disadvantaged position of excluded individuals while neglecting their skills, ambitions, and the plurality of their experiences (Ghorashi, 2014), and (c) reinforce (implicit) hierarchical relationships between "powerful" researchers "giving voice" to "powerless" migrants (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020).

The question thus emerges of how to create transformative knowledge that challenges exclusionary structures, images, and relations, and that honours and incorporates "the deep theorizing and analysis already taking place within communities that reside outside of academia" (Shea, 2024, p. 2) instead. In this article, we argue that it only makes sense to conceptually understand relational processes of how we live together if we also embrace a move towards relational and mutually and actively negotiated—in short, convivial—methods of knowledge production (cf Merlín-Escorza, 2024). The concept of conviviality is about the "capacity to live together" and builds on concepts of reciprocity, solidarity, and community as social processes that are "actively produced through social practices, often in the face of change and conflict" (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 424).

Critique of the so-called "convivial turn" warns of a "descriptive naivety" (Valluvan, 2016, p. 205) that merely describes "happy-clappy" (Wise & Noble, 2016, p. 425) ways of living together across lines of difference. Hence we insist on a critical interpretation of conviviality, which recognizes structural relations and categorizations of inequality, including racism, and the effort it takes for people to "live together and care about each other against the odds" (de Noronha, 2022, p. 160), while actively *refusing* racist and nationalist notions of difference (de Noronha, 2022) and the normative (politics) of belonging and identity (Valluvan, 2016). As such, a critical conceptualization of conviviality brings the notion of negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict, in which community and belonging is not a given but a *practice* of hard labour for all its members (Wise & Noble, 2016).

Despite an increased interest, examples of methodological innovations and instructions on *how* co-creative approaches to knowledge production "are more difficult to locate" (Shea, 2024). Responding to this gap in the "how" of co-creative knowledge production, in this article we will reflect on a co-creative participatory theatre and research project called the Extraordinary Queuing Experience (EQE), as part of a wider public outreach project on migration called Contained Project. We explore the practices, challenges, and opportunities of this particular form of co-creative research by answering the question: How can applied theatre serve as a co-creative convivial research methodology to co-create knowledge on living together in refugee-receiving societies?

We will argue that co-creative convivial ways of producing knowledge are less about the particular questions we ask or the particular co-creative format to spark dialogue. Rather, it is about creating and holding space

for participants to feel sufficiently safe and challenged to put in the work of producing and negotiating knowledge on what it is like to live together. We argue that when putting in this work, differences do not have to lead to antagonistic relationships that need to be eliminated, managed, exoticized, or made the basis for marginalization, but rather they can be a source of creativity and the basis for a better shared world (Kaptani et al., 2021; Venkatesan et al., 2024).

In what follows, we will conceptually and methodologically set the stage for this work. Then, we will discuss three distinct processes through which we think applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative method. In the conclusion, we will make a case for convivial knowledge co-creation as a means to create and hold space for embodied, relational, negotiated knowledge to emerge.

2. Co-Creative and Convivial Research Approaches to Living Together in Refugee-Receiving Societies

Co-production of knowledge can be defined as "a process of mutually articulating, refining, and amplifying valued knowledge and practices with community partners to strengthen learning environments locally and influence theory, teaching, and policy more broadly" (Shea, 2024, p. 1). Such approaches "develop…more equitable partnerships rooted in community values and knowledge" and are, moreover, "contextual and relational, responding to the desires of community partners and the contours of local practice" (Shea, 2024, p. 2; cf. Gattenhof et al., 2021).

Co-creative research approaches may prioritize the process of creating and holding a space (cf. Pascoe et al., 2020) in which people who are most affected by an issue take a central role as relevant holders and co-creators of knowledge (Lenette, 2019). This enables the emergence of a diversity of voices, perspectives, and experiences (Gattenhof et al., 2021), including perspectives that can potentially challenge taken-for-granted understandings (Lenette, 2019). The term "holding space" is a relatively underexplored concept in academic literature but is commonly used in group and community work that involves vulnerabilities, where it may be defined as "being present, compassionate, and supportive of someone without trying to fix or change them or their circumstances" (Centre for Holding Space, n.d.). This relates to Ghorashi and Ponzoni's (2014) concept of interspace, where people take time to temporarily suspend their own taken-for-granted positions and truly listen to "the other." By establishing in-between and held spaces where participants, researchers, and different audiences take the time to be present, compassionate, and supportive, they can share, reflect on, challenge and better understand each other's positionings and perspectives, while enabling, but not enforcing, any form of transformation. As such, co-creative forms of knowledge production can contribute to people relating to each other in new ways and co-creating more inclusive and transformative knowledge.

Applied art forms, including applied performative arts, are increasingly recognized as tools for co-creative knowledge production (Leavy, 2020). Performance and theatre in general have long been recognized as relevant to understanding social interaction, as theatre can be viewed as a metaphor for social life itself (Bune, 2023). However, theatre as performance may also contribute to victimizing, stigmatizing, and "othering" marginalized people in a "spectacle of suffering" that fixes the (victim) subject and the (non-victim) witness in essentialized frames, without making a clear contribution to social change (Balfour, 2011). Applied theatre (also called "participatory theatre"), on the other hand, may be defined as performative art forms that

seek to engage audiences as participants while explicitly creating an active space for storytelling, healing, teaching, and learning, and, through these processes, social change and personal transformation (Dennis, 2009; Shaughnessy, 2012; Taylor, 2003).

Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO; see Boal, 1979/2019) is a highly influential example of applied theatre that is used in social work settings globally. The methodology is designed to invite groups of participants with a shared experience of oppression to explore and make visible power inequalities and injustices and try out ways to challenge them, considering the theatre floor as a rehearsal space for the real world (Bune, 2023; Erel et al., 2017). The methodology consists of an arsenal of games, exercises, and theatrical formats that can be adapted to the needs of the specific group (Boal, 2002). Over the years, a small number of researchers have applied the methodology as an ethnographic or participatory action research method (Bune, 2023; Erel et al., 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008).

In addition to its inherent transformative power, TO as a research method constitutes a move towards co-created and convivial knowledge production, as the methodology offers tools for building a community in which participants can safely explore, share, and analyze experiences—even if they are covered in taboo and trauma (Davids et al., 2024; Erel et al., 2017). Participants do not need to share their own stories but rather reflect on the fictional images and stories created on the theatre floor—which creates a safe emotional distance to discuss sensitive topics. The role of the facilitator is to strike a balance between supporting and provoking participants and pay attention to the relationship between the personal and the societal dimensions of the work. As such, the methodology creates space for knowledge that has been denied agency and voice and creates space to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Bune, 2023; Österlind, 2008).

There are also caveats to the application of TO in our search for a co-creative convivial research approach. To not reify mechanisms of exclusion such as categorization and essentialization of migrant identities, we wanted to include but not isolate migrants in the research population (Dahinden, 2016), and we wanted to create space to elicit diverse experiences, not focusing on oppression. Boal (2002) originally designed the TO methodology for small homogeneous groups. When used in groups with mixed experiences and power positions, the focus on oppression may elicit "moves to innocence" (Tuck & Yang, 2012) by participants in more privileged positions by negating the issues or assuming a position of the oppressed, thereby contributing to silencing and further oppression rather than solutions (Hamel, 2013). Hence, we sought an adaptation to the original TO methodology that offers space for relationality between diverse positionalities and experiences, and found it in applied improvised and physical theatre.

Improvised theatre is a form of theatre in which the actors do not know in advance what role(s) they will play. Improv actors train to be actively present in the moment, accept and adapt to the situation, and not judge their fellow actors for their choices (Drinko, 2018). Applied improvised theatre practitioners recognize these things as crucial life skills and conditions for creativity and use these basic principles and techniques "to foster the growth and/or development of flexible structures, new mindsets, and a range of inter and intra-personal skills required in today's volatile and uncertain world" (Dudeck & McClure, 2018). When used in applied settings, improv principles are meant to slightly put people out of their comfort zone, unsettle fixed perspectives, induce laughter, and rewire the brain (Drinko, 2013). Physical theatre is characterized by forms of performance that do not take text but rather the movement of physical bodies as its starting point,

and may as such be seen as a space where hegemonic, rational/word-based forms of expression, knowledge, and power may be subverted or questioned. This gives space to acknowledge the body in relationship to the socio-political, cultural-historical, and symbolic context as a source of knowledge (Coetzee & Munro, 2010). Although the field of applied improvisation and physical theatre is a lively community of practice, to the best of our knowledge it has not yet been reported as being used as a research methodology in the social sciences.

It is the combination of this acknowledgement of the body and movement as a source of knowledge, the liberating, unsettling qualities of applied improv, and the dedication to creating a safe and inviting rehearsal and performance space for TO that formed the groundwork for our own methodology and aim to explore how applied theatre can serve as a co-creative convivial research methodology.

3. Methodology

The Extraordinary Queuing Experience, an applied theatre and research project, provides the empirical basis for this article. EQE was reproduced several times with different teams in the UK, Belgium, and the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017 as part of a wider public outreach initiative on migration Contained Project. Situated during and right after the "asylum system crisis" (Larruina, 2023), the EQE explored the question of how it feels to arrive somewhere unfamiliar, where the rules are unknown, what challenges and strategies people face, and which "gatekeepers" and allies have an influence on that.

The project resulted from a combination of a slowly growing awareness of the limits of conventional migration research, first author Marieke's expanding training and hands-on experience with performative techniques, including a long-standing practice of improv theatre, a professional training in the TO methodology and some training in physical theatre (cf. Davids et al., 2024), ad hoc opportunities to create and perform in various settings, similarly ad hoc means of (very limited) funding and a lot of free labour and passion by all team members including the authors.

The first two production rounds were developed and performed by teams of semi-professional or professional actors, many with migration experience but all well-established in their current communities. The third production took place in Amsterdam with a team with recent and less recent refugee and other migration backgrounds as well as native Dutch, both semi-professionals and non-actors. It proved to be very useful to have tried out the methodology with (semi-)professional and established actors, before doing this with a diverse and multilingual group with diverging vulnerabilities. Each production round had both an internal rehearsal process and an external performance process. In the remainder of this article, we will mainly refer to the most diverse group of the "Amsterdam" production round.

After being asked to do a performative intervention with participants of a charity walk for Stichting Vluchteling (The Refugee Foundation), Marieke, supported by second author Maria, sought collaboration with the community initiative BOOST, a local initiative that was set up to promote contact and integration between newcomers and local Amsterdammers. Marieke spent a few weeks "hanging out" to introduce the idea of jointly creating a performance through flyers, announcements during the shared lunchtime, Facebook, and meet and greet sessions.

The first rehearsal session was optional, after which we asked participants if they wanted to commit to the full production. Eventually, the team consisted of 19 people, including 14 actors, two photographers, two filmmakers, and a facilitator, plus a colleague collecting audience reflections after the performance. Seven participants had arrived in the Netherlands recently (less than three years ago), six participants moved to the Netherlands between five and 30 years ago, and six were born in the Netherlands. Many, but not all, of the participants were also either volunteers or beneficiaries in the BOOST community centre. Marieke acted as a facilitator of the rehearsal sessions, supported by a co-facilitator who was also an actor. Maria was one of the participants of the project and was also involved at BOOST as a student volunteer who conducted qualitative research for her MA and PhD on the dynamics within this community initiative. Maria contributed to the co-analysis and writing, and conducted reflective interviews with some of the participants.

Before the start and throughout the process, Marieke made it clear that the process served a triple goal. The first was to bring people of different backgrounds together to share, connect, and have fun, which, in the words of Wright et al. (2021), is the basis for a "practice of care, as an inclusive relational ethic for research." The second goal was to give audiences an experience of what it feels like to be a migrant in order to spark dialogues. The third goal was to generate research insights into this method as a way of co-creating knowledge on mechanisms of migration and living together.

The internal process consisted of a series of six workshop-rehearsal sessions and had three components: (a) physical and associative exercises from TO, physical theatre and improv, which elicited pieces of story, emotion and action that participants chose to share about their thoughts on, and personal experience of, the theme; (b) improvisations on emerging themes and topics through image building and improvised scenes; and (c) rehearsing the script that Marieke wrote based on the themes, improvisations, and reflections that emerged during the rehearsals. We then carried out the resulting performance as an immersive and partly invisible theatrical performance, a theatrical format developed by Boal that is a small theatrical play in a place that is not a theatre, and for an audience that is not (aware of being) an audience (Boal, 2002), which we will discuss further in the next section.

Each exercise, improvisation, or scene that we performed was followed by collaborative reflections and analysis based on four questions: What did we do? How did it feel? What does it mean (for our collaborative research)? And what do we do next? (Stanfield, 2000). All of the rehearsal sessions and some of the introductory sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed in a logbook. The collaborative analysis, captured in the notes and the recordings, forms the basis for the analysis for this article.

Some parts of the rehearsals and the performances were also video-recorded. The group was always asked for its permission before recording started, and it was made clear that the audio- and video-recording carried out by the researcher was solely for the purpose of research. By contrast, participants gave their permission to professional photographers and filmmakers to record specific moments in the process that were explicitly meant for publication. Some reflections of audience members were also partly video- and audio-recorded.

4. Processes of Convivial Co-Creation Throughout the EQE

In this section, we first identify three distinct yet obviously overlapping processes through which the EQE contributed to a relational and convivial co-creation of knowledge in the internal workshop/rehearsal sessions,

where these processes were most clearly visible and probably had the deepest impact. Then, we will discuss how these three processes emerged in the external, performance part of the project.

4.1. From Reproducing Structural Exclusion to Creating a Shared Playing Field

The first process through which we aimed to contribute to relational and convivial co-creation of knowledge was creating a shared playing field where people of diverse backgrounds, with the aspirations and/or skills to perform, would come together. We gratefully built this playing field within the lively BOOST community centre where many participants felt safe and at home. Next, instead of focusing on what they, *some deficient "others,"* lack (Ghorashi, 2014), the aim of this project was to play with what *we, as a group,* enjoyed and felt good about, thereby including and not isolating migrants. This is in line with Wright et al. (2021), who argue that a crucial element in relational inclusive co-creative research practice is creating a space for "emotional energies" such as fun and pride. Having fun in research, they argue, constitutes crucial evidence of relationships in the making, and the strengthening of groups' social cohesion (Wright et al., 2021). Reza later reflected:

> Yeah, I saw the energy between people who want to do well….Some days I was really tired. But I just wanted to go…and in that moment you really don't feel tired but you get energy from the atmosphere, from the other people and, uh, you really live in that moment. (Reza, Farsi/English, photographer; for each quoted participant, we indicate a pseudonym, main language proficiency, and role in the EQE)

Reza stressed that he wanted to participate in rehearsals even if he was tired. The concrete performance date created an interdependency, urgency, and focus to come to the rehearsals and we also expressed our expectation that team members who committed to the project would come to all rehearsals because of this interdependency. Compared to other activities at BOOST, our project seemed to stand out as all participants remained committed until the end instead of the better-known development of attendance rates slowly decreasing. The EQE furthermore constituted a co-created space in which all participants, no matter what their backgrounds were, could bring in, experiment with, and develop their skills and aspirations. Participants appreciated the fact that they were not recruited because they were refugees but for their skills and aspirations, and that we were forming a team of professionals and amateurs with migrant, refugee, and non-migrant backgrounds. Reza reflected on how he experienced the project as follows:

> I never did theatre or performance and, eeh, that was very exciting for me. I did it with my heart, I mean I just really wanted to do well and I felt really good that I could contribute something to this project. And it was personal development and I did not know that I [could] do photography or use my pictures in social media and….I also participated as an actor but I never thought, in my I life, [that] I [could] do theatre or play a role. I found it very exciting. And I felt really good, I could see another Reza, another perspective on myself….For example, later during a meeting at my work, I could say that I can take photos at very large events with 500 people. That was the beginning, it all started with Contained and with this project, that is ideal. So that's why I say that self-development is important for me. (Reza, Farsi/English, photographer)

Reza mentions that the project created space for his personal and professional development. Four other participants, who were professional actors, photographers, or filmmakers in their country of origin and had recently arrived in the Netherlands, mentioned that this project was a way of building their portfolio in the

Netherlands. Other motivations to join included meeting new people and trying out new things, having something to do to relax and not worry, and redirecting a sense of frustration and a sense of injustice.

Another important aspect of creating this playing field is language: In most other spaces where our participants with a refugee background interacted with Dutch locals, Dutch would be the "goal language," the hegemonic standard all participants were encouraged to aim at in order to be able to integrate into society. By contrast, in our project, where all participants relied on each other to develop a performance, group communication prevailed over improving individual language skills. In the introduction meetings, we always did a quick round of language skills: Thumbs up, down, or halfway would represent our language skills in each language. Asking the question "which language(s) do you speak?" instead of "where are you from?" was intentionally aimed at highlighting skills and plurality of belonging rather than highlighting and essentializing native–outsider constructions with the question "where are you (really) from?" (see Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019). We then made sure that everything we did was translated back and forth by fellow participants between the main shared languages, in our case Arabic, Farsi, English, and Dutch. There was definitely still a power dynamic based on language, as those who spoke more languages would inevitably understand and be able to communicate (at least in words) more, but instead of people with the most Dutch or English skills, it was now people who had the best *combination* of language skills that had an advantage. These were often those people with a migrant background. Moreover, these positions were dynamic: Not everyone could make it to all the rehearsals, so we decided every time anew who would be the translator for that rehearsal.

4.2. From Stereotypical Victimization to a Plurality of Mobile Experiences

The second process we identify in our quest for convivial co-created knowledge production is creating space for a plurality of voices and experiences rather than an overemphasis on victimization and marginalization. After the introductions, the first exercise of the first session was a sharing round, in which we asked participants to share in pairs with each other what "being on the move, going on a journey, arriving and reception" meant to them. The listener was then asked to summarize the story of their peer in one to three words and we would write those words on a flipchart. We also kept adding keywords throughout the process as they emerged. This led to the following list of words (associations with being on the move/making a journey/arriving/reception):

> Migration / family / Italy / curiosity /history /interest / curiosity / alertness / sensory simuli / luxury / home / cookies / journey / refugees / refugees / aeroplane / holiday / hotel / long green road / house / hope / starting over / emptiness / language / life course / hospitality / without a goal / with a goal / living / learning / leaving behind / relaxation / collaboration / alone / together / enduring /giving up / fighting / tension / competition / cooperate / follow / game / resistance / together / powerful / to work against / fast / first / last / connection / interesting / rhythm / cheerful / active / boring / stubborn / closure / (not) standing out / (in)visible / patience / waiting / dependent / (un)comfortable / beginning / trust / group / choice / responsibility / movement / moving house / e expand / helping / tired / power / energy / motivate / annoying / seasons / variety / safe / to take with / forward / abandoning / joining / game / agreement / strategy / attitude / fleeing / following / motivation / situation / feeling / thinking / group pressure / feminine / masculine

We then asked what this collection of words meant to us:

> Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: So we have [repeats list of words]. What do you make of these words?

> Anna [Dutch/English, actor]: Positive!

> Marieke: So being on the move is also positive for many people. What else? What do you see in these words?

> Yasmine [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: Life!

> Marieke: Yes, being on the move is also part of life.

> Reza [Farsi/English, photographer]: All the life is being on the move.

> Jan [Dutch/English, co-facilitator and actor]: But also learning. What is that? Interests, history. And relaxation.

> Iris [Dutch/English, actor]: But there were four times "refugees," right? It's not just positive.

> Carla [Dutch/English/Italian, actor]: It's also leaving behind.

> Marieke: Yes, so leaving behind and going somewhere new.

This exercise revealed that participants had very diverse personal associations with migration and journeys, including insecurity and victimhood, but also adventure, excitement, strength, resistance, competition, collaboration, flexibility, creativity, and hope. The reflection that followed also showed different interpretations of the collection of words, portraying, as one might argue, equally diverse interpretations of the theme beyond the self.

This list of keywords was hanging in the rehearsal space and we kept coming back to it—to jointly decide which words we would want to explore through creating human images, using them for character building or improvisations.

In addition to the verbal associations, we also elicited a plurality of embodied attitudes towards being on the move through physical exercises, such as "leader and follower" (as adapted from a workshop called "Moving into political voice" by Arts for Action), a simple physical exercise that elicited a wealth of reflections:

> The exercise starts with all participants on one side, facing the same direction. One person, the leader, starts a movement and a sound, and everyone copies it. At some point, somebody crosses over to the other side, facing the group, and initiates a different movement and sound. All others may choose when they go to the other side—when everyone has crossed over, a new "leader" moves to the other side and initiates a new movement and sound. Then, participants are asked to do this a second time, whilst at the same time being mindful of what they observe, feel, and what that means.

After both rounds, as with any other exercise, Marieke asked what happened and how this felt. The participants burst into an engaging discussion about what they felt during the exercise: the need to collaborate, not wanting to give up, pride, confusion, tension, care, competition, curiosity, stubbornness, patience, feeling exposed, trust, responsibility, dependency, power, and energy.

Marieke then asked participants to reflect on what this means: how this linked to the topic of our joint exploration, the theme of being on the move, thus linking the personal embodied experience to the wider societal issues (Österlind, 2008). The following is a brief excerpt from the discussion:

> Carla [Dutch/English/Italian, actor]: You're dependent on others. You may want to make your own choice, but those are also dependent on other people.

Yasmine [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: You don't have a lot to choose.

> Karim [Arabic/Dutch, filmmaker]: [It's about] seasons. If we have one season, it's not nice. If we have four seasons, it's nice.

> Marieke: Variety?

> Anna [Dutch/English, actor]: You don't want to leave people behind, [you want to] help them.

> Peter [Dutch/English, filmmaker]: It's not leaving behind, is it? You can take care of them from a distance.

> Hossein [Farsi, Dutch, actor and musician]: If you don't connect to the group, the group cannot close. You need to continue, if a person doesn't [follow].

> Leila [Arabic, English, actor]: In my opinion, everyone has responsibility over what they choose, it's your responsibility and no one else's.

The discussion went on like this for five pages of transcribed text in total. Although there is no space to analyse the entire conversation, what stands out here is that people took the space to portray their own positions and were very precise and nuanced about interpreting their own bodily reactions and what it means in terms of mobilities, while actively listening to other perspectives. Collectively, we analysed the complexity of what it means to take the decision to be on the move, based on these different voices. This reflects how people in co-creative research interact and negotiate knowledge in an "interspace" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014), and confirms Bune's observation that in the theatre space, "experience is not only shared but challenged, negotiated, and contested in the friction with other [participants]," which can be viewed as a practice of agency (Bune, 2023, p. 56) and conviviality (Wise & Noble, 2016).

4.3. From Fixed Hierarchies to Dynamic and Embodied Relations

A third process we identify is the extent to which we were able to create a space to dismantle hierarchical relationships in the research process.

In the EQE rehearsal process, we used improv warm-up games, seemingly silly games meant to slightly put people out of their comfort zone, unsettle fixed perspectives, induce laughter, and rewire the brain (Drinko, 2013). After such warm-ups, we used physical theatre exercises in which hierarchical relations could be more explicitly "undone/rewired"—for example, in a game called *Gatekeeper*:

> The group is split in half: Members of Team A, the "border crossers," have to find ways to break through the barriers of Team B, the "gatekeepers," after which they switch roles. The teams try different strategies to break through the gatekeepers or resist the border crossers. Participants reflect with surprise on insights they get from taking a different perspective than their own, such as a feeling of responsibility to protect the border as a gatekeeper. The exercise also elicits embodied memories: Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor and musician] comes out very excited, with his eyes wide open and a tense body posture, shouting: "This is exactly the way I passed the Serbian border!" At the same time, Iris [Dutch/English, actor] comes out, with a similar body language, saying: "This is exactly how we resisted the military police during the Amsterdam squatters' riots in the 1980s!" They see and recognize each other's position and start to exchange experiences. Through their bodily knowledge they are able to connect in a way that is new to them; Iris is also a volunteer at the community centre and we have witnessed her take a clear teacher position, seeing it as her job to educate newcomer "students" about Dutch language, norms, and values.

The research of Maria within the community initiative BOOST revealed how easily exclusionary assumptions, structures, and relations can be reproduced, notwithstanding inclusive intentions of initiators and volunteers (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). What we believe we witnessed in the theatre project, however, is that creating a space that intentionally unsettles fixed roles and perspectives, in this case through improvisations and games and physical exercises, created the grounds for feeling and recognizing (embodied) shared connections beyond differences in positionalities. This supports the argument that "emotions such as fun and pride can promulgate hierarchical power relations as well as transgress and transform them" (Wright et al., 2021).

There are also limitations to "undoing hierarchies" in this convivial co-created research space—firstly, because the researcher/facilitator did come in with a plan (to co-create a performance), a central theme (being on the move and arriving in a new place) and a format (the EQE). Moreover, she assumed the role of facilitator and director of the rehearsals, and co-author of the academic paper based on this work. As discussed in a different piece (Davids et al., 2024), part of this hierarchy can be further undone by ensuring co-creation in every step of the research cycle, including co-designing and co-authoring the output. Yet the facilitator has to establish the conditions for a convivial space in which everyone feels invited and safe to participate and contribute in the way that works for them. For that, the facilitator's role is to set conditions regarding how to take care of privacy, team building, a mentally logical build-up of the sessions, healthy time management, etcetera. Based on our lived experience, we argue that for the creation of a convivial space, a level of leadership is inevitable and even desirable.

More problematically, we also experienced the stickiness of structural inequalities permeating and shaping interpersonal interaction in a conflict between the two cameramen, as the vignette below shows:

> The EQE has two cameramen on board: Karim had a wedding photography and filming business in Syria before coming to the Netherlands. Peter is a Dutch documentary maker. The idea is that the

two men film the process and the final performance, and produce a film about it together. But things are going not so smooth between them: a difference of opinion on the use of equipment and software lets Karim believe that Peter is not taking his skills and his equipment seriously, and is just using him to shoot footage, without recognizing his autonomy as a professional. Peter, for his part, feels that Karim is being stubborn; he just wants to make the best possible film, for which he is of course going to credit him. It is hard for both filmmakers to find a way of working together on an equal footing, as Peter's insistence on the highest quality of software and equipment affects Karim's sense of professionalism and dignity, which adds to a pile of experiences in the Netherlands based on racialized notions of inequality. Marieke tries to mediate this conflict by having a meeting with both filmmakers, in which Karim explains his discontent and Marieke tries to translate and amplify the words of Karim, explaining that he feels underestimated and disrespected as a professional, and the frustration of Peter [in] not feeling understood in his good intentions. A while later, Peter indicates that due to personal circumstances, he is not able to complete the film. Instead, Karim makes a short trailer with his own software and equipment.

The incident of the two filmmakers shows how easily hierarchical relations are reproduced in a space with inclusionary intentions, and how transformative co-creation entails negotiation, friction, and sometimes conflict, in which community and belonging is not a given but a *practice* of hard labour for all its members (Wise & Noble, 2016). This also means that not all conflicts can be solved. We also think that part of the reason for this was that the film team operated as a semi-autonomous team within the project, which meant that they were not completely operating within the equal playing field that we created. A lesson to be drawn from this is that the spaceholding should be more consistently applied throughout the project, but also that it is often not within the capacity of the facilitator to undo structural notions of inequality.

4.4. Performing Relationality and Diverse Experiences

The three distinct processes that we described in the internal sessions, namely creating a shared playing field, eliciting a plurality of mobile experiences, and stimulating embodied and dynamic relations, also transpired in the performance, which constituted both an output of the co-creative research and an additional layer of data collection. We describe the set-up of the performance in the vignette below:

The unexpecting audience are participants of a charity walk—starting at midnight, their mind is set on walking 40 kilometres around Amsterdam to raise funds for Stichting Vluchteling (the Refugee Foundation). Two kilometres into the walk, they need to board a ferry to cross the river IJ. At the ferry landing, they unknowingly become "spect-actors"—immersed participants of a partly invisible and increasingly absurdist theatre performance.

In phase one, the arriving audience is stopped by gatekeepers, in security vests representing authority but also clearly in character, which is visible through their big authorative gestures. They represent Leadership, Street Level Bureaucrats, the System, and Corruption—characters that we developed based on participants' improvisations. An Announcer with a megaphone says: "Welcome to the Extraordinary Queuing Experience. Of course, you all want to board the ferry as soon as possible but our boat is small and not everyone can be on it. So get in line, fill in the form and we hope you have a *brillic* time. For your own safety, always follow the *Klump*." We use these non-existing words to

represent the estrangement due to language and communication barriers. The gatekeepers hand out clipboards with forms containing ambiguous questions that are hard to answer. While these elements are all clearly part of a "show," there are also actors dressed up as walkers, representing a storyline and an attitude to being on the move as came forward from the rehearsals: Curiosity; the Group person; the Tourist; the Victim; Hope; and the Beast.

In phase two, the selection process starts. All participants are "requested to start *folliding* into the *brenacle*"—another non-existent concept. The gatekeepers move into the audience and check their "folliding" capacity and their answers on the form, and give red or green stickers. The characters in the audience show different strategies matching their attitude and storyline.

In phase three, the selection process comes to a climax: All people with a green sticker are requested to step forward. The different characters in the audience experience this in a different way: The Victim makes a mistake and needs to go to the back of the line. Curiosity speaks up about this injustice but gets punished herself. The Group Person starts a riot by chanting "let us through!" Hope finds a spectacular way in. The Beast escapes and breaks through by force. Both gatekeepers and audience are highly agitated. There is a sense of crisis and chaos. At that point, the Announcer breaks the performance and says: "Congratulations! You have just survived the Extraordinary Queuing experience. But what if this was real? What if getting in was a matter of life and death? A lot of what you have just been through is reality for us. We are from Iran, Italy, Syria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Afghanistan. We wanted to let you experience, in a playful way, a little bit of what we experienced on our journeys. Of course, you are all welcome on the ferry—please talk to our colleagues on the ferry for more information!" The audience laugh and applaud in relief and quickly board the ferry, where they meet a colleague who asks for their reflections. The total experience has taken 10–15 minutes and spanned the time it took the ferry to make the round trip and board new passengers.

The performance was a partly invisible play guided by clear TO principles: during the time we had—we wanted to be done once the ferry was back to avoid unnecessary delays in walkers' long journey—we made it very clear to the audience, through visible dramatic cues in the roles of the gatekeepers, that they were immersed in a performance, to make them feel safe, welcome, respected and entertained. At the same time, and despite audiences' realization that they were experiencing a performance, we provoked them by making them feel blocked in their real-life movements. The space we created was also intentionally messy, chaotic, unequally visible to everyone, and entailed an amount of waiting. As such, it represented some of the qualities of experiences of mobility. A few weeks after the performance, we reflected as a team on this:

Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: What was the Extraordinary Queuing Experience about for you?

Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: [translates for other Farsi speakers:] The Persians are saying that it was about refugees and the way in which refugees made their journey.

Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor, and musician]: The beauty about theatre is that you can express yourself. That you can bring the thing you have inside of you out. That thing that is hard to express with language.

Marieke: So you can say with your body what you can't say with words?

Reza [Farsi/English, photographer]: Exactly!

Marieke: Beautiful. Anything else?

Amir: The Arab side?

[laughter]

Karim [Arabic/Dutch, filmmaker]: We are doing something right. That is information through movement. It's not always in the news that refugees have a difficult time. Do you understand? That is writing, but this is movement, with theatre. And that makes it easier for Dutch people [to] understand. If I do something, it's better than reading something.

From our collective reflection, we concluded as a team that the performance gave people an embodied experience, rather than a written account, of refugees' journeys, making it easier to communicate a lived experience. Much to our own amazement, many audience members did indeed reflect on a simultaneity of real feelings of anxiety and the awareness of the performance being fiction at the same time. This is aptly discussed by one audience member: on the one hand, she reflected on her awareness of the fictitious element of the performance, and her experienced distance to the reality of migrants:

You always know that it's a safe environment, I always process this information as if OK, they're playing a game to make a point, but you know I will never be able to feel the same way as a refugee feels, because I know from the start that it's a safe environment, so....I wasn't really feeling like it's the same type of experience. (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

In the same reflection she recognized, despite her own skepticism, her instinctive negotiation between submission to authority and determination, and how that created an embodied understanding of what drives migrants:

It's something stupid that you do. You fill in a stupid form and they give you a stupid sticker, but they sort of make you feel that you have to do it, to get on the boat. So at some point I was like, there is no point, but they still make you do it....There is no alternative. You need to get on the boat. And that's the same for them. They are going on that journey and by the time they make it to the coast they gotta get on that boat, right? (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

By combining reality and fiction, we created a shared playing field, a relational space in which all "spect-actors" were exposed to the same situation—in this case, the will to cross the river and the power of the gatekeepers.

An added layer of provocation came from the "invisible" part of the performance, in which invisible actors in the audience played out the *plurality of mobile experiences.* For spect-actors, these individual storylines were experienced by one of "us," rather than "them," a perceived "other." Afterwards, audience members reflected on their instinctive reactions to what was happening to them and what they perceived as their fellow audience members:

You just try to comply with the rules. You don't resist. You are focused on getting in. (Audience member, Amsterdam, June 2017)

These embodied reactions of spect-actors, all people who are actively supportive of refugees, were also noticed by the team members:

Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: Maybe that's my projection. Maybe it's in my head that people that are pro-refugee are automatically, implicitly, a bit more easy-going and a bit less "hello, let's go quick." That, I thought, that belongs to right-winged people.

Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: When it's about themselves, they're not so nice anymore?

Amir: Maybe it's not abnormal but I thought it was weird to see that they could be so, just really angry…

Iris [Dutch/English, actor]: They just wanted to get through. Even if they are pro-refugees, they just wanted to get through.

Marieke: But that's the funny thing, you understand it's a game, but also a real experience.

The reflections from both audiences and team members on whether or not they had stepped up for injustice, complied with the system, or were pushing to get through did not necessarily show behaviour that they hoped or expected of themselves, or what others would expect of them. Although this audience of refugee supporters might expect themselves to be more altruistic, they also displayed individualism and opportunism. As such, fixed hierarchies between "us" and "them," "victims" and "saviours," were unsettled, in an—almost magical—in-between space between fiction and reality in which people opened up to different perspectives on themselves and others.

5. Discussion

Marieke [Dutch/English, facilitator]: So we made people feel, a little bit, what it feels to be a refugee. Which message or which problem did we show?

Leila [English/Arabic, actor]: It was double faced. We all played the fears. We are forcing people to try it again. For me it was the best thing that I gained from that play. Facing your fears is the best way to [get] over it. That's why from the beginning I agreed on that….If you do something like this, it's kind of your way to [get] over it.

Marieke: To overcome?

Leila: Yeah.

Hossein [Farsi/Dutch, actor and musician]: Walking, tired, refugees. When you arrive at the border, you're a bit happy it's finally over, and then they say, you can't get through. You're walking so far and you get a bit of hope and only then you find out, you can't pass…

Marieke: So hope and despair at the border?

Hossein: Exactly.

Leila: It was funny because they have the choice to walk. And then they are being forced to wait for the boat. For refugees it was no choice, they were forced to walk across countries. And forced to get the boat to drown there.

[later]

Jan [Dutch/English, actor]: I'm not a refugee and I don't know what it's like to get to a country where you may or may not be allowed to enter. But for me it was very clearly about arriving somewhere where you have certain expectations, and it turns out that's totally not the situation. You arrive somewhere where you don't know the rules of the game, so you may step into a game you can't play. And that powerlessness, the frustration, and everything that it elicits, that is what this is about for me.

Marieke: So you step into a game where you don't know the rules?

Amir [Dutch/Farsi, actor]: I think that's very well said.

We believe that the essence of co-creative, less extractive, more relational, less exclusionary knowledge production is not about "giving voice" to marginalized people (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020), as "there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Roy, 2004). As we experienced, Leila, Hossein, Amir, Jan, Iris, Karim, Reza, Yasmin, Carla, Anna, Peter, and the other members of our team really did not need to be "given" a voice. Rather, each of these individuals intrinsically holds a unique voice that showed deep and embodied analyses of the issues under discussion (cf. Shea, 2024). Our job as facilitators of the research process, then, is to co-create and hold the space (Pascoe et al., 2020) for these voices to come forward, by making participants feel safe and supported *and* provoked and challenged to bring their issues to the table, negotiate their meaning, and decide what to do with that knowledge (Bune, 2023; Österlind, 2008).

This requires a radically humble positioning, in which the facilitator/spaceholder also needs to acknowledge the way the relations within the group are structured by exclusionary divisions and hierarchies (de Noronha, 2022)—in our case, based on racialization, language skills, nativity, and researcher/participant dynamics—and attempt to create a space that may not take away these power relations but does attempt to take away any blockages to the expression of voice that emerge as a result of these power differences.

In this article, we have shown how we created and held the space for a plurality of voices to shed light on a plurality of mobile experiences that are about facing fear and trauma, hope and despair, choice and force, expectation and frustration, waiting and action, as discussed in the dialogue above. As we have seen both in the internal rehearsal process and in interaction with wider audiences, this does not lead to "happy-clappy" (Wise & Noble, 2016) living together but instead becomes a space where voices can be heard and negotiated through friction, which may unsettle fixed hierarchies and lead to more dynamic and embodied relations.

Building on the literature and our own experiences discussed in this article, we suggest that in order to create and hold the space and remove blockages of voices to move towards co-created convivial methods of knowledge production, the researcher/facilitator/spaceholder must do their best to meet five basic conditions:

1. Reflect on different positionings and power relations, and put in the work to try to unsettle these (Wise & Noble, 2016), by co-creating a space in which all people involved are both teacher and student at the same time, and are open to being transformed in the process. In our project we tried to create a playing field that was as equal as possible by attending to language, and by using improv and TO methods to "rewire" our brains (Drinko, 2013) away from fixed perspectives and take different perspectives. When we ran into a conflict with underlying notions of structural inequalities, we invested time and energy to mediate the conflict, reject racist and nationalist notions of difference (Valluvan, 2016), and insist on principles of equality and dignity, but we also had to acknowledge our limits there.

2. Ensure transparency, clarity, trust, and safety with regard to the goal of the process, what is expected of participants, and what will happen with the results. We did this by coming in with a clear and tested methodology that was ready to work with, and by taking extensive time to provide all information about the goal and format of the rehearsals and the performance. During the sessions, we provided clarity through predictable structures, including clear opening and closure rounds and time management.

3. When working with people that are surviving in daily life and are in a constant state of alertness, it is vital that we create conditions where people can temporarily have a break from that crisis mode, to be able to relax and take a step back to reflect on their lives (Davids et al., 2024) and listen to the "other" (Ghorashi, 2014). In our case, this was especially relevant for the refugee newcomers in the group, who were in the process of finding housing, learning the language, navigating the administrative system, finding employment, and family reunification. We were heavily indebted to the BOOST community centre, a welcoming physical space where people clearly felt safe and at home, and our project could build on that.

4. Make sure that a plurality of voices are equally heard and mutually and actively negotiated (Merlín-Escorza, 2024). We tried to do this by consistently translating back and forth between languages, and by eliciting and writing up single-word reflections, jointly deciding on which words to elaborate further on, and having dialogical reflections on their meaning. This worked to a certain extent: Language inequalities still emerged when people would get into enthusiastic and fast discussions and forget to translate.

5. Strike a balance between attending to the personal and the political dimensions of what emerges (Österlind, 2008). We did so by consistently reflecting, first, on how we *feel* after a particular exercise, allowing space for, but not enforcing, emotions and personal reflections; and second, what the observations and feelings *mean* for understanding the topic of arriving in a new place (Stanfield, 2000).

6. Conclusion

In this article we have discussed three distinct processes through which applied theatre can serve as a convivial co-creative research methodology to co-create knowledge on living together in refugee-receiving societies. The first is creating a shared playing field around shared interests and skills that are inviting to, but do not isolate or essentialize, migrants. Having fun and the ability to communicate with each other is crucial in this process. The second process is creating space for a plurality of voices and experiences rather than an overemphasis on marginalization. Simple yet carefully crafted verbal and physical exercises, inspired by the

TO, improvisation theatre and physical theatre, and co-creative analysis based on similarly simple but effective reflection questions, created a space where people felt supported and encouraged to portray their own positions, to be nuanced, focused and alert, while also being attentive to, challenging and negotiating the position of others. And the third process is partially dismantling hierarchical power relations in the research process. Through the discussion of some of the techniques, we hope to have contributed to the question of the "how" of co-creative methods that challenge structural mechanisms of exclusion and extraction in knowledge production.

Yet most of all, we argue that the essence of co-creative convivial knowledge production is creating and holding space for marginalized voices to be heard and negotiated. In the space that is created, there is hard work and fun, negotiation, and creativity on the part of all the participants involved. In that space, differences can be a source of creativity and the basis for a better-shared world (Kaptani et al., 2021; Venkatesan et al., 2024), or at least, in all its imperfection, a better-shared knowledge production.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflicts of interest. In this article, editorial decisions were taken by Halleh Ghorashi (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands).

