

Indigenous wisdoms and the decolonial efforts in migration studies in South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, where the legacies of colonialism and apartheid persist, decolonial approaches become increasingly imperative. Migration studies, in particular, has been challenged as a field historically linked to inequality and extractivist research practices. In response, scholars are seeking to re-center Indigenous knowledges that challenge Euro-American epistemologies. However, critiques warn of risks of appropriation and misuse, raising questions about whether and how decolonization is possible. This article examines the contested role of Indigenous wisdoms, ubuntu from Africa and *corazonar* from Abya Yala in decolonial efforts toward migration studies. Drawing on narratives from migration scholars and professional activists, advocates and artists working with forced migrants in South Africa, we explore efforts to engage more ethically during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents how Indigenous wisdoms link knowledge production with practices of care, conceptualized not as individual acts but as relational socio-political practices of justice. At the same time, care is both enabled and constrained by structural inequalities that shape both lived experiences and academic engagement. By examining the possibilities and limitations of ubuntu and *corazonar*, the article reimagines pathways for collaboration with African forced migrant communities by foregrounding relational care against the backdrop of structural inequalities. In doing so, we critically reflect on the (im)possibilities of decolonial efforts in migration studies in South Africa.

Keywords Indigenous wisdoms; decolonization; migration; care; South Africa.

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Introduction

“... these are unprecedented times ... you can’t be expecting me to answer your question when I’m starving ...” (personal communication, 16 June 2020).

We begin with a poignant quote shared by Inyoni, a Black South African emergent decolonial scholar and activist, who described how the COVID-19 pandemic led her to reflect further on her position within academia, and within the field of forced migration in particular. Identifying herself as a Black, decolonial African feminist, Inyoni questioned whether cultivating critical, grassroots research in times of profound crisis was ethical, what kinds of methods would be appropriate, and how her positionality would unfold vis-à-vis migrant sex workers, a community disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Mutariri 2022). We therefore situate Inyoni’s reflections as a departure point to address ongoing efforts to unsettle histories of oppressive power relations in academia, and migration studies in particular, as a contribution to decolonial or border thinking (Anzaldúa 2004).

In South Africa, where histories of colonialism, apartheid, and racial capitalism (Alexander 1985) continue to manifest through rampant inequalities and segregation, decolonization becomes a fundamental approach to unsettle structures of racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2021). This is manifested not only in the way Black students and staff continue to disproportionately struggle to access and remain in South African universities (Hlatshwayo 2020), but also in the way academia has been complicit in normalizing alienating discourse that “othersises” Black communities, including Black migrant communities, while sustaining white privilege. Questions around who has access to produce academic knowledge, how knowledge is produced, and with what purposes and implications highlight the need to unsettle the coloniality entrenched in academia, in relation to the lasting patterns and structures inherent from colonization and apartheid (Tamale 2020).

A clear manifestation of coloniality has been the historical silencing of Indigenous wisdoms, which, in this article refers to worldviews that include knowledge, languages, concepts, and practices, as well as sensorial, cognitive, and spiritual experiences of those who were formally colonized (Guerrero Arias 2010). Euro-American perspectives have historically guided academic institutions in South Africa, having endorsed such epistemicides through deeply segregated education systems, where even after apartheid, continue to marginalize the languages, cultures, and perspectives of Black, African communities, including migrants. This is why decolonial efforts have highlighted the importance of respecting and incorporating Indigenous wisdoms into research conceptualization, ethics, and dissemination, making research contextually relevant (Cross and Ndofirepi 2017). However, significant critiques remain regarding how Indigenous wisdoms come to be defined and articulated within academic spaces that have historically silenced and excluded the indigenous communities. Moreover, a focus on Indigenous perspectives is especially contested in the field of migration studies in South Africa, as colonial logics cemented nations states and borders (Mbasalaki and Kizito 2024). While apartheid logics of segregation have resulted in a sense of competition among local and foreign Black communities over which communities are more deserving of receiving social and epistemic justice. With rising xenophobia in academia, we see Indigenous wisdoms as a political construct, having historically resisted colonial oppression but also one that goes beyond state borders, and activist postures based on colonial state ideologies and practices that reproduce racist border controls and alienate Black communities on the move (Khalema et al. 2018).

Similar critiques on reproducing colonial concepts of borders and the state have been directed at migration studies. The field has been particularly challenged by decolonial efforts in unpacking the historical influence of unequal and unjust power structures on research

concerning migrants' lives and migration. Focusing on migration and its control, [Vanyoro \(2024\)](#); stresses the way (South) African migration has been largely framed by colonial and apartheid interests, and continues to inform present political realities including migration studies' conceptualizations, research processes and dissemination. Indeed, scholars such as [Crawley et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Fiddian-Qasmiyeh \(2020\)](#) have highlighted the dominance of Western-based scholarship in the field, noting the reinforcement of a "paradigm of absence" ([de Souza e Silva 2021](#)), which portrays communities from the Global South as lagging behind, deficient, and precarious, with the main goal of relocating to the Global North.