Data Availability
Written, anonymized field notes can be shared upon request via the first author. Due to privacy regulations, the video material cannot be shared.

References
Anderson, E. (2012). Epistemic justice as a virtue of social institutions. *Social Epistemology*, *26*(2), 163–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2011.652211

Balfour, M. (2011). Refugee performance: Encounters with alterity. *Journal of Arts and Communities*, *2*(3), 177–195.

Boal, A. (2002). *Games for actors and non-actors*. Routledge.

Boal, A. (2019). *Theatre of the oppressed*. Pluto Press. (Original work published 1979)

Bune, J. N. (2023). *Haunted refuge: Forum theatre, insistence and open futures among young Afghans in Denmark* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Aarhus University.

Çankaya, S., & Mepschen, P. (2019). Facing racism: Discomfort, innocence and the liberal peripheralisation of race in the Netherlands. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, *27*(4), 626–640. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12699

Centre for Holding Space. (n.d.). *What is holding space*? https://centreforholdingspace.com/what-is-holding-space

Coetzee, M. H., & Munro, M. (2010). Embodied knowledges: Physical theatre and the physicality of theatre. *South African Theatre Journal*, *24*(1), 10–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2010.9687918

Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the 'de-migranticization' of research on migration and integration1. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(13), 2207–2225. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1124129

Davids, T., Van Houte, M., & Alpes, M. J. (2024). *Mixing creative and qualitative methods: An appreciative inquiry into responsible knowledge production for engaged scholars*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

de Noronha, L. (2022). The conviviality of the overpoliced, detained and expelled: Refusing race and salvaging the human at the borders of Britain. *The Sociological Review*, *70*(1), 159–177. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261211048888

Dennis, B. (2009). Acting up: Theater of the oppressed as critical ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(2), 65–96.

Drinko, C. (2013). *Theatrical improvisation, consciousness, and cognition*. Springer.

Drinko, C. (2018). The improv paradigm: Three principles that spur creativity in the classroom. In S. Burgoyne (Ed.), *Creativity in theatre: Theory and action in theatre/drama education* (pp. 35–48). Springer.

Dudeck, T. R., & McClure, C. (2018). *Applied improvisation: Leading, collaborating, and creating beyond the theatre*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Erel, U., Reynolds, T., & Kaptani, E. (2017). Participatory theatre for transformative social research. *Qualitative Research*, *17*(3), 302–312. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117696029

Gattenhof, S., Hancox, D., Klaebe, H., & Mackay, S. (2021). Nothing about us without us: Co-creation with communities for impact assessment. In S. Gattenhof, D. Hancox, H. Klaebe, & S. Mackay (Eds.), *The social impact of creative arts in Australian communities* (pp. 45–60). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-7357-3_4

Ghorashi, H. (2014). Racism and 'the ungrateful other' in the Netherlands. In I. Hoving & P. Essed (Eds.), *Dutch racism* (pp. 101–117). Rodopi.

Ghorashi, H., & Ponzoni, E. (2014). Reviving agency: Taking time and making space for rethinking diversity and inclusion. *European Journal of Social Work*, *17*(2), 161–174. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2013.777332

Hamel, S. (2013). When theatre of the oppressed becomes theatre of the oppressor. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *18*(4), 403–416. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2013.836918

Kaptani, E., Erel, U., O'Neill, M., & Reynolds, T. (2021). Methodological innovation in research: Participatory theater with migrant families on conflicts and transformations over the politics of belonging. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, *19*(1), 68–81. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2020.1843748

Kaptani, E., & Yuval-Davis, N. (2008). Participatory theatre as a research methodology: Identity, performance and social action among refugees. *Sociological Research Online*, *13*(5), Article 2. https://doi.org/doi:10.5153/sro.1789

Larruina, R. L. (2023). *The winding road to meaningful integration: A ten-year multi-perspective approach to unraveling refugee reception and integration in the Netherlands* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. https://doi.org/10.5463/thesis.63

Leavy, P. (2020). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford Publications.

Lenette, C. (2019). Arts-based methods in refugee research. *Springer*.

Medina, J. (2013). *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and the social imagination*. Oxford University Press.

Merlín-Escorza, C. E. (2024). Sheltering extraction: The politics of knowledges' transitions in the context of

shelter organisations in Mexico and the Netherlands. In A. Triandafyllidou, A. Moghadam, M. Kelly, & Z. Şahin-Mencütek (Eds.), *Migration and cities: Conceptual and policy advances* (pp. 277–291). Springer.

Oliveira, E., & Vearey, J. (2020). The seductive nature of participatory research: Reflecting on more than a decade of work with marginalized migrants in South Africa. *Migration Letters*, *17*(2), 219–228.

Österlind, E. (2008). Acting out of habits: Can theatre of the oppressed promote change? Boal's theatre methods in relation to Bourdieu's concept of habitus. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *13*(1), 71–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780701825328

Pascoe, S., Sanders, A., Rawluk, A., Satizábal, P., & Toumbourou, T. (2020). *Intervention: 'Holding space for alternative futures in academia and beyond.'* Antipode. https://antipodeonline.org/2020/04/22/holding-space-for-alternative-futures-in-academia-and-beyond

Rast, M. C., & Ghorashi, H. (2018). Dancing with 'the other': Challenges and opportunities of deepening democracy through participatory spaces for refugees. *Social Inclusion*, *6*(1), 188–198. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i1.1300

Roy, A. (2004). *Peace & the new corporate liberation theology—2004 City of Sydney Peace prize lecture* (CPACS Occasional Paper). Sydney Peace Foundation. https://sydneypeacefoundation.org.au/peace-prize-recipients/2004-arundhati-roy

Shaughnessy, N. (2012). *Applying performance: Live art, socially engaged theatre and affective practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Shea, M. V. (2024). Developing methodologies for co-production of knowledge: Data production and analysis in community-based research partnerships. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *31*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241227268

Stanfield, R. B. (Ed.). (2000). *The art of focused conversation: 100 ways to access group wisdom in the workplace*. New Society Publishers.

Taylor, P. (2003, February 20-22). *The applied theatre* [Paper presentation]. Symposium: What is 'Cinderella' hiding? Theatre/Ideology/Young People, Arizona State University Department of Theatre, Tempe, AZ, United States.

Tuck, K., & Yang, E. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor: Indigeneity. *Education & Society*, *1*(1), 1–40.

Valluvan, S. (2016). Conviviality and multiculture: A post-integration sociology of multi-ethnic interaction. *Young*, *24*(3), 204–221. https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308815624061

Varga, A. (2015). *The theory and practice of inclusion*. University of Pécs. http://pea.lib.pte.hu/handle/pea/23819

Venkatesan, S., Ntarangwi, M., Mills, D., Gillespie, K., Davé, N., & Backhaus, V. (2024). A decolonial anthropology: You can dismantle the master's house with the master's tools. *Critique of Anthropology*, *44*(2), 99–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275x241253373

Wise, A., & Noble, G. (2016). Convivialities: An orientation. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *37*(5), 423–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2016.1213786

Wright, L. H. V., Tisdall, K., & Moore, N. (2021). Taking emotions seriously: Fun and pride in participatory research. *Emotion Space and Society*, *41*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2021.100836

About the Authors

Marieke van Houte is an assistant professor for cultural anthropology and development studies, and a senior researcher for human geography at the Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Her research focuses on issues of migration/mobilities in the context of social change, identity/belonging, and conflict. She actively searches for innovative methods using co-creative, theatrical, and participatory methods. Her long-term goal is to contribute to navigating the complexities of social change through solid and more just knowledge production, teaching and outreach. With compassion, creativity, and connectedness.

Maria Charlotte Rast (PhD) is a researcher and lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In her research, she focuses on the challenges, opportunities, and conditions of co-creative endeavors between scholars, professionals, volunteers, civil society players, and other individuals and communities with and without refugee background. Her work shows how such endeavors are conditioned by, navigate within, and transform exclusionary academic and societal structures.

Cogitatio

ARTICLE

Moving Margins: Writing in Relation as Liberatory Practice

Saba Hamzah [1] and **Kolar Aparna** [2]

[1] Sociology Department, Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands
[2] Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki, Finland

Correspondence: Kolar Aparna (kolar.aparna@helsinki.fi)

Abstract

This article is a practice of writing in relation. We consciously keep the conversational format to be close to our practice as educators, migrant-artists, and scholars. We weave our personal journeys as political and urgent for epistemic justice on questions of social inclusion of (forced) migrants. We do so to question the dominant forms of inclusion practiced in institutions that our bodies have navigated and continue to do so. Our intention is to open rather than fix our approach of relational biographical writing to bring attention to some hidden forms of daily violence and paradoxes challenging the path of emancipatory practice within spaces claiming social inclusion of migrants/refugees. We reflect on why we write and why we came to academia, inviting the reader to journey with us in what we experience as moving margins.

1. Introduction: SaK Collective Memory

In this article we attempt to outline a vision for epistemic justice urgent to our practice as academics, artists, migrants, women, mothers, sisters, daughters, lovers, friends, and so much more. In the last half-decade, we have been talking to each other almost every day. Talking to question, challenge, confront, navigate, move, stay, hold, push, embrace, see, celebrate each other in relation to the structural conditions that we navigate in academic and art institutions, but also in our daily lives. We did so to thrive and inhabit spaces we are not meant to be in, asking questions we are told we are not supposed to. This is to also acknowledge the hidden labour that goes behind the written word since we have had to claim and make space for our forged sisterhood in the margins of institutional spaces, despite also encountering each other in academic institutions

in the Netherlands. We consciously keep the conversational format to be close to our practice as educators, artists, and scholars, weaving our personal journeys as political and being conscious of the reciprocal process that hooks (1994) reminds us of:

> When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice. Indeed, what such experience makes more evident is the bond between the two—that ultimately reciprocal process wherein one enables the other. (p. 61)

S refers to Saba, K refers to Kolar, and *a* refers to so many people and things that bring us together. SaK also means to question in the Swedish language, and it represents our practices. We are restlessly asking questions, activating our sense of being, while valuing overthinking as a way to navigate the world.

Writing this article is also a liberatory practice in recovering our moving selves and the writing subject as a relational being and from there building a vision for social transformation in institutions and engaged practices of teaching and research on the theme of this thematic issue related to social inclusion for refugees/undocumented migrants. It is part of doing the deep coalition building against multiple forms of oppression that Lugones (2003) and Spivak (2010) call for. This *doing* involves being open to a process of ontological displacement and moving out of one's comfort position precisely because our bodies do not speak the same language, while being able to develop a common ground to name the oppressions they have gone through. This is so because the hegemonies, as Grewal and Kaplan (1994) have pointed out, are scattered but related (Lugones, 2003, 2010). In our writing, we write in conversation, weaving our experiences in response to each other's narratives, aiming for collective consciousness, inspired by Anzaldúa (1987). We tell our stories for what Cairo (2021) calls holding space, for our knowledges. We do so to challenge the fear of our experiences being torn apart in analysis, as Hill Collins (2000) highlights. Our intention is to bring attention to some hidden forms of daily violence and paradoxes obstructing the path of emancipatory practice within spaces open to "international students," non-white students and scholarship, and knowledges of migrants/refugees. Rather than visibly exclusionary spaces we especially focus on spaces of hope that we experienced as part of institutional life in the Netherlands that, however, reached certain limits and razor edges. Such edges shed light on institutions being unable to receive and transform from the plural knowledges we carried with us as professionals moving/being moved from the Global South.

Then writing becomes part of reflecting on our practices of moving out of one's place in such spaces of hope and constraint, in relation. We invite the reader to journey with these reflections. We experience this process as moving margins—margins not as a space for limiting and boxing one's identity, but as a space of what hooks (1989) calls radical openness. Margins as part of moving "out of one's place," "pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex and class domination" (hooks, 1989, p. 15). Moving is, at the same time, being moved by each other's journeys and life experiences. Moving is also being moved by each other's onto-epistemic (linguistic) differences (Lugones, 2010; Spivak, 2010). We therefore adopt a form of writing that allows for our streams of thought to flow in relation. As migrants from the Global South, the condition of moving and being moved inevitably also produces its own temporalities of memory.

By following what Minh-Ha (2009) calls body-writing in relation, we hold space for stories that have been buried in our bodies for the sake of "moving on." Such stories now surface in this article as the grounds on

which we build and have built our practice in order to forge what Khan (2024) calls wilful coalitions, across forms of oppression, and our relationships to academic spaces in the Netherlands. This allows us to not only critique hidden forms of exclusion in the name of inclusion but in fact to also open up the process of rescripting our subjecthood and responses to such situations in relation. This, we believe, is a necessary path in order to challenge what Lugones (2010) calls coloniality of gender in institutional spaces from a "fractured locus"—a path that cannot be created by individuals but communities (p. 747). Rather than looking for a coherent author behind the texts, we invite the reader to follow the narrating selves guiding each of the sections that follow. Such narrating selves, we contend, not only bring to light the intersectional forms of exclusionary paradigms in everyday life, but also enact writing as a process of reclaiming the self through the narration of past events in relation. We consciously write to be guided by what Glissant (1997, p. 189) calls the right to opacity, and against transparency—what he argues to be the basic requirement of Western thought. At the same time, we articulate the moments when our bodies and knowledges were asked to fit into a scale or norm of such transparency and a gaze to "understand" us. As Glissant (1997, p. 190) argues, "in order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce." It is at these moments when we faced the gaze that demands transparency and the inevitable reduction of knowledges involved in inclusion that we open up to in our writing process.

We consciously centre and separate "the stories" from the debates in which we embed our arguments, in order to honour the knowledges in the stories to speak for themselves to a broad audience not bounded by certain standards of legibility and qualification, or for fitting into what Karimi (2024, p. 48) calls "communities of epistemic whiteness." Instead, as feminists such as Elenes (2006, p. 216) have long argued, we write for the "epistemological validation of everyday life as a key source of knowledge." The process of writing and the words in this article, following Anzaldúa, emerge as, "blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 71). We also bring people who carry knowledges—scholars, writers, poets, grandmothers, and mothers—who are not always visible or legible in the spaces we inhabit. We wish to underline that knowledge comes in different shapes and forms. This is essential for our struggle to keep our voices and make space for voices that are often not heard. Rather than writing to feed what Adebayo (2022) calls the "positionality enterprise" where researchers are pushed to reflect on positionality for the sake of reflecting rather than for social transformation, we have attempted to hold space for our writing selves to lead the way in unpacking multiple forms of oppressions we have navigated in everyday life. We do so as a practice of learning about each other as resisters to the coloniality of gender at the colonial difference (Lugones, 2010, p. 753). This path is not complete with this article nor only began with it but is and has been ongoing.

2. Theorizing Beyond White Spaces

To be honest, whenever I am asked to discuss the relationship between theory and practice, I often find myself stumbling for an answer. While I recognize their disconnect in many academic contexts, even in feminist approaches and gender studies, unfortunately, in my role as a feminist poet-scholar and educator, they've always been intimately intertwined. For me, theory is not merely abstract it is a form of practice by itself. I engage with and participate in theory-building to understand, challenge power dynamics, and raise my voice against violence, oppression, and injustice. In my work, theory seamlessly intersects with my advocacy for justice.

In moments when reality seemed impossible, I turned to theory to explore and carve out spaces for myself. As hooks (1994) notes, I began theorizing from a young age, even before fully grasping the concept. I rebelled against injustices, especially when I encountered gender-based discrimination, such as being told I couldn't ask certain questions simply because of my gender.

I grew up surrounded by a huge collection of books that reflected my father's genuine love for reading in general rather than with a specific preference. I was also sent to study at scientific institutions that, paradoxically, placed a greater emphasis on language and religion than science. Their curriculum was advanced, teaching high school-level material in elementary school and university-level material in high school. There, I encountered religious practices that, while slightly different from those I was learning at home, were crucial in shaping my understanding.

My journey of self-discovery and advocacy was also influenced by my mom. Despite not having a formal education, she has been a fierce feminist who challenges societal norms and stereotypes. She managed the household with strength and grace, all the while standing up for what she believed in. She fearlessly voiced her opinions on various topics, particularly when she witnessed injustices against women. Her actions and beliefs echoed those of many feminists, even though she may not have identified herself as such. However, when she was personally involved, she adhered to the very norms she opposed.

This exposure to diverse viewpoints and conflicting beliefs and practices provoked me to question more deeply and seek the truth from an early age. It also taught me the value of embracing multiple approaches and challenging the notion of a singular path. It instilled in me the understanding that writing can serve as a powerful tool for theorizing new realities derived from everyday experiences. At home, we had collections by prominent authors like Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, Nazik al-Malaika, Abdullah Al-Bardoni, and Mai Ziyada. Those were writers who challenged the traditional norms and hierarchical structures in their writings and in the way they were writing as well. Reading their texts, I felt I belonged to the spaces they created, and the issues they tackled and challenged. It was their way of freely writing that created this sense of belonging to the written word. Engaging with their writings profoundly influenced my perspectives and choices. Many people around me labeled me as stubborn, tactful, rebellious, and strong-willed, but these descriptions merely scratched the surface of who I was. They encapsulated my daily struggle against the injustices I witnessed in the world around me.

Through all of that, I found my voice as a woman and began speaking out and writing about issues that mattered to me and the people around me. My upbringing, combined with the influence of strong female figures, shaped my perspective and determination to challenge hierarchical structures and fight for justice. Writing became my sanctuary. It provided me with a home and a horizon to navigate and thrive freely without the need to engage in meaningless arguments with those who cling to the status quo or fear change. It liberated my thoughts from constraints, allowing them to roam freely without limitations or boundaries. It offered me a joyful space when joy was forbidden or prohibited. It helped me to channel the anger that arose from witnessing injustices, transforming it into power for meaningful discourses and actions.

In Yemen, I was using storytelling as an alternative pedagogy in teaching speaking skills, seizing the opportunity to address social and gender issues in the classroom, and engaging my students in meaningful debates. It was crucial to me that the classroom served not only as a space for language learning, given my role as an ESL

(English as Second Language) instructor, but also as a realm for critical thinking. Upon fleeing Yemen, I ceased formal teaching but continued to educate. I delved into numerous books, discussing them with friends, and explored new methods of engaging with people through writing, both in theory and practice. I thought of ways to attract readers and encourage a critical engagement with the subjects I was aiming to address.

Inspired by Iranian author and professor Azar Nafisi's novel *To Read Lolita in Tehran*, I integrated international literature into everyday experiences. The first blog in this series was To Read Lolita in Sana'a. Despite the platform I wrote for being blocked in Yemen, thousands of people engaged with the blog. This interaction provided both me and my editor, Abdul Rahman Faris at New Arabs, who was a prominent figure in the Egyptian revolution, with the motivation to write more blogs.

3. Narrating in a Space of White NOISE

Upon moving to the Netherlands in 2018, I wanted to delve deeper into alternative pedagogies and learn how to translate my personal experiences into a body of knowledge or find a framework for doing so. I was inspired by many fierce feminists who ignited a fire within me, making Gender Studies the most fitting place for me.

After attending some classes in feminist historiography, I began to doubt my decision. I didn't want to engage with knowledges that centred experiences of white bodies, while either deliberately or ignorantly disregarding the struggles faced by others in different parts of the world. Nor did I want to participate in abstract discussions, while millions of women and men were/are enduring violence that I thought I fled. When I joined gender studies, I believed it to be the most radical space in academia that could make a change in the world, but I remember writing this sidenote after one of the lectures that depicted my frustration: لقد تمكن الرجل الغربي من حصر النقد قي زاوية المرأة وأشغلها بمسائل فكرية ضحلة ليتفرغ هو لشئونه الخاصة. This note was written during a moment of deep frustration, as I felt disconnected from the topics discussed in the classroom. While the focus was on issues related to the body, pronouns, and sexuality, I was preoccupied with the violence experienced by the people I had left behind—violence stemming from colonialism, war, displacement, floods, and famine. These were life-and-death struggles for basic rights like survival, education, and healthcare. I had hoped for women/gender studies to be the place to address these urgent forms of violence, but I was disappointed to find that the topics covered were far removed from my expectations. As a result, I wrote this note in my diary. I have chosen not to translate the note to convey my sense of alienation to the reader. It was the day I decided I needed to rethink my whole decision. Eventually, I realized that I had to let go of my romantic idea about gender studies as a space for activism and solidarity and see it for what it is: an academic space in a white institution. I enrolled in the master's degree program in 2019 and was accepted. This was an achievement that instilled renewed hope and joy in me because I didn't have to meet additional educational qualifications or complete a pre-master's program, a common challenge for many migrant students. The program coordinator recognized my previous education and experiences as sufficient qualifications for higher education.

These are excerpts from *Reflections on Summer School, August 2019*:

> I'll begin with the final day of the summer school part of the Gender Studies program. We were divided into groups based on colours, and I belonged to the Light Blue group. These colors were deliberately chosen to "make space" for diverse perspectives and voices. When it was our group's turn to present, I stood up

silently from my seat in the middle of the hall, prompting the entire row of white students to stand up so I could pass. I neither uttered "please" nor "thank you." As I exited the hall without heading to the front, they assumed I wasn't part of the group and erupted into laughter. After my group finished presenting, I returned, once again causing the row to stand up so I could reclaim my seat. I wasn't performing silence; I wasn't silent at all, but I was amidst a white NOISE—a noise in which my voice would never stand out or be heard. So, I made a conscious decision to adopt the role of the visible invisible, protesting loudly with a muted voice. I'm uncertain if I was truly heard or seen, but I seized the opportunity to present myself—the authentic me, a complete stranger, who resists classification yet belongs to one of the most marginalized layers on Life's Screen. It exists yet remains unheard or barely seen, no matter how noisy it becomes. It doesn't manifest visibly; it's not even the black dot on a white canvas.

Learning is a process, and if my presence was hard to be read or heard, then I believe it will have space one day, just like me in that fruitful, effective, and beneficial week. And yes, I was invading the space somehow, thanks to the people who made it possible. On the other hand, although I am struggling with the burden of doubt, as Nirmal Puwar (2004) calls it, I am trying to understand the awkward position I am in, where I must learn and unlearn at the same time. Enduring not to constantly prove that I deserve to be here and to focus more on why I am here and what it is that I want to gain.

One of the most important reasons I chose gender studies is that I want to place my own experience within an academic framework, or in other words, explore how I can generate knowledge from this experience. What I gleaned from Mijke van der Drift's lecture aided me in delineating a clear path in my mind: understanding how to learn about what I don't yet know and then articulate what I do know to create knowledge.

This week opened my eyes to a broader landscape of what I thought about gender and gender studies. Some lectures were not relevant to me at all, and some lectures seemed, to me, as if they were performances and the lecturers were acting. It was not the performance that bugged me but the way they acted. It was fake to me, trying to justify an idea or to say what the audience would love to hear; even if it resonated with me, it was still bothering. I then realized that there is a massive gap between what we know, what we think we know, and what we want to know. I unlearned a lot, and that was not a deleting process where unlearning means giving up knowledge. On the contrary, this process of unlearning added some valuable insights and illustrated hidden meanings for me.

The juxtaposition of NOISE and In/visibility was a tempting theme, and asking for a reflection on it made me think of me as the other, the invisible, the not-yet-of-colour who has no shadow to be reflected. Yet, I can still read what was reflected in the mirror (that week). Coming to that conclusion, I was afraid to submit a blank page since mixing all colours would only reflect WHITE!

After submitting my reflection on the NOISE week, the only black Dutch student in the group reached out to discuss her thoughts on my paper. She questioned whether I had read the other students' papers because, to her, my writing didn't measure up to theirs. I attempted to convey that I wasn't concerned with comparison; our distinct paths of upbringing, education, life experiences, knowledge, and backgrounds set us apart, and I viewed that as a strength rather than a weakness. However, she remained unconvinced. To her, it boiled down to a binary of good versus bad, academic versus non-academic. I learned that she had grown up and studied in the Netherlands, yet she apparently felt a stronger connection to me than to the other students.

Throughout our conversation, she continued to reflect on the papers, our work, and the notion of positionality in academia and gender studies, particularly framing it as "us" versus "them."

The only time we had a class on something related to my cultural background was on Islamic feminism. I felt deeply troubled because it romanticized "Muslim women's" experience, overlooking the diversity of their experiences. What astonished me the most, however, was how almost the entire class criticized those who advocated for questioning Islam or women's "liberation" as right-wing propagandists. I felt the dual shadow of violence within academia and the challenging position I was in, attempting to convey that so many voices get lost in such rigid paradigms.

The same friend was observing my interactions throughout the courses. She had initially come to me and asked me how I, as a mom, was managing to read all the literature assigned to the courses and ask those brilliant questions. I had explained to her that my approach to reading and questioning was focusing only on what was personally important to me. I didn't attempt to appear clever or ask "smart" questions. One day I asked her if what I was saying or asking in class resonated with her. Unlike our first encounter after the feminist histography class together and during the NOISE summer school, her approach to me was different this time. She responded, "I actually don't know what you are trying to say at all." This shattered me because, to some extent, I could agree with her.

By this second encounter I was already trying to fit into that space, witnessing all the white noise around me. It felt like I was losing my voice. It was difficult for me to keep up with all the courses and readings in the same pace as the other students. Also, the language gap, as most of them were native speakers of sorts, intimidated me. But also given the fact that I couldn't find translations for so many terms in Arabic, I had to do more work to understand specific terms or subjects. I was also afraid of sharing any of my stories to not be analysed by other academics who seemed to be more interested in building their careers by engaging with refugees and migrants' stories rather than co-working/creating. I was joining my black Dutch friend in an invisible space of violence: diversity in shape and colour but not in practice.

I spoke to my advisor about the whole thing. I was seeking help and guidance on how to move forward. She reassured me that I was progressing well and expressed her appreciation for my work. She also emphasized that what she liked most about me and my work was that I was doing it for myself and not solely for academia or academic validation. It took me some time to fully understand what she was trying to convey.

It was the distinction between what matters to me and what was deemed acceptable within academia that I was struggling with. I entered academia to find/found a framework for my knowledge and experiences, aiming to translate them into a body of recognized academic knowledge so that other women like me could find something or someone who speaks their language—a language of multilayered experiences, violence, struggles, and multiple tongues.

I aimed to break free from paradigms and theories that discussed women who may look like me but didn't necessarily reflect my own experiences.

4. Dancing Out of My Place

The journey from dancing to geography was a painfully beautiful one. My last performance on stage was for a dance festival in the Netherlands in Spring 2007 as a student at a top avant-garde art school in Amsterdam. I danced to refuse the violence of conceptual art that was experimented on and through my body. Conceptual art that did not converse with the knowledges and stories my body carried. My body was seen as a "South Asian" dancer trained in Kathak whose embodied knowledges were to be silenced to fit the designs and concepts of the choreographer, whose body stayed in the comfort zone of thought and ideas. In one of the rehearsals, I was asked to dance the movements and gestures of kathak without my pants on. It was clear that the choreographer was "pushing our limits" while remaining within the comfort of his/their conceptual journey. I did what was asked of me. I did it to refuse the voices in my head—voice of "oh, you trained in classical Indian dance, you must find it hard to go against your guru [teacher]"; voice of "you must be rich to study in Amsterdam, India is such a poor country"; voice of "once you cross the Indian ocean you lose your roots"; voice of "always remember where you come from, don't forget your roots." I did it to refuse these voices that had stayed in my head and needed to be let out.

The Spanish co-dancer was asked to perform the routine of a namaz while we watched his/their body struggle with the gestures. We were not part of the concept-building process of the choreographer that such work would give form to. Later I would come to read in an online interview where it was mentioned by the choreographer that the people involved in creating this piece would raise questions around "the issue of war, the issue of the Other, the issue of the role of women in society." If this was the intention, my dancing body was not engaged with the research questions shaping the piece. My body was not approached as a theorising/conceptualising body. I had to reclaim my body for the performance after this abusive rehearsal. A spontaneous act of shaving my head. I sacrificed my hair. I did it, simply, without much thought, as a gesture of allowing my body to hold itself amidst the twisted gaze and power relations forcing her to move in ways she did not and had not always wanted to. In hindsight I think I did it to burn the conditions of welcoming I was offered (what was then) "here" in my new home and the road "back home" (what was then) "there." My body knew that both were unsafe. I danced the piece to burn my old self while mourning her. I danced without gratitude to the choreographer, screaming silently my exilic condition, which no one heard. I was muted by the grand visuals, the spectacular stage setting, the jarring sounds of the live music band, the spotlights, the coldness of the audience. The violence of the spectacle is that we accept the dividing line between observing and being observed. We have given up other senses in guiding this relation.

I was burnt out after this performance. I had given too much without being nourished. I tried to meet the director of the school and asked for some days of rest. He advised me to return "home." I did not know and realise that he was in fact opening a legal case of voluntary return and eventually making me quit the school but also lose my residence permit. I was seen as a burden and a student not good enough to be groomed as the school's graduates. I sensed that I was seen as not being grateful to the choreographer who was the director's good friend. What remained invisible to their eyes, but also to the structures of the arts education system, was all that was underneath the iceberg of my student registration in Amsterdam with my Indian passport. Years of training in forms and knowledges that were made illegible here but were also fixed there. Years of dreaming to escape from an unsafe home. Years of saving up and applying for scholarships. Years of not having space to rehearse and develop my own audition piece and my work as an independent dancer. Long periods of paperwork and visa procedures and even a police investigation to verify my home address before arriving

in Europe, in the Netherlands. The hypocrisies of attracting "international students" needed to claim appeal and capital as a Dutch art institution, alongside the provinciality of art schools in Europe that dismissed plural knowledges built from restless questioning, experiences, and training became evident.

There was a continuum of violence that my dancing body experienced here and there. I did not get translations of the Urdu poetry I was dancing to, across the Indian sub-continent in the 90s and 2000s. Nor did I get access to the texts behind the concepts of the piece my body was asked to move to here in Amsterdam, in one of the most avant-garde and international schools for new dance development in Europe in 2007. My movement expressions and knowledges were, on one hand, received through an Orientalist gaze as "Indian" and "timeless" fixing me in space and time and unable to catch up to European trends. On the other hand, they were used to perform a radical critique of occidental knowledges without sensing it as a theorising body. In hindsight, I was yearning to make my own space and time for building knowledges from my experiences to develop a relational frame/form for which I came to this school.

I was welcomed and celebrated as the first "Indian" student in the history of the school when I got selected as one among the 10 out of 100 dancers selected to the program. The selection committee was excited that I would be teaching Kathak to the students at this school and other schools it was affiliated with. My body was made to become "out of place" and "out of time," while in fact I was radically demanding/creating my own space and time. My body needed to rest and restore to rebuild herself from the condition of displacement and transformations part of the same. There was no space or time from the institution, staff, and the students or the procedures to allow for this.

The student mentor supposed to offer guidance and supervision and in charge of our well-being tried to reveal aspects of "Indian culture" that she was exposed to as a tourist in South India. She told me that she had been to Hampi (in South India) and had been "dancing on the rocks." Her gaze had no space for my inner transformations. She gave me a small elephant made from stone to support me. These symbols of "my culture" coming through her visits to "India" that were being offered to me in fact kept me in place—i.e., under her gaze. My art history teacher covered movements such as Dadaism, showing us videos of dancers in Europe and the US such as works of Martha Graham and non-representational pieces from Yvonne Rainer, among others, that did not pass through my body. We did not get much context to situate these works in larger geopolitical, political, historical, economic, cultural circulations, let alone global designs of cultural imperialism shaping "canons" of European art history. The staff were predominantly white not in terms of appearance but in terms of speaking, and assimilated into the singular language legible to the institution and trends circulating in Europe and North America, even if the forms we were all trained in looked different.

I was burnt out from being unable to hold my space in a white institution that had failed to provide the safe and brave space needed to find a frame for my experiences and to build theories from there. I moved to academia to protect my body and for the same reason that hooks (1994) talks about—because I was hurting.

5. Theorising as Conversing To Go-On

I remember theorising at the age of five or seven, sitting next to my father, on the pavement by the temple at the corner of the street between my home and school. He simply kept repeating that he did not want to live, that he wanted to die, and could not go about his daily life. I was trying to find words to not only comfort

him but to get him to move from inside out, and in the process trying to move myself and play with him. I was trying to love as play, embracing his urge to kill himself while trying to grow with him through conversations. I felt it was a play that often went in loops. All he could say was "ನನಗೆ ಆಗ್ತಾಯಿಲ್ಲma" (*I cannot go on*). I was searching for a frame to name his/our struggles to be able to love, in a society where naming a mental health condition would result in out-casting someone. I wanted to find a way of articulating our struggles to get him out of his condition through my thoughts and words articulated orally. I did not read much but kept finding a way of talking to everyone around me in coded languages and measuring their responses, denials, body expressions, gestures, silences, to build my own framework to navigate my father's struggles in relation to my family's struggles.

I had to find a way to make him see the light of moving and living. I remember affirming him of his strengths, of why I love him, and that this would pass, and so on. Recently, after more than three decades, his response was the same. But my location had shifted. I began to see his struggle as part of the societal violence to silence knowledges. Theorising meant finding ways to talk about something that one does not yet have the vocabulary nor the space for, while being spoon-fed with narratives that were indigestible but meant to be "good for you" or given as "the truth." I had been doing this sub-consciously but now I became more conscious of this, which is part of the writing process of this article.

At the same time, I remember looking into the eyes of my great-grandmother, as a seven-year-old child. She was blind and had never been to a formal education system. I remember feeling the magic of storytelling and imagination. As a child I remember entering her room like I was entering a magical land. Her eyes were so lit up and full of stories that had the power to transform the little room—a small bed, cupboard, and a toilet—into a magical land. Her stories speculated on futures she did not have this life. Storytelling was her way to empower herself and the women she knew who were struggling with limited options to transform their lives in the material world by imagining and living future lives and therefore their daily life. This was/is magical for me because it was a practice of theorising as active dreaming urgent to pass through her/their daily struggles. This is what I hold on to today for building theorising practices as liberatory.

My theorising has always been oral from early on. Till today, it's my capacity to have conversations and theorise while talking, finding ways to transform each other's day-to-day struggles. Theorising is for finding a reason to move and act and be in this world as relational beings, always incomplete, broken, and beautiful. Conversing allowed me and us in this article to rescript our subjecthood against the violence we carry in our bodies intersecting with broader phenomena of war, colonialism, inter-imperialisms, racism, gender discrimination, caste, class, social inequalities across places and times.

6. Conclusion: Writing as Making Times and Living Spaces of Liberatory Practice

In writing in relation, we articulate the everyday dynamics of silencing in spaces especially interested in including "diverse" and marginalised voices, that our bodies have gone through (Spivak, 2010). In doing so, we underline the power of language in shaping such contours of global epistemic standards (see also Aparna & Hamzah, 2023), not only in terms of English language skills but also in the lesser visible exclusions in the name of "critical academic language" or "avant-garde art" in schools of gender studies and performing arts. The identity politics of looking, performing, and sounding different while becoming the "marginalised other"

who is legible, audible, and visible to, what Khosravi (2024) calls white ears, and eyes, we argue, limit epistemological plurality.

Writing this article is our practice to weave ourSelves in relation. It is at the same time a practice of not separating theory and practice, art, activism, daily lived knowledges/experiences from "critical academic" thought and writing. Theorising for us is a practice of raising our voice when the lived realities become impossible to inhabit. It is a practice to develop tools to detach from the performativity of the "critical academic subject," or "conceptual artist," that appears diverse in shape and colour but not in practice. It is a practice to theorise from that space where our bodies refuse to name our feminisms within the boxes of Islamic or South Asian feminisms. It is a practice to reclaim our writing, dancing, living, conversing, and theorising bodies as relational and unique, rather than to fit into standards defined externally. Writing this article is our practice to not reproduce the violence that our bodies carry in some of our engagements in institutional spaces. It is a practice to build on the knowledges that have otherwise not counted as knowledge carried in our bodies and passed on as wisdom from strong women, men, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, without romanticising them but learning and unlearning to read them as we pass through white institutional spaces.

Writing is a practice of making a home and horizon when and where they do not exist. Teaching and learning a new language is a constant practice of searching for vocabularies to name and overcome shifting gender and social inequalities that our bodies experience. At the same time teaching and learning a new language also means opening them up for others to relate, write, and think from. Writing is also a practice of naming our experiences of navigating White institutional spaces and asking how we can nevertheless reclaim ourselves, and our voices, and build open-ended theories from there. Writing is a practice of moving to not fit into standards that erase the literacies and knowledges of our/other marginalised daily experiences. Such knowledges we believe have the power to transform power hierarchies and inequalities while opening pathways for alternative epistemologies needed for the same. Writing this article is our practice of making our times otherwise not granted to us—times that are not linear or fixed to dominant speeds, narratives of progress, and histories or geographies or subjectivities or identities that are bounded. Writing this article is our practice of living spaces of relational subjecthood otherwise not granted to us—spaces where the I becomes many *I*s and the pre-determined "We" is disturbed. We write as living spaces for conversing endlessly without boundaries of personal and professional and theorising from there. We write as weaving our trajectories without imposing, keeping close to our daily lives to open rather than bounding them to fixed narratives of oppression or liberation. We write as a practice of not defining the path to liberation but making times and living spaces of liberatory practice otherwise not granted. We bring attention to the specific institutional spaces mentioned above because they continue to be spaces of possibility and hope for us, despite the limits in breaking silences on structural racism in the present. We write to reclaim our roles as writers, academics, artists, mothers, friends, sisters, daughters within and at the margins of various institutional spaces from the kitchen table to the board rooms of scientific and artistic institutions and the playing fields beyond.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Adebayo, K. (2022, June 7-10). *Who positionality "epp"?* [Paper presentation]. Africa-Europe Reciprocal perspectives Albert Ludwig University Freiburg im Breisgau Freiburg, Germany.

Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (1st ed.). Aunt Luke Book Company.

Aparna, K., & Hamzah, S. (2023). Languaging as refusal. *Fennia-International Journal of Geography, 201*(2), 215–228.

Cairo, A. (2021). *Holding space: A storytelling approach to trampling diversity and inclusion.* Aminata Cairo Consultancy.

Elenes, C. A. (2006). Borderlands, pedagogies, and epistemologies. In D. D. Bernal, C. A. Elenes, E. G. Francisca, & S. Villenas (Eds.), *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 215–217). State University of New York.

Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of relation.* University of Michigan Press.

Grewal, I., & Kaplan, C. (Eds.). (1994). *Scattered hegemonies: Postmodernity and transnational feminist practices.* University of Minnesota Press.

Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

hooks, b. (1989). choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 1989*(36), 15–23.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress.* Routledge.

Karimi, Z. (2024). I am not the info desk for Islam and Arabs: The racialization of Islam and boundaries of citizenship. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 47*(1), 45–63.

Khan, A. (2024). Wilful coalitions: On the conjunction of anticolonial and queer politics. In K. Aparna & J. Metcalfe (Eds.), *Differential doings, europes in margins.* Manuscript in preparation.

Khosravi, S. (2024). Doing migration studies with an accent. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 50*, 2346–2358.

Lugones, M. (2003). *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia, 25*(4), 742–759.

Minh-Ha, T. T. (2009). *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism.* Indiana University Press.

Puwar, N. (2004). *Space invaders: Race, gender and bodies out of place.* Berg.

Spivak, G. C. (2010). Can the subaltern speak? In R. C. Morris (Ed.), *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea* (pp. 21–78). Columbia University Press.

About the Authors

Saba Hamzah سبأ حمزة is a poet-scholar, author, and educator. Her research delves into the intersections of knowledge production, memory, and social justice from a decolonial lens. Saba's work critically examines the power structures embedded in society, using art and literary interventions as tools for education, social mediation, and transformative change. With a strong foundation in art, history, and gender studies, Saba approaches knowledge production and justice with a focus on curating and preserving the narratives of marginalized communities.

Kolar Aparna is a scholar and educator with a background in human geography and performing arts. Her teaching and research practices have contributed to debates in postcolonial studies and decolonization of universities. Such works also question the politics of knowledge production while striving to create relational spaces for producing situated knowledges across peripheries and margins.

cogitatio

ARTICLE

"When Someone Gets Sick, We Run to Them, Not From Them": Holding Space for Solidarity Otherwise and the City in Times of Covid-19

Aminata Cairo [1] , Lisa-Marlen Gronemeier [2] , Rosalba Icaza [2] , Umbreen Salim [2] ,
Jyothi Thrivikraman [3] , and Daniela Vicherat Mattar [3]

[1] Independent Researcher, The Netherlands
[2] Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
[3] Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University College, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Rosalba Icaza (icaza@iss.nl)

Abstract

How can we think about solidarity in ways that are attentive to the diversity of stories, spaces, practices, bodies, and temporalities shaping a city? In this article, we argue that "holding space" is at the heart of such endeavour. In the project that informs this article, we examined different practices and dynamics of solidarity in The Hague, The Netherlands. The project took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and aimed at exploring the multiple forms of solidarity that occur between city dwellers, the places they occupy in the city, and their daily practices that support urban life. Departing from our own practices of solidarity as researchers with different migratory backgrounds and belongings, as well as a basic understanding of solidarity as an embodied and enfleshed set of relations of care, we interrogate how solidarity practices unfold across different locations in the city of The Hague. Embarking upon this exploration, we as researchers became part of the communities and locations where these communities exist. We learned about solidarity firsthand as our stories became interwoven with those of other residents and the places they inhabit. These stories are the ones we describe in this work. The article is not just about *what* we learned, but also about *how* we learned in the process of doing this research. Thereby, we highlight the need to reconceptualize solidarity in a way that allows for differences to come forward; to be creative with those differences (Lorde, 1979/2018) to be able to grapple with the plurality of life stories of solidarity that shape the city of The Hague.