[Vanyoro \(2024, 2026\)](#) has highlighted how, indeed, migration studies in South Africa has not truly deconstructed coloniality in the field, but instead has internalized and reinforced colonial concepts and power dynamics through, at times, xenophobic regimes, despite aiming for decolonial approaches. This reflects similar critiques ([Tuck and Yang 2012](#); [Raghuram et al. 2020](#)) that have warned about the colonization of decolonization by uncritical, reductionist, and superficial propositions that do not unsettle power relations but rather offer alternative disguises for structural inequalities. Such critiques also target participatory methods and artistic projects that aim for more relational approaches instead of extractivist research. While these methodologies seek to center migrants' voices and depart from community-based engagements, they at times reinforce notions of inclusion that place historically marginalized groups, such as racialized migrants, as subjects to be studied, fixated in a place of lack and suffering, and as either a threat to be controlled and eradicated, or as victims to be saved ([Fiorito 2024](#); [Vanyoro 2024](#)). When more bottom-up research does not critically address structural inequalities within knowledge-making, it runs the risk of disguising asymmetric power relations, bringing little to no benefit to marginalized migrant communities, and instead using them to sustain the status quo of privileged academics ([Raghuram et al. 2020](#)).

Considering such critiques, we approach the concept of critical engaged scholarship as academic work that aims to recognize and challenge structures of exclusion and inequality entrenched in academic knowledge-making ([Kajner 2013](#)), and thus potentially supports border thinking or decolonial efforts. It does so by bringing further participatory approaches, seeking not only more creative and communal methodologies, but also reframing ontological as well as epistemological paradigms in research, unsettling academic structures of power in order to contribute to social justice ([Ocadiz Arriaga 2025](#); [Ponzoni et al. 2026](#)). In this regard, we see a correlation between engaged scholarship and decolonial love, as "a form of rupturing subjugated forms of knowledge, and hence, forms of being" ([Davids, 2019: 112](#)). Love here is a technology exercised through ethical relationships of care and respect for differences in order to disrupt oppressive hegemonies ([Sandoval 2000](#), quoted in [Davids 2019](#)). This brings us back to Inyoni's narrative on how COVID-19 amplified unjust conditions of existence, stressing the need to unpack the role of care in pursuing critical decolonial efforts.

Focusing on the urge for critical and decolonial efforts in migration studies, and the relevance of care in times of heightened crisis (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), this article aims to investigate the contribution and contested position of Indigenous wisdoms in academia. It focuses on *ubuntu*¹ and *corazonar*, wisdoms from Sub-Saharan Africa and Abya Yala, respectively, as frameworks to approach the narratives of twenty-two migration scholars and fourteen professional artists, activists, and advocates working with migrants during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Ubuntu is native to several African communities and has been extensively discussed in the South African context as a currency for justice and equity ([Gouws and Van Zyl 2015](#); [Mbasalaki 2018](#)). Corazonar comes specifically from the Kitu Kara people in Ecuador and was introduced into academia by [Guerrero Arias \(2010, 2011\)](#) as a political and

spiritual initiative for dignity, freedom, and justice. These specific Indigenous wisdoms are approached here due to their focus on weaving practices of care into processes of knowledge-making.

Cognizant of the structures of oppression and inequality prevailing in South Africa, deeply linked to entrenched power relations in academia, we approach the contributions of ubuntu and corazonar to unpack the contestations of cultivating critical engagements with migrants, contributing to the (im)possibilities of decolonial efforts or border work in migration studies. We do so by exploring, while problematizing, a South–South dialog on the theoretical relevance of ubuntu and corazonar to academia, and migration studies in particular. We then engage with the narratives of migration scholars and professionals, complicating notions of care and exploring further pathways for ethical and critical collaboration with migrant communities.

Indigenous wisdoms: epistemic logics and ethics of care

Recognizing that decolonization is about the reparations of Indigenous life and land, there is an urgent need to question whether and how Indigenous ways of being and knowing can be implemented to unsettle colonial structures in academia (Tuck and Yang 2012). However, we are well aware that there is a serious risk of misusing Indigenous wisdoms to not only reinforce but also disguise colonial logics of power imbalances. Especially with irresponsible use, without contextualization or recognition of indigenous communities could result in appropriation (Legault and Bleau 2025). While being reflective and critical in our approach to Ubuntu and Corazonar, we are cognizant of the fact that that we are situated within academic systems that are historically colonial and neoliberal. Being racialized, gendered scholars based in the Global North, we are even more conscious of our liminal position and our personal and academic relationships to Indigenous wisdoms. We also recognize that to “truly decolonise entails removing settler-colonial infringements, structures and dominance, and restoring and reclaiming Indigenous structures, practices, morals and values” (Legault and Bleau 2025: 74). This is a quest that extends beyond the scope us; rather, we aim to contribute to decolonial debates by intentionally foregrounding Indigenous ontologies, praxes and epistemologies through a South–South dialog that emerges from the cocreative processes underpinning the research presented here.