Keywords

Covid-19; holding space; solidarity otherwise; storytelling; The Hague

---

1. Introduction

In March 2020, as Covid-19 began spreading and national lockdowns were implemented, the poorly denominated "social distancing" regulations in the Netherlands imposed control on everyday physical interactions to contain the outbreak. In this context, the Local Engagement Facility initiative of the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) funded the multidisciplinary and inter-universities collaborations that underpin the research informing this article. In 2020–2021, researchers and students from different disciplines, and at different moments of their academic trajectories at Leiden University College (LUC), the ISS, and The Hague University of Applied Sciences (THUAS), worked together exploring stories of solidarity in five different locations of The Hague. The aim was to make visible stories of communities "othered" by the white Christian Dutch norms and misrepresented as a separate group organized based on race, religion, ethnicity, and so on (Weiner & Carmona Baez, 2018). Migrants are constituted as one such group and are often misrepresented or erased in the media and local politics in the city. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, these communities' stories were further silenced and denigrated under the shadow of the pandemic fears.

At the onset of this project, we started by identifying ourselves by differentiated degrees of "otherness": We are all immigrant women in the Netherlands—yet with divergent social positionings as a result of global processes of migration, racialization, and capitalist exploitation. These positionings determine from where we think and speak, and how we theorise and practice solidarity in our respective milieus. We carry with us differences in terms of our respective epistemic perspectives yet have in common a refusal to adhere to dominant systems of knowledge production disembedded from solidarity practices (Lorde, 1979/2018). Moreover, we have experienced the position of being "othered" in our institutional journeys as we have embraced and specialised in critical feminist, Indigenous, post-and/or decolonial approaches to scholarship. In this sense, we take research to be a co-learning journey, making it an embodied experience. As will become clear, our different positionalities across migratory histories shaped our roles, responsibilities, experiences, and cultivated knowledge in this research, with some of us becoming part of daily community life and others engaging in conversations and exchanges with city dwellers. We all participated in team meetings and the collaborative writing process.

Our article is organised into five sections, through which we attempt to ground theory, that is, to open space for plural ways of knowing by focusing on the everyday expressions of macro-structures of inequality (De Eguia Huerta, 2020). Grounding the research in the city is not to be confused with the research methodology of grounded theory as the systematic development of theory through the collection and analysis of data (De Eguia Huerta, 2020; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Turner, 1986). Grounding means a movement towards epistemic vulnerability instead of certainty, assuming researchers are most of all learners. Firstly, we unpack and challenge normative liberal approaches to solidarity. Secondly, we introduce the role of storytelling as a means of exploring plural practices and meanings of solidarity. Thirdly, we elaborate on the embodied and place-based character of the stories of *solidarity otherwise* through food market initiatives in The Hague. Fourthly, we highlight the ambivalences and shades of solidarity as experienced in a Pakistani community centre in the city. Fifthly, we describe the enfleshed character of these stories in shaping plural temporalities of the city by sharing stories at a mother, father, and theatre/cultural centres in the city. Finally, we conclude by weaving lessons learned within the context of "holding space" (Cairo, 2021) as research methodology in critical times. In each of these sections, we present embodied and situated responses to our opening question while displaying how our positionalities influenced our interest in

challenging dominant societal norms, refusing extractivist research and normalized assumptions about othered communities while foregrounding practices of solidarity otherwise in the city of the Hague.

2. Challenging Normative Notions of Solidarity

It is with attention to our divergent positionalities that Gronemeier, as a white European who crossed one EU border, critically interrogated dominant notions of solidarity, which we contextualize within the Western European liberal tradition. The Dutch Covid-19 preventive lexicon and related notions of solidarity demarcated possibilities of belonging to the "solidarity community" and becoming a subject of solidarity. Solidarity was framed in terms of rational individual behaviour and personal responsibility in response to sanitary needs. Characterising citizens as grown-ups, the Dutch government advised them to self-isolate appropriately while keeping a *frisse neus* ("getting fresh air"; Burgos Martínez, 2020). As the government addressed "the people," imagined in terms of rational, autonomous, and self-sufficient individuals, preventive measures were tailored to a particular ideal subject (white, middle-class, able-bodied). The imperative of social distancing was proven to be far from being universally exercisable as "place, space and sociality were already differently conceptualised and practised by inhabitants of The Hague of diverse backgrounds" (Burgos Martínez, 2020) and in different settings. Often equated with antisocial behaviour, non-compliance with preventive measures became ascribed to certain bodies/subjects, as an intrinsic characteristic of certain groups (defined by race or/and class), and was attributed to lack of respect, integration, or education (Burgos Martínez, 2020).

These appeals to solidarity often resorted to discourses embedded in Western European liberal thought. This tradition maintains two distinct notions of solidarity, which feature prominently in EU policy and intellectual discourses: "solidarity within Europe," which erases diversity within states, and "solidarity with Europe's 'other'" (Karagiannis, 2007). "Solidarity within Europe" constructs people who form part of European polities since the times of colonial and imperial conquest as Europe's "others," often displacing them outside of European "solidaristic culture" (Bhambra & Narayan, 2016, p. 4; see also Karagiannis, 2007, pp. 15–16). These "others" tend to be glozed over under the façade of multicultural societies. Discourses on multiculturalism ascribe an essentialized notion of culture to some bodies, which is used to explain the behaviour of those recognized as non-Dutch (read: non-white, non-Christian), thus doing the work of "race" (Wekker, 2004). Thereby, they reproduce distinct boundaries between the dominant culture (that becomes unintelligible as culture through its claim of universality) and the cultures of Europe's "others." The "multicultural" contrasts with the "cosmopolitan," which reinstitutes the Enlightenment subject of the human/Man in the likeness of the European (white, male, middle-/upper-class) rational subject (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Since multiculturalism was declared dead by the early 2010s, working-class populations, especially those with migratory backgrounds, are increasingly constructed as a financial and social burden to European solidarity in official discourse (Bhambra, 2017; Mantu & Minderhoud, 2017).

"Solidarity with Europe's 'other'" is theorised as enacted upon distant "others" by a disembodied, reasonable, cosmopolitan subject, and is thus disengaged from place, time, relationality, and primal forms of care and reciprocity (Ahmed, 2004; Andreotti et al., 2015; Chouliaraki, 2011; Jabri, 2007). From a postcolonial perspective, liberal cosmopolitan thought is inherently hierarchical, conferring legitimacy to act upon "distant others" in the name of cosmopolitan right (Jabri, 2007). Ahmed (2004, 2016) shows how the Western subject becomes aligned with the agent delivering solidarity. This solidarity is disconnected from

histories of oppression, reinforcing the very relations of domination and subjugation that require responses to existing injustices.

Our team examined how these racialized and classist constructions played out in the Dutch response to Covid-19, and how they were reproduced, negotiated, or disrupted by residents of The Hague in different locations. To do so, our research project needed to *move beyond* these frameworks. This implied not only challenging liberal multicultural understandings of solidarity, but mostly de-silencing existing practices of solidarity already supporting the reproduction of daily life, as embodied and enfleshed experiences. Thus, methodologically, we approached this research by using story-telling and became involved with what Cairo (2021) conceptualises as Holding Space.

3. Storytelling and Holding Space as Approaches to Knowledge

From Indigenous perspectives, storytelling is at the core of being in the world. This is why for Motta (2016, p. 33) storytelling is an "onto-epistemological" positioning, a way of being that grounds us and shapes how we come to know the world. Storytelling strengthens and affirms connections with others, across time and space, while at the same time being situated in time and place. Stories are what bind us to the world and each other. For example, the Ubuntu principle from South Africa, "I am because we are," affirms that one's life only has meaning because its story is interwoven with that of others. It is believed that as people share stories, their spirits connect, and they can be transformed (Turner, 2003). This form of connection of the present (what is) with who preceded us (what has been) speaks of the plurality of temporalities that coexist in the act of sharing stories.

As a research team focusing on the stories of the marginalised, we chose to be guided by Indigenous forms of knowledge. Building on aspects such as relationality, plural temporalities, and the appreciation of place, embodied-enfleshed relations, spiritual, and ancestral knowledges, and ways of knowing, we intentionally embraced stories to pursue this work. We witnessed and shared stories with people often silenced and/or ignored in the mainstream representations of the city. And in some instances, their stories interwove with our stories, both as researchers and migrants. Storytelling became then a form of dialogue and exchange. Motta (2016) however cautions that this dialogue is not simple and cannot be taken for granted. So many have been silenced, objectivised, instrumentalised, and harmed in extractive research processes. Thus, paying attention and care to this requires developing special listening skills and using the storytelling craft to retell and reinvent stories with those marginalised at the centre *without* speaking on their behalf. Motta (2016) describes this as "an act of love." This links to Cairo's (2021) work on holding space, which she describes as the communal act of allowing people's stories to be present in all their complexities, without judgement. She refers to this act as "love work," as it requires considering the historical contexts that shape the way stories are told, held, and shared. The act of Holding Space can be transformative for everyone involved. Thus, in this research process, we held space for each other, for our students in the respective settings of the city we worked in, and for communion with people for whom these settings are part of their daily lives and routines in The Hague.

In this way, we understand holding space and storytelling as revolutionary acts that enable us to place marginalised people at the centre, affirming their/our presence in a world that silences and negates them/us. Williams et al. (2003) examine the potentialities of collaborative storytelling for challenging dominant social discourses through asserting alternative understandings, identities, and worldviews. As "othered"

researchers with stories of migration and relative marginalisation of our own, both personal and academic, we embraced storytelling as a way of bringing all of ourselves into these exchanges: We became volunteers and regular visitors to different settings in the city to connect, listen and share stories of dealing with the pandemic with community members. Each team spent a minimum of three months engaging in their respective community sites, initially face-to-face and after the lockdown, online. On four occasions, we held collaborative storytelling workshops with community members and the students who joined our projects. Furthermore, we paid attention to how community members included us in their stories and made us part of their routines, sometimes as a matter of fact, sometimes explicitly. We connected these experiences with our academic understanding of solidarity, and realised the interwovenness of theirs and our stories, moving us to think solidarity otherwise.

4. Solidarity as Embodied and Situated Experiences in the City

In this section, we focus on the relevance of place for how stories of solidarity unfold in the city. We considered place, following Aucoin (2017), as infused with meaningful interactions and experiences, and understand the space these places create as always under construction and unfolding as the result of ongoing relations (Massey, 2005). This helps us think about how solidarity relations are situated in relation to specific spatial infrastructures, in this case, food markets. Thrivikraman and Vicherat Mattar together with a group of 5 LUC students, explored different food markets and food provisioning initiatives during the pandemic.

Traditionally, food markets are a key part of the city's social infrastructure that can foster social solidarity between different peoples. During this project, we engaged with two open-air markets (De Haagse Markt and the Organic Farmer's Market), one food cooperative (Lekkernassuh), and one digital platform of food distribution, especially active during the height of the lockdown (Lokale Markten). De Haagse Markt is the biggest and oldest open market in The Hague, located at the intersection of two highly stigmatised immigrant neighbourhoods, and usually open to the public four days a week. The Organic Farmer's Market is a small gathering of vendors at an upper-scale location in the centre of The Hague, serving organic products. Lekkernassuh is a cooperative-based initiative aimed at distributing locally grown organic foods once a week, occupying a former gym location in a rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood. Finally, Lokale Markten was a student-organised online initiative to distribute fresh food from De Haagse Maarkt during the pandemic.

In all these different formats, these food market initiatives provide the infrastructure needed for practices of food exchange. In doing so, they are not merely topographically or discursively defined as spaces "out there" in the city. Rapidly, the research team realised these were infrastructures in specific places of the city that held spaces of sociality, grounding interactions for those frequenting them. The notion of "holding space" (Cairo, 2021) invites us to think about space not as something to be produced outside of us, and potentially among us, but also *within* us. In that way, the group explored the ways in which these food markets and initiatives could be understood as connective spaces with others, with food, as an external/public, and also as intimate relations. The food markets and associated initiatives can be understood as infrastructures of solidarity (Vicherat Mattar et al., 2023), where solidarity becomes an embodied and situated in-place experience.

The markets' own infrastructures reflected a messiness and complexity of settings, where solidarity is manifested both to replicate and disrupt the socio-economic segregation that characterises The Hague. Each

market dynamic reflected their location in the city. The plurality of relations in these markets revealed alternative layers and forms of solidarity. In the marketplace, people connect with the purpose of exchanging food, regardless of their differences. Covid-19 allowed for traversing historically entrenched racialized and socio-economic differences in new and unsuspecting ways, but also reproduce existing historical boundaries.

Several vendors in the De Haagse Markt have been in this market for several decades, with market stalls that pass down from generation to generation:

> You know, my father-in-law started in 1950, and so did all the other people in the market. So yeah, you knew the customers, the fellow market traders, and they knew I had a boyfriend, that we were going to marry, that I was pregnant (cheese vendor).

This familiarity was crucial for surviving the Covid-19 restrictions, because maintaining close and trusting relationships with the customers enabled vendors to carry on with their business. In the words of a coffee vendor:

> If I had no connection to my customers, I would have been bankrupt. I have had conversations with many of them, people have "liked" [my posts] on social media, other people send you emails. So, I think all businesses have a form of resource management, and so do I. Whoever I sold goods to in the past, I actively sent them messages and told them "I'm alive, if you want to order coffee."

Solidarity emerged amongst vendors across products sold; for example, vegetable vendors partnered with cheese, nut, or coffee vendors. It was rare for vendors of similar products to support each other, especially as customer flow was reduced, and competition to sell hindered collective action between similar sellers of products.

Workers at the Lokale Markten, the online platform distributing food from the De Haagse Markt, indicated that deliveries were always racially segregated, inhibiting potential solidarity and collective action, something that is also visible given the presence of two trade unions in the market, with marked racialised differences between their affiliations.

However, collaboration emerged in other ways:

> There are 400 market entrepreneurs at a very small surface and we constantly look at each other, how we do business, what makes us stronger, so of course we help each other. Just a couple of days ago I talked to someone who sells vegetables and how we could improve our marketing strategies. Of course we do that together. That looking out for each other also has something to do with crime, because when he has to take a leak (points at the vendor across from him), and he goes to the bathroom he leaves his shop all alone, so if I see something happening over there-he knows I will go towards it. (coffee vendor)

The Covid-19 measures associated with control and policing brought a common enemy to previous competitors, allowing for collaboration and support to appear where it had been previously absent, for example between white Dutch vendors and racialised vendors with migratory backgrounds. For example,

policing was unevenly implemented in open markets, being more prevalent in De Haagse Markt than in any of the other locations, which generated resistance among vendors across the board. This market experienced an increased security presence at the entrances and exits of the market with security cameras, marked routes for pedestrian flow, and the noticeable and constant presence of security guards.

As we mentioned above, racialised dynamics manifested not only at De Haagse Markt. They could also be observed in upper-end markets like the Organic Farmer's Market. Thrivikraman recounts her experience as follows:

> The veggie stall has a dedicated entrance and exit, and people line up 1.5 m distance waiting for their turn. It was my turn to enter the main veggie stall area, so I stepped in. Then this white lady who was behind me inches closer to me….I step further to the right to keep my distance. She kept moving towards me, so I kept moving right. And then the stall owner asks me to keep distance. I was outraged!! I was outraged because this is the second time I have been called out for not keeping distance, when it was this lady behind me that kept on moving towards me (and it was not her turn to be helped). I did call out the lady and pointed out it was actually her and not me, which led to a flurry of conversation in Dutch which I could not understand. And then I was shown what 1.5 m was by the owner spreading his arms out….I was fuming because his actions implied I was disregarding the safety protocols and was essentially clueless. Mind you, I was the only one wearing a mask and even the sellers, who were not keeping 1.5 m, didn't have safety protocols. In addition, people are only supposed to move in one direction, yet there were people moving back and forth at this same stand and not getting called out for it.

This experience left her shaken. Through being specifically singled out as not adhering to "normal solidarity practices" and confirmed in her "otherness," she lost trust and loyalty to a market where she was a recurrent client. Her experience aligned more closely with minoritized groups in the city, like those severely securitized in De Haagse Markt, than her supposedly integrated place as an "expat" academic researcher. It also confirmed that even when one sees oneself as being part of the story of the market, there can be reminders—through forms of solidarity that demarcate difference—that one does not belong (Davis & Nencel, 2011). This story illustrates how solidarity is fraught with tensions and contradictions. It cannot be described in an abstract disembodied manner because solidarity is always entangled with the (hi)stories of places, spaces, bodies, and relationships that support it as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion, depending on those who are involved.

These food markets and initiatives housed a dense network of bonding and support strategies deployed between different actors, including vendors, customers, volunteers, and researchers and their various interrelations. This multiplicity of social ties varies in their intensity and the strength that binds communities together and also keeps people apart and marked as different. To better imagine how different intensities shape different expressions and forms of solidarity, Thrivikraman and Vicherat Mattar suggest extending the notion of strong and weak bonds from the work of Granovetter (1973). In the markets, there were strong forms of solidarity, like those deployed by generations of vendors in De Haagse Markt, producing intense forms of attachments and care. Conversely, solidarity can also take place when the ties are weak, for example demarcating racialised difference, like in the story told by Thrivikrman. This story illustrates the racialization of national identity, and how this manifests in mundane othering practices that are prone to produce tensions. Thinking about solidarity in terms of weak and strong bonds invites us to think about

solidarity otherwise—that is, solidarity as embodied and situated through specific infrastructures and places in the city, like the various forms of exchange occurring in food markets show.

5. The Pakistani Community: Shades of Solidarities

As part of the Pakistani community, Salim spent time and shared stories with a faith-based community: Muslim Pakistani families. This last engagement is from where the inspiration for the title of our work comes from. As one member of the community stated: "When someone gets sick, we run to them, not from them." This guided community members' actions during the pandemic. They did not think of their caretaking actions as anything special, but they supported each other "as a given," continuing what they did before Covid-19, but now through different means and with adjusted behaviour.

In Urdu, solidarity is formally translated as *yakjehti*. However, the more commonly used Urdu word referring to solidarity, care, and being there is *farz*. It is translated as responsibility and duty—something Pakistani community members take pride in as part of everyday social norms. Salim who is of Pakistani origin herself, spent time investigating *farz* in a community where she plays multiple roles.

For members of the Pakistani community, *farz* is translated into collective efforts and initiatives in individual capacity. Particularly, Salim observed *farz* in relationships people had among each other, within the community as a whole, and across communities. During Covid-19 the standard "expected" joint community efforts had to shift to more individualised efforts. As a recovered member shared: "For me, solidarity means 'not expecting' what I expected from my near and dear ones in normal conditions." She practised solidarity by first understanding that they should not visit and secondly caring for her friends and relatives by keeping away from them. The isolation and loneliness were a new and challenging feeling as they seemed counter-intuitive to the historical forms of solidarity forged by the community. Their understanding of solidarity shifted, it became otherwise: Healing became rooted in prayers and in adopting the feeling that physical distance was a form of social caring. She elaborated that coming to terms with this was not easy. She had to convince herself that she needed to "give" care instead of "expect" it and shift her role from care-recipient to care-giver. Significantly, "listening" to each other, to our challenges, and sometimes to stories of everyday life increased manifold as we sensed and felt that listening contributes to healing from isolation and loneliness during Covid-19. Community members shared we feel and heal *with* others when we listen to each other. This showed their trust in feeling and listening as crucial aspects during the pandemic, something that Salem and Icaza (2023, p. 221) affirm as "really trust[ing] my other senses." These acts of solidarity otherwise are different from ways of solidarity advocated by the Dutch government and may not make sense within the dominant intelligibility (Lugones, 2003).

5.1. Shifts and Adaptations

In a community that relies on mutual support for social, physical, and cultural survival, a shift from care-recipient to care-giver significantly contributed to creatively remaking solidarity practices. For some, adaptations were more difficult. For example, some elderly people did not receive the expected and needed attention from their relatives. Whether this was due to Covid-19 restrictions, neglect, or a combination of both is not the question, rather what mattered is that these elders could not get past the fact that their family members did not act according to cultural expectations. They saw it as shameful and felt embarrassed

towards the community, illustrating like in the stories recounted by Thrivikraman and Vicherat Mattar, how solidarity can also become tainted by tensions and frustrations. In the case of these elders of the Pakistani community, rather than forming other connections or sharing their needs and concerns with the community home nurse, they chose to experience this in silence.

5.2. Being There in Spite of...

However, one way to practise *farz* is by "being there." People continued to be there, if not in person, then with the support of digital infrastructures, like those creating virtual spaces or via phone. Crossing physical locations and social boundaries was already an integral aspect of *farz*. Residents in The Hague connected across neighbourhoods, across cities, and across regions of the world. Under the Covid-19 lockdown, community members continued to reach out and support each other as best they could. Food and rituals were also a major part of these forms of connections. As one woman shared:

> During a WhatsApp community session, I learned how to store food as our ancestors used to do in Pakistan. I find it the most important and relevant thing to share this knowledge of our traditional ways of storing food. I think "sharing" such valuable and about-to-die knowledge is the biggest example of care and solidarity in our community. Transmission and preservation of our [knowledges] in such challenging times is important.

Cooking together or sharing recipes online allowed community members to feel connected to their ancestral and family recipes, norms, and memories of elders, thus practising multi-generational solidarity. In this way, *farz* as an act of caring and sharing ancestral knowledges was practised while cooking together and maintaining relationships such as with the elders and the community members (Salim, 2023).

People practised solidarity to support each other locally and nationally, within their community and beyond. A second-generation Pakistani single mother, working three jobs, adopted an orphan child in Afghanistan whom she will support for the rest of her life. Explaining her reason, she shared that she felt the responsibility for the ones near to her and for those most deserving: "My mother died of Corona. I was not allowed to see her during her last moments. I decided if I can't be there for her, I can be there for someone else needing support." This shows how practising *farz* was not limited to Pakistani people in their community. Sometimes, the shared religious and/or migratory background and the associated challenges brought people together. The Pakistani community had relations with Moroccan, Turkish, and Indonesian communities and collaborated on initiatives such as food distribution via community centres and mosques.

6. Solidarity as Enfleshed Experience in Plural Temporalities

Cairo and Icaza set out to learn about stories of solidarity as these were articulated by residents who attended three community centres, some of whom shared migration and parental experiences and languages. The father centre, mother centre, and theatre/cultural centre were located in neighbourhoods of ethnically diverse and immigrated residents in The Hague. They supervised two groups of students from THUAS who engaged with these community centres to work on two projects for a sustainable design course.

6.1. Becoming Part of These Stories

Cairo and Icaza began their journey of becoming part of the stories by joining the different community centres. Having immigrant backgrounds themselves, they were easily included in conversations in languages other than Dutch or English. At the father centre, once it was clear that Cairo was of Surinamese descent, references to Surinamese particular behaviours or experiences were directed at her. Icaza was often included in Spanish conversations, while at the same time being encouraged to work on her Dutch. On Tuesdays, they regularly visited the mother centre. Here, rather than volunteering alongside community members, they attended scheduled presentations or provided some themselves, including a workshop on storytelling. Attending the Hague Municipality's health programs allowed them to interact as fellow mothers, and to sometimes be called upon for their expertise. They were also confronted first-hand with the denigrating ways some program presenters addressed the mothers. Repeatedly, material was presented with the assumption that the mothers had little to no knowledge: from information on the importance of childhood vaccinations to response in cases of medical emergencies. By joining as migrant mothers themselves, the researchers were able to challenge those assumptions and help create new spaces where the women could share their wisdoms. When Cairo challenged a doctor who questioned the mothers' lack of medical consultation, the mothers joined in and started sharing their experiences with health care personnel. Consequently, the doctor admitted that there was value in looking at discriminatory medical practices in stigmatised migrant neighbourhoods.

In listening to, and sharing in, the unfolding stories in Dutch, English, Spanish, and Papiamento, the authors refused disembodied, abstract, and uprooted notions of solidarity that are detached from place, cultural roots, embodied/enfleshed memory, and spiritual and ancestral wisdoms and instead assert autonomy and universality. Eventually, their stories became interwoven. Their presence, including their language, ethnic and parental experience, and active contribution became part of the stories of the other volunteers. As researchers, they were gradually invited to participate in practices of solidarity. They were called upon to help newcomers, move furniture as needed, and were approached for assistance and consultation with personal matters.

Consequently, the more interwoven their stories became, the less they felt it appropriate to utilise some of the formal research methods they had planned. This was not a matter of "going native" as it is referred to in anthropology, where researchers become so enmeshed with their research subjects that they abandon their research, while power asymmetries often remain intact. Instead, these authors had become part of the communal body in these different centres, through "being with" and interweaving stories. Doing so shifted something inside them, they were learning about solidarity not just intellectually, but affectively as well. They included those shifting feelings as a guide on how to proceed. "This doesn't feel right, so we are not going to do it"—trusting that inner ethical voice became part of the lessons about solidarity.

6.2. Enfleshed Experiences

Aiming to avoid extractive relation to the regular members of these centres, especially women, Cairo and Icaza considered offering one young woman in the mother centre a stipend. The young woman was a skilled singer and they wanted to compensate her for her performance in the planned community gathering. They were quickly corrected by the program director. Offering the woman money would set her apart from the

group, the body of people. As a group member, she was supposed to be willing to offer her gifts to benefit the community. This might be seen as a research dilemma to be "solved," but for Cairo and Icaza this was an invitation to think solidarity otherwise.

They found guidance in Black feminist theologians' concept of "enfleshment." Copeland (2010), for instance, posits that the body is more than just the self: "The body mediates our commitments with others, with the world and with the Other" (p. 7). This facilitates understanding the body not only as place or cultural discourse, but as an enfleshed and contextual experience located in a plurality of temporalities. An enfleshed understanding of the body goes beyond the physical, social, or political body in the here and now (contextual). It goes back to the Indigenous knowledge of interconnectedness, as it draws upon ecological, ancestral, remembrance, spiritual connections, and things you just feel but cannot put into collective words (Vázquez, 2017, p. 2017). You only get there when you surrender and become part of a collective body, as Cairo and Icaza understood by joining these community centres.

Indeed, across these sites, food markets, Pakistani community centre, fathers, mothers, and theatre/cultural centres, we learned central lessons about the importance of Holding Space (Cairo, 2021) for the many stories of solidarity unfolding in the city. The spaces created by solidarity practices made us mindful of the complexities, contradictions, and subtleties, of solidarity. Rather than reducing solidarity as strong displays of social bonding and ties within communities, we recognise the need to be particularly cautious of the stories that are overlooked and silenced, contradictory and ambivalent, often not part of dominant discourses, but vital part of these initiatives existence in The Hague.

7. Holding Space for Solidarity Otherwise

We started off questioning how we can think about solidarity in ways that are attentive to the diversity shaping The Hague. Particularly, we were concerned with the incomplete Covid-19 story because it neglected, minimised, or misrepresented the stories of many city dwellers. Whereas the normative liberal notions of solidarity are mediated through grammars of "otherness" and are conceived from within the same registers that (re-)produce injustice (Andreotti et al., 2015), we go beyond this framework to think and practice plural solidarities, or solidarity otherwise, as derived from embedded and enfleshed experiences.

We highlight the intellectual and political relevance of conceptualizing solidarities in a way that not only challenges homogenized narratives of solidarity "towards" marginalized communities that remain a "separate pillar" (Essed, 1991; Ghorashi, 2014) in Dutch society but also de-silence ongoing practices of solidarities. Rather than mining and extorting stories from "others," we interwove our own stories with those of various communities, spaces, and places these initiatives take in the city. Doing so, we moved away from extractive research approaches that often build on tools, theories, and concepts that separate the "researcher" from "the researched," the academy from the community, the self from the "other," and privileges reason over experiential, embodied knowledges (Hlabangane, 2018). The emerging lessons ultimately transformed *us*.

7.1. Relationality: Being There, Being With

"Being with" is the first and most profound lesson we learned from thinking about solidarity otherwise. From the Pakistani community, we learned that "being there" and "being with" was not limited by the Covid-19

physical restrictions. Being with was linked to "being seen" and "being seen as valuable." In different sites, like food markets or community centres, ethnic and class differences were bridged on the basis of religious and migratory backgrounds, shared hardships, or other shared experiences. Being with requires working across differences and helps forge strong bonds, like in the Pakistani community, but also fleeting ones, like the stories shared in the markets. These are stories of mutual support like the coffee vendor illustrated.

Being with offers a possibility for healing and transformation, which disrupts the often instrumentalized logics of (neo)liberal understandings of solidarity, where solidarity becomes "a practice of voyeuristic altruism" (Chouliaraki, 2011, p. 366), reproducing the moral distance between the "self" as empowered and self-aggrandising agent and the "other" as passive recipient of solidarity. This instrumentalization of solidarity perpetuates relations of domination between the subject of solidarity and "vulnerable others" (Chouliaraki, 2011). As we interwove our stories with each other and the communities, we did not feel the need to defend, justify, explain, or downplay our differences. For the first time, and during these critical times, we could just be, and as a result were able to bring out the best in ourselves and each other. The process of carrying out this research was a way of being with one another and in the city—holding space for one another—in spite of the restrictions imposed during the lockdown.

7.2. Multiplicity of Spaces and Temporalities

"I am because we are"—so says the Ubuntu philosophy. In doing so, it subverts space and time as a limitation for what we can be, who we are, and what we can become. In the market stalls that were part of family businesses for generations, as in the community centres, there was an extended sense of self that was always present and practised. We were connected and strengthened through relationships based on collective memories, places, and its infrastructures (like the community centres, markets, and digital platforms). Furthermore, even though people are physically in The Hague, that location is just one of the many meaningful locations that people feel connected to. From accepting financial responsibility for orphaned children in other countries to organising medicine drives for one's home country, examples of solidarity practices across ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries abound. This radically reformulates liberal narratives of solidarity, whereby solidarity is either practiced among people(s) characterized by sameness or enacted upon distant "others," and is thus disengaged from place, ancestrality, relationality, and reciprocity.

7.3. (Un)muting Stories of Solidarity

"I am sick and tired of talking about Corona!" The forcefulness with which the community member at the mother centre addressed Cairo and Icaza stopped them in their tracks and made them shift their whole course of inquiry, forcing them to listen. Just because you want to hear a story does not mean you are entitled to it, and certainly that story, all stories, have a life of their own. Even though the initial intent was to collect stories to correct the incomplete story-scape of The Hague, the message was loud, clear, and profound: Stories of solidarity exceeded those of surviving or coping with the pandemic because they are stories of creation and support to endure life in the city.

When exploring the different markets, the following questions were raised: Which story gets told, by whom? Who speaks, in which language, for whom, how loud, and who gets drowned out? How is it that some solidarity measures support some members while excluding others? The biggest lesson here is that making

stories visible should be a careful, sensitive, and embedded process. The students working with Thrivikraman and Vicherat Mattar became voluntary workers in the food initiatives; their team navigated both strong and weak ties of solidarity among themselves and with the people they met in the different food markets and initiatives. Secondly, it matters which stories are being muted, and which are not. Rather than digging hard to make visible stories, we highlight the value of being with and using that principle to process and protect the stories we became part of, too. Thereby, we moved away from the instrumentality of research as predominantly conducted within academic practice, which ultimately serves the researcher's objective of knowledge production, whereby methods constitute "a way to a goal" (Brinkmann, 2018, pp. 1003, 1018).

7.4. Restorative Transformation and Resilience

That you matter is a given. That you are worth fighting for is a given. Time and time again, this message reached us as we interwove our stories with those of the communities and the places we visited, and the spaces these engagements created. Time and time again, we heard ourselves repeat that same message to our students who struggled with their studies during the lockdowns.

We came to understand these messages as a reflection of solidarity otherwise, actions used to preserve the preciousness of life. We saw this in the community centres where the directors were relentless in creating new stories for their constituents, or in the Pakistani community where members never wavered in their support of their immediate and extended community. We also saw this in the marketplace and food initiatives, where actions were not just about economic survival, but about honouring the preciousness of relationships, both in strong and weak terms. Driven by their respective causes, people were committed to engaging with one another. These engagements were often about taking a stand, fighting for, and finding alternatives and creative ways to pursue their goals. In doing so, creating new stories that supported the reproduction of the city life.

From the media to the government, the negative representations of the communities we were part of were consistent. The goal of this project was to broaden the story-scape of The Hague and bring some healing with the tools of honouring, listening, and respecting the multiplicity of stories that get often portrayed in a rather monochromatic form. This requires transformation that allows unfolding, rather than forcing. For this unfolding to happen it is crucial to display the ability to hold space.

7.5. Holding Space for the Unfolding of Solidarity Otherwise

In pursuing this research, we proposed to think about solidarity otherwise. The concept of "otherness" connected us with the work of Cairo (2021), who employs it to explain the maintenance of unequal power relations, which defined our story-scapes. Holding space required us to examine the conditions necessary for all the stories to just be, rather than seeking out "positive stories" that advance a normative and normalised understanding of solidarity. We assert that thinking solidarity otherwise goes beyond its understanding of it as always affirming, always positive, and devoid of conflict. We learned that solidarity is ambivalent, it is rather a form of holding space that takes multiple shapes, contributing to the transformation or the rewriting of stories—the communities', our own, and inevitably, or hopefully, the city's. We learned about transformation "out there" and also within. We learned that transformation can be forceful and also restorative.

We have been strengthened in our own sense of the right to be here just as we are, personally as well as academically. Ironically, the gift that we wanted to give to the various communities we engaged with was in fact bestowed upon us. This also manifests how our stories as researchers are interwoven with that of The Hague. Whilst we saw its undersides, we also learned to love parts of it as we rode our bikes through familiar and unfamiliar routes in the city, enjoyed our gatherings, and engaged with different peoples. As our stories are now grounded in the land—and story-scapes of The Hague, we believe that we have contributed to a restorative transformation of the city towards a better understanding of itself in the plural.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Relevant data is available with the authors upon request.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004). Collective feelings: Or, the impressions left by others. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *21*(2), 25–42.

Ahmed, S. (2016). *Progressive racism*. feministkilljoys. https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/05/30/progressive-racism

Andreotti, V. O., Stein, S., Ahenakew, C., & Hunt, D. (2015). Mapping interpretations of decolonization in the context of higher education.*Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, *4*(1), 21–40.

Aucoin, P. M. (2017). Toward an anthropological understanding of space and place. In B. Janz (Ed.), *Place, space and hermeneutics. Contributions to hermeneutics* (pp. 395–412). Springer.

Bhambra, G. K. (2017). The current crisis of Europe: Refugees, colonialism, and the limits of cosmopolitanism. *European Law Journal*, *23*(5), 395–405.

Bhambra, G. K., & Narayan, J. (2016). Introduction: Colonial histories and the postcolonial present of European cosmopolitanism. In G. K. Bhambra & J. Narayan (Eds.), *European cosmopolitanism Colonial histories and postcolonial societies* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.

Brinkmann, S. (2018). The Interview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 576–599). Sage.

Burgos Martínez, E. (2020). *Towards a Covid-19 lexicon of conceptual off-shoots: Locking sociality down in the Netherlands and Spain*. Allegra Lab. https://allegralaboratory.net/towards-a-Covid-19-lexicon-of-conceptual-off-shoots-locking-sociality-down-in-the-netherlands-and-spain

Cairo, A. (2021). *Holding space: A storytelling approach to trampling diversity and inclusion.* Aminata Cairo Consultancy.

Chouliaraki, L. (2011). Improper distance: Towards a critical account of solidarity as irony. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *14*(4), 363–381.

Copeland, M. S. (2010). *Enfleshing freedom: Body, race, and being.* Fortress Press.

Davis, K., & Nencel, L. (2011). Border skirmishes and the question of belonging: An authoethnographic account of everyday exclusion in multicultural society. *Ethnicities*, *11*(4), 467–488.

De Eguia Huerta, M. (2020). Knowledge decolonization *à la* grounded theory: Control juggling in research situations. *Social Epistemology*, *34*(4), 370–381.

Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism. An interdisciplinary theory*. Sage.

Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2012). Decolonization and the pedagogy of solidarity. *Decolonization*, *1*(1), 41–67.

Ghorashi, H. (2014). Racism and "the ungrateful other" in the Netherlands. In P. Essed & I. Hoving (Eds.), *Dutch racism* (pp. 101–116). Rodopi.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Aldine.

Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*(6), 1360–1380.

Hlabangane, N. (2018). Can a methodology subvert the logics of its principal? Decolonial meditations. *Perspectives on Science*, *26*(6), 658–693.

Jabri, V. (2007). Solidarity and spheres of culture: The cosmopolitan and the postcolonial. *Review of International Studies*, *33*(4), 715–728.

Karagiannis, N. (2007). Solidarity within Europe/solidarity without Europe. *European Societies*, *9*(1), 3–21.

Lorde, A. (2018). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1979)

Lugones, M. (2003). *Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing coalition against multiple oppressions.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Mantu, S., & Minderhoud, P. (2017). EU citizenship and social solidarity. *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, *24*(5), 703–720.

Martin, P. Y., & Turner, B. A. (1986). Grounded theory and organizational Research. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *22*(2), 141–157.

Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. Sage.

Motta, S. C. (2016). Decolonising critique: From prophetic negation to prefigurative affirmation. In A. C. Dinerstein (Ed.), *Social sciences for another politics: Women theorizing without parachutes* (pp. 33–48). Palgrave Macmillan.

Salem, S., & Icaza, R. (2023). A world in which many worlds can fit: On knowledge production and multiplicity. *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, *9*(1), 216–224.

Salim, U. (2023). Decolonial dialogues: Covid-19 and migrant women's remembrance as resistance. *Globalizations*, *20*(2), 332–342.

Turner, E. (2003). Life, death, and humor: Approaches to storytelling in Native America. *Arctic Anthropology*, *40*, 23–29.

Vázquez, R. (2017). Precedence, earth and the anthropocene: Decolonizing design. *Design Philosophy Papers*, *15*(1), 77–91.

Vicherat Mattar, D., Thrivikraman, J., & Burgos Martínez, E. (2023). Unsettling the frontiers of food waste in the Netherlands: Infrastructural stories of food waste transformation in The Hague. *Frontiers in Sustainability*, *4.* https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2023.1259793

Weiner, M. F., & Carmona Baez, A. (2018). Introduction. In M. F. Weiner & A. Carmona Baez (Eds.), *Smash the pillars: Decoloniality and the imaginary of color in the Dutch Kingdom* (pp. ix–xxv). Lexington Books.

Wekker, G. D. (2004). Stilll crazy after all those Years. Feminism for the new Millennium. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *11*(4), 487–500.

Williams, L., Labonte, R., & O'Brien, M. (2003). Empowering social action through narratives of identity and culture. *Health Promotion International*, *18*(1), 33–40.

About the Authors

Aminata Cairo, born and raised in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents, obtained a dual bachelor's in psychology and physical education, master's degrees in clinical psychology and medical anthropology, and a PhD in medical anthropology. Her passion is to use her academic skills to positively impact communities. She has done extensive community work in the Netherlands, the US, Suriname, and Ghana. Aminata was lector of social justice and diversity in the arts at the Amsterdam University in the Arts while writing this article.

Lisa-Marlen Gronemeier (she/her) is a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies. She works on questions of epistemological and social (in)justice across decolonial and gender studies. Her involvement in collective study, teaching, and research gave rise to the following questions she seeks to interrogate: How do dominant iterations of feminisms in the realms of epistemic and political power in Germany (re)produce harm? What lessons do past and present insurgent feminist praxis hold in terms of repair and transformation?

Rosalba Icaza is a decolonial feminist activist-scholar of Mexican origin and professor in global politics, feminisms, and decoloniality at the Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University of Rotterdam where she also serves as Deputy Dean of Research. She is chief co-editor at the Red Transnational Otros Saberes (RETOS) Publishing House and collaborates with Suumil Mookt'an in Sinanche, Yucatan, Mexico. She has published extensively on decolonial feminism and global politics, diversity and inclusion policies, and decolonial feminist pedagogies.

Umbreen Salim is a decolonial feminist, a migrant and refugee rights' advocate, member of the teaching team, and a PhD researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, in The Netherlands. Her work is positioned in a space where decolonial thought meets the decolonial praxis. Her research is focused on the politics of time and knowledge surrounding migrants and refugees. She is also part of a migrant and refugee-led group—New Women Connectors.

Jyothi Thrivikraman is an assistant professor in global public health at Leiden University College (Leiden University, Netherlands). She teaches in the bachelor's program of global challenges courses on prosperity, social determinants of health, policy, and behaviour change. She along with Dr. Elena Burgos Martinez and Dr. Daniela Vicherat Mattar have an exhibition detailing their current research on display in the Hague. More details are found here: https://www.foodwastetransformers.com

Daniela Vicherat Mattar is an associate professor of sociology at Leiden University College, The Hague. Her research and teaching focus on cities, citizenship, and care, looking at the multiple forms they take in Europe and Latin America. Taking an interdisciplinary perspective, she explores urban experiences to unpack how citizenship and care are lived and politicized in daily life. Daniela led the inter-faculty project and exhibition *Food Waste Transformers: Stories of Solidarity and Change Through and With Food Waste*, funded by a GTGC grant at Leiden University.

cogitatio

Cultivating Ethical and Politically Rooted Research Practices With Undocumented Migrants

Lucia León [1] 🔟, **Leisy J. Abrego** [2] 🔟, and **Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales** [3] 🔟

[1] School of Liberal Arts and Education, Dominican University of California, USA
[2] Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies, University of California – Los Angeles, USA
[3] School of Education, University of San Francisco, USA

Correspondence: Lucia León (lucia.leon@dominican.edu)

Abstract

One of the authors and two co-editors of the anthology *We Are Not Dreamers: Undocumented Scholars Theorize Undocumented Life in the United States* reflect on the meanings, emotions, and expectations of the project as they are associated with the factor of time. While academic timelines can feel urgent and pressing, the authors learned through their collective work that when guided by a politics of care, the slowing of time can be a foundation for an ethical and political imperative in research with undocumented immigrants and scholars. Researchers with a deep commitment to the community they write about can rely on time to digest information slowly and to handle complex emotions as they theorize difficult experiences that may parallel their own lives. Time can also be prioritized to grant study participants multiple rounds of feedback for each written piece, until they feel comfortable with how their experiences are represented. We also reflect on the need for researchers to take their time in developing an ethical data collection process. For example, conducting interviews with care with undocumented migrants requires researchers to take the time to get to know people, give them time to reflect during the conversation, and consider the timing of questions to ensure that each interview minimizes harm to interviewees. In these ways, we highlight the importance of extending time as an ethical imperative of doing research with undocumented migrants.

Keywords

accompaniment; ethical research; political imperative; time; undocumented migration; writing

1. Introduction: Creating *We Are Not Dreamers*

We Are Not Dreamers: Undocumented Scholars Theorize Undocumented Life in the United States (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020) centers the empirical work of 10 contributors—themselves currently or formerly undocumented migrants—as they theorize nuanced understandings of undocumented life in the US. In this first edited volume of empirical research by undocumented scholars, the authors—who included one undergraduate student (Maldonado Dominguez, 2020), three recent college graduates (García Cruz, 2020; Mondragón, 2020; Mónico, 2020), five doctoral students (Cabrera, 2020; León, 2020; Ramirez, 2020; Sati, 2020; Silvestre, 2020), and one postdoctoral fellow (Valdivia, 2020)—challenge exclusionary narratives, call for an expansive articulation of immigrant justice, and offer new paths for scholarship and activism. The collaboration began in 2016, coinciding with the US presidential campaign of Donald Trump; the hateful discourse targeting immigrants that was a cornerstone of his platform was also the backdrop for the early days of the anthology's development. Navigating this broader political context and grappling with the potential ramifications of what a Trump presidency would mean for immigrants deeply impacted the contributors who were based across four US states at the time. Once Trump was elected, the repressive reality of the political situation brought on a new moment of anxiety, stress, fear, and vulnerability for the authors. This impacted multiple facets of their lives, making it uniquely challenging to write about and theorize undocumented life. Writing about the vulnerability of immigrants felt harder as the Trump policy agenda began to take shape, putting the contributors' lives, and those of their families, loved ones, and communities, directly in the line of fire. When people's livelihoods and wellbeing are at stake, writing can feel impossible (Negrón-Gonzales, 2014), and, on the other hand, the urgency of the political reality can reinvigorate a need for ethical and engaged research.

As law and society scholars of migration, in this piece we reflect on the role of time as an important element when working with undocumented scholars. We focus on the association between how time is allocated and the development of ethical and politically rooted practices of reflexivity, accompaniment, and politics of care. For the purposes of this piece, we draw on the concept of time to refer to pragmatic, logistical matters in academia and research. Moreover, we employ the conceptualization of *time work* and *temporal experiences*, including multidimensional temporal experiences that include duration, frequency, allocation, and timing (Flaherty et al., 2020) to engage with the agentic use of time during the research process. Time arose as an important factor because of ethical research considerations that surfaced during our collaboration. As one of the authors and two co-editors, we share our reflections on the meanings, emotions, and expectations of the book project as we extended our time with the anthology, despite the pressures of time and political urgency.

Contributing author Lucia León reflects on the emotions and meaning that emerged during her research, writing, and theorizing as a formerly undocumented migrant. Sharing her reflexive process, she describes allocating time to cultivate her *(un)documented scholarly voice*, a theorizing space inhabited through her research, an embodied undocumented experience, and ethical and political commitment to immigration justice. The co-editors, also navigating their grief over the political situation, share how their process of developing the anthology was guided by an ethical, political, and scholarly commitment to bring the anthology's scholars' work to broader audiences. Their vision was for undocumented scholars to not only contribute to the field, but to help lead it, moving beyond the field's prior practices of situating them only as the objects of study. As editors, they balanced the timeline and deliverables of the project with a politics of care (Valenzuela, 2017), prioritizing time

for check-ins with authors, double-checking that they continued to feel interested in pursuing this project, and supporting them closely through the edits. The lessons we offer here may be helpful to other scholars who are similarly situated in the academy and in relations with immigrant communities. An agentic use of time, we argue, needs to be considered as an ethical imperative in research, particularly as intentional modifications to duration, allocation, frequency, and timing serve to support scholars' emotional labor in their careful research design, writing, and analysis, and during attempts to build a collective of support for scholars to work relationally with mentors, participants, and other scholars.

2. Ethical Research with Undocumented Migrants

Law and society scholars of migration are concerned with understanding the causes and consequences of migration, the complex lived experience of migrants and their families, and the role of law and the state in shaping immigrants' lives. In the US, the use of *undocumented migration* refers to migrants without the legally required documents to enter and/or remain in the country. The term "undocumented" emerges from the efforts of immigrants and US advocates who call for humanizing language when describing immigrant experiences. "Undocumented" is akin to terms like "irregular," "forced," and "clandestine" that are preferred in other countries (see Duvell et al., 2008). Across these contexts, migrants who do not have legal status to reside in their new country face restrictive and detrimental laws that make them subject to surveillance, detention, and deportation. Given the precarity and vulnerability of undocumented communities globally and locally, ethical considerations are of critical importance for scholars who work with undocumented communities.

Some migration researchers have developed ethical guidelines in their work. The CLANDESTINO project (Duvell et al., 2008), an EU-funded research project on irregular migration, for example, offers a guiding framework for when ethical issues arise during research with undocumented communities. The authors define research ethics as "a code of practice," or a set of "moral principles and guidelines" that are adopted or developed by researchers, groups, or institutions from the research project's inception to completion (Duvell et al., 2008, p. 4). We agree with their assessment that while research ethics is a valuable framework that can set minimum standards for conducting ethical research and protections for participants and researchers, it is a starting point, not an end point: "Ethical codes and guidelines are conducive to this aim but are neither sufficient nor necessary conditions for ethical research" (Duvell et al., 2008, p. 5). Rather, a scholar's research ethics is the process of consistently making informed decisions from an ethical and informed position. Scholars must lead with an "ethical conscience," wherein making ethical decisions becomes a central and persistent component of their research process.

Research with and by undocumented immigrants similarly calls for ethical and political imperatives for undocumented theorists and their scholarship (Aguilar, 2019; Bejarano et al., 2019; Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021; Veinrich, 2019). In their collaborative book *Decolonizing Ethnography*, Bejarano and Goldstein, with their undergraduate research assistants Juárez and García, propose a decolonial approach to theory and method and a joining of academic scholarship with social engagement and political activism. In their anthropological study with undocumented workers (Bejarano et al., 2019), they argue that decolonizing anthropology and ethnographic research requires us to rethink research practices at all levels and to recognize research "subjects" as producers of knowledge and theorists of their own lived experience:

> Decolonizing anthropology, then, requires a shift in orientation and technique, the adoption of new perspectives on both theory and method, with the goal of enabling subalterns—those enduring objects of anthropological study—to decolonize knowledge practices as they become powerful actors in their own liberation. (Bejarano et al., 2019, p. 37)

Emphasizing the utility of ethnography as a tool for self-empowerment and advocacy, Juárez and García's journey as producers of knowledge is presented as a powerful personal transformation resulting from their merging of ethnography with activism. Moreover, the authors argue that given the urgency of the situation of undocumented migrants, scholars have an ethical and moral imperative to decenter academic knowledge as the exclusive goal of their work and move towards engaged political action.

Undocumented scholars also discuss strategies for navigating academia and the political dimensions of their work. Bazo Vienrich (2019) names three strategies as an undocumented teacher and researcher, including taking ownership of immigrant narratives, "coming out" as a source of bravery, and finding meaning in her academic journey. She underscores that this act required much self-reflection and support from family and mentors. Similarly, Reyna Rivarola and López (2021) call attention to important considerations for undocumented scholars in theorizing about the self, bringing into question the purpose of research devoid of a critical practice of reflexivity and clear articulation of political intentions. These interventions by undocumented immigrant scholars require an intentional use of time and underscore the need to build community and to produce work that matters beyond the academy as central aspects of research. Along with our own long-term commitments to the immigrant community, we align ourselves with these scholars in calling for a deeper, more ethically-informed engagement with undocumented immigrants and undocumented scholars.

3. Allocating Time in Academia to Developing Collective Practices

Caring, ethically-informed research takes time. This additional time can feel like a burden when faculty, staff, and students regularly experience academia as a site of urgency, with insufficient time in an ongoing negotiation across multiple temporal layers. Students must read and write and submit assignments always on deadlines within the parameters of a quarter/semester or school year. Graduate students, in particular, feel the pressure to advance in their program because their funding is likely tied to their time to degree and they need the degree to begin to earn living wages. To increase their chances of getting hired as faculty, during their training, they must also attempt to publish their work in peer-reviewed journals and present at academic conferences, all of which also require them to be on multiple additional timelines and deadlines. This is also true for untenured faculty who are expected to publish their work as journal articles and books to earn tenure. The ongoing nature of these multiple expectations and deadlines creates a sense of urgency and the feeling that there is never enough time for all of the academic work that needs to be completed (Mountz et al., 2015).

Immigration researchers may also feel added urgency in their work related to the role of time and timely considerations in immigration processes for the people and experiences they write about (Cohen, 2018; Coutin, 2005; Griffiths, 2014; Menjívar, 2006). That is, immigration processes themselves (i.e., legalization, visas, temporary work permits, applications for asylum, etc.) are centered around time and timeliness in ways that exalt the meaning of time for migrants. Quick changes in immigration policies and practices ushered in

by new presidential, gubernatorial, or mayoral administrations also add a sense of urgency for scholars to produce analysis about the consequences of such changes. For example, the executive action known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals has had a notable effect in the lives of recipients. This executive action provided a cohort of over 800,000 undocumented youth with protection from deportation and a renewable work permit, making higher education more accessible and allowing many to work in professional fields of their choice. Scholars documented massive changes in income, health, and general wellbeing over a relatively short span of time since 2012 when President Obama first signed it to 2017 when President Trump attempted to fully rescind it (Alulema, 2019; Cebulko & Silver, 2016; Wong & García, 2016). Between 2017 and 2024 at the time of this writing, the dispensation has been debated and considered in courts at state and federal levels, blocking access to new potential applicants. The inability to inform the public in a timely way about these speedy yet consequential changes makes academic publishing feel chronically behind and perpetually too slow.

In scholarly writing, time is generally a pragmatic consideration related to productivity, publication processes, and output. When we say that time can also be a foundation for an ethical and political imperative in research with undocumented immigrants and scholars, we are intentionally broadening out from the pragmatic realm. In developing the anthology with undocumented scholars, considerations of time extended beyond pragmatic considerations because the writing process became a site to grapple with trauma, explore deep connections between personal stories and documented histories, and care for vulnerabilities embedded in the undocumented experience. In this sense, we enacted an agentic use of time, what Flaherty calls *time work*, "a personal or interpersonal enterprise directed toward provoking or preventing various kinds of temporal experience" (Flaherty et al., 2020, p. 13). Although we are used to thinking about time in terms of pragmatic and logistical matters, it is through an agentic use of time that individuals can shape and modify various dimensions of temporal experience, including duration, frequency, timing, and allocation of time (Flaherty et al., 2020). In academia, this requires great effort to plan, deliberate, and negotiate choices.

In creating the anthology, we shaped various dimensions of our temporal experiences, including the duration and frequency of time and our intentional allocation of time (Flaherty et al., 2020) to facilitate collective practices of politics of care (Valenzuela, 2017) and accompaniment (Aguilar, 2019). Education scholar Valenzuela (2017) theorizes a "politics of care" that is an orientation, rooted in a set of practices, that intentionally resists a deficit model of understanding marginalized students. Politics of care insists on a holistic approach to the multiple and intersectional needs of marginalized students as central to their ability to function at full capacity and reach full potential in an educational setting. Accompaniment practices emerge from immigrant rights work and refer to a category of work that brings volunteers into community with immigrants navigating the immigration system to "accompany" them in this navigation. Accompaniment does not require a legal background, but rather is a way for ordinary people to walk in solidarity with immigrants as they navigate the notoriously confusing and complicated immigration system in this country. Aguilar (2019) conceptualizes *acompañamiento*, not only as a cultural and educational practice of supporting undocumented youth, but as an extension of accompanying and being accompanied by community in the creation of knowledge. Thus, we draw a connection between accompaniment in the immigration process to accompaniment in the research and writing process, which for first-generation undocumented scholars can be similarly intimidating, confusing, and obtuse. We practice a politics of care to centralize a holistic approach to supporting undocumented scholars in their navigation of the ethical and political imperatives that ground their knowledge production.

4. Cultivating an (Un)Documented Scholarly Voice: Reflections From a Formerly Undocumented Scholar

I, Lucia León, was a graduate student when Leisy Abrego shared the call for the anthology *We Are Not Dreamers*. My chapter is titled "Legalization Through Marriage: When Love and Papers Converge," and theorizes how undocumented young adults grapple with the impact of adjusting their immigration status through an invasive marriage-based legalization process. As a formerly undocumented person and scholar of migration, it was a deeply personal topic grounded in my long-standing commitment to undocumented communities. Like the undocumented folks I spoke with for this project, I migrated to the US as a child and grew up undocumented. Politicized in the early 2000s, I became a youth organizer with undocumented movements in California mobilizing for educational rights and legalization. It would be over 20 years before I obtained legal status through the only pathway available to me: marriage. My experience with and post legalization was an intense and isolating process, leaving me with disquieting questions about my new legal status. I sought solace and searched for stories about migrants' process of adjusting their legal status in books, articles, news, and films. At best, I found oversimplifications and, at worst, problematic caricatures of "green card marriages" set in assimilationist narratives. The absence of my experience was a deafening silence and I committed to graduate school as an avenue to fill this void and deepen the understanding of legalization *for* undocumented folks and their loved ones.

The book project's vision to center the empirical work of undocumented theorists was a timely and exciting opportunity. Nonetheless, theorizing through the lens of my undocumented experience was a challenging process that weighed heavily. Without a clear strategy or guidelines for how to theorize illegality as folks intimately tied to the undocumented experience, I relied on my graduate training and produced scholarship that was technical and mechanical, devoid of my narrative voice. As mentors and editors, Professors Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales encouraged me to insert myself, my experience, and my voice more deeply into my chapter. As a book contributor, I benefited from the editing and collective process to more profoundly consider *how* to craft my chapter and my *scholarly voice*.

Through careful recrafting, I began my chapter by stating my positionality and connection to the topic. While the bulk of the chapter was the empirical analysis of interviews with undocumented folks, I inserted myself as narrator with a shared experience:

> I am reminded of the difficult balance undocumented young adults face in navigating the legalization process and protecting our marriages, all while also claiming our humanity against a system that deems us eligible for legal recognition only upon the bureaucratization of our most intimate relationship. (León, 2020)

Moreover, I ended the chapter with a section titled "We Did the Best We Could" to provide insight into my own methodological and analytical decisions. I outlined how I had dedicated additional time, prior to the formality of interviews, to form a deeper human connection with my participants, taking time to get to know each other while discussing the interviews and their involvement with the project. Participants often asked me to share about my undocumented experience and legalization process; we spoke of our family and romantic partners, our career goals, and our intention to understand legalization for undocumented people. In sharing how I weave my experience during interviews and in my writing, I guide the reader through my

strategies to create ethical human connections based on reciprocal vulnerability and openness. This form of accompaniment became an ethical engagement with participants who openly recounted their lives and challenges for the research process as well as for our own journeys of reflection and healing.

I am unequivocally committed to centering the humanity of undocumented communities and the complex consequences of illegality in my scholarship. Centering *my* humanity through the process of forging my scholarly voice took time, patience, and compassion. The process for cultivating a voice as undocumented theorists has received minimal attention. Notably, Bejarano et al. (2019) articulate *undocumented activist theory*, an inductive theory emerging from scholars' research and activism as they draw on their emotions, experiences, and identities as undocumented people. As my immigration status changed, from undocumented to documented, I grappled with the emotional and legal changes that accompanied this rare privilege. As I de-centered "undocumented" as an identity (Campos Ramales, 2019), I struggled to find language that captured theorizing through an immigrant experience, past and present. Born out of a struggle to define my theoretical voice, I articulate what I call my *scholarly (un)documented voice*, as a "grounded" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) theorizing space that draws on my embodied existence with undocumented and documented life, my research observations, and my ethical and political commitments to immigration justice and migration studies.

The anthology and forming part of this collective of scholars allowed me to consider how and when to cultivate this (un)documented scholarly voice with intention by implementing strategies to care for myself as an immigrant theorist. In that process, time became my greatest companion as I confronted my vulnerabilities, the contradictions of competing goals, and the pieces of me that I had to unlearn. Over time, I learned to give myself grace and compassion to accept setbacks, mistakes, ask for help, and make changes. For example, I learned to let go of frustration over delays by understanding that I needed time after conducting interviews or during my writing process to hold space for the complex emotions that emerge when we recount distressful and dehumanizing experiences. I implemented various approaches in my field notes, complementing my research notes with journal entries and voice memos to solely capture my raw human emotions. I took time to pause and deeply reflect on and revisit important questions: What topic/discussion do I have the capacity to include? The courage to confront? The wisdom to abandon? How certain am I of my argument? Can I push past incomplete thoughts or are they too incomplete to include? What does my argument add to a broader conversation? Is this project/argument a helpful contribution for undocumented immigrants? Can this information be misconstrued or weaponized? How does this project fit with my overall goals? What would be helpful to complete this project or step? How am I taking care of myself? How am I showing up for undocumented communities? Who can I lean on to discuss these questions?

My development as a scholar has allowed me to see the *doing* of the work itself as the goal, rather than focusing solely on the finished product. This required new strategies of sustainability and wellbeing. I learned to negotiate when to push past the discomfort or tiredness of the tediousness of writing, versus when to pause, suspend, or abandon if the price was too high. I learned that I could not avoid, nor afford to ignore, the pain that comes from the undocumented experience, but I could learn to address it with more intention and in tune with my mental and physical health. I learned to lean on a larger community of undocumented scholars and mentors and to bring family and friends into the journey, for their accompaniment was often the source of gentle reminders to center rest, joy, love, and celebration in more intentional ways.

Through these profound acts of reflection and vulnerability, I learned to identify and address the particularities of conducting research with and as (un)documented migrants. It took time and accompaniment by the co-authors, editors, and broader community to forge helpful strategies and deepen my political commitment to the scholarly contributions of current and former undocumented scholars. In doing so, it enhanced my agency and power to speak our truths and purpose more boldly and proudly. I reclaimed my power through the alchemy of turning my experience, and that of my immigrant communities, into living moving text. I argue, this alchemy is the materialization of my *(un)documented scholarly voice* as I transform my lived experience into textual articulations that aim to be generative, actionable, and coexistent with other voices. Over time, a regular practice of self-reflection opened new possibilities to create deeper insights, purpose, and meaning for my work. These are practices that I renegotiated through the remainder of my PhD and do so today, as a faculty member. In this article, we discuss similar practices and call for a purposeful use of time as an ethical imperative for researchers, mentors, and folks who hold personal, political, and professional commitments with undocumented immigrants. As we demonstrate, these practices can be useful as scholars begin their research design and as they build collective spaces to write and share their scholarship.

5. Reflections of Accompaniment Through Ethical and Politically Rooted Research

First as doctoral students and then as faculty members, we (Leisy Abrego and Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales) had been advising and accompanying undocumented students and the undocumented youth movement for many years at our respective campuses before we decided to work together on this volume. We had learned tremendously from brilliant students who conducted research that told the stories of undocumented communities, rooted in personal narratives of navigating illegality but also speaking to a broader set of experiences, as well. This process was guided by a political, ethical, and scholarly imperative to bring these scholars' work to broader audiences, not only to contribute to the field but to lead it. We recruited 10 undocumented or formerly undocumented people who had conducted research in undergraduate, master's, or doctoral programs, and worked closely with them to revise these existing papers into book chapters that could be included in the edited volume. Between the two of us, we had previously advised four of them, and met the others through this project. Having many times supported students through the writing process, we also anticipated, though we could not yet fully account for, how much time it would take to help writers through what are often paralyzing phases of the writing process. In our experience, this happened for multiple reasons, as students and their families continued to face structural challenges as undocumented immigrants and because this type of analysis brought them face to face with the consequences of legal violence in their lives (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Working in the university context, with its set calendars, deadlines, and rules, in our advising we felt the urgency of getting students to complete their projects so that they could graduate, apply to graduate school, or simply reach a sense of completion on this work. In taking on the book project, the factor of time was initially more amorphous and therefore became the source of important lessons for us.

Producing a book requires working closely with a press; editors have their own timelines and expectations, so we started out by setting benchmarks for completion. We divided up the chapters and met individually with authors, working with them in the early stages on the broader elements of writing such as the central argument and the goals for the piece, and in the later stages to closely read and provide line-by-line suggestions for clarity. A recurring theme that emerged from these conversations was the emotional and intellectual work required

of them as they grappled with writing about communities they were connected deeply to and taking on the role of scholar and researcher. Indeed, many had participated in other scholars' research as interviewees, several recounting experience after experience of sitting for an interview with a grad student, researcher, or journalist who asked them to recount their "story." These experiences spurred a process of reflection—what aspects of those experiences did they want to reproduce, and which ones did they want to unsettle, disturb, and problematize now that they sat in the chair as researchers? Some felt strongly that they wanted the people in their studies to approve of the work before it went to print because they had not ever had a chance to review what other scholars had written about them. These reviews could take many additional weeks, requiring the authors to send multiple reminders, set appointments for conversations, and more time to make additional edits. It was only after taking this time to check in with each participant that authors felt comfortable moving forward, feeling validated in their work when participants felt that their experiences were carefully and accurately represented. These kinds of processes, which they came to see as cornerstones of intentional and ethical research, require extended periods of time.

A key learning moment in the process of co-editing the volume came after the first round of edits of all the chapters, when we drafted the introduction to the volume. By that point, we were familiar with all the chapters and had developed a sense of how they fit coherently in the volume. Our introduction endeavored to help readers understand the political and scholarly contexts in which the field of undocumented students had developed, drawing on our background as long-term mentors to contextualize the personal and intimate experiences of undocumented scholars who face unique challenges in the research and writing process. We felt it was important to name these dynamics. We shared the draft with the 10 authors, requesting their feedback, edits, and reactions. While they did not have substantive changes, many shared their raw emotions at reading what felt to be painfully true of their own writing processes. While they were proud of their scholarship and enthusiastic about their inclusion in what would become the edited volume, the rawness of the writing process sat heavily on them. In particular, theorizing experiences they were living through in acutely vulnerable ways raised many challenges in the writing process. It became especially clear that though writing can sometimes serve as a space of healing and empowerment for many who face their struggles through a research process, for undocumented scholars the writing process also has the potential to bring up deep trauma, rip off scars that never really properly healed over, and bring to the surface emotions, fears, and vulnerability in new and different ways. Because they believed so profoundly in the work, sorting through these emotions was also intensely difficult. This type of process exposes the nuances of what writing is and can be—beautiful and exhilarating and deeply painful all at the same time—and this process naturally requires time. Time is necessary to sit with, confront, and work through emotions and also to find ways to capture these processes in the written word for others to take in.

Throughout the process, we needed more time to fully engage the authors in their work, in our chapter, in their process, and in their vision of the volume. We worked intentionally to welcome their thoughts, input, feedback, and concerns, always making it explicit that we were committed to making sure both the process and the product were respectful and reflective of their experiences, insights, analyses, and reflections. We also were committed to making sure that the final version of each chapter, though a product of many rounds of revisions and involving substantive mentorship, still felt like it was singularly theirs and reflective of their voice. Although it took a long four years from the review of their first drafts to the date of publication, now that we can look back on the process, we feel confident that we took the right amount of time to do this collaborative work in the most ethical way.

6. Ethical and Political Imperatives for Undocumented Theorists in Research With Undocumented Migrants

The violence of illegality is a familiar experience for undocumented and formerly undocumented researchers. Theorizing through the lens of undocumented lived experience can resurface painful memories and produce complex emotions. As an author and co-editors, we learned through collective reflection that allowing time to process these experiences and emotions is a critical step in centering the humanity of immigrant researchers. Not everyone will require the same tools, but we offer here some possibilities learned through our collective process to facilitate the work and mentorship and support of undocumented theorists.

Authors of *We Are Not Dreamers* developed practices to support their wellbeing through the writing stages. One particularly notable strategy was to recognize that when feeling overwhelmed by the painful aspects of the work, it was not helpful simply to avoid writing or to move on to the next thing to avoid feeling difficult emotions. Writing paralysis, or avoidance, happened often when authors preferred not to engage with interviews or analysis. Initially, this felt like it allowed the authors to bypass the hard emotional and intellectual work; but even after long periods of avoidance, the feelings were still present when they returned to the work. Such practices, moreover, add time to the process, but do little to empower the author or to strengthen the work in the long run. Time that ran this way also had the undesired effect of adding stress to the process because writers were coming up on deadlines without a sense of control.

Through collective discussions, scholars realized that they needed to conjure more intentionality to stop and reflect on the materials they were gathering for their research and to feel their emotions during the writing process. Noticing that it was hard to process the emotions stemming from interviews and her writing, León slowly and iteratively came to develop a practice of journaling through written or voice memos whenever she was experiencing a desire to avoid the work. Recognizing that avoidance was a setback, she eventually found it more useful and humane to reclaim the time with strategies that supported her own agency. As she reflects back on that period, León notes:

> I accepted that I indeed needed more time, but with deeper reflection. Much like healing work (McClintock, 2019; Singh, 2019), I purposely built into my research and writing schedule time to pay attention to my emotional and physical symptoms. For example, after conducting an interview at a park, I found another location to sit and write quick reflections of my raw emotions. This space allowed me to express when something was difficult to process or too complex to engage with, in that moment; but the recognition alone felt validating enough to let me release it with the understanding that I would come back to it when I felt ready.

These practices that require scheduling additional time for contemplation are perhaps useful for any writer, but are especially important for creating space to release and reflect on the human response when conducting research that is parallel to lived experience.

These complex human responses are also accompanied by other challenges scholars may face, such as the trials of graduate school, financial precarity, career planning, community commitments, family responsibilities, xenophobia, and other intersecting forms of oppression that impact their daily lives and take time to consider. In those moments, amidst multiple challenges, scholars may also negotiate time to step

away from the work and refocus energy towards other activities that holistically support their wellbeing. In academia, this is a delicate balance to strike, particularly for researchers with intimate ties to the work, where research and everyday life are impossible to fully separate. To center the scholar holistically requires a politics of care for their overall wellbeing (Valenzuela, 2017), including the scholar's mental and physical health, to combat distressful or physical manifestations stemming from the work. While we do not aim to be prescriptive, we encourage scholars to seek mental health resources and support while researching and writing. Other practices that were helpful among members of our collective include: being outdoors, drinking plenty of water, taking walks, joining online and in-person writing groups, getting enough rest, and frequently coming back to what grounds them and inspires them to do their work.

Time is also necessary to humanely accommodate the ongoing considerations of doing this kind of research. For example, the authors built a network to check in with each other about topics such as disclosing vulnerable immigration statuses in their chapter drafts. How much of oneself should one disclose? When is it appropriate to speak of their own fears and struggles alongside those of study participants? And when does it serve the work best to focus the analysis exclusively on others' words and experiences? To expand on these conversations, three authors of the anthology, Lucia León, Katy Maldonado Dominguez, and Carolina Valdivia, founded Undocumented Insights, a collective *for and by* undocumented and formerly undocumented scholars of migration (Maldonado Dominguez et al., 2020). They organized a series of webinars that offered panelists and attendees intentional space to speak frankly about the state of immigration scholarship, emerging challenges, and pathways to recenter the power of undocumented theorists individually and as members of a larger collective. They offered peer support to acknowledge their emotions and plan more intentionally for potential challenges they would face during research. And they gave each other tools for minimizing harm in their writing, creating support teams, and promoting wellbeing across various stages of their work. Similar collectives have emerged, as dedicated spaces for undocumented scholars to share scholarship, build community, and create collaborations (University of California – Santa Cruz, 2024).

Although it can add more time to their writing process, personal reflection and conversation with trusted supporters can help scholars process fears and motivations about sharing their undocumented experiences, including negotiating how much to disclose, when, and to whom. These are important considerations, as immigrant scholars also share intersecting identities and various immigration situations with different levels of vulnerability. For example, someone waiting on a decision about their immigrant visa application may rightfully feel especially apprehensive about revealing personal details in a publication that may delay or derail their immigration process. Even those who obtain legal permanent residency, moreover, may continue to fear the possible loss of legalization (Menjívar & Lakhani, 2016), thereby worrying about how their published scholarship may affect their own legal protections. As the anthology intentionally centered the theoretical voices of undocumented scholars, the contributors each decided the extent to which they felt comfortable sharing their personal experience of being undocumented in their respective chapters. Indeed, they feel the weight of this decision every time they contemplate the intended audience of each new piece they write. For undocumented scholars, similarly careful consideration and time must be taken for decisions about publishing venues, academic institutions for study or work, selection of mentors and dissertation committees, and development of professional and community networks. In each case, their own protection may be at stake.

The reflexivity we encouraged in the volume among the editors and authors also led to conversations about the time needed to treat study participants ethically in the research. The authors agreed that they often felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility to represent their study participants well; did not want to pathologize or oversimplify study participants' experiences; and feared replicating harmful narratives about undocumented immigrants in their work. In response, they were committed to their study participants' approval of the work, requiring extended time to allow interlocutors and participants multiple rounds of feedback for each version of the chapter. Such a commitment, while it extends the length of time of any project, also grants these authors a sense of satisfaction that their work is accurate and that they remain accountable to the community that most matters to them.

The scholars of the anthology were motivated by personal and political connections to their chosen topics. Their chapters were undergraduate projects, master's theses, or doctoral projects which they revisited, extended, and adapted for the edited volume. While writing, revising, and editing takes time for all writers, we came to understand that time took on a unique importance in the project. While ethical practices in research design, data collection, and writing is a clear principle to get behind, there are real implications on time that adopting this approach entails. This was magnified in many ways for the authors in this collection, not only because they were managing deep community and personal commitments, but also because nearly all had personal experiences of feeling like objects of study. They intimately knew how those previous research engagements had negatively impacted them. For example, sitting down for an interview with a stranger who then began asking probing, personal questions that bring up traumatic experiences was a cautionary tale for these undocumented researchers, insistent they did not want to repeat this dehumanizing and damaging dynamic. Rather, they put effort into building relationships and meaningful connections with research participants to make interviews less impersonal and extractive. The added time spent developing relationships also elongates the research process, but we feel strongly that the extended time is necessary for ethical research with undocumented immigrants.

At the point of developing interview questionnaires, another example of the undocumented researchers working to disrupt problematic dynamics is in spending additional time to carefully consider what might seem to be a relatively benign question in most contexts but that takes on a different tone when asked of undocumented research participants. One researcher remembers being asked at the end of an interview where she sees herself five years from now; it is a question that is commonly asked of college students. She recounts the way the question rubbed her raw—everything about her future as an undocumented young person was uncertain. The seemingly innocuous question was everything but, when asked of her, in this context, at the end of the interview, leaving her to grapple with this uncertainty long after the interview concluded and the interviewer moved on with her own life without a second thought. The timing of the question—at the end of the interview—magnified its impact. This is yet another way that time took on a different and unique importance to these researchers. While time can seem to be a flat concept—measured clearly in numbers, with little ambiguity—this experience opened up the ways in which time for undocumented researchers is complicated, requiring and sometimes demanding special care and nuanced consideration and approaches.

Published in August 2020, the anthology continues to be an important contribution as it reaches broader audiences in the US and globally. The editors and authors have held numerous book talks on college campuses, at conferences, and in community spaces. These talks have often been generative and community-building

spaces as attendees share their perspectives, inquiries, experiences, and aspirations. During our book talks, readers have also expressed a strong connection with the anthology and its scholars. For some, reading the book and engaging in conversations caused an emotional response and they too sought a slower digestion of the book and its analysis. While we continue to grapple with this response, we find comfort in knowing that readers seek this book in search of connection and find it, albeit sometimes painfully. Like the scholars, readers also benefit from the passage of time and exercise their temporal agency as readers by absorbing chapters slowly and in intervals. Attendees also reminded us of the importance of centering our joy, of being present and celebrating the impact of the anthology—all of which is increasingly more available to us with the passage of time.

The question thus emerges, what should other professors/mentors/researchers do to responsibly and enthusiastically accompany undocumented scholars in the scholarly research and writing process? We resist the inclination to put forward a set of formal guidelines, and instead encourage our colleagues to consider the context of their particular institution and the needs of their students in the development of a practice suitable to that context. It is our responsibility to see undocumented students as scholars, not simply as students or research subjects, and to take steps to cultivate not only this scholarly practice but also to consider how we live up to our responsibility to accompany undocumented students in the research and writing process as a part of our professional obligations not only to them but to the field as a whole.

7. Conclusion

While a careful allocation of time can help mitigate some of the painful aspects of research, we are reminded that time has its limits. Time does not heal all wounds. To theorize from this wound is painful. The hard truth is that being undocumented in the US is harmful and immigrant scholars both experience and theorize the consequences of this harm. When their scholarship examines those most impacted, they aim to do so in ethical and responsive ways that uplift their shared commitments to end oppressive systems. Practices of accompaniment and politics of care allow scholars and supporters to exercise and provide care, practice reflexivity, uphold accountability and harm reduction, and center individual and collective wellbeing and healing. In doing so, we also witness the power, commitment, and deep connection of theorists and readers as the authors continue their work, and readers return to the book to accompany their own journeys.

The book project and emerging collaborations between the authors counter the dominant culture of academia that enshrines competitiveness, individualism, and transactional relationships (Mountz et al., 2015). As supportive environments that amplify undocumented people as facilitators of knowledge, they require practices of vulnerability, reflection, and trust between immigrant scholars and supportive networks. Much like liberatory practices (Jawaid & Azali-Rojas, 2022), grappling with challenges as an undocumented scholar is an act of self-reflection and self-determination and can take many forms. Primarily, it requires an agentic use of time, including modifications of duration, frequency, allocation, and timing (Flaherty et al., 2020), to consider and make informed choices about the challenges of researching familiar topics and how to reduce these challenges and potential harms towards new liberatory practices. There is no "chosen path" that can be prescribed, rather we lean on the encouraging experiences of the authors who call for generative, reflexive, and collaborative spaces. In turn, their intentional use of time to build liberatory practices can facilitate greater epistemic and ontological capacity to address the intellectual and ethical dimensions of research with undocumented communities. As undocumented students practice their own research ethic

they will continue to innovate research methods and writing practices to ethically engage with undocumented communities and the multiple audiences of their work. As their supporters, we encourage collective and reflexive practices rooted in ethical and political commitments to undocumented communities.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abrego, L. J., & Negrón-Gonzales, G. (Eds.). (2020). *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 110–126). Duke University Press.

Aguilar, C. (2019). Undocumented critical theory. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, *19*(3), 152–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708618817911

Alulema, D. (2019). DACA and the Supreme Court: How we got to this point, a statistical profile of who is affected, and what the future may hold for DACA beneficiaries. *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, *7*(4), 123–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/2331502419893674

Bazo Vienrich, A. (2019). Undocumented in the ivory tower. In M. C. Whitaker & E. A. Grollman (Eds.), *Counternarratives from women of color academics: Bravery, vulnerability, and resistance* (pp. 130–136). Routledge.

Bejarano, C. A., García, M. A. M., Juárez, L. L., & Goldstein, D. M. (2019). *Decolonizing ethnography: Undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smmv5

Cabrera, G. (2020). Disrupting diversity: Undocumented students in the neoliberal university. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 66–86). Duke University Press.

Campos Ramales, L. (2019). A political action against the good immigrant narrative. *Genealogy*, *3*(4), Article 69.

Cebulko, K., & Silver, A. (2016). Navigating DACA in hospitable and hostile states: State responses and access to membership in the wake of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *60*(13), 1553–1574.

Cohen, E. F. (2018). *The political value of time: Citizenship, duration, and democratic justice*. Cambridge University Press.

Coutin, S. B. (2005). Being en route. *American Anthropologist*, *107*(2), 195–206.

Duvell, F., Triandafyllidou, A., & Vollmer, B. (2008). *Ethical issues in irregular migration research* (Deliverable D2 prepared for Work Package 2 of the research project CLANDESTINO). European Commision.

Flaherty, M. G., Meinert, L., & Dalsgård, A. L. (Eds.). (2020). *Time work: Studies of temporal agency* (1st ed.). Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1tbhq6s

García Cruz, G. (2020). Contesting 'citizenship': The testimonies of undocumented immigrant activist women. In Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Aldine.

Griffiths, M. B. E. (2014). Out of time: The temporal uncertainties of refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *40*(12), 1991–2009.

Jawaid, S., & Azali-Rojas, D. (2022). *Love letter to the movement: Using a coach approach for healing, justice, and liberation*. Self-published. Jawaid, Azali and partners.

León, L. (2020). Legalization through marriage: When love and papers converge. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 190–210). Duke University Press.

Maldonado Dominguez, K. (2020). Undocumented queer parenting: Navigating external and internal threats to family. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 211–233). Duke University Press.

Maldonado Dominguez, K., León, L., & Valdivia, C. (2020). *Undocumented Insights: Fostering growth and resilience in academia*. https://undocuinsights.wordpress.com

McClintock, K. A. (2019). *When trauma wounds: Pathways to healing and hope*. Fortress Press.

Menjívar, C. (2006). Liminal legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants' lives in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, *111*(4), 999–1037.

Menjívar, C., & Abrego, L. (2012). Legal violence: Immigration law and the lives of Central American immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(5), 1380–1421.

Menjívar, C., & Lakhani, S. M. (2016). Transformative effects of immigration law: Immigrants' personal and social metamorphoses through regularization. *American Journal of Sociology*, *121*(6), 1818–1855.

Mondragón, G. (2020). 'I felt like an embarrassment to the undocumented community': Undocumented students navigating academic probation and unrealistic expectations. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 45–65). Duke University Press.

Mónico, G. (2020). American't: Redefining citizenship in the U.S. undocumented immigrant youth movement. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 87–109). Duke University Press.

Mountz, A., Bonds, A., Mansfield, B., Loyd, J., Hyndman, J., Walton-Roberts, M., Basu, R., Whitson, R., Hawkins, R., Hamilton, T., & Curran, W. (2015). For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, *14*(4), 1235–1259.

Negrón-Gonzales, G. M. (2014). The power of the pen: Writing mentorship and Chicana/o MA students. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *13*(1), 62–70.

Ramirez, M. L. (2020). Beyond identity: Coming out as UndocuQueer. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 146–167). Duke University Press.

Reyna Rivarola, A. R., & López, G. R. (2021). *Moscas*, *metiches*, and methodologies: Exploring power, subjectivity, and voice when researching the undocumented. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *34*(8), 733–745. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1930262

Sati, J. (2020). 'Other' borders: The illegal as normative metaphor. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 23–44). Duke University Press.

Silvestre, A. (2020). Me vestí de reina: Trans and queer sonic spatial entitlement. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 168–189). Duke University Press.

Singh, A. A. (2019). *The racial healing handbook: Practical activities to help you challenge privilege, confront systemic racism & engage in collective healing*. New Harbinger Publications.