The first author, from Mexico, was raised with the wisdoms of Abya Yala that practice corazonar, and encountered ubuntu through research on migration during COVID-19 in South Africa. The second author, who lived and worked in South Africa for many years, was born in Uganda and raised with an inherent notion of ubuntu, present throughout her lived experiences as well as in how she engages with academia and knowledge production. As nomadic subjects, our embodiment of these knowledges, which traverse families, friends and communities enables us to appreciate and engage with Indigenous wisdoms as ontological understandings of human existence, viewed as a counter-narrative to xenophobia while contributing to the decolonial efforts in migration studies in South Africa.

As we engage with Indigenous wisdoms, we remain cognizant of their contested position in the South African context vis-à-vis rampant xenophobia. Indeed, African mobility, belonging and citizenship remain a challenge due to borders and nationalism (and, by extension, the label of “migrant”), all rooted in coloniality and brewing as an undercurrent in Pan-African efforts (Mbasalaki and Kizito 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). National interests often take precedence over continental solidarity, leading to conflicts and divisions that

undermine the Pan-African project and disrupt decolonial approaches to Indigenous wisdoms through nativism. The persistence of xenophobia indicates that cultural and ethnic divisions within South Africa are not merely relics of colonialism but also products of contemporary socioeconomic and political conditions such as high levels of unemployment and political rhetoric that positions the African migrant as a scapegoat for economic ills (Mbasalaki and Kizito 2024).

Ubuntu, embedded in Bantu languages across the African continent, loosely translates as the maxim “a person is a person through persons” (John Mbiti 1969, quoted in Mbasalaki 2018: 44). Indeed, to outsiders, ubuntu is often assumed to be uniquely South African, yet it permeates the African continent in various iterations of Bantu-speaking languages and gained prominence during post-independence in several African states. In Zimbabwe’s Shona language, it is expressed as “Hunhu,” while in the second author’s (Basoga) language, it is referred to as “obuntu bulamu.” Its continental embeddedness as an Indigenous knowledge frames why it is a central notion for us. At its core, ubuntu is the ontological principle that a person becomes human through interrelations with others, and this should be regarded as praxis as much as philosophy (Mbasalaki 2018). Ubuntu can be strongly aligned with Pan-Africanism, a political and cultural movement that advocates for the solidarity of African peoples worldwide. Leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Marcus Garvey played pivotal roles in articulating the ideals of Pan-Africanism, emphasizing shared heritage, collective identity, and political unity (Mbasalaki and Kizito 2024). Corazonar, meanwhile, is a wordplay that can be translated as “thinking with the heart,” referring to the process of engaging with the world by fusing emotion, affection, and reason to cultivate transformative praxis (Guerrero Arias 2010). Corazonar is part of a network of concepts from Abya-Yala, such as *el buen vivir* or “a dignified life,” which collectively aim to pursue social and epistemic justice (Albarrán González 2022; Varea and Zaragocin 2017). We worked with ubuntu and corazonar because they are rooted within ethics of care, which this article centers, in addition to our own connections to them, as well as some of our research participants.

The migration studies scholars who participated in this research worked within the framework of decolonial and feminist praxis in their engaged scholarship. The intersection of feminisms from the South and Indigenous wisdom serves as a point of departure, where humanity is not defined as individual and inherited, but rather as a relational process with others. Our existence as humans is an ongoing journey of becoming alongside others. Archbishop Desmond Tutu pointed out that ubuntu is an ontological principle where “[m] humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours. We belong in a bundle of life” (Tutu 1999: 31 quoted in Swanson 2007: 58). Here, existence is not only in community with other individuals, but also with other living and nonliving things. We see this same conceptualization in corazonar, which reflects a *cosmoexistencia*, whereby being human, or *runa*, is the ongoing journey that gives meaning to human existence by living life as an act of love that allows us to coexist with others. If we exist “because we feel, because we have the capacity to love” (Guerrero Arias 2011: 99), then our humanity is attained through loving relationships with others. The ontological principle of human existence as a matter of communal interconnections is also reflected in feminist epistemologies from the South, which advocate for knowledge production that is relational, communal, and aware of power inequalities a framework we propose as essential to decolonizing migration studies in South Africa.

Knowledge cultivation, academic, or otherwise, from the perspective of Indigenous wisdoms, is a communal effort that emerges and evolves through personal relationships with others and their environment. In communal discourses, there is space for the contextual and subjective lived experiences of each member of the community, according to each

worldview. Indigenous wisdoms regard being and knowing as an interconnected process, where engagement for academics (in our case, migration studies scholars) and (migrant) communities is not just about knowledge co-creation, but also a means of being together (Shultz and Kajner 2013). *Corazonar* urges warmth and tenderness in encounters (in our case, migration studies scholars) by incorporating emotions, senses, and affections as a central consideration (Guerrero Arias 2010). Indigenous wisdom encourages the researcher to include the self in a reflexive and critical manner, which negates the scholar as the archaic holder of knowledge. A similar conceptualization is shared by African decolonial feminist scholars, who encourage critical perspectives on positionality to become aware of how power operates in the research process, being cognizant of complicity, and taking responsibility as members of the community, through humble togetherness (Seehawer 2018).

In both ubuntu and *corazonar*, the notion of humble togetherness unsettles the dichotomy between the researcher (I) and the community (you/others), resulting in processes of mutual learning to become human together (Guerrero Arias 2011; Swanson 2007). The idea of humble togetherness is fundamental to ubuntu because it connects the epistemic and the ontological through a sense of reciprocity. *Corazonar* helps to understand this better through its vision of reciprocity as a cosmological principle (Guerrero Arias 2010). Opposites exist and coexist at the same time, within the same space, in the complexity of the cosmos. For each act and event, there is a complementarity that emerges as a symbol of reciprocity, which entails giving and receiving in order to enable a relationship of trust and respect. Relationships based on such principles manifest decolonial love in the sense that empathy is foregrounded in order to disrupt colonial hierarchies that have excluded and marginalized communities (Davids 2019).

Empathy becomes fundamental within and across differences to cocreate knowledge, something we see in both *corazonar* and decolonial love, while at the same time drawing on affinity to enhance ties of solidarity. When we empathize with the struggles of others such as migrant communities in South Africa we see their suffering as our own from an ontological perspective (we are together), and we develop a shared strength to fight for social and epistemic justice. This is the same fabric that crafts solidarity in ubuntu as the “empathic awareness of others’ conditions, acting in ways that benefit others, and improving their capacity for communal relationship” (Siniora et al. 2022: 5). Within this framework, Indigenous wisdoms would envision an academia (in our case, migration studies) where solidarity enables the collective cultivation of knowledge that is meaningful for the struggles of disenfranchised forced migrant communities.

African feminists Gouws and Van Zyl (2015) frame reciprocity and empathy in relation to justice through feminist ethics of care as connected to ubuntu. The authors highlight how, in the interconnections of humanness, the quality of relationships among people is affected by power inequalities, which in South Africa are specifically related to the oppressive histories of colonialism and apartheid (Gouws and Van Zyl 2015). Thus, there is a danger in approaching ubuntu while ignoring social grammars of race, class, and gender, because this silences differences. This is why Mbasalaki (2018) makes a distinction between ubuntu (lower case), which refers to ubuntu praxis (as it is used in this article), and Ubuntu philosophy, which refers to the ideology as Ubuntu capital, which “affirms the human and their humanity through the recognition of an ‘other’ in his or her uniqueness and difference” (Mbasalaki 2018:48). Mbasalaki further argues that Ubuntu capital is unstable, and at times unattainable, due to grammars of differentiation (Mbasalaki 2018). It is within this framing that we see widespread experiences of violence against women, migrants and LGBTQI communities,

as well as structural and social inequalities, which are considered “colonial situations” (Grosfoguel 2007: 219, quoted in [Davids 2019](#): 110). However, ubuntu praxis, although difficult and not always achievable, attempts to reconcile this through reciprocity and respect, drawing on practices of care that balance communal wellbeing and personal autonomy ([Mbasalaki 2018](#)). This is therefore in line with feminist ethics of care, where care involves cultivating a deep and proactive sense of empathy that seeks responsive relationships in order to resist injustice and oppression. It reflects a form of reciprocity and relationality that is cognizant of, but may at times fall within, the trappings of “elite capture”, where the most advantaged, such as migration studies scholars, retain control over political agendas and resources ([Amelina 2021](#); [Vanyoro 2024](#)).

Here, the combination of ubuntu and feminist ethics of care enriches the understanding of community, where sameness and difference can merge through moral maturity, which is “the ability to sustain relations of mutual empathy and intersubjectivity” ([Gouws and Van Zyl 2015](#): 172). Moral maturity is thus a practice of decolonial love, where systemic violence and oppression are counteracted by constantly seeking the conditions for more ethical relationships within and across differences ([Davids 2019](#)). Decolonial love, as the proactive process of care to rehumanize, intersects with feminist ethics of care and Indigenous wisdoms in the centering of empathy, respect, and humbleness. In the following sections, working with ubuntu and *corazonar*, entangled with decolonial love and feminist ethics of care from the South, we unpack their relevance for contemporary engaged scholarship as a proposition for decolonial efforts in (forced) migration studies in South Africa.