University of California – Santa Cruz. (2024). *Undocu-Theorizations Conference*. https://eop.ucsc.edu/undocumented_student_services/uss-events-workshops/conference.html

Valdivia, C. (2020). Undocumented young adults' heightened vulnerability in the Trump era. In L. J. Abrego & G. Negrón-Gonzales (Eds.), *We are not dreamers: Undocumented scholars theorize undocumented life in the United States* (pp. 127–145). Duke University Press.

Valenzuela, A. (2017). Academia Cuauhtli: (Re)locating the spiritual, if crooked, path to social justice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *30*(10), 906–911. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312610

Wong, T. K., & García, A. S. (2016). Does where I live affect whether I apply? The contextual determinants of applying for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. *International Migration Review*, *50*(3), 699–727. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12166

About the Authors

Lucia León is assistant professor in social justice and Latino studies at the Dominican University of California.

Leisy J. Abrego is professor in the Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies at the University of California – Los Angeles.

Genevieve Negrón-Gonzales is professor in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco.

cogitatio

ARTICLE

"Livability" and "Ungratefulness": A Refugee Critique of the Law and Humanitarianism

Yến Lê Espiritu [1] and Ma Vang [2]

[1] Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California – San Diego, USA
[2] Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, University of California – Merced, USA

Correspondence: Yến Lê Espiritu (yespiritu@ucsd.edu)

Abstract

Critical refugee studies (CRS) conceptualizes refugees' lived experience as a site of theory-making and knowledge production with and for refugees. As co-founders of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), and as scholars with refugee backgrounds, we theorize alongside our refugee partners to offer a refugee critique of refugee law and humanitarianism. Departing from the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of "refugee," whose restrictive legal and historical framing cannot account for the complex conditions that displace human beings, we offer the concept of "livability" to name the mundane, creative, and fearless possibilities of living that undergird refugees' claims to move audaciously. Furthermore, departing from humanitarian narratives that expect refugees to be forever thankful for having been rescued, we propose the concept of "ungratefulness" to describe refugee refusal to exhibit gratitude and deference for the space they have been allowed. Our critique emerged from sustained engagement with refugee partners through in-person and virtual gatherings organized by the CRSC. Together, we argue that livability and ungratefulness constitute examples of "epistemic disobedience" of the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees, as they call attention to distinctly discernible refugee agency and epistemology that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through a lens of precarity and gratitude.

Keywords

critical refugee studies; livability; ungratefulness

---

1. Introduction

For bell hooks, the interdependent nature of theory and practice is the vital link between critical thinking and practical wisdom because "when we create a world where there is union between theory and practice, we can freely engage with ideas" (hooks, 2010, p. 186). Following hooks (2010), we insist that theoretical work that is co-created with refugees and that emerges from their lived experiences has the potential to be liberatory and transformative. As co-founders of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), we move beyond the legal definition of refugees that is premised on "fear and persecution," and adopt instead a critical refugee studies (CRS) definition of "the refugee" as "all human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin...regardless of their legal status" (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 72). In opposition to hegemonic ways of producing knowledge that is marked by positivism and abstract generalizations, we insist that theorizing alongside refugees as knowledge co-creators is a creative, collaborative, and critical practice that promotes "purposeful knowledge" for "thinking against the grain" (Vacchelli, 2018, p. 9). We depart from the asymmetrical representational apparatus that renders refugees both hypervisible and invisible, erasing their humanity, heterogeneity, and agency; instead, we conceptualize refugees' lived experience as a site of theory-making that demands and inspires critical reflection on and action for differently positioned and impacted individuals.

Wyborn et al. (2019) define knowledge co-creation as "processes that iteratively unite ways of knowing and acting—including ideas, norms, practices and discourses—leading to mutual reinforcement and reciprocal transformation of societal outcomes" (p. 320). Liberatory knowledge co-creation necessarily involves the practice of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2008)—the refusal to adhere to the hegemonic rules of knowledge valuation and a commitment to theorizing from and between devalued knowledge systems to generate more critical ways of thinking about the world and envision social life (Meghji, 2023). These manifestations of "epistemic disobedience" emerge in diverse forms, ranging from narrated ethnographies in scholarly studies to creative production in the cultural sphere. Key to the practice of knowledge co-creation with those who have experienced displacement is the recognition and empowerment of these forced migrants as "knowledge holders" (O'Neill et al., 2019, p. vii) who engage in "knowledge-decolonizing" (Lenette, 2019, p. xiii). Adhering to these tenets, we approach the question of "refugee" from the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced—from the lived, embodied experiences, memories, and postmemories of refugees and their children who craft their lives in the ever-unfolding afterlife of multiple and overlapping forms of disaster and displacement.

As displaced peoples, refugees are apprehended in immigration law, essentialized in humanitarian discourse, and diminished in cultural (mis)representations. The promise of knowledge co-creation with refugees is the potential to incorporate emancipatory methods and practices that empower participants to co-generate research "data" that "*speak back* to regressive and at times cruel policy measures" (Lenette, 2019, p. xi, emphasis in original). Accordingly, theorizing as a liberatory practice entails knowledge co-making that prioritizes space sharing, informal conversations, storytelling, and creative practices with refugees— exchanges that are grounded not in rigid social science paradigms but in fluid counter-narratives and creative and social practices that imagine and produce new ways of theorizing about community and collective justice. Importantly, the emancipatory promise of knowledge co-creation with refugees is a commitment to approach theorizing as a conduit to social change—to balance and restore the power to describe, narrate, and emancipate (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 23).

Centering refugee lifeworlds, the CRSC conceptualizes refugee displacement not as a problem for the nation-state but as a site of theory-making—a generative site of inquiry and activism and social and political critique (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 22). The CRSC mounts a humanistic approach to forced migration by centering refugee stories and experiences as a mode of analysis and a paradigm, documenting the world-repairing role of culture, memory, and imagination in the difficult work of resettlement. In so doing, we want to produce not only new knowledge but also new ways of knowledge-making—to regard theorizing as a communal practice that centers on how refugee actors name and address their own understanding of and need for safety, dignity, and beauty. To illustrate refugee agency and epistemology, we offer below a refugee critique of refugee law and humanitarianism by tracing the intentions and actions of the CRSC and its refugee partners as they worked toward formations of refugee livability and ungratefulness that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through the lens of precarity and gratitude. Together, these concepts denounce the discourse and politics of trauma that erases the structural violence of displacement and reduces refugees to victim status, in need of rescue. They also simultaneously uplift refugees' political subjectivity: Livability centers what refugees want for their lives and ungratefulness demands space for defiant refugee subjectivities (Marshall, 2013). Ungratefulness is how refugees enact livability, to live their lives with humanity and dignity.

2. The CRSC

2.1. Intentions and Actions

We approach the practice of knowledge co-creation with forced migrants as scholars with refugee backgrounds and as co-founders of the CRSC. Founded in 2016, the CRSC is a group of US-based interdisciplinary scholars who advocate for and envision a world where refugee rights are human rights. Committed to community-engaged scholarship, we chart and build the field of CRS by centering refugee lives—and the creative and critical potentiality that such lives offer. Collective members not only study refugees, but many are also refugees themselves with long and deep ties to their respective communities.

The formation of the CRSC is premised on a mode of critical collaboration—both amongst members of the Collective and between CRSC members and the larger refugee communities—that operates as both strategy and method, the results of which have yielded formative imaginings and conversations within and beyond academia. We ground our work in feminist idea(l)s and politics of collectivity and prioritize collaboration as a tool and a practice—an intellectual and political mode of being. In this, we draw from the deep well of power that comes from collaborative acts, which upends the individualistic and neoliberal ethos that undergirds dominant notions of knowledge production in the academy. In all our work, CRSC members aim to produce not only new knowledge but also new forms of communal knowledge-making alongside our refugee partners.

The CRSC views public engagement, community collaboration, and mutual respect as central to our intellectual endeavor and critical intervention. We are intentional about creating spaces where relationships with refugee subjects can be built organically: through conferences and symposia that spur genuine conversations amongst researchers, students, performers, and community members; through graduate student writing retreats that model collaborative knowledge-making for the next generation of CRS scholars; through grant giving that seeds innovative projects by undergraduate and graduate students, community organizations, and artists; and through the CRSC website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com) that both

disseminates and archives refugee stories, which is the focus of this article. The CRSC considers relationship-making practices a form of feminist praxis and methodology enacted through emotional labor. Building relationships is how CRSC members theorize and forge actions through and beside refugee partners. In all our activities, we ask:

> What are the desires—and not only the needs—of the forcibly displaced as they create improvised, fluid, and alternative homemaking and healing strategies on the run? How do scholars bring about refugee policies that align with refugees' rights of movement, livelihood, and dignity?

Conversations are key to how we engage in theorizing with and for each other. Conversations are ephemeral moments of grounded thinking as we respond to each other's perspectives and deepen our understanding of what it means to value refugee lives and stories. Conversations allow us to build relationships and maintain interconnectedness with each other. Abolitionist organizer Mariame Kaba explains that "everything worthwhile is done with other people," a lesson she learned from her parents who emphasize that we are interconnected and need each other (Kaba, 2021, pp. 176–186). Kaba's insights illuminate the CRSC's multifaceted efforts to create spaces, both in-person and virtual, where we build and renew connections to different refugee communities, whether they are researchers, community members, artists, teachers, or students.

The community-based conferences and public talks that CRSC hosted make visible the layered refugee lives and experiences that are different but interrelated. Co-theorizing with our refugee partners occurs through these conversations in these spaces as we participate in the organic process of refining our ideas about refugee storytelling and archiving. We learned that refugee storytelling is not about pinpointing the real refugee stories and lives but about showing how they overlap and make visible other forms of violence and injustice. These are the questions that we ask each other: How can we understand refugees' experiences when they are embedded in the narratives and languages of the landscapes and geopolitics of the resettlement countries? How are the processes of global displacement linked to war as well as neoliberal policies in globalization? Moreover, even as we acknowledge refugees' traumatic and transformative life experiences, we also know that "even as we're crossing, we are more than sadness, more than the trauma" (Zamora, 2020). These organic conversations, which we consider to be co-research practices grounded in the lived experiences of refugee partners, make room for mistakes in our perceptions and language and for corrections and apologies to happen in real-time. We can participate in what activist and writer Sunni Patterson describes as a radical notion of forgiveness and community, in which forgiveness is to admit and accept that we may not know everything in order to build community (Patterson, 2024). Radical living that insists on refugee humanity and dignity is foregrounded in all our activities, both in person and in virtual spaces, that are inspired by refugee work and words.

In this article, we focus on the CRSC website, designed and maintained by CRSC co-founder Lan Duong, as our site of analysis, as it represents a form of cultural labor that pronounces the importance of refugee enactments in terms of stories and histories, and of art and the archive. Debuting in 2017, the website concretizes the kinds of interventions, communities, and conversations we want to create with one another and with refugee communities at large in both actual and online spaces. Designed to be informative, collaborative, and interactive, it extends our dialogues with refugee activists, academics, and artists locally and globally as we populate the website with refugees' art, music, poetry, and testimonials. On this virtual canvas, we put our theories into practice, showing how the figure of the refugee is a social actor and

theorist, one who has always imagined other worlds, other possibilities, through creative expression. With the CRSC website, we intend to bring together communities here and elsewhere to strive for collective liberation and social justice for the globally displaced (Espiritu et al., 2022). Below, through an analysis of the CRSC website, we show how our critiques of the law and humanitarianism are grounded in and fueled by refugees' lived experiences and creative endeavors.

3. Toward Refugee Livability

Departing from the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of refugee that is based on "fear," and in an ongoing conversation with refugee allies, we offer the concept of "refugee livability" to name the mundane, creative, and fearless possibilities of living embedded in refugees' claims of the right to return, to stay, and to move audaciously—to be present everywhere. While we acknowledge the power of law to constitute reality, we look to refugees' meaning-making practices to craft our understanding of livability, where life is dignified. Livability names the capacious and bountiful ways of refugee living and lifeworlds. At the core of livability is the quality of life expressed through storytelling and other self-produced narratives. It is an insistence on a better life that is not centered on fear but on humanity, dignity, and futurity—the truth of the possible, if not the actual (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 2). By continuing to show up, refugees demonstrate that the law is not a totalizing force in their lives, thereby exposing the law's limitations as they engage, critique, and even evade the law.

4. A Critique of the Law and Fear

The legal mandate of the 1951 Refugee Convention definition of the refugee—someone who has a "well-founded fear of persecution"—emerged from the specificities of the geopolitical context of Europe and the historical conditions of World War II. The centrality of Europe in the humanitarian agenda, as Chimni (2009) explains, maintains continuity between the colonial era to the present because humanitarianism legitimizes imperialism and advances the goals of hegemonic states. Furthermore, the knowledge produced from humanitarian efforts carried out in the Global North, as in the counting of internally displaced persons, turns into knowledge and social categories that engender "legal norms for behavior" (Chimni, 2009, p. 18). Humanitarianism continues to be intertwined with colonialism because "forced migration issues have today become *part of a western project of global dominance* and that Forced Migration Studies is implicated in it" (Chimni, 2009, p. 20, emphasis in original). Along with our refugee partners, we insist that today's complex contexts and conditions for displacement cannot be adjudicated on the basis of fear and persecution that was stipulated in the Convention. The spatial and temporal limits of the international refugee law shaped a restricted idea of fear for which only certain kinds of fear can be recognized and certain spaces where "fearful" people can go (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 1). The Convention framework does not make room for the multiplicity and complexity of refugee claims. This limitation produces the uneven adjudication of fear across different groups seeking asylum.

In addition, nation-states play a big role in interpreting and implementing international law, which typically positions the refugee as a threat. Indeed, state power as persecution and the withholding or failure of state protection from persecution has traditionally been the site through which refugees as a legal category are produced. It is also the nation-states that claim to be fearful of refugees who will allegedly breach the security of their borders and threaten the safety of their citizenry. As such, fear operates as a double-edged sword for

refugees and asylum seekers who must be able to articulate a "well-founded fear of persecution" but who also are simultaneously constructed by the state to threaten national security. Concerns about national security have produced further restrictions on refugee migration and entry. Australia, for example, intercepts asylum seekers at sea to reroute them to its detention centers in Nauru on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island and across Indonesia (Mountz, 2020). This process of offshoring borders and externalizing enforcement is not unique to Australia (National Immigrant Justice Center, 2021). The US response to Central American asylum seekers since 2014 was to detain them in centers within its own borders, push them to make-shift camps on the Mexican side of the US–Mexico border, or separate families so that children become "unaccompanied minors." The children are placed in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement where they live in overcrowded shelters and may be released to relatives or foster families.

Finally, much of the scholarship and public discourse on refugees is framed from the perspective, logic, and needs of the nation-states and humanitarian organizations. As such, most academic theorizing on refugees adopts a state-driven approach that views refugees through the security lens as a crisis and a source of threat (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 2). While the power of the law is vast, refugee critiques show that the law is not a totalizing force in refugees' lives. We assert that refugees are cognizant of the law's restrictive impact, and they constantly negotiate between their own fear of the law and the nation-state's fear of them.

5. Colonial Mapping and Counter Mapping

Given that the UN Convention on Refugee Status was geopolitically specific to Europe and that the applications of the law have privileged nation-states' border security imperatives, mapping refugee flows has been inseparable from colonial cartography. In fact, conventional refugee mapping projects by the UNHCR or research organizations typically superimpose abstract dots and lines to visualize migration flows that are unidirectional from the Global South to Global North countries. This form of colonial and humanitarian mapping reproduces geopolitical inequities that mark forced migrants as peripheral subjects who invade the Global North. Indeed, the dots on the maps appear as targets that turn the visualization of displacement into visibility that produces vulnerability for refugees. In the context of fabricated fears about refugee (and immigrant) populations as national security threats, the dots on the map that string their path of migration from the place of displacement to the place of refuge come to represent refugee invasion. As such, these visual representations that map the refugee paths and their population size do the work of enhancing the threat and fears of displaced migrants. The conventional use of flow lines is problematic because it (mis)represents border crossing as an effortless journey. These lines erase the personal hardships, dangerous treks, and legal hurdles that are linked to border crossings (Kelly, 2019, p. 34). Kelly (2019) explains that such conventional borders lack dimension through their simplification into lines on a map such that "continuous lines are convenient symbols for borders because of their perceived permanence and uncontested fixity; they appear static, essential, and inexperienced" (pp. 35–36). They record and provide information rather than tell life stories. As Smith (1999) reminds us, colonial mapping practices dispossess Indigenous peoples of land and establish settler-colonial states.

Cognizant of how cartography, the art and science of making and remaking maps, is linked to the spatial sedimentations of power, the CRSC created a Story Maps page on their website (https://critical refugeestudies.com/story-maps) to visualize how place is experienced, understood, and practiced differently by refugees. In making refugee social life central to the understanding of place, the story map project

co-creates understanding of place with refugees, relying on their stories and images to show how refugees make spaces meaningful. We thus engage in the process of community mapping, which invites refugees in the diaspora to "map places and locations that matter to them, in whichever language or symbols is most meaningful to them" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 91). This process thus centers the refugee as a mapmaker and emphasizes the "integrity of the knowledge producer or mapmaker" (Kelly, 2019, p. 38).

Community mapping draws on counter-mapping as an approach to underscore how "refugee movement" exposes the interconnectedness of lives and landscape. Boatcă (2021) explains that counter-mapping works as a form of "global solidarity between and across cores, peripheries, and semiperipheries in the global system" (p. 260). Indeed, the work of traditional map-making to create uniformity and sameness reinforces differential power and negates opportunities for visualizing overlaps and solidarities in human experiences. Instead of highlighting differences, counter-mapping attends to the similarities among asylum seekers. Counter-mapping that privileges feminist perspectives recognizes "differentiated bodies and affective experiences as instrumental to visualization" (Kelly, 2019, p. 37). It allows for bodies, which are non-traditional spaces and non-traditional borders, to be brought into the maps to tell stories (Kelly, 2019, p. 41). As artist Tiffany Chung explains: "For me, maps represent life. If there is no life, no society, no culture, no people, there would be no maps...maps not only define borders, they are also about people" (Critical Refugee Studies Collective [CRSC], n.d.). We draw inspiration from Chung's claim that "maps represent life" to conceptualize the refugee story maps hosted on the CRSC website. As CRSC co-founder Lan Duong explains:

> We endeavor to reconstruct maps about refugees to tell a different story *by* refugees; that is, how they came from a history of militarism; how they have rebuilt their communities; and how they continue to survive and thrive, telling stories, rewriting history, and making art, literature, poetry, and films along the way. (Critical Refugee Studies Collective [CRSC], n.d.)

In August 2023, Chung created a map installation on the US National Mall and adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. titled *For the Living*. The installation opened from August to September 2023 and featured a map of the world that "traces the global routes of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees from the Vietnam War" (Monument Lab, 2023). Based on the routes of exile, the installation invited visitors to "reimagine" how the paths contributed to the "story of US geography and belonging" (Monument Lab, 2023). Indeed, viewers experience the effect of the war on a human scale providing a glimpse of the forced migration process. Chung further explains the work of map making in her artistic installation:

> Creating maps...is an act of countering the colonial legacy of mapping from above. So, I think by bringing the map into the landscape, it is a kind of a reverse process for people to go through that landscape and going through that process of mapping and understanding how subjective it could be. (Trust for the National Mall, 2023)

We draw on Chung's dictum to create alternative maps and feature some of her maps on the CRSC website to frame our own refugee story maps.

6. Mapping Our Stories: About Livability

We created the story map feature on the CRSC website as a departure from the digital forms of representing human displacement through dots and lines that are devoid of life and life-making. We curate our story maps to have the capacity to hold the dynamics of life-making. We use the existing infrastructure of mapping, the ArcGIS platform of story mapping to embed refugee stories in an accessible way for users to navigate and visualize. Story mapping uses Google Maps to coordinate and embed story points onto the platform. Users can interact with the stories by navigating the different locations on the map. We explored different platforms and found ArcGIS to be navigable for the user due to widespread familiarity with Google Maps. Refugees were already using different technologies whether it was navigation apps or social media to facilitate their migration across borders to locate resources and communities and to tell their stories.

Our version of story mapping is intended for refugees to literally put their community on the map and to tell stories about refugee living that are happening everywhere. On these pages, we take our cue from Chung that "maps represent life." We endeavor to reconstruct maps about refugees to tell a different story by refugees; that is, how they came from a history of militarism; how they have rebuilt their communities; and how they continue to survive and thrive, telling stories, rewriting history, and making art, literature, poetry, and films along the way. Together, the story maps mark the refugee world spatially—in the US, Argentine, Belize, Scotland, Israel, Malaysia, Guam, Malawi, and more—where refugees experience displacement, create makeshift homes in refugee camps, get resettled; these places are where living happens. Many of the story points highlight festivals and exhibits of refugee art and culture. The story maps show that wherever refugees settle, they build communities where life is bountiful and live with dignity despite the persistence of fear. In this way, our story maps tell refugee stories, created by refugees themselves, in an effort to flood the world with refugee humanity.

As an example, the set of stories mapped to California's Central Valley (Figure 1) represent dynamic forms of life-making among the different refugee groups who have settled in the region since the late 1970s.
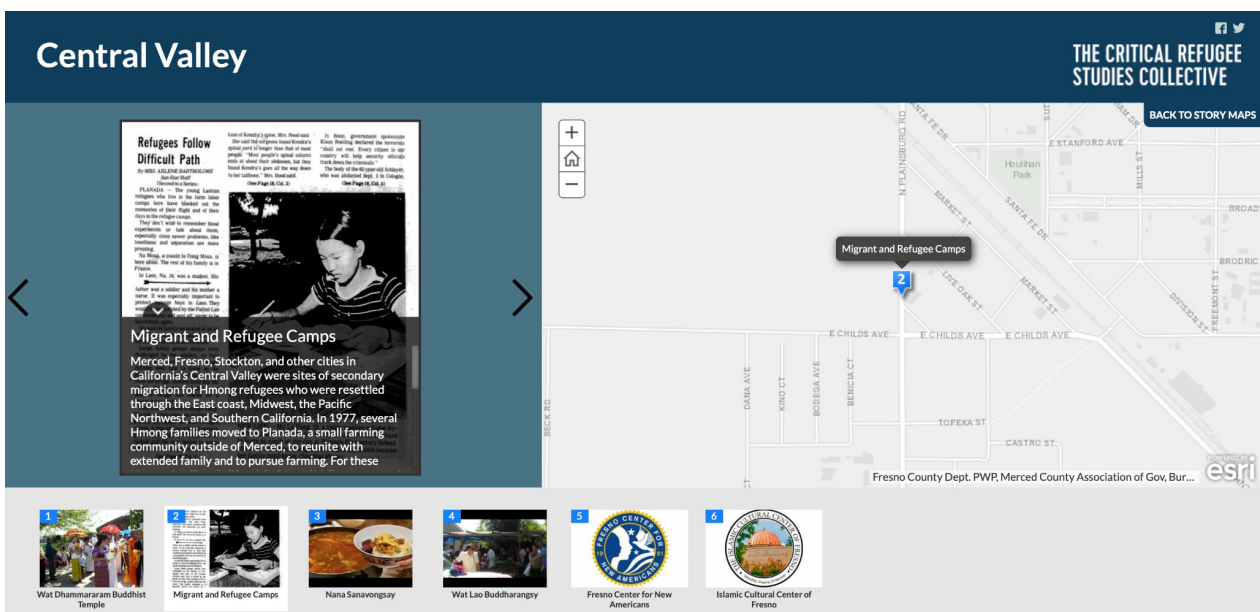

Figure 1. Story map of refugee stories in California's Central Valley.

The stories emphasize food, communal and spiritual celebrations, community organizations, and migrant camps as anchors for living with dignity. The featured organizations, the Fresno Center for New Americans (FCFN) and the Islamic Cultural Center of Fresno (ICCF) provide services for Southeast Asian refugees and Syrian refugees, respectively. They provide education, social services, employment, immigration support, mental health, housing, and other important needs that newly arrived refugees struggle to access once their initial resettlement assistance program concludes. In addition, the early wave of Hmong refugees who resettled in Merced, CA, between 1977 and 1980, lived in migrant camps alongside Mexican-American migrant farmworkers where they worked together in the area's agricultural fields, with Hmong refugees crediting the migrant farmworkers for helping to ease their initial resettlement process. Together, these story maps depict refugee living that necessitates collaboration, cohabitation, and mutual assistance among different community groups. They map refugee relationships forged through necessity in the absence of or very limited support for resettlement from the US state.

In sum, our story maps illuminate refugee livability—refugees' insistence to live with humanity and dignity in mundane and creative ways and to tell their stories of fear but also of joy—by spotlighting how refugee stories are intertwined with place and persist in solidarity with the people and stories from those places.

7. Toward Refugee Ungratefulness

The articulation of humanitarian aid as a *gift* to refugees generates narratives about refugees that are largely restricted to crises, suffering, and fear. From the perspective of the refugees, this unequal relationship is most evident in rescue narratives in which humanitarian agencies and agents expect a display of gratitude from those whom they have "rescued." As subjects of humanitarianism, refugees are hyper-aware that performing the role of the grateful refugee, which removes their agency and dignity, is often the unspoken condition to acceptance, hospitality, and friendship (Nayeri, 2019). In this context, the concept of ungratefulness—the willfulness to define one's humanity and subjectivity beyond the limits of the savior tropes—constitutes a site of refugee agency. As Nayeri (2020) asserts, refugees should not have to "spend the rest of our days in grateful ecstasy, atoning for our need." In rejecting and refusing idealized notions of restoration and resettlement, the "ungrateful refugee" (Nayeri, 2019, 2020) advances a refugee critique of humanitarian-centered rescue narratives that uphold purported liberal ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. Even when refugees appear to display gratitude, this practice is often strategic and performative; that is, refugees are self-aware as they playact the relationships and affects required of them to survive, and even to thrive. These calculated performances of (in)gratitude constitute a refugee tactic that ensures survival and prosperity in a sponsorship-based economy, and an example of "epistemic disobedience" that exposes the colonial and unilateral production of refugees as seen entirely through a lens of precarity and gratitude (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 3).

8. A Refugee Critique of Humanitarianism

The contemporary critique of humanitarianism can be traced to Hannah Arendt's work on totalitarianism. In her 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt, writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, articulates the tensions that statelessness posed to human rights and humanitarianism—the stipulation that to enjoy civil, political, or social rights, individuals must first be a member of a political community. Since the right to be a citizen constitutes a juridico-political precondition for protection of other human rights, Arendt (1951)

pushes for a "reimagining of global justice beyond humanitarianism" (Howard, 2017, p. 98)—for the principle of the "right to have rights" that moves beyond the right to belong to a state. In other words, everyone should be allowed to belong somewhere. According to Arendt (1963), the practice of humanitarianism is depoliticized as it builds on a politics of pity and compassion, replaces rights with charity, and differentiates between those who can help and those who need help. As such, the "right to have rights" creates possibilities for the stateless to "negotiate the line between being an abject subject of compassion and administrative logic versus being a legal person as well as a political activist claiming the recognition of his or her international rights" (Benhabib, 2018, p. 121).

Building on Arendt's insights, refugee studies scholars have established that humanitarian discourses and practices of benevolence uphold patriarchal and neocolonial relations of power and systems of meaning and representation, which bolster the unequal relationship between refugees and the humanitarians who claim to save them (Hyndman, 2000; Rajaram, 2002). Humanitarian narratives often depict refugee lives only in terms of losses and their resettlement in Western countries only in terms of gains: "The trauma discourse and the pathologization of refugees is the most common reaction to the presence of refugees in Western arrival countries" (Blazan & Hatton, 2016, p. 98). In most instances, refugees' eligibility for assistance and resettlement hinges on their ability to demonstrate their defenselessness and neediness rather than on the specificities of their histories of dislocation. As such, humanitarian assistance is often based on the language of pity and suffering rather than on the language of justice and reparation, thereby dispossessing refugees of their own agency. Within this privatized structure of refuge, the refugee subject is belittled and isolated, forever indebted and grateful to the resettlement state and its citizens for the bestowed "gift of freedom" (Nguyen, 2012). Moreover, humanitarian interventions are often practices that recuperate state sovereignty by eliding the fact that contemporary refugee crises are largely the result of the Western world's historical, sustained, and ongoing patterns of imperial and colonial violence and economic, social, and racial stratification (Espiritu, 2014).

9. Refugee Archives: "The Personal Is a Form of Critique"

The archive is a power-laden space where those in power produce meaning by determining what gets archived (Foucault, 1972; Trouillot, 1995). Attentive to the challenges of archival representation, scholars, librarians, and community organizers have heralded the practice of assembling refugee-produced documentation of their own lives. These bottom-up approaches to the subjectivities and lifeworlds of refugees, which have been largely elided or obscured in official archives, center "refugees as knowing and speaking subjects rather than as objects of knowledge" (Phu & Nguyen, 2019, p. 10). As an example, in their study of Burmese refugee exodus in 1942, Joseph and Balakrishnan (2022) relay how refugees "become agents of change" (p. 739) through their narratives that create a space of appearance for themselves. Refugee archives, which empower refugees to become the custodians and articulators of their own experiences (Hynes, 2003), thus have the potential to document not only displacement but also emplacement that amplifies refugee personhood.

In their discussion of archives and methods for CRS, Phu and Nguyen (2019) insist that "the personal is a form of critique" (p. 7). Accordingly, to co-theorize with refugees is to ground theory on refugees in refugee stories and struggles. The CRSC recognizes the need for refugees not only to create their own stories, but also to have a space to archive and share these stories. Toward these goals, we created the Refugee Archives page on the CRSC website (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/archives) to serve as a digital storage space for stories,

histories, ephemeral items, artwork, images, writing, music, and media that have been generated by and for refugees. Users from anywhere in the world can upload their materials by themselves onto the CRSC website; they can also manage these items once they are up, adding to, deleting, and editing their work as they see fit. The CRSC holds no ownership of the works and has no selection process; we simply created a digital space so that they may be stored and accessed virtually. In offering a virtual space for refugee stories that is free, open, and interactive, we conceptualize refugee communities as critical partners in replacing and reversing the dehumanization of refugees within colonialist gazes and frames, sensational stories, savior narratives, big data, and spectator scholarship. Our intention is to celebrate refugees' creative acts as profoundly agentive and imaginative, and to fashion the new critical communities to work toward social justice for the globally displaced. In short, the Refugee Archives is our effort to ground the process of co-theorizing refugee lives in concrete refugee struggles, tending always to the specific histories and contexts that shape their stories (Espiritu et al., 2022, Chapter 3).

10. Archiving Our Stories: Toward Ungratefulness

We envision the materials uploaded by our users to the CRSC's Refugee Archives as refugee critiques and theories that take the forms of poetry, art, film, music, and other genres. Collectively, these small stories radiate refugee agency and imagination, constituting an antidote to the objectifying capture of refugees in Western media as the dead, wounded, starving that elicit pity and sympathy, but not discernment and assessment. Constructed for Western consumption, these spectacular(ized) images are also masculinist, rendering invisible and inaudible the everyday and out-of-sight struggles as well as the triumphs of the displaced as they manage war's impact on their lives (Espiritu & Duong, 2018). As a counterpoint, the CRSC's Refugee Archives take seriously the knowledge point of the forcibly displaced, both the hidden and overt injuries but also the joy and survival practices that play out in the domain of the everyday. As such, the Refugee Archives present the forcibly displaced not as objects of analysis but as sites of knowledge production that contribute to the emergence of critical theory from the Global South.

As of this writing, the Refugee Archives has over 30 entries that recount refugee stories through creative forms seldom found in traditional archives: artwork, poetry, podcast, music, dance, video, essay, zine, and memoir. The storytellers share slices of the life of refugees who hailed from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Haiti, Uganda, and Nigeria; some entries include non-translated words or excerpts in Hmong, Vietnamese, Khmer, Spanish, and Dari. Together, the entries chronicle the hardship of refugee plight but also the more mundane, routine, and open-ended dimensions of refugee life: A woman tells of her struggle with sexual violence in Eastern Uganda; a Hmong man narrates his family's escape by foot from Laos to the Thai border in 1975; a third-generation Salvadoran recounts her grandmother and father's language mishap while shopping at Smart & Final for the first time; and a Vietnamese daughter shares the mental health implications of being a child of war refugees. This cacophony of sounds, images, and tales disables the collapsing of the multifaceted and overlapping refugee stories into a "single story." As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us, "the consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult " (Adichie, 2009).

Attentive to the practice of refugee refusal, we share below our analyses of four Refugee Archives entries to illustrate how they help us theorize the concept of "ungratefulness."

In the aftermath of US wars in Southeast Asia, the centering of refugee rescue and resettlement obscures the violence and racism of US military actions in the region that led to the displacement in the first place (Espiritu, 2014). In the entry *Militarized Silence* (Figure 2), Ryan Nguyen disrupts this narrative of rescue by inserting his *ông nội*'s (paternal grandfather) story into the archive. A former Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldier, his grandfather's war duty of cannon firing has permanently damaged his hearing. Nguyen likened his grandfather's injury to "the birth defects, disabilities, and other toxic effects caused by Agent Orange" suffered by millions of other Vietnamese. His photo art superimposes the images of the cannon, the spraying of Agent Orange, and the Republic of Vietnam's flag onto his grandfather's photo. Nguyen's entry thus refutes the US narrative of rescue, emphasizing instead the ongoing costs of the war, both physical and psychological, borne by Vietnamese in the diaspora.

In another indictment of the US wars in Southeast Asia, Cambodian American performing artist and scholar Tiffany Lytle performed the song *Justice* that she composed in reaction to the 2018 ruling by a UN-backed tribunal that officially categorized the mass killings in Cambodia a genocide, forty years after the fact. With

Figure 2. *Militarized Silence.*

the refrain—"Why doesn't this feel like justice?"—Lytle scrutinizes the US's military culpability in Cambodia and its failure "to categorize Cambodia as a genocide." Together, these entries mark Southeast Asian refugee ungratefulness as they make visible the past, present, and future of US militarism in Southeast Asia that has been masked by the US resettlement of refugees from that region.

Refugee Archives entries also underscore the persistence of dissettlement for racialized refugees, even after resettlement. Following the 9/11 attacks, refugees from Arab and Muslim countries residing in the US became targets of government racial profiling practices and were subject to mass surveillance. In his video *I would Rather Be Free*, Abdul M. Saleem recounted his father's experience with racial profiling. A refugee from Afghanistan who came to the US in the late 1980s, Saleem's father was placed on a "no fly list" in 2010, thirty years after his resettlement, which caused him to miss his brother's wedding in Afghanistan. Refugee displacement also persists into the lives of the second generation. In her artwork, *Hamara Ghar (Our Home)* (Figure 3), Zahra Masood deftly illustrates the pervasive state surveillance of Muslim young people by inviting Muslim college students to superimpose their fingerprints—as fingerprinting is a national security measure targeting Arabs and Muslims—on a depiction of a mosque, which Masood understands to be not only a space of worship but also "our home, our *ghar*." These entries also exhibit refugee ungratefulness as they underline the ongoing surveillance experienced by refugees and their children, even long after resettlement.

In centering and prioritizing refugee experiences and epistemologies that mix personal reflection with historical recollection, the Refugee Archives entries constitute examples of refugee refusal that reframes the narrative and public discourse surrounding their community; its intent is "to stop a story that is always being told" (Simpson, 2014, p. 177). Collectively, the Refugee Archives entries counter the humanitarian narrative that turns refugees into dehistoricized objects of rescue; they name instead the cycle of violence and displacement that take place long before and after resettlement (Tang, 2015).

Figure 3. *Hamara Ghar (Our Home).*

11. Conclusion

The premise of our article is that refugee lives constitute a site of theory-making and knowledge co-production. To grasp refugee agency and epistemology, we offer a refugee critique of the law and humanitarianism by moving resolutely toward formations of refugee "livability" and "ungratefulness." Both of these key terms emerged from the CRSC website projects that elevate refugees' interests, desires, and needs as primary considerations. They offer a space for refugees and their children to speak in the language of aural, visual, and written poetry and to record and preserve the joys, sorrows, memories, and desires that border their lived realities. Our efforts are thus directed toward constructing the communities with whom we want to be in conversation. We advocate not only for the continual injection and flooding of refugee stories in all areas of cultural and political life but also for a careful mode of looking and listening that centers refugee agency, imagination, and knowledge. These refugee stories enable us to co-theorize the terms "livability" and "ungratefulness" with refugees as new analytics that engage in "epistemic disobedience" of the colonial and unilateral knowledge production about refugees.

We center these refugee stories in our critique of the law and humanitarianism to mark the ways that refugees (re)present themselves not in grateful deference to the host countries but always in relation to their own need for livability, safety, and dignity. While the power of the law is vast, it is not a totalizing force in refugees' lives. Attentive to the ways that refugees speak back to the law to insist on their humanity, we recognize the capacities and limits of state power and track refugees' capacity for extralegal agency and insistence on quality living and life (re)making. Along the same lines, we develop a refugee critique of humanitarianism that delineates how humanitarianism originates from and reproduces unequal power relationships and how refugees experience and subvert this power differential. In doing so, this article shows how refugees' lived experience, as a site of theory-making, allows for new forms of knowledge to be co-produced. We offer the concepts of refugee "livability" and "ungratefulness" as points of access to distinctly discernible refugee agency and epistemology that break with the historically appointed role of refugees as seen entirely through the lens of crisis, precarity, and gratitude.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en

Arendt, H. (1951). *The origins of totalitarianism*. Schocken.

Arendt, H. (1963). *On evolution*. Penguin.

Benhabib, S. (2018). *Exile, statelessness, and migration: Playing chess with history from Hannah Arendt to Isaiah Berlin*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691167251.003.0006

Blazan, S., & Hatton, N. (2016). Introduction: Refugees and/in literature. In S. Blazan & N. Hatton (Eds.), *Refugees and/in literature* (pp. 171–92). Konigshausen & Neumann.

Boatcă, M. (2021). Counter-mapping as method. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung, 46*(2), 244–263.

Chimni, B. S. (2009). The birth of a 'discipline': From refugee to forced migration studies. *Journal of Refugee studies*, *22*(1), 11–29.

Critical Refugee Studies Collective. (n.d.). *Story maps*. https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/story-maps

Espiritu, Y. L. (2014). *Body counts: The Vietnam war and militarized refuge(es)*. University of California Press.

Espiritu, Y. L., & Duong, L. (2018). Feminist refugee epistemology: Reading displacement in Vietnamese and Syrian art. *Signs*, *43*(3), 587–615.

Espiritu, Y. L., Duong, L, Vang, M., Bascara, V., Um, K., Sharif, L., & Hatton, N. (2022). *Departures: An introduction to critical refugee studies*. University of California Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. Pantheon Books.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical chinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.

Howard, K. (2017). The 'right to have rights' 65 years later: Justice beyond humanitarianism, politics beyond sovereignty. *Global Justice Theory Practice Rhetoric*, *10*(1). https://doi.org/10.21248/gjn.10.1.124

Hyndman, J. (2000). *Managing displacement: Refugees and the politics of humanitarianism*. University of Minnesota Press.

Hynes, T. (2003). *The issue of "trust" or "mistrust" in research with refugees: Choices, caveats and considerations for researchers* (Working Paper no. 98). UNHCR.

Joseph, C. E., & Balakrishnan, V. (2022). The Burmese refugee exodus of 1942: Making a case for the Refugee Archive and inclusive refugee policies. *Interventions*, *25*(6), 739–755. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801x.2022.2157306

Kaba, M. (2021). *We do this til we free us*. Haymarket Books.

Kelly, M. (2019). Mapping Syrian refugee border crossings: A feminist approach. *Cartographic Perspectives*, *93*, 34–64.

Lenette, C. (2019). *Arts-based methods in refugee research: Creating sanctuary*. Springer.

Marshall, D. J. (2013). 'All the beautiful things': Trauma, aesthetics and the politics of Palestinian childhood. *Space and Polity*, *17*(1), 53–73.

Meghji, A. (2023). Dwelling in epistemic disobedience: A reply to Go. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *74*(3), 294–301. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12987

Mignolo, W. D. (2008, February 2). Epistemic disobedience and the decolonial option: A manifesto. *Subaltern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Study of Media and Communication*. http://subalternstudies.com/?p=193

Monument Lab. (2023). *Beyond granite: Pulling together | Tiffany Chung, for the living*. https://monumentlab.com/projects/beyond-granite-pulling-together-or-tiffany-chung-for-the-living

Mountz, A. (2020). *The death of asylum: Hidden geographies of the enforcement archipelago*. University of Minnesota Press.

Nayeri, D. (2019). *The ungrateful refugee: What immigrants never tell you*. Catapult.