Stories about life—decolonial methodology

In this article, we bring the wisdoms of ubuntu and *corazonar* into our analysis by examining their understanding of storytelling as a decolonial methodology. We approach the personal narratives of twenty-two scholars and fourteen professionals as “stories about life” ([Guerrero Arias 2011](#): 115), which “enable the encoding of our embodied forms of knowing and learning” ([Mucina 2011](#): 6) on engaged migration scholarship in contemporary South Africa. We have seen these embodied forms of knowing and doing manifest through stories that question what it means to be a critically engaged migration studies scholar. The effort to find a shared meaning of engaged migration scholarship guided us in selecting those scholars who emphasized practices of care with marginalized forced migrants.

In doing so, they brought the self into their scholarship and professional work, which links to the importance of relational care in Indigenous wisdoms and feminist ethics of care as a decolonial encounter. Feminist ethics of care and decolonial love, in a way, offer a rethinking of university formal ethics processes firmly framed within bureaucracy, further speaking to this decolonial encounter. Within such a framework, we were able to observe practices of care as being oriented toward storytelling, as well as navigating the complex balance between un/safety and enjoyment during the pandemic. In the case of professionals, we selected artists, activists, and advocates who collaborate with academics to counteract antimigrant practices and discourses. Both groups were contacted by the first author and interviewed in person and online between April 2019 and March 2022. All participants gave oral consent to conduct and record the conversations. We have used pseudonyms to ensure their privacy.

Practices of care and the (im)possibilities of decolonial efforts in migration studies

Community as/and storytelling

One of the dominant narratives that we observed is the layered notion of community in relation to storytelling, which came across on two fronts: storytelling as a practice to cultivate a sense of community; and storytelling as a practice of meaning-making within the community, often toward social justice. Noting that community and storytelling are core elements for ubuntu and corazonar, this speaks to the ontological principle of humanity as relational and interdependent. Mucina (2011) sees storytelling as ubuntu praxis through a meaning-making process that engages with the relational and interconnected nature of humanity. Therefore, in both registers, we see storytelling translated into actions within community settings. This is fundamental for decolonial love, which is about taking action to enable ethical interrelationships with the self and within communities (Davids 2019), enhancing some level of justice, however small, within and beyond academic research.

For the first manifestation of storytelling as a means of cultivating community, migration studies scholars stated that their engagement either supported an already existing community or promoted a sense of community within the research process itself as a site of storytelling. Participants reinforced the importance of locating their engagement within migrant communities. Migration studies scholars shared stories noting how their academic engagement also became a space of community-making through storytelling. Njinga narrated this in the following quote:

What's going on here that is bringing you back to the [research] space? And there was something about building community. So this [research] space was an artificial space, but it was creating a community within it because people were sharing information about their lives that they wouldn't otherwise share (Njinga, personal communication, 10 July 2020).

In this quote, we see how community kept people invested in a research project. A sense of community is developed through sharing stories, especially those not shared in other contexts, enabling "story doing," where the experiences of a shared community become the story. The importance of cultivating community through storytelling can be seen as an iteration of social justice. From the perspective of indigenous wisdoms, relationality through respect, trust, and empathy is fundamental to enabling an ethics of care throughout knowledge-making processes. Corazonar emphasizes that stepping out of oppressive structures where migrant communities are positioned as objects of study rather than authors of knowledge requires a sense of belonging rooted in a shared commitment to resist oppression (Guerrero Arias 2011).

The second manifestation is illustrated through Inyoni's work with migrant sex workers. Her research exemplifies community through processes of meaning-making. Because sex workers experience high levels of marginalization, Inyoni explained that her scholarship aims to support their social struggles. She fostered community through consultations and discussions, as she described:

[The research] becomes this rather consultative process, from "okay, guys, this is what I'm thinking about. What do you think? Does it make sense? Does it speak to your reality? Is it something worth investigating?" and then taking that to shape your research

question, which will then help inform your methodology, which will then hopefully have an outcome (Inyoni, personal communication, 16 June 2020).

Within this quote, Inyoni perceived community building and involvement as relevant to developing her critical engaged scholarship in migration studies. The “consultative process” shows meaningful collaboration at all stages of the research, where community is fundamental. For her, the stories of community members were essential in framing the scope and agenda of the research project. This indicated a more bottom-up approach to knowledge cultivation on migration, where migrant sex workers and she work together to cocreate academic processes that include and respond to communities’ concerns and needs. Inyoni narrates a research process that steps out of normative scholarship in migration studies, which has historically sidelined and silenced Black migrant communities. Instead, she portrayed a process rooted in relationality and care, which reflects decolonial love, in that the hierarchies between researcher and participant are disrupted, centralizing the voices of historically marginalized communities through ethical research (Davids 2019).