Nayeri, D. (2020, March 26). The ungrateful refugee: 'We have no debt to repay.' *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/04/dina-nayeri-ungrateful-refugee

National Immigrant Justice Center. (2021, August 3). *New report: How offshoring and externalization policies*

imperil the right to asylum [Press release]. https://immigrantjustice.org/press-releases/new-report-how-offshoring-and-externalization-policies-imperil-right-asylum

Nguyen, M. T. (2012). *The gift of freedom: War, debt, and other refugee passages.* Duke University Press.

O'Neill, M., Erel, U., Kaptani, E., & Reynolds, T. (2019). Borders, risk and belonging: Challenges for arts-based research in understanding the lives of women asylum seekers and migrants "at the borders of humanity." *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, *10*(1), 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.10.1.129_1

Patterson, S. (2024, April 12). *Conference keynote* [Paper presentation]. Interdisciplinary Humanities Graduate Annual Conference, Merced, CA, United States.

Phu, T., & Nguyen, V. (2019). Introduction: Something personal—Archives and methods for critical refugee studies. *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, *45*(3), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2019.0013

Rajaram, P. K. (2002). Humanitarianism and representations of the refugee. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *15*(3), 247–64.

Simpson, A. (2014). *Mohawk interruptus: Political life across the border of settler states*. Duke University Press.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.

Tang, E. (2015). *Unsettled: Cambodian refugees in the New York City hyperghetto*. Temple University Press.

Trouillot, M. R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.

Tuck, E., & McKenzie, M. (2014). *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315764849

Trust for the National Mall. (2023, August 10). *Beyond granite: Pulling together, artist preview: Tiffany Chung, trust for the national mall* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6FWgmVa0fI&t=100s

Vacchelli, E. (2018). *Embodied research in migration studies: Using creative and participatory approaches*. Policy Press.

Wyborn, C., Datta, A., Montana, J., Ryan, M., Leith, P., Chaffin, B., Miller, C., & Kerkhoff, L. V. (2019). Co-producing sustainability: Reordering the governance of science, policy, and practice. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, *44*, 319–346. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-101718-033103

Zamora, J. (2020). Revisiting the border during a pandemic. *The Bare Life Review*. https://www.barelifereview.org/revisitingtheborder

About the Authors

Yến Lê Espiritu is Distinguished Professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, San Diego. She has published extensively on Asian American communities, critical immigration and refugee studies, and US colonialism and wars in Asia. A founding member of the Critical Refugee Studies Collective, Espiritu is the lead author of *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (University of California Press, 2022), written collaboratively by CRSC members.

Ma Vang is an associate professor of critical race and ethnic studies at the University of California, Merced. Her book, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Duke University Press, 2021), examines how secrecy structures both official knowledge and refugee epistemologies about militarism and forced migration. She is co-author of *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* (UC Press, 2022) and co-editor of *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

ARTICLE

Forced Migrant Counter Cultural (Co)Productions

Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki [1] and Kalemba Kizito [2]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Essex, UK
[2] Communications Department, Boston College, USA

Correspondence: Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki (pk21584@essex.ac.uk)

Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of knowledge co-creation through the lens of documentary filmmaking with forced migrants in South Africa. Drawing on empirical research done in South Africa in 2022, both narration and the documentary film became potent modes of knowledge co-production, illuminating how cultural productions contribute to shaping our understanding of forced migration and its associated challenges. Emphasising the prevalence of anti-migrant rhetoric in South Africa and the prevalence of violence meted out against (forced) African migrant workers, this article identifies parallels with global discourses surrounding migrancy, where false nationalisms vilify migrants as scapegoats for societal issues. Central to the overarching claim of the article is the integration of border theory as an epistemological framework. We centralise the "bodily border" as the ultimate marker of differentiation where violence is enacted through the frameworks of "recognising strangers" and can be as severe as death. We unpack the makings and framework of the nationalist discourse in South Africa that targets (forced) African migrants—one rooted in citizenship without content, lacerated Pan-Africanism through colonial borders, and bodily borders, among others. We then examine the documentary film as a cultural text, a structured narrative that blends factual storytelling with artistic representation, highlighting its role in co-producing migrant knowledges. Therefore, the documentary film functions not only as a visual and narrative counterpoint to dominant anti-immigration discourse but also as a co-constructed medium for exploring and articulating the complex notions of home experienced by African (forced) migrants in South Africa. Consequently, the article argues that integrating border theory into the process of knowledge co-creation not only deepens our understanding of forced migration but also acts as a catalyst for reshaping societal narratives, fostering a more cohesive and integrated vision of Africa.

Keywords

borders; co-creation; documentary film; forced migrants; Pan-Africanism; South Africa

1. "Go Back to Your Home/Country": An Introduction

The numerous times the phrase "go back to your home/country" has been directed to us—nomadic subjects and forced migrant communities that this article foregrounds—is uncountable. Sometimes it takes the form of a question, upon learning about our supposed non-formal citizenship in the dynamics of being or living in "a foreign country." It has surfaced in conversations with acquaintances or even random strangers on a bus. We the authors are both nomadic subjects. We were both born in Uganda but currently live in the Northern hemisphere—Europe and the US. But we have also lived in other parts of the world. P. K. Mbasalaki (the first author) has studied, worked, and lived in South Africa, a country she considers one of her many homes, a contrast to the phrase we open with, as well as the overwhelming anti-migration discourse in South Africa. Brah (2005, p. 193) asserts this paradox powerfully: "It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home." "Go back to your home/country" was also a familiar phrase to the forced African migrant group in South Africa who took part in a short documentary film made by P. K. Mbasalaki, and what this article focuses on. The film is titled *Kudingwa Kumusha: On Being Un/Homed*. Indeed, the prevailing anti-immigration sentiments, especially targeted towards African (forced) migrants, tend to have the narrative "they must go back home to their countries" or "go back home/to your country." A recent example of this happened with Chidimma Adetshina, a Miss South African contestant (in 2024) born in South Africa to foreign (non-South African) parents. The nation was gripped by a debate over her nationality, many weighing in on social media, including government officials such as the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs: "On behalf of South Africans, we don't recognise her and that name! She better start packing and go home," raged one commenter on X (Kupemba, 2024). Because of this, Chidimma eventually withdrew from the competition citing feeling unsafe. This brief discussion is meant to highlight how the statement "go back to your home/country" plays out not only in everyday encounters but also within the national anti-migration discourse in South Africa.

"Go back to your home/country" conjures up the idea of home as "fixed" in all its various aspects such as meaning, feeling, expression, kinship, and so on, and therefore unchanging and only tied perhaps to one's country of "origin." There are indeed certain aspects of home that could be considered "fixed" in a way, such as in the African context or Uganda in particular, an "ancestral" home, with a burial site for the extended family or clan. In our mother tongue, it is referred to as *ekiigya*. And within these frameworks, both authors usually state that their ancestral home is Uganda but have many places they call home. This was also the case for some of the forced migrants that participated in the documentary film.

Home, both as a sociological notion, takes on different forms in terms of place(s), space(s), feeling(s), practices, or an active state of being in the world: "Home is variously described as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying. Many authors also consider notions of being-at-home, creating or making home and the ideal home" (Mallett, 2004, p. 65). In other words, home can symbolise or take on various meanings, including nationhood. It is important to note that home is a co-created space through relationality to both humans and non-human animals as well as things. Additionally, there are attributes that render "home" as a source of safety or terror, and sometimes a place of both (Farahani, 2015), or as a space that can be inclusive or exclusionary, or one that requires forms of negotiation where inclusions and exclusions exist. For migrant communities, this negotiation of inclusions and exclusions is constant in both contexts of "origin" and host countries entangled within the narrative of "leaving home" and "being at home" or perhaps an in-between space—limbo. This in-between space also takes on various forms—in terms of failure to get asylum

or legal citizenship, as well as various forms of alienation and non-belonging. Some of these amalgamate from legal processes and structural dimensions that are echoed in "go back home/to your country." The rise in anti-immigration rhetoric can be considered, especially on a political level, a "happy meal" if you like for nationalist discourse or false nationalism (as this article will show, rooted within modernity and colonial borders that exclude historical tribal relations and connections across the African continent) that is ever endlessly giving and eaten up. This means that the increase in anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly in the political sphere, serves as a convenient and continuously gratifying tool for nationalist discourse or pseudo-nationalism (in this case, nationalist exclusion targeted towards African migrants but not white migrants as we point out later on), which is perpetually consumed and reinforced.

These nationalist discourses are vast and thriving in all corners and parts of the world, South Africa and the US alike. These nationalist discourses have been going on for a while in South Africa but seem to have intensified in the last few years. In fact, South Africa saw a reconfiguration of the Trumpist "America First" narrative in the form of the "South African's First" rhetoric the nationalist Operation Dudula bases its vigilante operation on. Operation Dudula was established in 2021 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dudula is an isiZulu word that loosely translates into "force out" or "knock down"—expressing the common purpose of this organisation—to force out African migrants in South Africa. Operation Dudula is a splinter group from a faction in the Put South Africans First Movement. The Put South Africans First Movement draws its sentiments from Trump's "Americans First" rhetoric, which Trump launched with his inaugural presidential speech (SAHO, n.d.). This operation mostly targets African (forced) migrants in South Africa who are scapegoated as taking jobs and bringing crime/drugs to South Africa. A recent BBC documentary looked into this operation and followed their work, which was nationally organised and whose activities are executed in a very methodical manner (BBC News, 2023). Even though the organisation's work is deemed illegitimate—basically, the organisation has no legal mandate to carry out such work—they claim they work within the confines of the law when they raid companies, individuals, or organisations in search of undocumented workers or migrants. The fact that the organisation and operation are nationally organised brings to the fore several unanswered questions: How can a non-legitimate organisation openly operate nationally and "get away with it" in the eyes of the law? Who funds their operations? Just like in the US and elsewhere in the world, this is also the case for South Africa where right-wing organisations have become crusaders around vilifying migration and migrant communities. Forced African migrants bear the brunt of these rhetorics and violence.

With heightened nationalism, borders are at the center of these discourses, sentiments, rhetoric, and violent exclusions, all based on a fixed idea of home as a country—one single country—reserved for those within the confines of white privilege. For instance, in South Africa, these pseudo-nationalist exclusionary sentiments and violence are not targeted towards Dutch, British (both former colonisers), or German migrants but rather African migrants—such as the forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo under discussion in this article. African migrants in South Africa especially bear the brunt of this nationalist violence, with death being the price paid by some, particularly Zimbabweans. In a recent gruesome incident, under Operation Dudula in early April 2022, a Zimbabwean man was burned to death after he failed to provide his passport during a night raid of Operation Dudula in Diepskloof, Alexander township in Johannesburg (Gilili, 2022). A passport, a signifier of borders or border control, is entangled with the politics of the nation-state, determining who belongs and who doesn't. His body paid the ultimate price, through "bodily border" tactics. Meanwhile, in the US, nationalist sentiments are not targeted toward European migrants but rather South Americans and other

migrants of color. White privilege conjures up a borderless existence and experience, while people of color are subjected to bodily border tactics as (forced) migrants.

Against this backdrop, what unfolds when the voices of forced African migrants are centered in a documentary film as part of a collaborative process on migrant knowledge co-creation with researchers who, as global nomads and border-crossing subjects themselves, share the experience of fluid identities and shifting boundaries? The process of co-production took place in August of 2022 with a group of forced African migrants in Cape Town, mostly from Zimbabwe. Mobilised through the P. K. Mbasalaki's networks, many of whom she knew through her previous work, the documentary film engaged with a "talking heads" format through direct interviews conducted by Mbasalaki. Prompted by the national discourse of "go back home to your own country," the notion of home was centralised and interrogated in its various dimensions and contradictions, including community, kinship, and belonging. By collaborating with forced African migrants in the knowledge-generation process, the documentary ensures that their voices, perspectives, and lived experiences are authentically represented, and that scholarship about migrants is deeply informed by their firsthand accounts and insights. This participatory approach empowers the interviewees, giving them agency in narrating their own stories rather than being passive subjects of an external narrative. This direct representation challenges stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated by xenophobic discourses, providing a platform for migrants to assert their identities and experiences. Paulo Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue in creating a democratic and just society, asserting, "dialogue cannot exist without humility" (Freire, 2005, p. 68). This humility is essential in co-produced documentaries, where the filmmakers listen to and amplify the voices of the marginalized.

In this article, we aim to bring co-production as a form of co-creation with a group of forced African migrants in South Africa. Prompted by what was going on around Operation Dudula, which had a lot of media attention—both public media, including national media, as well as social media and other avenues—we wanted to co-create a counter-narrative that foregrounds the lives, fears, anxieties, and hopes of forced African migrants. The concept of co-creation was important to us as engaged scholars who work within the frameworks of anti-colonial and Afro-feminist ethics, centring "researching with" rather than on, for, or about. In what follows, we unpack the makings and framework of the nationalist discourse in South Africa that targets African migrants. This discourse is rooted in citizenship without content, lacerated Pan-Africanism through colonial and bodily borders, among other elements. We then reflect on the co-production of the documentary film, not only as a counter-narrative to the overwhelming anti-immigration discourse, but also as co-meaning making about the concept of home.

2. "Encountering Strangers": Bodies and Borders

Central to negotiating the idea of home, the participants' insights into borders and their imposed subjectivities provided crucial examples of how borders complicate the notion of home. By framing their lived experiences through the lens of borders, the participants showed how home is constantly under threat, not just from the exclusionary policies of the state but also from societal attitudes that view them as outsiders. Borders, according to them, were not merely geographical markers but were tied to the social, political, and psychological barriers that migrants have to navigate every day. This understanding of borders—both physical and symbolic—was woven into the documentary, deepening its exploration of how forced migrants experience displacement, exclusion, and the persistent struggle for belonging.

Nationalism and anti-migration discourses are not a new phenomenon in South Africa. These sentiments are part of the daily reality for many migrants, though they become more violent during each public eruption. These eruptions, often targeting African migrants, resemble war, with violence, arson, and death becoming the language through which they are expressed. In his work on borders, K. Kizito (the second author) offers the thesis that borders are documents of violence, reminding us that borders are tangible reminders of colonial legacies and the violent histories that shaped them (Kizito, 2019, 2020, Kizito & Carter, 2022). He argues that borders are the physical and symbolic markers that perpetuate hierarchies of belonging and non-belonging, continuously influencing how individuals and groups are classified, controlled, and marginalized. Kizito's framework is particularly useful in understanding the roots of anti-migrant violence in South Africa. His work emphasizes how national borders inherited from colonialism not only separated people geographically but also reinforced ideological and racial divisions that continue to manifest in contemporary politics. Accordingly, borders transcend geographic boundaries. They permeate daily life through internal mechanisms of control, such as police checks, mobility restrictions, and societal perceptions. Kizito argues that beyond geopolitical borders, border enforcement extends inward to exert violence against migrants, both by state apparatuses and local communities. By framing borders as documents of violence, Kizito reveals that anti-migrant violence in South Africa is not an isolated phenomenon but a continuation of deep structural and historical forces. His work calls for addressing colonial legacies and rethinking borders to foster an inclusive African identity that dismantles rather than reinforces the divisions driving xenophobic violence.

Dating as far back as 1994, many (forced) migrants in South Africa ended up being displaced in these violent processes, seeking refuge in churches or common rescue grounds (SAHO, n.d.). Attackers have frequently charged that foreigners are stealing the fruits of democratisation with putative underlying causes such as class and the postcolonial condition (Klotz, 2016). Prior to democratisation, black South Africans were not only non-citizens but also migrants in their movement from Bantustans into cities for work and had to carry formal documentation—a dompass. Some scholars argue that removal of race as the core feature of citizenship (where during apartheid, race and by extension whiteness served as the primary and only form of citizenship), the post-apartheid era opened the complex question of "who are the people" that democracy should now serve, and without "black" as the primary reference for innumerable demands, "South Africans" became an identity with no obvious content (Chipkin, 2007). The deficiencies of South African citizenship are evident in the inability to access fundamental resources, such as adequate housing and sanitation, particularly for Black South Africans. This is compounded by high levels of unemployment and other systemic failures. These issues are part of the broader economic legacy of apartheid and colonialism, positioning South Africa as one of the most unequal societies globally. The disparity is starkly reflected in the post-apartheid income and wealth gap. For example, the 2020 Oxfam South Africa report indicates that the wealthiest 20% of South Africans control nearly 70% of the nation's resources. Furthermore, the report highlights that the economy remains dominated by a few large corporations, many of which originated during the colonial and apartheid eras and continue to benefit from government support and historical advantages. In other words, the biggest share of income in South Africa is still allotted to the white minority. The fruits of democratisation are minimal and have reached only a small portion of black South Africans, hence fending off African migrants, who are perceived to be encroaching on these modest resources available to black South Africans.

The specific targeting of African (forced) migrants often gets the rest of the African continent upset with emotive responses. For instance, in 2019, when the Nigerian government and citizens responded to

xenophobia in South Africa by protesting and calling for Nigerians to boycott South African products (supermarkets) and services (such as the MTN mobile network) in Nigeria ("Letter from Africa," 2019). Burna Boy, one of the most visible and internationally recognised African singers, cancelled a concert in South Africa in protest of the country's xenophobia. Burna Boy's song *Another Story* highlights the disillusionment with the state of Africa and the plight of African migrants. His lyrics underscore the irony and tragedy of African migrants: Despite the rich natural resources and potential of the continent, many Africans feel compelled to leave their homes to find basic dignity and survival elsewhere. The song serves as a reminder of the human cost of this migration, as people face dangerous conditions, exploitation, and often hostility in foreign lands. Other responses alluded to the fact that the African continent supported South Africa during apartheid in various ways, including housing or hosting special African National Congress (ANC) programs. For instance, at one point the ANC headquarters were housed in Lusaka, Zambia, during the height of apartheid. Yet with post-apartheid amnesia, these once-strong solidarity ties are forgotten, decimated. Additionally, borders, as a colonial invention, decimated former tribal or ethnic lineages that existed on the African continent. Traces of these remain in iterations such as Bantu languages across the continent. One of the primary obstacles is the persistent adherence to national borders that were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers. These borders have not only divided African nations but also entrenched a sense of nationalism that often supersedes the broader Pan-African identity. Consequently, the notion of a unified Africa remains an elusive dream, complicated further by internal conflicts, economic disparities, and political instability. The legacies of Bantu education and censorship have left many South Africans with limited knowledge of regional pan-African history (Klotz, 2016).

Indeed, xenophobic violence in South Africa highlights a fundamental contradiction in the notion of Pan-Africanism: the tension between national sovereignty and continental unity. While Pan-Africanism advocates for the erasure of artificial colonial borders and the unification of African peoples, the reality is that nation-states remain the primary units of political organisation and identity. National interests often take precedence over continental solidarity, leading to conflicts and divisions that undermine the Pan-African project. Furthermore, the persistence of xenophobia indicates that cultural and ethnic divisions within Africa are not merely relics of colonialism but also products of contemporary socio-economic and political conditions. These divisions challenge the assumption that a shared African identity can easily transcend national and ethnic boundaries. Pan-Africanism as an aspirational ideal remains a powerful vision for the future of Africa, promising unity, solidarity, and collective progress (Ubuntu). However, the reality on the ground, as evidenced by South Africa's xenophobia against African migrants, reveals significant obstacles to achieving this vision. Constrained by the legacy of colonial borders, coupled with contemporary socio-economic and political challenges, the pursuit of a united Africa is a far cry.

A critical interrogation of the relationship between borders and xenophobia in South Africa yields knowledge of a standing contradiction between the ideals of Pan-Africanist thought and the entrenched geopolitical colonial identities that characterise the identity of the nation-state. Originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries among the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean who sought to combat colonialism, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation, Pan-Africanism is a political and cultural movement that advocates for the solidarity of African peoples worldwide. The movement's leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Marcus Garvey played pivotal roles in articulating the ideals of Pan-Africanism that emphasised themes of shared heritage, collective identity, and political unity, all of which contradicted the postcolonial African nation-state. Moreover, Klotz also points to the political

manoeuvring that took place at the turn of the last century, in relation to the formation of South Africa as a nation-state, he states that:

> History of evolving borders reveals that the current notion of foreign Africans in South Africa has deep roots in racist citizenship policies, defined by territorial lines which resulted primarily from a complex array of white elites and their political manoeuvres. Starkly stated, Botswana (1966), Lesotho (1966), and Swaziland (1968) as well as Zimbabwe (1923/1980) owe their independence largely to British fears of Afrikaner nationalism. Once these colonies gained formal statehood, their rulers crafted nationalist discourses that reified those borders even while transforming other aspects of the postcolonial state." (Klotz, 2016, pp. 192–193)

In other words, had Britain not feared Afrikaner nationalism and the instigation of apartheid, those three countries—Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe—could have been part of South Africa. Afrikaner policies drove the process of bordering, which is currently being reified in anti-migration rhetoric, politics, and policies in South Africa. Furthermore, the current anti-migration rhetoric could also be a nationalist articulation that draws from continuities in history, similar to that deployed by the National Party, which was responsible for instigating apartheid in South Africa. In other words, a continuity of an Afrikaner nationalist discourse that also excluded black South Africans and other persons of colour. And therefore offering another racialized dimension in the historical spillages or continuities of nationalism in South Africa.

If we take a moment to engage with border scholarship, this offers insight into gatekeepers that delineate the inside from the outside, who belongs and who doesn't, who is a member of the in-group and who is not. Borders are not merely lines on a map but are imbued with powerful symbolic meanings that influence social attitudes and behaviours. Sundstrom and Kim (2014) shed light on "civic ostracism" as a mechanism for maintaining boundaries between normative whiteness and the Other, positioning individuals as insiders legally but outsiders socially. This is something we observe in South Africa, where Africans and migrants of colour are bearing the brunt of nationalisms and xenophobia unlike white migrants from Europe or the US, who are excluded from this narrative. The Othering here is clearly towards migrants of colour. Indeed, Silva (2015) underscores the xenophobic atmosphere fostered by civic ostracism, noting its psychological, political, and existential ramifications, reinforcing the notion of foreigners or immigrants as outsiders within a polity. In this case, the new democracy in South Africa whose citizenship black South African are clinging to as alluded to earlier. In the realm of international relations, scholars such as Balibar and Williams (2002, 2010), Brunet-Jailly (2011), and Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2009) grapple with border-related issues like territorialization, sovereignty, and citizenship. Concurrently, scholars like Ngai (2014) and López-Sala (2015) explore borders through the lens of jurisprudence, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of border dynamics. DeChaine (2015) portrays the border as a multifaceted entity, encompassing symbolic, material, affective, and performative dimensions, underscoring its omnipresent influence. Building on this, Ono (2012) emphasises the dual nature of the border, both literal and figural, elucidating how it extends beyond geographical boundaries to impact bodies and societal constructs. Ono's concept of the "bodily border" underscores how bodies themselves become sites of border enforcement and negotiation. In this particular case with South Africa, it is African bodies or persons of colour who are (forced) migrants.

By virtue of being black or African whether migrant or not connotes relationality of sorts—continentally through kinship (historical Bantu lineages) or otherwise. The notion of "bodily border" invokes Ahmed's

(2000) notion of the "encountering stranger." She writes that a stranger is not simply the one whom we have not yet encountered, but one we have already encountered, or already faced. The African (forced) migrant stranger in this case is one who easily "blends in." For instance, P. K. Mbasalaki is constantly told that she could easily pass as South African by "just looks" or physical features. How then is the migrant stranger recognised in the South African case? The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: We recognise somebody as a stranger rather than simply failing to recognise them (Ahmed, 2000). Being all African, the "recognising stranger" (in the South African case) that distinguishes non-South African blacks as outsiders is deployed or manifests through several "bodily" techniques—such as accents. For instance, the Zimbabwean English accent is quite distinct (really just like any other country-based English accent that is quite distinct; e.g., Congo is distinct from Uganda, which is distinct from Nigeria). Another "bodily border" technique deployed is through names: African names north of South Africa are quite distinguishable from South African names; for instance, one can easily tell Zimbabwean English names. Language is also a big maker of differentiation, through the inability to speak any of the main South African languages other than English. Moreover, for those (forced) migrants who manage to learn Zulu or other South African languages, there are markers of differentiation, e.g., certain isiZulu words are very difficult to pronounce for non-native speakers, such as the word "elbow." These "bodily border" markers were also featured in our conversations during the documentary filmmaking. Techniques deployed engaged with the "bodily border" by manoeuvring through various aspects of the body to recognise the African (forced) migrant Other. Such techniques involve ways of reading the bodies of "others" South Africans come to face as mis/recognising the stranger within. Along similar lines, Ahmed further argues that "Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place. Such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of 'this place,' as where 'we' dwell" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 22).

Jones (2016) expands the discourse on borders to include cultural barriers based on factors such as sexual preferences, religion, and nationality, conceptualising the notion of a "social relations border." This multifaceted approach to understanding borders underscores their complex and pervasive nature, extending beyond geographical boundaries to encompass legal, social, and cultural dimensions. Considering these exclusionary regimes, as well as some of the techniques deployed, as engaged scholars we wanted to co-create counter-narratives with forced migrants, mostly from Zimbabwe, to counter the prevailing discourses, which we explore in the next section.

3. Counter Co-Productions: Narratives of Home/Homing and Pan-Africanism

P. K. Mbasalaki was based in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic and witnessed the rise of Operation Dudula, with heightened animosity towards Zimbabwean and Nigerian (forced) migrants. She continued following their development when she moved to the UK, in addition to maintaining communication with Zimbabwean friends who are forced migrants in South Africa and were anxious about being targeted. Some were indeed victims of malicious acts. For instance, one of her friends was "outed" in an NGO she worked with, where a mass email was sent to the whole organisation from a bogus email address stating her documentation status as well as the salary she earned. Constant news streaming of violent attacks spurred off the idea of a documentary film. A co-creation approach was eminent within the framework of engaged scholarship.

Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) to understand a complex problem or phenomenon (Van de Ven, 2018). It has grown over the years in the quest for cutting through the boundaries that separate the university from society. Being conscious of this divide, in a post-colony like South Africa, engaged scholarship has taken various forms. For example, student protests in 2015 called for the decolonisation of the university and demanded a renewed awakening. This has formed the basis of most of the research we partake in. Approached as a form of praxis, engaged scholarship is accordingly understood here as being driven not simply by a desire to interpret and understand the world, but also to change it (Cowley, 2013). The kind of research that calls for meaningful collaborations that aim to destabilise and trouble hegemonies embedded within the academy and non-academic binaries. Nagar and Ali (2003, p. 360) refer to this kind of engaged research as "praxes that focus explicitly and deliberately on":

> (a) conceptualising and implementing collaborative efforts that insist on crossing multiple and difficult borders; (b) the sites, strategies and skills deployed to produce such collaborations; and (c) the specific processes through which such collaborations can find their form, content and meaning.

This becomes even more important in reference to forced migrant communities who face multiple alienations and exclusions as well as various forms of violence. Collaboration here took on the shape of co-creating/co-producing a documentary film, and it meant paying a great deal of attention to issues of safety, compensation of time, and nourishment, as well as offering access to support in relation to trauma. It was a kind of transformative and meaningful collaboration.

In post-apartheid South Africa, transformation has become an overused concept or term, often without much substance. It features on many agendas, programs, and interventions in South Africa as an empty term of sorts in many instances. Very few interventions take on its radical meaning, use, and interpretation. Drawing on the framework of critical pedagogy, co-producing a film with forced migrants aligns with the principles of transformational praxis as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005). This framework situates the documentary not just as a medium of representation but as an active process of empowerment and social change. By engaging with the subjects as co-creators, the documentary disrupts traditional power dynamics in media production, fostering a more democratic and equitable form of storytelling. Moreover, this approach resonates with the ethical imperative to do justice to the complexities and nuances of migrants' experiences. It acknowledges their expertise and authority over their own narratives, challenging their often reductive and dehumanizing representations in mainstream media. A jointly produced documentary is a form of transformational praxis. Transformational praxis, in this context, refers to the process of advocating social change through critical reflection and action. A co-produced documentary film, created collaboratively between the producer and forced migrants, holds significant potential as a form of transformational praxis because of its potential to effectively counter and challenge xenophobic discourses, policies, and practices in several ways, such as amplifying forced migrants' voices, exposing structural injustices and fostering dialogue and solidarity through co-intentional education. The production process itself served as a site of "co-intentional education" (Freire, 2005, p. 49), fostering dialogue and solidarity between African migrants and the filmmaker. This collaborative effort builds bridges of understanding and cooperation, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

In this regard, the transformative nature of this engaged research lies within the "encounter itself that creates an immediate opportunity to acknowledge and in turn celebrate the work of many research participants, through shared recognition of their commitment to making a difference, or simply their daily struggle to overcome the micro, meso and macro level injustices of our unsustainable systems and institutions" (Franklin, 2021, p. 8)—this is especially central to (forced) African migrants in South Africa who are alienated from belonging and whose public image is painted as "invaders," "criminals," and non-citizens. So, the potential transformative nature of this experience lies also within the boundaries of co-creation, not only from a research point of view but from a political or activist point of view as well, where the documentary film works as an aesthetic grammar for creative activism (Mbasalaki & Matchett, 2020). This is familiar territory, in many ways, to engaged scholars; a kind of activism that is also historically associated with South African universities and research.

Co-creation in this case took on "researching with" and collaborative storytelling, among other methods. The methods and approaches are understood here as co-creative when they stimulate alternative understandings of why and how things are and how they could be (Franklin, 2021)—in this case, bringing to the fore the daily lived experience of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo in South Africa, in the height of dominant narratives such as that of Operation Dudula. Franklin (2021) further adds that "stimulation of alternative understandings needs to be a shared one, experienced (albeit in different ways and to different extents) by multiple persons within a research process, including both the 'researchers' and the 'researched' alike" (p. 2). For us, this alternative stimulation came through the ability of film to capture authentic voices and lived experiences, a powerful tool for democracy in public engagement that can be used to bring to light existing inequities caused by xenophobia, as well as the effects of movements like Operation Dudula have on the lives of African forced migrants in South Africa. This then becomes a case of joint storytelling between the researcher and forced migrants.

Initially, with co-creation in mind, we wanted to create a dialogue between the film *Man on Ground* (Omotoso, 2011), chosen by K. Kizito, and the documentary film *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed* made by P. K. Mbasalaki, but our efforts to find the former were futile. The disappearance of this film is particularly perplexing given the film's official sanctioning and injection of financial support from the South African Government. Our failure to access the film raises significant academic concerns. Firstly, it highlights the precarious nature of cultural products as tools for knowledge creation. Films, as dynamic and impactful media, offer invaluable insights into societal issues like xenophobia, providing a narrative and visual engagement not always possible with written texts. The difficulty in obtaining this film underscores a broader issue within academic research: the reliance on and vulnerability of ephemeral cultural products. Moreover, the film's disappearance prompts a re-evaluation of the mechanisms for preserving and distributing cultural content. It raises questions about the stewardship of media resources, particularly those with educational and societal importance. The inability to access *Man on Ground* also suggests a potential gap in the global academic community's engagement with African cinematic works, potentially limiting the scope and diversity of scholarly discourse on African issues. Ultimately, this bizarre scenario serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for robust archiving and dissemination practices to ensure that significant cultural works remain accessible for future research and education. The academic implications are profound, urging scholars and institutions to advocate for better preservation and distribution systems. Only through such efforts can the co-creation of knowledge continue to benefit from the rich and diverse array of cultural commentaries available worldwide.

Documentary film as a methodology draws on practice-based research in the visual arts through a creative documentary, where creativity becomes the vocabulary or medium through which research is engaged. Indeed, documentary films, through their multi-sensory nature, have been found to be more impactful in portraying reality as well as a means for social persuasion (Nichols, 2010). In recent years, documentary films are increasingly being used in academia for disseminating knowledge. An evolving belief is that documentaries can be valuable in any field of research to illuminate issues of social justice and existing inequities in public education, as well as democratise research (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). The innate nature of documentaries allows the capture of reality and triggers important conversations in society, thus enabling researchers to contribute to knowledge generation in non-traditional forms by including participants' authentic voices in the knowledge generation process. This means that the emphasis on the researcher's interpretation or meaning-making shifts in documentary filmmaking towards that of the viewer's interpretation and the impact of the sensory experience on the viewer (Petrarcha & Hughes, 2014). The central purpose of a documentary film like *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed* is to work as an aesthetic grammar or agitator for change (Mbasalaki & Matchett, 2020) around anti-immigration sentiments, discrimination, and violence, centring the lived experiences of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo. Mbasalaki and Matchett (2020) argue that creative activism does not necessarily evoke the kind of mass rally activism that registers when one thinks of protest action globally but rather incites conversations, discussions, dialogues, debates that stimulate people to consider their role in the situation and how they can actuate it from a point of personal observation to personal action. Indeed, documentary films provide the opportunity for viewers to engage in their own meaning-making—co-meaning-making. The ability of film to capture authentic voices and lived experiences is a powerful tool in a democracy and for public engagement. It can be used to bring to light existing inequalities and, in the case of *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed*, the experiences of inclusion/exclusion of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo as a counter-narrative to prevailing discourses.

This documentary's storytelling serves as a scholarly intervention into what it means to be a migrant, particularly in relation to the concepts of home and borders. The co-production process itself was a form of collaborative knowledge-making, where the forced migrants, alongside the producer (P. K. Mbasalaki, first author), filmmaker, and crew (sound and lighting), shaped both the filming space and narrative. Filming in Mbasalaki's living space rather than a studio transformed the environment into a co-produced and co-created set, carefully negotiated and choreographed to reflect the intimate and complex nature of the stories being told. Through this process, the participants were not passive subjects but active co-creators, deeply influencing the film's exploration of what home means to them—whether it's a place of comfort, estrangement, or contradiction. Their stories revealed the tensions of feeling at home while simultaneously being surveilled, unwanted, or un-homed, and they illuminated the emotional and physical tolls of anti-immigration violence, such as Operation Dudula. The documentary also delved into the importance of community and kinship for migrants navigating hostile environments. The editing phase continued this collaborative co-production spirit, with drafts shared between the filmmaker, the producer, and a small group of forced migrant participants who provided input and suggestions on the rough cuts. Their involvement extended to the very title of the documentary, *Kuzdingwa Kumusha: On Being Un/Homed*, which they themselves devised. This process illustrates how the documentary not only captures but also co-produces new understandings of home, borders, and migrant identity, making it a profound scholarly contribution to migration studies.

As alluded to earlier, the story told in the film centers on various iterations of home, belonging, community, and kinship. However, these themes are complicated by the presence of borders—both physical and symbolic—as an integral variable in shaping migrant experiences. One of the dominant expressions repeatedly voiced by the participants was: "We are all Africans here." This reflects a sense of bewilderment at the nationalized and ethnicized forms of Othering that African (forced) migrants encounter. This phrase, on the surface, suggests a borderless relationality, perhaps invoking a Pan-African ideal of unity across the continent. Yet, it also brings into sharp focus the harsh reality of how borders function—not just as geopolitical boundaries but as markers of exclusion, surveillance, and control. In this context, borders become both literal and figurative spaces of tension, simultaneously defining and undermining the concept of home for migrants. The phrase "we are all Africans here" takes on a deeper meaning when juxtaposed with the lived experiences of those who, despite a shared continental identity, are alienated through national borders and subjected to border techniques that surveil, restrict, and fragment their lives. The film thus grapples with the contradictions of Pan-African ideals against the backdrop of modern-day border regimes, questioning whether home can truly exist in a space where borders continually dictate who belongs and who is excluded. In doing so, the documentary becomes not only a narrative about home and belonging but also a critical analysis of the borders—both real and imagined—that force migrants to navigate complex and often contradictory identities.

The concept of a shared African identity that transcends national boundaries remains an aspirational ideal. Borders, both physical and symbolic, present persistent challenges that undermine this ideal, revealing that despite its noble aspirations, Pan-Africanism has struggled to translate its ideological principles into tangible political and social realities in South Africa. While Pan-Africanism featured prominently on South Africa's second post-apartheid president Thabo Mbeki's agenda, particularly through his promotion of the "African Renaissance," its impact has been limited. Mbeki defined the African Renaissance as a call for Africans to define who they are, what they stand for, their visions and hopes, how they act, what programs they adopt, and how they relate to one another, encouraging South Africans to embrace an African identity (Landsberg, 2019). This vision stands in contrast to the restrictive function of borders, which continue to fragment African unity. Borders, as legacies of colonialism, serve as mechanisms of exclusion that force migrants into positions of marginalization, surveillance, and alienation. The phrase "we are all Africans here" offers a powerful counterpoint, invoking a sense of collective identity that transcends these artificial divisions, and reflecting the possibility of African reunification. Yet, the enduring presence of these borders complicates such efforts, as they not only delineate physical spaces but also perpetuate socio-political boundaries that deny migrants a sense of belonging and unity. To move closer to the Pan-African ideal, it is essential to address the legacy of these colonial borders that continue to divide the continent. These boundaries, often arbitrary and fictitious, impede the full realization of a connected and transcendent African identity by restricting the movement and rights of African migrants, thereby perpetuating a fragmented vision of what it means to belong on the continent.

The second phrase that emerged during the filming conversations was: "But this is my home now, where should I go?" Responding to the phrase "go back home," the question challenges the assumption that home is a fixed, singular location, emphasizing instead, the fluid and constructed nature of home as a place where they have built a life, regardless of external pressures to return to a presumed origin. Indeed, many of the forced migrants who participated in the documentary film had been living in South Africa for several years, and various aspects of South Africa had become home or contributed to the feeling of home, such as being able to provide for

family/children financially—this was a great marker, unlike the economic difficulties in Zimbabwe. Being able to send remittances to Zimbabwe and providing for those "back home" brought with it an element of home in South Africa from a financial sense.

Queer and trans forced migrants being able to find refuge in a country that is legally friendly to queer bodies foregrounded another aspect of home. For instance, one participant speaks honestly and candidly about how South Africa offered an opportunity for him to come home into his male body as a transman who transitioned while in South Africa, something that would never have been possible in Zimbabwe. All these point to a co-meaning making of notions of home in South Africa. Yet, even though there were strong emotions and connections of various versions of home in South Africa, there was also an overwhelming feeling of being unwanted there, and therefore they longed for a "home" back in Zimbabwe or Congo where they belonged. Yet again, these contradicting or paradoxical emotions relating to home are in line with Brah's (2005, p. 193) arguments when she posits that "it is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home." Indeed, there was an overwhelming expression of the longing for home—Zimbabwe or Congo, especially in relation to anxieties related to the proximity of violence—being violated or having experienced violence in South Africa. The freedom to move without being a target for violence or death brought about nostalgic feelings of missing home.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through this co-production and co-creative research, in terms of knowledge production, it is clear that home is a complex feeling or space that is multi-dimensional and not tied to only one fixed place, space, or country as nationalistic discourses will have one believe. Home is indeed not fixed but malleable and ever-changing regardless of the "fixity" of certain objects such as houses. It is also clear that a combination of factors—for instance, citizenship without content for South Africans, an inherited form of nationalism that is rooted in white supremacy from the apartheid government (National Party), as well as borders rooted in colonialism that have lacerated Pan-Africanism and drive a faux ideal of nationalism targeted towards fellow Africans through various modes of surveillance. The actual enactment of violence is deployed through "bodily border" techniques of the "encountering stranger" and is as severe as death. Perhaps this is an inherited version of bodily border techniques that black South Africans themselves have experienced before, during the apartheid regime built on white supremacy.

This article therefore underscores the vital role of border theory and documentary filmmaking in the co-production of knowledge on forced migration. By integrating border theory, the research illuminates how borders, both physical and symbolic, are deployed as tools of exclusion, particularly against African migrants in South Africa. The concept of the "bodily border" reveals how these borders are inscribed on the bodies of migrants, differentiating them as the Other and subjecting them to violence and exclusion. Documentary filmmaking, as a method of co-production, offers a powerful medium for capturing and conveying the complex lived experiences of forced migrants. This participatory approach not only amplifies the voices of those most affected but also challenges traditional power dynamics in knowledge production. The documentary film serves as an aesthetic grammar that destabilizes the singular notion of home or country, questioning the fixed, nationalist ideas that are often imposed on migrants. By presenting diverse narratives of home, belonging, and identity, the film disrupts the reductive and dehumanizing images of forced African migrants as mere outsiders.

Moreover, the co-production of the documentary film offered a "safe space" not only to air out anxieties for forced African migrants in South Africa but also a space of co-meaning making on various notions of home. In the hope that this, when watched by South Africans, works as an aesthetic grammar that destabilises the single notion of home/country or the (forced) African migrant Other. This documentary film was recently featured in the Khayelitsha Raw Film Festival on 4th August 2024. One of the film participants attended and had powerful things to say about her voice being heard. Especially in the wake of the recent xenophobic/Afrophobic attacks directed towards Miss South Africa contestant Chidimma Adetshina.