We see a connection between decolonial love and the ontological principle of humanity, namely that humans exist in communities. This is also the epistemological principle of Indigenous wisdoms—that knowledge is a result of communal discourses. Both ubuntu and corazonar view knowledge as being cultivated through sharing and (re)interpreting lived experiences encoded in stories. We argue that storytelling within Indigenous wisdoms can be perceived as a decolonial methodology whereby different life worlds come to (co)exist and co-create polyphonic texts where diverse voices are heard, instead of traditional ethnography, where the vision of the scholar is the (only) central voice (Guerrero Arias 2011). Just as decolonial love urges differences to be expressed through their own means, polyvocality in Indigenous wisdoms includes stories that are often silenced and marginalized (Ghorashi 2014a). This is what gives space for untold stories, which was described by participants as an expression of their commitment to social justice, and thus an act of activism by unsettling power relations in migration scholarship.

Rani, a human rights lawyer, exemplified this further by grounding her advocacy for migrants within a long tradition of community engagement in South Africa. She described how, from the 1980s, antiapartheid struggles were about building political education and organizing communal campaigns of resistance within townships, moving theory into practice. In the post-apartheid era, communal engagement intersected with the rise of antimigrant discourses, such as through stigma and discrimination, alluding to a laceration of Pan-Africanism or ubuntu. Similarly, Marwan, an advocate for LGBTQI+ migrant communities, added that in his collaborations with academia, he has continued antiapartheid traditions of activism to engage with forced migrants, which often implies the use of storytelling as a mechanism of communal knowledge creation:

Within my archival work, there are a lot of migration stories ... and it has been so powerful seeing how storytelling and narratives can really change the way we think and perceive life. My work is about reinserting voices into history where they were violently removed, and that’s quite powerful. I feel this is a way of reimagining our history, but also reimagining our future ... To me, this is activism in the sense of being able to share stories and have conversations. It’s about being able to really situate myself within this kind of society and then seeing what changes I can make (Marwan, personal communication, 9 May 2022).

Marwan's quote demonstrates that engagement with communities not only challenges epistemic injustice within academia, but has also been perceived as a currency for social justice through a direct relation between activism and community, which aligns with ubuntu and *corazonar*. Both quotes from Rani and Marwan demonstrate reciprocity with migrant communities as a way to co-create and co-curate their stories to inform communal actions against xenophobia.

Complicating community, un/safety, and care

For engaged migration studies scholars and professionals to critically engage with communal stories within activism, they needed to address key layers of un/safety. We note that, at times, safety aims to navigate the balance between individual autonomy and the communal good in the face of structural power inequalities, which in decolonial feminism is known as relational autonomy (Ghorashi 2014b). We acknowledge that safety, or feeling safe, has many layers. In their reading of ubuntu, Matchett and Mbasalaki (2020) point out that feeling safe is deeply related to feeling connected, which implies that feeling safe has a strong connection to being part of a community. The authors suggest that ubuntu is, by definition, a (re)connection to the self and to others as a form of cultivating a sense of wellbeing. This statement is based on an understanding that wellbeing is not only central to safety within a community, but also includes 'indicators of happiness, life satisfaction and positive states of consciousness such as feelings of self-worth' (Matchett and Mbasalaki 2020: 76). Well-being therefore also takes on a sense of enjoying life. We argue that, in ubuntu and *corazonar*, life enjoyment and satisfaction bloom through safe connections with others in such a way that a sense of humanity is enhanced and enabled, as mentioned in indigenous wisdoms (Albarrán González 2022).

However, it is not always the case that conditions of safety and enjoyment prevail, especially in a context like South Africa, where grammars of differentiation along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability are rife. We see sharp inequalities, physical and structural violence, as well as exclusions. As the narratives below will show, the collision of grammars of differentiation with ubuntu and *corazonar* may produce unsafe conditions or a lack of enjoyment at certain moments. We connect this to decolonial efforts that highlight the need to consider histories of oppression that contextualize migration studies. Vanyoro (2024, 2026)), for instance, warns that relational approaches that center racialize migrant voices in academic research are not only limited, but they run the risk of reproducing coloniality by departing from categories that fix migrants as the problematic "other." This means that epistemological approaches to engaged scholarship in migration studies, where different forms of knowledge are included, are not enough when ontological and structural considerations of who has access to the power to produce and disseminate knowledge are not addressed. Therefore, Vanyoro (2024) argues that "inclusive and ethical research are not so transformative because they are carried out in premature environments where dominant units of analysis that (re)embed a colonial world view, such as the migrant category, have not been undone" (p. 10).

Grammars of differentiation have complicated practices of care within migrant communities and, at times, heighten the chasms between migration studies scholars and migrant communities. Going back to Rani, she described how building a sense of community can become contested, causing divisions among people who share similar struggles. She explained how bringing people together solely on the basis of nationality can be problematic, as some might feel that their sexual identities or political affiliations could put them in danger due to their place of origin. Conversely, she also described cases where bringing people together

without considering their migration background could raise tensions, similar to what happened among truck drivers when non-South Africans became the targets of violence (see [Comins 2023](#)). Similarly, Inyoni, a critical scholar, narrated how these differences transpired:

[P]eople might think sex workers are sex workers, but you would be surprised... You hear a conversation [and somebody says], ‘at least I’m not a stripper!’... Then another person [says] ‘oh me, at least I am from South Africa, or I’m not a rebel or I’m not from Zimbabwe’. And you realise these little cliques even within this seemingly homogenous group, and it’s important for us as researchers to be aware of those findings because they do affect the dynamics of the group (Inyoni, personal communication, 16 June 2020).

In this quote, we see heightened expressions of difference, entrenched in inequalities along social grammars of gender, class and nationality. Drawing on Indigenous wisdoms as critical lenses in analyzing these differences, we can see how structures of difference collide with group cohesion within a migrant sex worker community to lacerate bonds, for example along nationalist or xenophobic lines. This laceration of bonds then brings with it conditions of un-safeness within the group. It is within this framework of un-safeness that migration studies scholars mentioned the need to be cognizant of power structures that disrupt the aim of enabling and sustaining safer spaces, acknowledging their limitations.

In South Africa, oppressive structures of colonialism and apartheid have been reproduced in migration studies, placing forced migrants at the margins of both academia and society ([Mpofu 2020](#)). Indeed, participants, in particular non-South African Black professionals and migration studies scholars, pointed out dynamics of segregation and discrimination within academic spaces, highlighting a sense of un-safeness (see also [Vanyoro 2024](#)). Hondo, an activist with a migration background, shared his frustration not only from experiencing blatant forms of oppression within the university, but also from feeling let down by so-called progressive and critical migration studies scholars. He mentioned a situation in which a self-described feminist migration studies scholar offered him a research collaboration project; however, despite the best of intentions, he did not feel safe:

I feel the researchers are not 100% accurate. Yes, you work with the community. But there’s always that thing of leaving people feeling kind of used... obviously when there is something that [migration studies scholars] need, they’re super nice. If the research is coming, they asked us “please write this so that we can submit it with the application”... but because we are so disadvantaged, it’s very difficult for us to say no, it’s very difficult for us to even speak out (Hondo, personal communication, 16 April 2022).

Here, Hondo describes how unsafeness can be experienced within researcher–community relationship dynamics. He narrates a mismatch between migration studies scholars’ intentions to enable a more horizontal collaboration and a reality where power imbalances remain. He noted how there are remarkable differences between migration studies scholars and “disadvantaged” migrant communities, who cannot afford to “speak out.” We recognize how feeling “used” and silenced within research spaces hinders possibilities for safeness, complicating relational approaches of decolonial love and practices of care because structural power imbalances are not being addressed. This not only hinders decolonial efforts, but it disguises colonial patterns of power imbalance, as stated by scholars who question the reach of participatory approaches (e.g., [Raghuram and Sondhi 2026](#)).

Tariro, a Black migrant activist and artist, also shared her narrative on similar issues, showing the limitations of relational approaches within wider structural inequalities in academia:

What academia wants from us, migrants, it's our lives [which are seen as being constantly] frustrated. People are being paid for whatever they do to get PhDs, while we are being evaluated. I recently learned a word called extractivism. Because, okay, within the academic space, there are power struggles, and you [academics] are fighting a system and an institution. But when this trickles down to develop your questionnaire or whatever, how much power do you give to this person that you think needs your help, because of the topic that you are investigating? What do we, migrants, benefit? (Tariro, personal communication, 12 March 2022).

Tariro's narrative unpacks how power imbalances within research can reproduce unsafe structures of extractivism. As both a professional and a migrant with extensive experience of working with academics, she was critical of how current, hegemonic academia places displaced people as subjects of study, with "frustrated" lives to be "evaluated" in order to obtain degrees and other benefits associated with academic research and publications. Meanwhile, migrants have little say in how research is formulated and disseminated, obtaining fewer or no benefits in return. Tariro verbalized the core of decolonizing efforts in migration studies, namely the way in which mainstream migration research reproduces problematic narratives of migrants as either passive victims or alien threats, which derive from coloniality (Fiorito 2024; Raghuram and Sondhi 2026; Vanyoro 2026). Both Hondo's and Tariro's quotes show how, even when approached through feminist or decolonial lenses, relational approaches do not eliminate power imbalances, which can produce feelings of unsafety. From the perspective of Indigenous wisdoms, this aligns with Gouws and Van Zyl's (2015) caution that ubuntu praxis has limits in contexts where structural and physical violence are pervasive. Within this framework, Mbasalaki (2018) adds that ubuntu praxis can become corrupted by grammars of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality, allowing un-safeness to persist.