Lastly, this article offers a sobering critique of the legacy of colonialism on the ideal of Pan-Africanism. While Pan-Africanism aspires to unite African peoples across artificial colonial borders, the enduring impact of these borders continues to hinder the realization of this ideal. The nationalist and exclusionary discourses that target African migrants in South Africa are stark reminders of how colonial legacies still shape the geopolitical and social landscape. Through the co-production of knowledge and the critical engagement with border theory and film, this article calls for a reimagining of Pan-Africanism—one that transcends colonial borders and embraces a more inclusive and integrated vision of Africa.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge.

Balibar, E., & Williams, E. (2002). World borders, political borders. *PMLA*, *117*(1), 71–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/823250

Balibar, E., & Williams, E. (2010). At the borders of citizenship: a democracy in translation? *European Journal of Social Theory*, *13*(3), 315–322.

BBC News. (2023). *Inside South Africa's notorious anti-migrant group* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdky8rTAhak

Brah, A. (2005). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge.

Brunet-Jailly, E. (2011). Borders, borderlands and theory: An introduction. *Geopolitics*, *16*(1), 1–6.

Chipkin, I. (2007). *Do South Africans exist? Nationalism, democracy and the identity of 'the people.'* Wits University Press.

Cowley, N. (2013). What is praxis? Discussed in relation to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Sartre. *TKKA*, *4*. https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/31150666/discussed-in-relation-to-hegel-marx-nietzsche-and-sartre

DeChaine, D. R. (2015). Tracking the "shifting borders" of identity and otherness; productive complications and ethico-political commitments. In E. J. Hartelius (Eds.), *The rhetorics of US immigration: Identity, community, otherness* (pp. 275–288). Penn State University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271076553-014

Farahani, F. (2015). Home and homelessness and everything in between: A route from one uncomfortable zone to another one. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *22*(2), 241–247.

Franklin, A. (2021). Introduction: Sustainability science as co-creative research praxis. In A. Franklin (Ed.), *Co-creativity and engaged scholarship: Transformative methods in social sustainability research* (1 ed., pp. 1–42). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84248-2_1

Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Friend, J., & Caruthers, L. (2016). Documentary film: The next step in qualitative research to illuminate issues of social justice in urban education. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching & Educational Research*, *15*(6), 33–47.

Gilili, C. (2022). Xenophobic violence: Zimbabweans live in fear of vigilantes in Diepskloof. *News 24*. https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/xenophobic-violence-zimbabweans-live-in-fear-of-vigilantes-in-diepsloot-20220411

Jones, R. (2016). *Violent borders: Refugees and the right to move*. Verso Books.

Kizito, K. (2019). *Borders as documents of violence: Colonial cartography and the epidermal border* (Order No. 27547296). University of Memphis.

Kizito, K. (2020). And Europe said, let there be borders: Autoethnographic reflections on border crossings and violence. In M. Franz & K. Silva (Eds.), *Migration, identity, and belonging* (pp. 99–107). Routledge.

Kizito, K., & Carter, A. (2022). Denied access: COVID-19, the epidermal border and Black health disparities. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *19*(2), 127–133.

Klotz, A. (2016). Borders and the roots of xenophobia in South Africa. *South African Historical Journal*, *98*(2), 180–194.

Kupemba, D. N. (2024, August 3). Beauty contest sparks row over who counts as South African. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn38ppr4zj0o

Landsberg, C. (2019). Thabo Mbeki as African pantheon: Claiming the 21st century for global Africa. *Brazilian Journal of African Studies/Revista Brasileira De Estudos Africanos*, *4*(7). https://doi.org/10.22456/2448-3923.91594

Letter from Africa: Nigerian anger over South African xenophobia. (2019). *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-49432558

López-Sala, A. (2015). Exploring dissuasion as a (geo) political instrument in irregular migration control at the southern Spanish maritime border. *Geopolitics*, *20*(3), 513–534.

Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. *The Sociological Review*, *52*(1), 62–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x

Mbasalaki, P. K., & Matchett, S. (2020). Aesthetic grammars of social justice: Sex work reimagined. *Studies on Home and Community Science*, *14*(1/2). https://doi.org/10.31901/24566780.2020/14.1-2.344

Nagar, R., & Ali, F. (2003). Collaboration across borders: Moving beyond positionality. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, *24*(3), 356–372. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9493.00164

Ngai, M. M. (2014). *Impossible subjects: Illegal aliens and the making of modern America*. Princeton University Press.

Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to documentary* (2nd ed.). Indiana University Press.

Omotoso, A. (Director). (2011). *Man on the ground* [Film]. TOM Pictures.

Ono, K. A. (2012). Borders that travel: Matters of the figural border. In D. R. DeChaine (Ed.), *Border rhetorics: Citizenship and identity on the U.S.–Mexico frontier* (pp. 19–32). University of Alabama Press.

Oxfam South Africa. (2020). *Reclaiming power: Womxn's work and income inequality in South Africa.*

Parker, N., & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2009). Lines in the sand? Towards an agenda for critical border studies. *Geopolitics*, *14*(3), 582–587.

Petrarcha, D. M., & Hughes, J. M. (2014). Mobilizing knowledge via documentary filmmaking—Is the academy ready? *Mcgill Journal of Education*, *49*(3), 561–582. https://doi.org/10.7202/1033547ar

SAHO. (n.d.) *Xenophobic violence in democratic South Africa timeline.* https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/xenophobic-violence-democratic-south-africa-timeline#:~:text=In%20December%201994%20and%20January,foreigners%20be%20forcibly%20and%20immediately

Silva, G. J. (2015). On the militarization of borders and the juridical right to exclude. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *29*(2), 217–234.

Sundstrom, R. R., & Kim, D. H. (2014). Xenophobia and racism. *Critical Philosophy of Race*, *2*(1), 20–45.

Van de Ven, A. H. (2018). Academic–practitioner engaged scholarship. *Information and Organization*, *28*(1), 37–43.

About the Authors

Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology and director of the Centre for Intimate Sexual Citizenship at the University of Essex. She is also a film producer and has worked extensively in South Africa and other countries. Her research interests are in critical race, gender, class, sexuality, creative activism, public health, migration, as well as decolonial thought and praxis.

Kalemba Kizito holds a PhD from the University of Memphis, Department of Communication & Film. His research explores borders as global bio-political structures impacting Blackness in African and Afro-diasporic contexts. Through teaching and writing, he examines power, identity, and marginalization, using traditional and innovative Black methodologies to challenge structures of inequality and envision transformative futures for marginalized communities.

cogitatio

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

Leah Koskimaki and Clementine Mukafuku

Institute for Social Development, University of the Western Cape, South Africa

Correspondence: Leah Koskimaki (lkoskimaki@uwc.ac.za)

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

---

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.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Agustín, Ó. G., & Jørgensen, M. B. (2016). Against pessimism: A time and space for solidarity. In O. G. Agustín & M. B. Jørgensen (Eds.), *Solidarity without borders: Gramscian perspectives on migration and civil society alliances* (pp. 223–233). Pluto Press.

Agustín, Ó. G., & Jørgensen, M. B. (2019). *Solidarity and the 'refugee crisis' in Europe*. Springer.

Amit, R., & Kriger, N. (2014). Making migrants 'il-legible': The policies and practices of documentation in post-apartheid South Africa. *Kronos*, *40*(1), 269–290.

Ataç, I., Rygiel, K., & Stierl, M. (2016). Introduction: The contentious politics of refugee and migrant protest and solidarity movements: Remaking citizenship from the margins. *Citizenship Studies*, *20*(5), 527–544.

Ataç, I., & Schwiertz, H. (2024). Introduction to the geopolitical forum. *Geopolitics*, *29*(2), 714–740.

Ataç, I., Schwiertz, H., Jørgensen, M. B., Vandevoordt, R., Hinger, S., & Spindler, S. (2024). Negotiating borders through a politics of scale: Municipalities and urban civil society initiatives in the contested field of migration. *Geopolitics*, *29*(2), 714–740.

Awumbila, M., Garba, F., Darkwah, A. K., & Zaami, M. (2023). Migrant political mobilisation and solidarity building in the Global South. In H. Crawley & J. K. Teye (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of South–South migration and inequality* (pp. 719–739). Springer.

Baban, F., & Rygiel, K. (2017). Living with others: Fostering radical cosmopolitanism through citizenship politics in Berlin. *Ethics & Global Politics*, *10*(1), 98–116.

Baban, F., & Rygiel, K. (2020). Introduction: Living with others: Opening communities to newcomers. In F. Baban & K. Rygiel (Eds.), *Fostering pluralism through solidarity activism in Europe: Everyday encounters with newcomers* (pp. 3–29). Springer Nature.

Batisai, K. (2022). Retheorising migration: A South–South perspective. In P. Rugunanan & N. Xulu-Gama (Eds.), *Migration in Southern Africa: IMISCOE regional reader* (pp. 11–24). Springer.

Bauder, H. (2017). Sanctuary cities: Policies and practices in international perspective. *International Migration*, *55*(2), 174–187.

Bauder, H. (2020). Migrant solidarities and the politics of place. *Progress in Human Geography*, *44*(6), 1066–1080.

Bauder, H. (2021). Urban solidarity: Perspectives of migration and refugee accommodation and inclusion. *Critical Sociology*, *47*(6), 875–889.

Bolzoni, M. (2009). Refugees and asylum seekers in Cape Town. Situation, challenges, perspectives. In F. Barbera & E. Ochse (Eds.), *A game of mirrors: Economic development and social cohesion in Piedmont and South Africa* (pp. 125–152). COREP—Regione Piemonte.

Chekero, T. (2023). Borders and boundaries in daily urban mobility practices of refugees in Cape Town, South Africa. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, *42*(3), 361–381.

Darling, J. (2021). Refugee urbanism: Seeing asylum "like a city." *Urban Geography*, *42*(7), 894–914.

Dinbabo, M. F., Zembe, Y., Carciotto, S., Chiwarawara, K., Belebema, M., & Ahmed, M. (2021). Refugee and asylum-seeking representative structures in South Africa: The case study of Somali, Congolese, and Ethiopian communities. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *34*(4), 3771–3792.

Doyel, S. (2022). Paragon of 'self-reliance': A critical analysis of refugee policy narratives in Uganda. *New Sociological Perspectives*, *2* (1), 1–19.

Erdal, M. B., & Oeppen, C. (2017). Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *44*(6), 981–998. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384149

Frank, L. (2023). *Seeking a dignified life: An exploration of the aspirations and experiences of women refugees in Cape Town, South Africa* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of the Western Cape.

Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Ghorashi, H. (2021). Normalising power and engaged narrative methodology: Refugee women, the forgotten category in the public discourse. *Feminist Review*, *129*(1), 48–63.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. International Publishers.

Hankela, E. (2015). Elaborating on ubuntu in a Johannesburg inner-city church. *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, *26*, 366–378.

Hlatshwayo, M. (2011). Is there room for international solidarity within South African Borders? COSATU's responses to the xenophobic attacks of May 2008. *Politikon*, *38*(1), 169–189.

Hlatshwayo, M. (2019). The trials and tribulations of Zimbabwean precarious women workers in Johannesburg: A cry for help? *Qualitative Sociology Review*, *2019*(1), 62–85.

Hoag, C. (2010). The magic of the populace: An ethnography of illegibility in the South African immigration bureaucracy. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *33*(1), 6–25.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Johnson, J. J. G. (2022). Constructing and contesting state-urban borders: Litigation over Refugee Reception Offices in post-apartheid South African cities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *48*(15), 3810–3827.

Jørgensen, M. B. (2024). Building an infrastructure of dissent—Civic solidarity as a transformative practice. In Ataç, I. Schwiertz, H., Jørgensen, M. B., Vandevoordt, R., Hinger, S., & Spindler, S. (Eds). Negotiating borders through a politics of scale: Municipalities and urban civil society initiatives in the contested field of migration. *Geopolitics*, *29*(2), 714–740.

Karriem, A. (2009). The rise and transformation of the Brazilian landless movement into a counter-hegemonic political actor: A Gramscian analysis. *Geoforum*, *40*(3), 316-325.

Kavuro, C. (2022). The disappearance of refugee rights in South Africa. *Obiter*, *43*(1), 49–78.

Khan, F., Mbatani, S., & Marais, C. (2021). Trusting democracy: The law can work for refugees, but what the system needs is an 'injection of humanity.' *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *56*(1), 48–63.

Kiewit, L. (2019, November 21). Fear inside the church of refugees. *Mail & Guardian*. https://mg.co.za/article/2019-11-21-fear-inside-the-church-of-refugees

Koskimaki, L., & Mazani, P. (in press). Migrant and refugee solidarity in urban South Africa. In H. Bauder & M. B. Setrana (Eds.), *Urban migrant inclusion & refugee protection: Vol. 2—Global perspectives of sanctuary, solidarity, and hospitality*. IMISCOE Springer.

Koskimaki, L., & Tyhali, S. (2024). *Institutional solidarity for and with forced migrants at a South African university*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Kreichauf, R., & Mayer, M. (2021). Negotiating urban solidarities: multiple agencies and contested meanings in the making of solidarity cities. *Urban Geography*, *42*(7), 979–1002.

Lacroix, T. (2022). Migration-related city networks: A global overview. *Local Government Studies*, *48*(6), 1027–1047.

Landau, L. B. (2014). Conviviality, rights, and conflict in Africa's urban estuaries. *Politics & Society*, *42*(3), 359–380.

Landau, L. B. (2019a). Shunning solidarity: Durable solutions in a fluid era. In M. Bradley, J. Milner, & B. Peruniak (Eds.), *Refugees' roles in resolving displacement and building peace: Beyond beneficiaries* (pp. 153–167). Georgetown University Press.

Landau, L. B. (2019b). A chronotope of containment development: Europe's migrant crisis and Africa's reterritorialisation. *Antipode*, *51*(1), 169–186.

Landau, L. B., & Freemantle, I. (2010). Tactical cosmopolitanism and idioms of belonging: Insertion and self-exclusion in Johannesburg. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *36*(3), 375–390.

Landau, L. B., Segatti, A., & Misago, J. (2011). *Governing migration & urbanisation in South African municipalities: Developing approaches to counter poverty and social fragmentation*. South African Local Government Association (SALGA); African Centre for Migration and Society. https://www.migration.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Governing-Migration-Urbanisation-in-South-African-Municipalities-Developing-Approaches-to-Counter-Poverty-and-Social-Fragmentation-1.pdf

Makanda, J. (2021a). Conceptualisation, construction and negotiation of inter-migrant support and care among Congolese, Burundian and Zimbabweans in Yeoville, Johannesburg, South Africa. *African Renaissance*, *18*(1), 115–137.

Makanda, J. (2021b). Meaning-making, negotiation and (de) construction of socio-political identities among migrants: The inclusion of the forgotten voices of forced migrants in South Africa. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, *8*(9), 132–140.

Maringira, G., & Vuninga, R. S. (2022). Beyond xenophobia: Migrants-locals in socio-economic spaces in Cape Town, South Africa. In C. Isike & E. M. Isike (Eds.), *Conflict and concord: The ambivalence of African migrant/host relations in South Africa* (pp. 145–156). Springer Nature.

Maseko, N., & Maweni, V. (2019). A study on perceptions of xenophobia at institutions of higher learning in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, *6*(3), 103–124.

Masuku, S., & Rama, S. (2020). A case study of government and civil societies' collaboration and challenges in securing the rights of Congolese refugees living in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *South African Journal of Science*, *116*(3/4). https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2020/6210

Mazani, P. (2023). *Migration and hospitality in Cape Town: A case of Zimbabwean migrants and refugees* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of the Western Cape.

Mbatha, N., & Koskimaki, L. (2023). Making life liveable in an informal market: Infrastructures of friendship amongst migrant street traders in Durban, South Africa. *Migration and Society*, *6*(1), 43–56.

Mgogo, Q., & Osunkunle, O. (2023). Students' perceptions of the influence of media on perpetuating xenophobia in South African universities. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *19*(1), Article 1218. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v19i1.1218

Moyo, K., & Botha, C. (2022). Refugee policy as infrastructure: The gulf between policy intent and implementation for refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa. In P. Rugunanan & N. Xulu-Gama (Eds.), *Migration in Southern Africa: IMISCOE regional reader* (pp. 77–89). Springer.

Moyo, K., & Zanker, F. (2020). *Political contestations within south African migration governance*. Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institute. https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/sites/default/files/political_contestations_within_south_african_migration_governance_moyo_and_zanker.pdf

Moyo, K., & Zanker, F. (2022). No hope for the 'foreigners': The conflation of refugees and migrants in South Africa. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, *20*(2), 253–265.

Mpeiwa, M. (2018). Political participation of refugees: The case of Congolese refugees in South Africa. Robert Bosch Stiftung, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/political-participation-of-refugees-the-case-of-congolese-refugees-in-south-africa.pdf

Mpofu, B. (2018). Church as hostile, host or home: Perspectives on the experiences of African migrants in South Africa. *Alternation Journal*, *2018*(22), 103–118.

Mukafuku, C. (2021). *The role of churches as social protection actors: The case of Rwandan refugee migrants in Cape Town* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of the Western Cape.

Nishimwe, C. (2022). Institutional prosperity: No money, no church, no fellowship in South Africa? Migrant women's relationships in a context of lack at Saint Aidan's Anglican Church. *African Studies*, *81*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/00020184.2022.2027227

Nowicki, L. (2020, January 10). Greenmarket Square refugees have split into "two hostile groups." *GroundUp*. https://groundup.org.za/article/reverend-criticises-greenmarket-square-refugee-leadership

Nyamnjoh, F. B. (2022). Citizenship, incompleteness and mobility. *Citizenship Studies*, *26*(4/5), 592–598.

Nyamnjoh, H., Hall, S., & Cirolia, L. R. (2022). Precarity, permits, and prayers: "Working practices" of Congolese asylum-seeking women in Cape Town. *Africa Spectrum*, *57*(1), 30–49.

Nzayabino, V. (2010). The role of refugee-established churches in integrating forced migrants: A case study of Word of Life Assembly in Yeoville, Johannesburg. *HTS: Theological Studies*, *66*(1). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.290

Okbandrias, M. (2023). Protection of the rights of Ethiopian and DRC refugees and asylum seekers: Examining the role of South African NGOs (2005–2017). *African Human Mobility Review*, *9*(3), 56–81.

Oloruntoba, S. O. (2022). From paradise gain to paradise loss: Xenophobia and contradictions of transformation in South African universities. In C. Isike & E. M. Isike (Eds.), *Conflict and concord: The ambivalence of African migrant/host relations in South Africa* (pp. 109–128). Springer Nature.

Otu, M. N. (2017). The complexities of understanding xenophobia at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. *Journal of African Union Studies*, *6*(2/3), 135–153.

Owen, J., Juries, I., & Mokoena, M. (2024). Beyond migration categories: Amity, conviviality and mutuality in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *59*(7), 2154–2169.

Pande, A. (2012). From "balcony talk" and "practical prayers" to illegal collectives: Migrant domestic workers and meso-level resistances in Lebanon. *Gender & Society*, *26*(3), 382–405.

Pascucci, E. (2017). Community infrastructures: Shelter, self-reliance and polymorphic borders in urban refugee governance. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *5*(3), 332–345.

Pozzo, M., & Ghorashi, H. (2022). How liminality enhances conviviality through multilingual co-creations: Young refugees in the Netherlands. *Current Sociology*, *70*(5), 682–702.

Rast, M. C., & Ghorashi, H. (2018). Dancing with 'the other': Challenges and opportunities of deepening democracy through participatory spaces for refugees. *Social Inclusion*, *6*(1), 188–198.

Rast, M. C., Younes, Y., Smets, P., & Ghorashi, H. (2020). The resilience potential of different refugee reception approaches taken during the 'refugee crisis' in Amsterdam. *Current Sociology*, *68*(7), 853–871.

Robins, S. (2009). Humanitarian aid beyond "bare survival": Social movement responses to xenophobic violence in South Africa. *American Ethnologist*, *36*(4), 637–650.

Rugunanan, P. (2022). Migrating beyond borders and states: Instrumental and contingent solidarities among South Asian migrant informal workers in South Africa. In P. Rugunanan & N. Xulu-Gama (Eds.), *Migration in Southern Africa: IMISCOE regional reader* (pp. 25–38). Springer.

Rugunanan, P., & Smit, R. (2011). Seeking refuge in South Africa: Challenges facing a group of Congolese and Burundian refugees. *Development Southern Africa*, *28*(5), 705–718.

Ruiters, G., Lombard, F., & Uwimpuhwe, D. (2020). Turning a blind eye to African refugees and immigrants in a tourist city: A case-study of blame-shifting in Cape Town. *African Human Mobility Review*, *6*(1), 27–49.

Sichone, O. B. (2006). Globalisation and internationalisation of higher education in South Africa: The challenge of rising xenophobia. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique*, *4*(3), 33–53.

Stierl, M., Ataç, I., Kron, S., Schillinger, S., & Helge, S. (2015). Struggles of migration as in-/visible politics. *Movements. Journal für kritische Migrations-und Grenzregimeforschung*, *1*(2), 1–18.

Tewolde, A. I. (2023). Against 'insider'/'outsider' positionality bifurcation in migration research: Framing migrant researchers' positionalities as 'unforeseeable.' *Migration Letters*, *20*(7), 463–479.

Thambinathan, V., & Kinsella, E. A. (2021). Decolonizing methodologies in qualitative research: Creating spaces for transformative praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766

Uwimpuhwe, D. (2015). *Xenophobia and the role of immigrant organizations in the City of Cape Town* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of the Western Cape.

Uwimpuhwe, D., & Ruiters, G. (2018). Organising Somalian, Congolese and Rwandan migrants in a time of xenophobia in South Africa: Empirical and methodological reflections. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *19*, 1119–1136.

Vanyoro, K. (2024). The borders of migrant and refugee activism in South Africa. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *2024*, Article fead094. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead094

Vuninga, R. S. (2021). *Combattants* and *Baswahili*: Beyond ethno-regional tensions among Congolese immigrants of Cape Town, South Africa. *Politeia*, *40*(2), 1–22.

Washinyira, T. (2019, October 9). Protesters camp outside UNHCR offices. *GroundUp*. https://groundup.org.za/article/protesters-camp-outside-unhcr-offices

Younes, Y., Ghorashi, H., & Ponzoni, E. (2021). Conflicting experiences with welcoming encounters: Narratives of newly arrived refugees in the Netherlands. *Social Inclusion*, *9*(4), 222–231.

Zihindula, G., Kavuro, C., Mande, M., & Mpazayabo, A. (2023). *The role of refugee-led organisations in the Global South: A case study of South Africa refugee-led networks*. Unpublished manuscript.

About the Authors

Leah Koskimaki is a sociocultural anthropologist and a senior lecturer at the Institute for Social Development (ISD) at the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, South Africa, where she is a founding member and coordinator for the Migration and Mobilities Interdisciplinary Collective in Africa (MMICA). She is also a co-investigator on the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) partnership project Urban Sanctuary, Migrant Solidarity and Hospitality in Global Perspective.

Clementine Mukafuku is a PhD student at the Institute for Social Development (ISD) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town, South Africa, where she also obtained her MA degree. Mukafuku's current doctoral research is concerned with the role of civil society in supporting forced migrants from the Great Lakes Region in Cape Town, South Africa. She is a tutor in the Sociology Department at UWC and has participated in the women's leadership training at Scalabrini, Cape Town.

cogitatio

Seeking Refuge in South Africa: Navigating Power, Healing, and Co-Creation in Body-Mapping Processes

Syeda Sidra Idrees [1,2] , Karin Hannes [2] , and Marisa de Andrade [1]

[1] School of Health in Social Sciences, The University of Edinburgh, UK
[2] Faculty of Social Sciences, KU Leuven, Belgium

Correspondence: Syeda Sidra Idrees (sidrees@ed.ac.uk)

Abstract

This article refines the participatory body-mapping process drawing insights from a preparatory workshop in South Africa, the country of origin of the method. Widely used in trauma-informed research, body-mapping as an art-based method enables participants to express embodied experiences through non-verbal storytelling. Responding to critiques of its cultural appropriation by the Global North, we engaged with scholars working with marginalised populations and/or in challenging research contexts to reflect on this participatory methodology. This article details their insights on how to conduct body-mapping research as a contextually grounded tool and sensitive to marginalised populations. The article reconstitutes body-mapping as a relational and dynamic method where bodies, spaces, and emotions interact to co-create knowledge. This process reshapes power dynamics between researchers and participants, transforming body-mapping into a collective space for healing and resistance. Rooted in the South African context, the research honours the method's origins while actively exploring ethical ways to expand its potential for future use in forced migration research.

Keywords

arts-based research; asylum-seeking young girls; body mapping; co-creation; migration; participatory art-based research; power dynamics

1. Introduction

Arts-based research (ABR) is a transformative approach in the social sciences, utilising diverse art forms such as poetry, narratives, music, performance, dance, and visual arts to produce, analyse, and disseminate

knowledge (Leavy, 2017). Among these, visual arts-based methods—particularly photography and drawing—have gained prominence in fields like health, psychology, and recently policy (Lenette, 2019; Orchard, 2017). This rise reflects an epistemological shift that values embodied expression and sensory experience, challenging positivist frameworks by emphasising subjective, emotional, and embodied forms of knowledge (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; de Jager et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Moreover, credible visual evidence uniquely captures the material and visible dimensions of social issues, making it invaluable for understanding silent or marginalised experiences within their specific physical and cultural contexts (Lenette, 2019). Furthermore, by centering participants' own cultural narratives, visual arts-based methods prevent the imposition of external interpretations, allowing individuals to share their lived experiences authentically. Especially effective with children and adolescents, these methods transcend language barriers and create inclusive, expressive environments (de Jager et al., 2016).

Rooted in participatory feminist and postcolonial thought, body-mapping is one such art-based method that materializes bodies that are usually relegated to the margins of society. Being silenced does not only apply to women but also to other social groups, such as migrants (de Jager et al., 2016). Through life-size drawings enhanced with colours, symbols, and images, body-mapping allows marginalised populations to document and share experiences that may be hidden by the dominant narratives (Gastaldo et al., 2012; Naidu, 2018). As an asset-based, decolonizing approach, body-mapping combines visual arts, therapeutic practice, and community development to empower participants to reclaim their narratives, shifting focus from perceived deficits to inherent strengths (Jama et al., 2024). This aligns with feminist scholarship, which asserts that research is inherently political and advocates for participant agency and the co-creation of knowledge, actively challenging androcentric biases of objective and researcher-led traditional methodologies (Praag, 2021). By blurring the line between researcher and participant, body-mapping democratizes the research process, creating a space for shared decision-making on data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Praag, 2021).

With its focus on visual and embodied expression, body-mapping resists the limitations of text-based methodologies, making the body a central site of meaning-making. By facilitating personal storytelling as activism, it empowers participants—especially those often stigmatized—to redefine themselves outside dominant, oppressive narratives, thereby advancing social justice and emancipatory goals (Orchard, 2017). Grounded in feminist ideals of transparency and reflexivity, body-mapping not only helps participants reclaim their narratives as co-producers but also fosters critical awareness of social issues impacting their lives, promoting a sense of agency and activism that transcends research setting. Orchard (2017) argues that despite its transformative potential, body-mapping can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuate Eurocentrism if applied without cultural sensitivity and a deep contextual learning, often leading to emotional distress for participants. This critique highlights the importance of ensuring that body-mapping is adapted thoughtfully to meet the unique needs and social realities of different populations (Boydell, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Addressing these limitations calls for a reflexive approach that prioritizes local expertise, ensuring that the methodology is emotionally safe and contextually grounded.

In response to Orchard's critique, this article focuses on a workshop conducted in South Africa, the country of origin of the body-mapping tool, with field experts experienced in working with refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable populations. Guided by Nunn's (2022) recommendation to integrate professional and experiential expertise before conducting research with marginalised populations, the workshop aimed to refine body-mapping practices to enhance emotional safety by learning from the lived realities and

cultural dynamics of the Global South. By collaborating with South African experts, we sought to address Orchard's concerns around cultural appropriation while aligning with Smith's (2021) call for decolonizing methodologies by respecting and engaging *with* the knowledge systems of the communities where these methods were developed.

Santos's (2015) concept of "abyssal thinking" offers a further deeper critique of Eurocentric thought in academic research. According to Santos, Western academia often operates along an "abyssal line," dividing "legitimate" knowledge from that deemed invisible or irrelevant (Santos, 2015, p. 118). While Orchard's critique emphasises the need for careful implementation to avoid appropriation, aligning with Santos' (2018) thought, we contend that the Western "protective" stance of overseeing and safeguarding non-Western methodologies often perpetuates the very Eurocentric dominance it seeks to critique. Rather than positioning Eurocentric ethical frameworks as safeguards of non-Western methods, Santos (2018) advocates for grounding research practices in epistemologies of the Global South, fostering genuine intercultural dialogue. As Santos (2015, p. 134) argues: "The rise of the appropriation/violence ordering inside the regulation/emancipation ordering can only be tackled if we situate our epistemological perspective on the social experience of the other side of the line." The South African workshop exemplifies this commitment by centering Global South expertise in shaping a participatory, inclusive body-mapping methodology that traverses power dynamics.

Insights from this preparatory workshop were foundational in shaping our primary research on the experiences of asylum-seeking young girls (from the Global South) with the asylum policy of the UK—an often-overlooked group facing intersecting challenges related to gender, age, and race (Lenette, 2021). The workshop was meant to explore how body-mapping process could be made emotionally safe for marginalised populations, addressing power dynamics and fostering an environment where participants' bodies could speak with relational resistance (Barad, 2007). This article thus highlights how our South African workshop informs a de-centered, participatory body-mapping methodology, underscoring the importance of continuous participant feedback and collaborative design. Such an approach not only bridges the gap between theory and practice but also aligns with broader goals of emancipatory and transformative research, fostering a more inclusive and contextually grounded research process that goes beyond Eurocentric thought with intercultural knowledge exchange.

This article is structured to first discuss the significance of body-mapping in embodied research, followed by elaboration on critique of body-mapping. It then outlines the methodological approach, including the authors' positionality and the biographies of the participating experts. The subsequent section presents the findings from the South African workshop, detailing how expert input was utilised to refine the body-mapping methodology. Finally, the article concludes by integrating the workshop outcomes with broader theoretical and ethical insights, emphasising the critical role of contextually informed, participatory research practices in addressing the complexities of trauma experienced by marginalised groups.

2. Body-Mapping: Transcending Binaries, Weaving Innovation, and Guarding Ethical Threads

Body-mapping serves as both compass and canvas, capturing unspoken trauma while navigating intersections of innovation and ethics. By transcending binaries—mind and body, personal and social—it

engages participants as co-creators of knowledge, weaving personal stories with broader cultural contexts. The following sections explore body-mapping as a relational tool that empowers and challenges, balancing innovation with honoring its roots and safeguarding ethical practice.

2.1. Tracing the Unspoken: Body-Mapping in Embodied Research

Embodied inquiry holds a pivotal role in social science, emphasising the ontological and epistemological centrality of the body in human experience. As Thanem and Knights (2019, p. 26) stress, "we cannot exist and act without our bodies, and we cannot imagine how we might do research without them." Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) assertion that "we do not have bodies, we are our bodies" underscores that bodies are not mere vessels; they are fundamental to how we perceive, interpret, and navigate the world. Traditional methodologies often reinforce a dualistic hierarchy, positioning the body as subordinate to the rational mind (Foucault & Deleuze, 1980). This approach leads to research conducted *about* the body rather than *with* it, thereby stripping the body of its agency (Thanem & Knights, 2019). Such disembodied approaches obscure the body's active role in shaping, resisting, and subverting dominant narratives. Embracing embodied inquiry thus restores the body's potential for agentic resistance, allowing it to serve as both the site and source of knowledge in research. Body-mapping, as an embodied methodology, directly addresses this gap.

Challenging Cartesian dualism in Western epistemology, body-mapping adopts a feminist participatory "mindbody" approach, treating mind and body as unified and socio-culturally influenced (Klein & Milner, 2019). Positioned as both a site and source of knowledge, body-mapping allows participants to visually explore layers of silent trauma, a critical advantage in forced migration research where verbal articulation may retraumatize participants (Murray et al., 2023). Unlike other visual arts-based methods such as photovoice or photography—which demand training, thoughtful camera use, and an emphasis on technically "successful" snapshots—body-mapping removes these cognitive and technical burdens. Participants engage directly with their bodies as canvases, allowing them to explore their narratives at their own pace, thereby fostering a more natural and personal engagement with embodied memory and expression (Murray et al., 2023).

Body-mapping enables participants to explore their lived histories, subjective meanings, and socio-cultural contexts directly on their bodies, constructing a holistic self-narrative that weaves together physical, emotional, and social dimensions (Orchard, 2017). Many participants in trauma research report an increased awareness of the richness of their life stories, resulting in a "thickening" of narratives that foster self-worth, power, and agency (de Jager et al., 2016). This reclamation of agency among survivors underscores body-mapping's alignment with an asset-based approach, where individuals draw strength from their histories rather than viewing them as deficits (Jama et al., 2024).

Unlike other visual methods, body-mapping brings to light the fluid, socially and historically inscribed nature of the body. It recognises that bodies—and their perceptions—are not fixed but are continually reshaped by shifting physical, social, and historical contexts. Rather than capturing isolated, neutral "snapshots," body-mapping allows for a layered exploration of these dynamic influences, offering a richer, contextually embedded perspective (de Jager et al., 2016). Furthermore, through data triangulation across visual, verbal, and symbolic dimensions, body-mapping supports rich, multi-layered interpretations rarely achievable in

traditional arts-based methods (Klein & Milner, 2019). This depth and flexibility make body-mapping not only a rich data source but also a therapeutic tool that supports healing, agency, and resilience.

Recognising that bodies are socially and historically material-discursive, our approach to body-mapping further aligns with feminist new materialist thought to emphasise how identities and experiences are dynamically shaped through both material and symbolic processes (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2013). Barad's concept of intra-action, which suggests that entities do not pre-exist in relation to their relationships but emerge through them, aligns with our body-mapping's approach of capturing identities as dynamically shaped within socio-cultural, physical, and historical contexts. This perspective honors the intersectional and situated knowledge of participants, particularly marginalised groups such as women of colour, allowing them to express their identities and experiences in ways that continuously resist homogenizing or universalizing narratives (Mohanty, 1988). By inviting participants to actively engage with the material-discursive aspects of their identities on their own bodies, body-mapping respects each participant's embodied knowledge, affirming socio-cultural and historical dimensions embedded within their identity (de Jager et al., 2016).

Integrating these methodological advantages with theoretical foundations of embodiment, it becomes evident that body-mapping offers a robust framework for exploring and understanding the embodied experiences of trauma survivors. However, as Gramsci (2020) and Adorno (2001) caution, cultural practices—including arts-based methods—are not entirely apolitical. Positioned within broader socio-political structures, body-mapping, while valuable in generating both ontological and epistemological insights, risks appropriation or exploitation if not applied with cultural sensitivity and integrity.

2.2. Body-Mapping Application Paradox: "Innovation" Over "Integrity and Collaboration"?

The popularity of body-mapping has grown significantly since its early use by MacCormack and Draper in 1987 in Jamaica, exploring female sexuality (de Jager et al., 2016). Later developed in South Africa as a participatory tool to reduce stigma around HIV/AIDS, body-mapping is celebrated for revealing hidden, embodied experiences and bridging cultural divides (Vacchelli, 2018). However, Orchard (2017) cautions that its "integrity" is frequently compromised when Global North researchers prioritize "innovation" over the method's participatory and contextual foundations. Specifically, Orchard identifies three core areas where integrity is compromised: (a) a lack of grounding in body-mapping's South African context, (b) the disregard for therapeutic practices essential for participant safety, and (c) inadequate preparation for managing the emotional intensity of body-mapping workshops.

Firstly, the lack of grounding in the method's South African origins reveals a deeper issue of cultural insensitivity. Many studies, including D'souza et al. (2021) on Jamaica with children, Collings et al. (2022) with mothers experiencing child custody loss, and Barnes et al. (2024) on children's experiences of racism, adopt body-mapping without acknowledging its origins in South Africa. By neglecting the method's cultural roots, these studies exemplify a form of Eurocentrism that appropriates the visual elements of body-mapping reinforcing the North–South power divide (de Jager et al., 2016). The second critical concern is the neglect of therapeutic practices, which are fundamental to the method's integrity. Solomon's (2007) facilitator guide, developed over months of reflective workshops, includes structured support elements like periodic check-ins and reflective breaks to manage intense emotions body-mapping can evoke. Yet, as Orchard (2017) observes, repeated misuse of these practices led Solomon to remove her guide from public

access after witnessing facilitators neglect therapeutic elements essential to participant well-being. In one documented instance, facilitators abandoned participants mid-workshop, leading to significant emotional distress (Orchard, 2017).

Finally, Orchard (2017) emphasises that proper preparation and contextual understanding are essential for body-mapping workshops, given the intense emotions they can evoke. She recounts an instance where a researcher, captivated by body-mapping's exotic appeal, applied the method with little knowledge of its origins or engagement with participants. This lack of contextual awareness reduces body-mapping from a therapeutic, collaborative practice to an aesthetic tool, reinforcing power dynamics by imposing a top-down approach that disregards participants' lived experiences. Such selective use of body-mapping's visual appeal, without acknowledging its origins, leaves its creators feeling "everywhere being seen but never being heard" (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p. 88). This disregard not only jeopardizes participant safety but also violates the ethical responsibility to "know as much as possible about the lives of the people they work with" (Orchard, 2017, p. 7), transforming body-mapping from a tool of empowerment into a visually appealing yet ethically compromised practice.

In our South African workshop, we directly address these ethical concerns by engaging in what Santos (2015) terms a "ecology of knowledges"—an approach that values diverse epistemologies equally and challenges the tendency to treat non-Western knowledge as secondary or peripheral. Through this intercultural exchange, South African experts contributed culturally specific insights that advocated for body-mapping's therapeutic and participatory foundations, reinforcing the method's original social justice objectives. As Thanem and Knights (2019) argue, ethical embodied scholarship requires ongoing learning and relational engagement, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through meaningful interactions (Barad, 2007; Braidotti & Bignall, 2018; Santos, 2015). By "becoming-with" South African experts in this co-creative process, our workshop countered Eurocentric tendencies of appropriation, illustrating how body-mapping could be applied in a culturally sensitive, empowering manner. This collaborative approach demonstrates the importance of addressing power dynamics in research, ensuring that body-mapping fosters relational resistance and participant empowerment rather than reinforcing hierarchical structures.

3. Approach

Our preparatory body-mapping workshop formed part of a larger participatory workshop series held in 2022 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Sponsored by the Flemish Interuniversity Council for North–South knowledge exchange, this week-long series was aimed at deepening the understanding and application of participatory research methods in challenging contexts. The overarching objectives of the series were threefold: (a) to develop approaches for working respectfully with individuals facing complex life circumstances, (b) provide insights for conducting fieldwork in volatile or high-risk environments, and (c) equip researchers to positionally situate themselves, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. These objectives have been further elaborated in our booklet *Doing Fieldwork in Challenging Circumstances: Summoning Participatory Methods* (Hannes et al., 2023).

Our one-day participatory body-mapping workshop, held in the birthplace of the method served as a pilot for our ongoing research on the experiences of asylum-seeking young girls from the Global South as they navigate restrictive asylum policies. Situated in South Africa, this workshop sought to address the critique that body-mapping has often been culturally misapplied by Global North scholars, inadvertently reinforcing

power dynamics rather than dismantling them (Orchard, 2017). By cultivating a relational and embodied space, we aimed to realign body-mapping with its participatory roots, exploring its potential to foster collaborative and culturally sensitive research practices.

Invitations for our participatory workshop were extended to researchers experienced in various arts-based methodologies, including digital storytelling, collaborative writing, body-mapping, narrative inquiry, and photovoice. Ten researchers participated, each with extensive experience in working with vulnerable populations, bringing valuable insights into adapting arts-based methods for marginalised settings. Conducting this workshop in South Africa allowed us to foster a relational space for intercultural exchange, where we could listen *to* and learn *from* those on the "other side of the line," as Santos (2015) suggests. This approach aligns with co-creative methodologies that emphasise integrating theoretical insights with lived experiences in research design (Davis et al., 2022; Nunn, 2022), reinforcing body-mapping's participatory roots and affirming its potential as a culturally responsive tool.

Our research team brings substantial experience with marginalised communities globally, including trauma-affected groups facing violence, displacement, and socio-economic challenges. We have collectively engaged with diverse populations, such as young people in urban slums, survivors of gender-based violence, refugees, HIV+ communities, and indigenous groups in South Africa. Key contributors include research psychologists and epidemiologists from South Africa, who focus on relational ontologies in community-based research, working extensively with HIV+ populations and children; a social geographer with expertise in sense of place; a community-based child psychologist specializing in decolonial, African-centered approaches to childhood trauma and violence; and a social/cultural anthropologist utilising participatory arts-based methods in low-income communities in sub-Saharan Africa. These team members, though primarily placed in South Africa, have actively engaged in cross-cultural knowledge exchanges between Global North and South, bringing nuanced insights that strengthen our commitment to culturally responsive, participatory practices. Central to our work is a commitment to fostering community engagement, social connectedness, and spaces that ensure the emotional and psychological safety of participants.

Positionality is central to co-creative and participatory research, as it shapes how knowledge is produced and shared (Bilgen et al., 2021). Our positionality, as three women researchers—two from the Global South—has greatly influenced our approach. With direct and indirect experiences of migration, we brought nuanced perspectives on marginalisation, migration, and asylum to this workshop. The lead author, hailing from Pakistan, has worked extensively with Afghan refugees in slum communities. The third author, born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, offers unique "South African expertise," shaped by her personal history of migration where her father was a male asylum-seeking boy who fled civil war in Africa. She was born in Johannesburg and spent 18 years there in education until her first year of medical school in 1999. Despite being currently positioned in the Global North, she sometimes resists the functionality and instrumentality of academic publications, reflecting the tension between her South African roots and her academic positioning. The second author, based in Belgium, has been actively involved with international student communities navigating the complexities of migration, marginalisation, and refugeehood. Although these shared experiences provide a sense of solidarity, we recognise, as Nash (2019) argues, that solidarity is not equivalent to "sisterhood." Instead, it is a dynamic coalition that acknowledges differences, allowing for a more intersectional and collaborative approach to research. This understanding of solidarity was critical in

our engagement with field experts from both Global North and South, enabling us to navigate the varying experiences and perspectives we encountered.

Despite these connections to migration and displacement, we remained mindful of our outsider status in certain ways. Indigenous research methodologies, as Smith (2021) emphasises, challenge simplistic notions of insider/outsider roles, acknowledging that even those who belong to a community must remain reflexive about their position. We acknowledge that while we shared experiences of migration, we did not share the specific experiences of forced migration, which faces systemic barriers such as legal limbo, statelessness, and restricted movements. Moreover, although we have strong connections in the Global South, and like the scholars from South Africa we have extensively worked with participatory research approaches, our positions within Global North institutions as "geographies of knowledge production" (Carozzi & Horner, 2023, p. 46) afford us a privilege we recognise and are aware of.

This realisation required us to continually negotiate our positionality within the research process, ensuring that we approached the participants of our research as co-researchers, recognising their agency and expertise in navigating their lived realities. To address this insider-outsider dynamic, we deliberately created what we termed the "third sphere," a conceptual space that allowed for a more fluid exchange of roles and knowledge. As described by Dierckx et al. (2019), this sphere occupies the intermediary space between traditional participant and researcher roles, where expertise is shared rather than owned. In this space, participants and researchers, regardless of their Global North or South affiliations, engaged on equal footing, dissolving rigid distinctions and enabling a genuine knowledge exchange (Hannes et al., 2023). In this third space, South African participants led workshops too where we joined as learners, further dismantling researcher-subject boundaries. This was not only an exploration of positionality but also an evolving site for co-creation and shared power dynamics, challenging hierarchical structures. The third sphere became an experimental ground for disrupting traditional power imbalances, supporting a reflexive, equitable, and relational approach to participatory research.

The mutual expertise in creating body-maps together did not only allow us to learn from the South African scholars to refine the body-mapping process but also revealed how we navigated power dynamics and emotional depths as a collective. Through this collaborative engagement, our bodies became active and relational acts of resistance (de Andrade et al., 2020), speaking to the complexities of vulnerability, empowerment, and solidarity. This shared journey laid the groundwork for the themes that emerged, highlighting how co-creative methodologies allow participants to not only share their experiences but also shape the research process itself.

4. Emerging Insights From the South African Workshop

In this section, we present findings from the South African workshop with field experts, which contributed to refining the body-mapping process in alignment with Orchard's (2017) critique of Eurocentric applications. The workshop centered on addressing Orchard's identified concerns: cultivating ethical practices to ensure participant safety, navigating power dynamics inherent in the research process, and managing the emotional complexities that body-mapping evokes in trauma research. To guide these discussions, an initial version of the facilitator's guide was developed and tested with the experts (Figure 1). This prototype served as a foundational tool for gathering feedback on how body-mapping could be adapted to address the unique

General Introduction before beginning	Introduction to body mapping
Body Tracing	Exercise 1: Body & posture Tracing
	Exercise 2: Draw where you research? (region, area, field, environment)
Personal Slogan and Symbol	Exercise 3a: Draw a personal symbol and assing a slogan to who you presently are as a researcher
	Exercise 3b: Draw a symbol and assing a slogan to who you WERE are as a researcher
Draw you future?	Exercise 3c: Creating personal symbol and slogan of who you 'aspire' to be as a researcher in future
	Exercise 4: Marks on or under the skin which you feel while working in the field with marginalised communities
	Exercise 5: Draw a symbol or a figure that demonstrates your support system during/after the field work

Figure 1. Prototype facilitator's guide.

needs of young girls with lived experiences of forced migration. By creating a physical draft of the guide, researchers were able to effectively communicate and test their concepts, identify challenges, and propose solutions (Dam & Siang, 2021). While the prototype was initially designed for the South African workshop, the feedback provided crucial insights into refining the process—particularly in handling emotional responses and negotiating power dynamics. The following sections explore how these insights informed the methodology, addressing key challenges and potential solutions to create a safe, meaningful, and participatory research environment.

4.1. Navigating the Body-Mapping Process

During the South African workshop, experts collectively identified key insights and challenges in participatory ABR. These findings, which emerged directly from their experiences in the field, offer practical guidance on navigating the complexities of space, time, and artistic expression, helping to foster safe and meaningful engagement in future body-mapping research.

4.1.1. Spaces Holding Memories: Artistic Expression in Vulnerable Communities

Navigating relational space effectively is crucial in participatory research, especially when engaging with vulnerable populations. Relational space refers to dynamic, interactive environments where participants and researchers co-create meaning, shaped by social, emotional, and physical contexts. The workshop highlighted significant challenges posed by conducting research in impoverished, resource-scarce environments. One participant who has extensively worked with HIV+ populations and children vividly described these conditions:

> Small houses...inhabited by multiple people...surrounded by garbage...working with communities who have so little access to resources is an incredibly humbling experience.

These conditions not only highlight the challenging living environments the participants endure but also deeply affect their ability to fully engage in a meaningful and empowering art-making process. In such contexts, relational space becomes even more critical, as it demands heightened sensitivity to the participants' lived realities and the creation of a safe, trusting environment where they feel empowered to express themselves.

Experts at the workshop emphasised the importance of considering both the physical and emotional contexts of research settings. Reflecting on the impact of these settings, one expert with expertise in social geography noted:

> I wonder how the space in which visual art is conducted has an impact on the results of research. For me, being in this room brings back a lot of bitter-sweet memories from my student days.

This underscores the complex role that environments play in shaping research experiences, aligning with scholarly discussions on the necessity of crafting safe spaces that foster meaningful participant engagement. Recent debates in the literature, such as those presented by Praag (2021), highlight how the creation of "safe spaces" in participatory research is essential for enabling genuine co-creation and engagement. Ensuring that research environments are safe, comfortable, and familiar to participants not only supports their emotional well-being but also enhances the validity and depth of their creative expressions. To implement this, field experts recommended forming partnerships with organisations that are already trusted by the participants to help identify locations that minimize potential trauma and maximize accessibility in forced migration research.

4.1.2. Time as a Canvas: Expanding Engagement in Body-mapping Research

During the workshop, the challenge of balancing meaningful engagement in creative processes with the stringent time constraints typical of community-based research projects emerged as a central concern. A visual artist with expertise in various arts-based methods highlighted the contrast between the more flexible timelines in art school and the strict deadlines in community research settings:

> Coming from art school, we used to have a lot less time constraints. In research, the findings just have to be the findings once the time allowed by community organizations is up. I have shown this with an hourglass on my map [see Figure 2] with a knife next to it.

This metaphor not only illustrates the tension between the need for expansive creative exploration but also the restrictive timelines imposed by traditional research frameworks, posing particular challenges for participants in trauma research who require significant time to process their emotions and experiences through art.

Leavy (2017) emphasises that the therapeutic potential of arts-based methods critically relies on providing participants ample space to engage deeply and reflectively—a process frequently compromised by conventional research deadlines. Boydell (2020) reinforces this perspective, noting that trauma-informed research settings must offer extensive opportunities for participants to explore their personal histories and complex emotions, which are essential components of the healing process. In response to these identified constraints, experts at the workshop proposed extending the duration of specific creative tasks, such as the
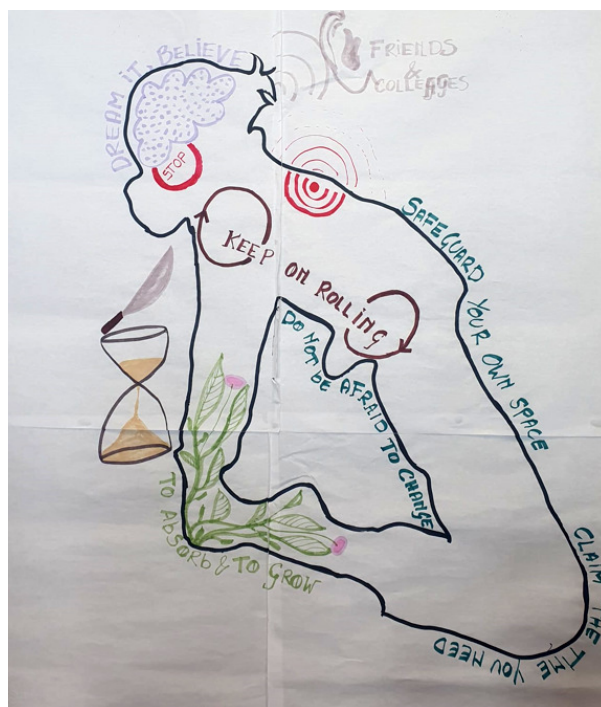
Figure 2. Hour-glass with knife on body-map.

initial outlining phase, to allow participants to revisit and refine their work in multiple sessions. This approach not only accommodates the varying paces at which individuals engage with the material but also underscores the importance of the *process* over the *product*. As one expert with experience in community-based participatory research highlighted:

> In co-creative research, it's more about the *process* than the end *product*.

Prioritizing the quality and depth of the creative process over strict adherence to predefined schedules enables researchers to cultivate a supportive and ethically sound environment, enhancing both the authenticity and therapeutic value of the research outcomes.

4.1.3. Cultivating Voices: Fostering Artistic-Expression in Participatory Research

Another challenge that emerged during the workshop was participants' reluctance to engage in artistic self-expression, a sentiment prevalent among marginalised groups particularly in forced migration research (Lenette, 2019). This hesitation was vividly expressed by a participant:

> I would not call myself an artist; however, I may be convinced to call myself a social artist.

This shift from reluctance to tentative acceptance marks a critical narrative change, reflecting common barriers of self-doubt due to a lack of confidence in expressive skills. Reframing the artistic process as a vehicle for personal and emotional expression rather than a demonstration of technical skill can significantly lower the threshold for engagement. This approach helps participants move beyond their self-doubt and recognise their potential as creators, fostering a deeper connection with the art-making process (Leavy,

2017). Such a supportive environment is essential, as it encourages a transformative experience through art, enabling participants to see and express themselves in new and empowering ways.

To address these initial hesitations, experts at the workshop advocated for a more inclusive and nurturing approach during the early stages of artistic activities specifically in trauma-informed research. The research psychologist and epistemologist from South Africa suggested:

> My experiences of similar work tell me to have informal meetings with them before the body-mapping workshops, [get them to] familiarize [with] you, draw with them…remember it is a relational co-creative process. You are becoming together…the connectedness in you as co-researchers, as humans.

By actively engaging alongside participants, facilitators can shift the focus from "correctness" to "connectedness," fostering a more inclusive and supportive art-making environment. This method not only encourages greater freedom of engagement but also underscores the therapeutic value of the process. Through collaborative interactions, facilitators create a space where art serves as a powerful tool for healing and self-expression, thus enhancing the depth and effectiveness of the participatory research experience. The emphasis on nurturing relationships within research settings enriches the transformative potential of art-based participatory research, making it a profound agent of change and personal growth.

4.2. Navigating Power Dynamics

In participatory research, power dynamics are constantly being negotiated. The South African workshop highlighted how power can be shared through collaborative agency, relational trust, and an openness to co-creation. These reflections challenge traditional hierarchies in research, emphasising that power is not static but fluid, evolving with the interactions between researchers and participants.

4.2.1. Reframing Power: Collaborative Agency in Participatory Research

Western academia, according to several experts, has a tendency to over-vulnerablise participants, especially if they are from the Global South, disabled, or young, and erase their agency and strength (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). This significant bias in Western research sets the stage for a broader discussion on the relational nature of power and agency in research settings. A community-based child psychologist, specialised in decolonial, African-centred approaches underscored this:

> It is problematic to assume, before even being in the field, that some have power and others don't. They come with their lived experiences as we have.

This perspective challenges the conventional view of power as static and unidirectional, emphasising instead its fluid and negotiated nature in the research process. Further enriching this discussion, another expert with expertise in visual arts-based methods highlighted the transformative potential of reciprocal trust in participatory and collaborative research:

> If you gift trust to someone else, they give back power…they give "you" power. I experience this often with my community work.

This reciprocal empowerment is pivotal in redefining traditional researcher-participant dynamics. By valuing participants' contributions and involving them as co-creators, research processes become more equitable, particularly for groups like asylum-seekers who often confront disempowerment by the policy narrative. McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021) support this view, suggesting that such collaborative practices can effectively democratize research, allowing participants to significantly influence the research's direction and assert their agency. The discourse on power dynamics extends to the global context, where Kwon et al. (2018) critique the colonial underpinnings of research conducted by Global North institutions. These institutions tend to impose their frameworks of unidirectional power narrative on marginalised/vulnerable communities, perpetuating a form of academic colonialism. The South African workshop serves as a counterpoint to this trend, emphasising the importance of local expertise and lived experiences in shaping research methodologies that genuinely reflect the needs and realities of "underrepresented" communities. This approach not only challenges the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production but also fosters a research environment where *power* is more evenly distributed and *agency* is actively cultivated, echoing Barad (2007) who contends that agency emerges from the dynamic interplay of relationality.

4.2.2. Renegotiating Power: Cultivating Openness and Reciprocity in Participatory Research

Renegotiating power dynamics in participatory research involves redefining spatial and interpersonal dynamics, essential when engaging with vulnerable and marginalised populations. The South African workshop demonstrated this through its deliberate spatial setup, designed to encourage free movement and interaction. Workshops were equipped with creatively stimulating environments, allowing free movement throughout—tables lined with paper, accessible colourful pens, and markers—fostering a dynamic and participatory atmosphere. This configuration reflects a cultural openness, as one South African psychologist with a focus on relational ontologies in community-based research noted:

> The local South African context and our social norms allow for free movement within and across personal spaces, perhaps not normalized in the Global North.

This practice of embracing "South-ness" fosters a welcoming space where incoming researchers are seen as partners in mutual learning rather than "the other," reflecting Santos' (2015) concept of "ecologies of knowledge." This approach encourages intercultural exchange that transcends abyssal divides in knowledge hierarchies and epistemologies. Experts further highlighted the importance of viewing consent as a dynamic, ongoing process, essential for maintaining an inclusive atmosphere. As emphasised in the workshop recommendations: "Ensure open free space where ongoing consent is allowed and participants can leave at any time." This underscores the necessity of adapting consent as interactions deepen and evolve. By ensuring workshop spaces remain open and activities consensual, we respected participants' autonomy and changing preferences. This approach, highlighted by Carozzi and Horner (2023), acknowledges the fluidity of participant engagement and the ethical need to maintain consent throughout the research lifecycle.

Addressing the ethics of compensation, the workshop participants actively challenged funding inequities prevalent in marginalisation and forced migration research. An expert emphasised that compensation extends beyond monetary value, reflecting respect and recognition of participants' contributions:

> What is in for them is essential, not as an indebtedness but in their sense of community. We provided food packs to our HIV-surviving participants.

This aligns with Lenette's (2019) perspective that participants, as knowledge holders, must be compensated for their collaborative involvement, directly addressing the power imbalances often inherent in research partnerships. Knowledge holders volunteer their time, their expertise, emotions, and their knowledge; while those hired for the research, or leading the research based in universities are funded for undertaking research.

Throughout the workshop, the unintentional yet meaningful relationships that emerged underscored a deep commitment to "South-ness"—an embodied immersion in shared geographical, cultural, and experiential bond that fosters genuine connections. These relationships, though not formally labelled, were enriched by mutual respect and a collective experience of solidarity and support, challenging the rigid, often colonial, research structures.

4.2.3. Power of Social Connectedness: Beyond Western Epistemic Control

Western academic geographies often practice epistemic control through enforcing "right" ways of knowing and doing research, leading to the erasure of alternative epistemologies—a phenomenon Santos (2018) terms as epistemicide. Despite promises under EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) policies to encourage creative methods like body-mapping, the ethical frameworks that underpin such policies remain entrenched in binaries, which separate the researcher from the participant and uphold a detached, objective research model (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As noted by Manning (2018), this approach not only undermines the relational, embodied nature of creative research but does violence to the very bodies it claims to protect. Detached, observer-centric research continues to be celebrated, while the close relationships fostered through co-creative methods like body-mapping are either dismissed or viewed with suspicion, still tethered to the ethics of positivism.

During a body-mapping workshop, when concerns about power dynamics arose, a community-based visual arts researcher contended:

> While working in the slum community, I formed close friendships. I did not intend it, but it was inevitable. Trust dissolved the power dynamics itself.

This dissolving of boundaries echoed across the workshop as Global North and South participants traced their bodies together, illustrating social connectedness through holding hands in their drawings (Figures 3 and 4). Such relationality defied the Western ethics rigid notions of separation between researcher and researched (Carozzi & Horner, 2023), instead embracing Barad's (2007) notion of entangled relationalities, where humans are deeply interwoven in their social being. Recognising this emergence, another scholar advised:

> Allow 30–45 minutes for participants to form connections [at] the start and meet informally before the activity to build collaborative bonds.

In this way, the field becomes a space of shared knowledge and collaboration, highlighting that the pre-set ethical frameworks cannot resolve the complexities of relational, co-creative research without being immersed in the field itself. Opportunities that emerge in the field need to be celebrated rather than sticking with the risk-averse narrative of Western ways of doing research.
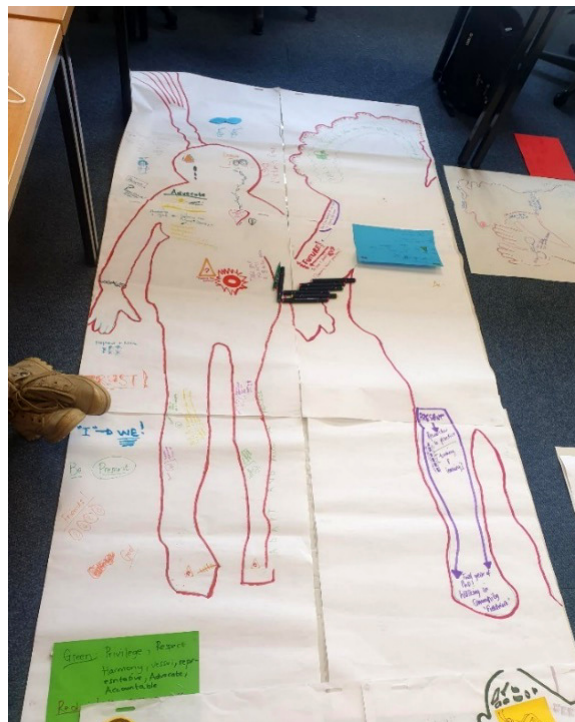

Figure 3. Image holding hands.

Figure 4. Body-map holding hands.

4.3. Navigating Emotions and Trauma

Navigating emotions and trauma in participatory embodied research requires careful attention to the emotional and psychological complexities participants bring into the process. The insights gathered from the South African workshop illustrate how trauma-sensitive methods can foster emotional expression, bodily autonomy, and collective healing, while maintaining ethical sensitivity throughout.

4.3.1. Exploring Emotional Depths: Trauma, Healing, and Ethical Sensitivity in Embodied Research

When working with vulnerable populations such as forced migrants, psychological and emotional safety are central concerns in arts-based research, which often brings emotions to the surface (Murray et al., 2023). Throughout the South African workshop, both experts and participants acknowledged the emotional toll such work entails, highlighting the critical need for approaches that prioritize emotional well-being. One participant working in social and spatial urban transformation poignantly shared:

> The circumstances in which my participants find themselves leave me feeling heavy and broken-hearted.

This illustrates how researchers themselves can be deeply impacted by the emotional weight carried by the participants. Research in trauma settings requires intentionally designed collaborative spaces where emotions can be processed non-verbally, using therapeutic methods such as body-mapping. Artistic expression, such as body-mapping, offers a meaningful medium for trauma survivors to externalize and process their pain. In the workshop, the same participant placed a symbolic "plaster" with words saying "let it go" on their body-map (Figure 5), representing emotional healing (Boydell, 2020).

Figure 5. Plaster on Heart with words reading "let it go."

This act illustrates the potential of body-mapping to allow participants to confront and express their trauma in a safe and controlled manner, staying true to its inception rooted in art-based therapy (Gastaldo et al., 2012). However, navigating these emotional complexities requires ongoing ethical sensitivity. Participants may experience conflicting emotions—grappling with both joy and sadness—necessitating flexible research environments that allow for breaks, emotional support, and responsiveness to emotional overload. As a child psychologist working with arts-based methods with children mentioned:

> Holding joy at the same time as sadness is honestly a lot so heavy.

Another participant emphasised the importance of building trust and familiarity, recommending:

> Make sure that the organisational leads or people these young women are familiar with are present in the field while you conduct body-maps. This has been a useful strategy in past research.

These emotionally attuned adjustments are crucial in ensuring emotional safety while maintaining the therapeutic value of the arts-based methodology.

4.3.2. Unveiling Trauma: Navigating Bodily Autonomy in Embodied Research

Gender related issues that may inflict trauma also came to foreground during the South African workshop. One expert expressed apprehension about certain practices during body-mapping:

> Some of the vulnerable gendered populations have been through various ordeals including assault. They may not be comfortable with peers drawing around their body even if they are of similar gender.

This reflection highlights the emotional and psychological risks inherent in activities that involve body tracing, especially for participants who have experienced trauma related to violations of bodily autonomy. Literature on participatory research echoes these concerns, suggesting that for trauma survivors, body-mapping must be approached with extreme sensitivity (Lenette, 2021). Offering participants the choice to draw their own outlines, rather than having others trace around their bodies, can help restore a sense of bodily autonomy, a vital aspect of healing for those who have experienced gender-based violence. By making such adjustments, researchers create a safer, more empowering environment that respects the bodily integrity of participants and avoids retraumatizing them.

A significant concern also arose around the "marks on the body" exercise, which asked participants to draw marks under their skin (Figure 1). While initially designed as a reflective tool for facilitators (Gastaldo et al., 2012), the suggestion to use this question in trauma-sensitive research raised concerns. One expert noted:

> Asking this question from vulnerable [people] who have been through various types of traumas can cause emotional and psychological distress.

This highlights the need for cautious adaptation of such exercises, ensuring that they do not retraumatize participants. The workshop's recommendation to remove this particular exercise demonstrates the care needed when engaging in embodied research, especially with gendered trauma survivors.

4.3.3. Collective Healing: Cultivating Emotional Safety in Participatory Group Settings

Social embodiment research indicates that physical and environmental cues—such as smells, brightness, warmth, connections, and body postures—shape our moral and social judgments, as well as how we engage with others (Lakens, 2014). During the South African workshop, participants reflected on how group settings contributed to their sense of emotional safety. In this workshop, participants observed that their choice of standing together around their body-maps to co-analyse fostered an atmosphere of collective engagement, where input from others helped deepen individual self-reflection. One participant remarked:

> Though the body-maps capture individual embodied meaning, the collective input on my map helped me better display my emotions.

The group co-analysis method, which emerged through participant negotiation, facilitated emotional expression by creating a space where participants could share their experiences and receive validation from peers. This highlights the relational nature of fieldwork, where ethics are not fixed but emerge from specific choices in context (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As Barad (2007) argues, researchers are not radical outsiders to the field; they are entangled in the process alongside participants, who serve as co-researchers in participatory research. This collaborative process helped cultivate trust—both in oneself and others—essential for emotional safety. Another participant, working with visual arts demonstrated how collective input fosters openness. This transformed the body-maps from individual tools into a collective process of healing and empowerment. As one participant put it:

> I am an introvert, but hearing others share their emotional experiences has enabled me to share my own.

Murray et al. (2023) emphasise that the co-analysis of body-maps, though scarcely documented, fosters safety, ownership, and community by allowing participants to connect, affirm, and validate shared experiences. This collaborative process embodies the idea that together we perform and produce research which helps us exploit our potential and constantly become (Boundas, 2006). Through these relational interactions, participants naturally cultivate solidarity, finding solace and strength in shared vulnerabilities. This recognition of common struggles not only deepens engagement but also highlights the therapeutic impact of collective artistic expression in participatory research settings.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Building on Thanem and Knights' (2019) critique of privileging discourse *about* the body over embodied experiences *with* the body, in our preparatory workshop, body-mapping became more than a method imposed on participants; it became a relational process, where both participants and researchers collaboratively created knowledge by taking "refuge" in the tool's country of origin. This engagement allowed for a deeper understanding of how emotions and power relations are continuously renegotiated and reshaped within the research space. Learning from South African experts provided critical insights into navigating marginalised settings with sensitivity and adaptability, positioning us not as detached researchers but as active participants in the co-creation of knowledge (Nunn, 2022). In this way, our body-mapping workshop emerged as an "intra-vention" rather than a mere intervention (Lupton & Leahy, 2021).

Barad's (2007) concept of "intra-action" underscores how bodies, environments, and emotions co-create meaning through mutual entanglement. Building on this, our body-mapping workshop emerged as an "intra-vention," where identities and insights unfolded dynamically within the participatory process rather than being pre-defined. Unlike conventional interventions, intra-vention involved mutual co-constitution, allowing participants' identities to evolve through body-mapping itself—some even identifying as "social artists" during the process. This approach was distinctly material-discursive, as the material aspects of the body, art, and environment interwove with participants' narratives of marginalization, resilience, and support. Embracing temporal fluidity, intra-vention enabled past, present, and future experiences to intra-act, generating a continuously evolving narrative of working with marginalised populations that defied a linear concept of time.

This intra-vention not only refined the body-mapping process but also redefined power dynamics. As participants shared insights, the researcher's role shifted from expert to engaged learner, challenging traditional hierarchies. Reflecting on this shift, I realised—as Puar (2020) suggests—that I became a cyborg rather than a goddess, embracing fluid assemblages over fixed identities. This adaptability blurred the boundaries between researcher and participant, showing that bodies, emotions, and power relations are continuously reshaped. Transcending these boundaries exposed a key gap in ABR: Scholars rarely pilot methodologies or engage in peer debriefing to address their own emotional burdens. This preparatory workshop provided such a space, offering collective reflection, healing, and critical learning alongside participants.

Orchard's (2017) critique of body-mapping's cultural appropriation, particularly the lack of grounding in its South African origins, is insightful but reflects a Global North perspective. In contrast, we contend that to situate a method in the Global South is to learn from its *South-ness*. Our workshop sought to centre body-mapping in its "South-ness," aligning with Santos' (2015) post-abyssal thinking, which challenges the Eurocentric "abyssal line" that marginalises non-Western knowledge. Santos calls for "ecologies of knowledge"—a coexistence of scientific, indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing fostering intercultural dialogue. By situating our workshop in South Africa, we embraced *relationality* over Western notions of *detachment*, positioning knowledge as relational and collectively shaped rather than individually owned or objectified (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As one South African expert eloquently noted, the local context and social norms in South Africa allow for a fluid movement within and across personal spaces—a freedom less emphasised in the Global North. This dynamic, which embraces openness and relationality, aligns with what Nash (2019) describes as the "letting go" of knowledge—rejecting Western academia's fixation on intellectual ownership. This ethos of shared learning became a lived practice in the workshop, symbolized by body maps featuring "holding hands" (Figures 3 and 4), reflecting connection rather than isolation. Furthermore, embracing "South-ness" meant prioritizing *reciprocity* over *extraction* (Santos, 2015); South African experts advocated for fair compensation, ensuring equity between researchers and participants as co-creators of participatory workshops. This "South-ness" also fostered a *dynamic* research environment, emphasising ongoing consent and participant agency, while challenging *static* and *unidirectional* narratives of vulnerability. Through this relational engagement, we created a shared space that not only exchanged knowledge but transformed it through our collective engagement.

Orchard's (2017) critique emphasised the importance of respecting the therapeutic orientation and contextual grounding of body-mapping. Echoing this, experts in our workshop suggested approaching body-mapping as

a *process* rather than a *product*, where rushing would undermine the method's potential to allow participants' bodies to narrate their own embodied stories. This aligns with Murray et al. (2023) argument, who underscore the need for trauma-sensitive approach where participants can process and express complex emotions at their own pace. The workshop also facilitated an exchange with trauma-informed experts, reinforcing Orchard's (2017, p. 7) call to "know as much as possible about the lives of the people they work with." Field visits to marginalised communities deepened our understanding, with experts recommending similar engagement in forced migration research. Their insistence on thoughtful, contextual adaptation was further highlighted in their advice to remove the "marks under the skin" activity, underscoring the importance of aligning methods with participants' unique lived experiences.

In this collaborative effort to address Orchard's critique and refine the body-mapping process, we further foregrounded its social and collective healing potential—an aspect previously unexplored. The workshop revealed how group co-analysis fostered emotional safety, helping participants to collectively navigate stress and complex emotions. This sense of community, celebrated in the South, emerged as a vital aspect, highlighting the relational therapeutic dimensions of body-mapping that had largely gone unacknowledged. Such relational processes allowed us to expand body-mapping's original conception, inviting new pathways for social embodiment and collective meaning-making. As Nash (2019) contends, honoring knowledge means resisting static ownership and embracing dynamic, co-creative potential. In this sense, to honor is to expand rather than hoard—to experiment and push boundaries. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) echo this, suggesting that experimentation is always "in the making." In our workshop's "third sphere," body-mapping was not about reaching a pre-defined outcome but about letting the process unfold through the active, relational dynamics of the field. This act of *making* became an embodied, social experiment where knowledge was co-created in real time. By pushing the boundaries of body-mapping's possibilities, we honored its origins not by keeping it static, but by letting it evolve into a fluid assemblage of emotions, shared experiences, re-negotiated power dynamics, and social connectedness.

While body-mapping enables participants to resist and redefine the "victim" narrative through active engagement, certain limitations warrant consideration. Egalitarian methods like body-mapping can foster mutual inspiration, as demonstrated by the emergence of social artists from our workshop, though they may also inadvertently lead to comparisons. In other settings, some participants might feel intimidated by others' artwork, which could hinder creativity rather than encourage it (Naidu, 2018). Additionally, while we advocate for treating body-mapping as an unfolding process rather than a fixed product, research contexts with stringent objectives might find this approach challenging, potentially rushing a method that thrives on time-intensive relationality.

Despite these limitations, the concept of social embodiment emerged in the field. This aspect of embodiment, however, remains under-researched in existing literature because it defies the traditional Western epistemological frameworks, which often emphasise binary, detached, and fixed orientations. In contrast, social embodiment is relational, multidirectional, and fluid, reflecting the ongoing interactions between bodies, environments, and communities. The reluctance of Western frameworks to embrace this relational potential of body-mapping has limited its exploration, making our work a necessary intra-vention in expanding the understanding of embodied, co-creative research.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The original contributions presented in this research are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

References

Adorno, T. W. (2001). *Selected essays on mass culture*. Routledge.

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barnes, L. G., Podpadec, T., Jones, V., Vafadari, J., Pawson, C., Whitehouse, S., & Richards, M. (2024). 'Where do you feel it most?' Using body mapping to explore the lived experiences of racism with 10- and 11-year-olds. *British Educational Research Journal*, *50*(3), 1556–1575. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3980

Bilgen, A., Nasir, A., & Schöneberg, J. (2021). Why positionalities matter: Reflections on power, hierarchy, and knowledges in "development" research. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement*, *42*(4), 519–536. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2021.1871593

Boundas, C. V. (Ed.). (2006). *Deleuze and philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press.

Boydell, K. (2020). *Applying body mapping in research: An arts-based method*. Routledge.

Braidotti, R., & Bignall, S. (2018). *Posthuman ecologies: Complexity and process after Deleuze*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Capous-Desyllas, M., & Morgaine, K. (Eds.). (2018). *Creating social change through creativity: Anti-oppressive arts-based research methodologies*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52129-9

Carozzi, G., & Horner, L. K. (2023). Onto-epistemicide and the research ethics board: Toward a reflexive ethics. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *31*(1), 45–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231209064

Collings, S., Wright, A. C., & Spencer, M. (2022). Telling visual stories of loss and hope: Body mapping with mothers about contact after child removal. *Qualitative Research*, *22*(6), 877–896. https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211004218

D'souza, N. A., Guzder, J., Hickling, F., & Groleau, D. (2021). Mapping the body, voicing the margins: Using body maps to understand children's embodied experiences of violence in Kingston, Jamaica. *Children & Society*, *35*(2), 179–197. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12413

Dam, R. F., & Siang, T. Y. (2021). *Design thinking: Get started with prototyping*. Interaction Design Foundation. https://library.parenthelp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/www.interaction-design.org_.pdf

Davis, S., van Nek, Y., & Horlings, L. G. (2022). How to nurture ground for arts-based co-creative practice in

an invited space: Reflections on a community in North Netherlands. In A. Franklin (Ed.), *Co-creativity and engaged scholarship: Transformative methods in social sustainability research* (pp. 229–263). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84248-2_8

de Andrade, M., Stenhouse, R., & Wyatt, J. (2020). Some openings, possibilities, and constraints of creative-relational inquiry: Introduction to the special issue. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, *9*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.1

de Jager, A., Tewson, A., Ludlow, B., & Boydell, K. M. (2016). Embodied ways of storying the self: A systematic review of body-mapping. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *17*(2), Article 22. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2526

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1994). *What is philosophy?* Verso.

Dierckx, C., Hendricks, L., Coemans, S., & Hannes, K. (2020). The third sphere: Reconceptualising allyship in community-based participatory research praxis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *17*(4), 522–539. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854402

Foucault, M., & Deleuze, G. (1980). Intellectuals and power. In D. F. Bouchard (Ed.), *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (pp. 205–217). Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501741913-011

Gastaldo, D., Magalhães, L., Carrasco, C., & Davy, C. (2012). *Body-map storytelling as research: Methodological considerations for telling the stories of undocumented workers through body mapping*. Migration as a Social Determinant of Health. http://www.migrationhealth.ca/undocumented-workers-ontario/body-mapping

Gramsci, A. (2020). Selections from the prison notebooks. In T. Prentki & A. Prestidge (Eds.), *The applied theatre reader* (2nd ed., pp. 200–202). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429355363-27

Hannes, K., Hendricks, L., & Dierckx, C. (Eds.). (2023). *Doing fieldwork in challenging circumstances: Summoning participatory methods*. Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek, KU Leuven.

Haraway, D. (2013). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. In M. Wyer, M. Barbercheck, D. Cookmeyer, H. Ozturk, & M. Wayne (Eds.), *Women, science, and technology* (3rd ed., pp. 233–245). Routledge.

Jama, P. P., Wood, L., & Ndlovu Nkomo, A. (2024). The power (and caveats) of body mapping as a visual methodology with vulnerable youth. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *24*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-11-2023-0172

Klein, M., & Milner, R. J. (2019). The use of body-mapping in interpretative phenomenological analyses: A methodological discussion. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *22*(5), 533–543. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1593378

Kwon, S. C., Tandon, S. D., Islam, N., Riley, L., & Trinh-Shevrin, C. (2018). Applying a community-based participatory research framework to patient and family engagement in the development of patient-centred outcomes research and practice. *Translational Behavioural Medicine*, *8*(5), 683–691. https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibx026

Lakens, D. (2014). Grounding social embodiment. *Social Cognition*, *32*(Suppl.), 168–183. https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2014.32.supp.168

Leavy, P. (2017). *Handbook of arts-based research*. Guilford Publications.

Lenette, C. (2019). *Arts-based methods in refugee research: Creating sanctuary*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8008-2

Lenette, C. (2021). Health on the move: Walking interviews in health and wellbeing research. In D. Lupton & D. Leahy (Eds.), *Creative approaches to health education* (pp. 136–159). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003126508-10

Lupton, D., & Leahy, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Creative approaches to health education: New ways of thinking, making, doing, teaching and learning*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003126508

Manning, E. (2018). *The minor gesture*. Duke University Press.

McIntyre, J., & Neuhaus, S. (2021). Theorising policy and practice in refugee education: Conceptualising 'safety,' 'belonging,' 'success' and 'participatory parity' in England and Sweden. *British Educational Research Journal*, *47*(4), 796–816. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3701

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1945)

Mohanty, C. T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, *30*, 61–88. https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054

Murray, A., Steffen, M., Keiller, E., Turri, M. G., & Lau, J. Y. F. (2023). Body-mapping for art-based inquiry in mental health research: A scoping review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, *10*(11), 896–908. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(23)00224-9

Naidu, M. (2018). When my body is in the way: Body mapping and troublesome positionality. *Agenda*, *32*(2), 106–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1455293

Nash, J. C. (2019). *Black feminism reimagined: After intersectionality*. Duke University Press.

Nunn, C. (2022). The participatory arts-based research project as an exceptional sphere of belonging. *Qualitative Research*, *22*(2), 251–268. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120980971

Orchard, T. (2017). *Remembering the body: Ethical issues in body mapping research*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-49861-4

Praag, L. V. (Ed.). (2021). *Co-creation in migration studies: The use of co-creative methods to study migrant integration across European societies*. Leuven University Press.

Puar, J. K. (2020). "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess": Becoming-intersectional in assemblage theory. In C. R. McCann & S.-K. Kim (Eds.), *Feminist theory reader* (5th ed., pp. 405–415). Routledge.

Santos, B. de S. (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315634876

Santos, B. de S. (2018). *The end of the cognitive empire: The coming of age of epistemologies of the South*. Duke University Press.

Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Solomon, J. (2007). *Living with X: A body mapping journey in the time of HIV and AIDS (Facilitator's Guide)*. REPSSI. https://repssi.org/documents/publications/REPSSI_body_mapping_guide.pdf

Thanem, T., & Knights, D. (2019). *Embodied research methods*. Sage.

Vacchelli, E. (2018). Embodiment in qualitative research: Collage making with migrant, refugee and asylum seeking women. *Qualitative Research*, *18*(2), 171–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117708008

Wang, Q., Coemans, S., Siegesmund, R., & Hannes, K. (2017). Arts-based methods in socially engaged research practice: A classification framework. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, *2*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.18432/R26G8P

Ziff, B. H., & Rao, P. V. (1997). *Borrowed power: Essays on cultural appropriation*. Rutgers University Press.

About the Authors

Syeda Sidra Idrees (سدرہ) is a fully-funded joint PhD scholar at the University of Edinburgh and KU Leuven, and a Chevening Scholar (2016/2017). Her PhD research uses body-mapping to understand asylum-seeking girls' experiences with the UK's asylum policy through a decolonial lens. Her notable work includes Pakistan's first slum profiling across eight mega-cities while also using visual and performative arts to boost immunization demand and improve Public health policy. Sidra is passionate about co-creative art-based methods to advance inclusive and equitable social policies.

Karin Hannes specializes in innovative research methods and models to respond to emerging social challenges, focusing on arts-based, place-based, and multisensory designs, and qualitative evidence synthesis as a meta-review technique. She develops, evaluates, and adapts methods for diverse study contexts. Her transdisciplinary team explores urban development, citizen science, art and design, social-behavioral and educational sciences, public health, community-based practice, and global sustainability, crafting inclusive frameworks to study complex phenomena critically. She also inaugurated and chairs the European Network of Qualitative Inquiry.

Marisa de Andrade is co-director of the Binks Hub, co-director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry, and programme director of MScR Health Humanities and Arts at the University of Edinburgh. Marisa uses "traditional" and (post)-qualitative methodologies to situate arts at the helm of strategic decision-making across multiple sectors including health and social care, employability, education, and social justice. Currently, she is project lead on a UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) £2.5 million transdisciplinary grant called REALITIES in Health Disparities: Researching Evidence-Based Alternatives In Living, Imaginative, Traumatised, Integrated, Embodied Systems.

Social Inclusion is a peer-reviewed open access journal which provides academics and policymakers with a forum to discuss and promote a more socially inclusive society.

The journal encourages researchers to publish their results on topics concerning social and cultural cohesiveness, marginalized social groups, social stratification, minority-majority interaction, cultural diversity, national identity, and core-periphery relations, while making significant contributions to the understanding and enhancement of social inclusion worldwide.

cogitatio