Cognizant of the way grammars of difference affect relational approaches in (forced) migration studies, engaged scholars were also critical of how migration studies reproduce problematic dynamics of power, especially in light of histories of apartheid and colonialism. Ismail, a Black critical migration studies scholar with a migration background, recognized, for instance, that academic categories, particularly in migration studies are "very colonial and often they're driven by policy imperatives" (personal communication, 20 April 2022). He then drew a correlation between coloniality and power asymmetries within research spaces:

We ... [South African-based] academics, are incredibly privileged, but we live in a society that is the most unequal in the world. Our comfort is not disconnected from the poverty outside of campus. So the question is: do we want to decolonize our field or do we just want to be cited by our colleagues in the North? Because if we want decolonization, that calls on us to question ourselves. Now, those are political choices everybody has to make for themselves ... (Ismail, personal communication, 20 April 2022).

Ismail describes how rampant inequalities in South Africa directly shape the politics of academic research, where scholars hold a privileged position vis-à-vis the communities they engage with. To unsettle this, he argues for a decolonial effort that requires us to "question ourselves," acknowledging injustices and making "political choices" around knowledge-making and dissemination. He implies that decolonization requires a political praxis that

does not depend on recognition from Northern institutions through citations. Instead, he adds that a decolonial stance in migration studies should “also be committed to actively pushing back against the global political economy of inequality, racism, and patriarchy” (personal communication, 20 April 2022), aligning with Indigenous wisdoms of weaving knowledge-making with collective efforts towards social justice.

Indigenous wisdoms, safety, and enjoyment

To unsettle structural injustices within relational approaches, participants urged the need to challenge power asymmetries on different fronts. Farah, a Black South African scholar, narrated how she translated a critical analysis of coloniality into engaged scholarship. To do so, she first challenged taken-for-granted power structures in migration studies:

The migration discourse has been constructed around this idea of the men from the Global South that move to the Global North, and this creates all these kinds of problems in the labor market, around border security and control (Farah, personal communication, 3 November 2020).

As a result, she has framed her “work to disrupt that discourse” through critical engagements with displaced communities in Johannesburg. She described this process in the following way:

In my work [with forced migrants] it is important to develop trust... before starting your research, positionality and intentions are really important. So having discussions around my responsibilities as a researcher towards the human beings I was working with, what expectations they might have of me. Some traditional scholars say that you shouldn't get involved, but how do you negotiate expectations and how do you create an approach that is ethical beyond just the university ethics process... I argue this goes beyond a moral point of view, but also from a research point of view, because by building those relationships and paying attention to positionality and power I argue that you have a much more nuanced understanding of the context and much richer data (Farah, personal communication, 3 November 2020).

In this quote, Farah translates her decolonial analysis of structural oppression into a decolonial praxis grounded in trust, ethics, and reciprocity, which aligns with *corazonar* and *ubuntu*'s understanding of relationality. She explains how discussing positionality and expectations with forced migrant communities is fundamental to her research, going beyond bureaucratic ethical clearances to demonstrate respect and responsibility towards the people she works with. From this perspective, Farah steps away from more “traditional” or mainstream scholarship to be accountable and responsive to forced migrants as human beings with agency to negotiate and intervene in knowledge creation. She pushes the boundaries between theory and praxis by pursuing ethical research processes that consider migrants' voices in shaping relational and relevant academic projects. Her approach aligns with *ubuntu*'s and *corazonar*'s emphasis on humanization as the point of departure for transformative knowledge cultivation. As reflected in *ubuntu* praxis and *corazonar*, Farah aims to unsettle power through empathy towards people's expectations and needs, while questioning her position as a researcher and taking responsibility. This exemplifies how engaged and decolonial migration studies scholars can acknowledge structural injustices that generate unsafeness, and actively work to counter these within and beyond their research projects.

Professionals shared similar narratives. Mohale, a Black professional storyteller, was critical of the way migration studies scholars approach displaced communities. She advocated for research that is both critical and caring:

Your research is important, awesome, but don't over-prioritise it over building connections with human beings. If you can really work at establishing that trust first, before, you can do better whatever that you need to do ... There are things that you need to do in order to make sure that the trust is established ... Food is a big deal. Provide good food. Then, do not patronise people. [A migrant] might not understand English or maybe she does not understand the academic language that you're using, but she's not a child. Something terrible has happened to them, but that's not who they are, that's not their identity. So food, trust, and just not patronising adults, and taking an interest in people, understanding them as fully human and not a tragedy (Mohale, personal communication, 23 March 2022).

In this quote, Mohale describes a research process rooted in trust, respect and empathy, which inform an ethics of care. Her approach is grounded in the ontological understanding that forced migrants are human beings who deserve no less than genuine connection and interest. She emphasizes making research not only ethical and respectful, such as by avoiding patronizing behaviour but also pleasant and even enjoyable through elements such as "good food." As reflected in decolonial love (Davids 2019), Mohale describes a process in which scholars are not only critical of power structures, but also reflective of how their research practices can enable connections in a more "human way" (p. 117).

We argue that this framework of cultivating more caring spaces incorporates elements of both safety and enjoyment. Njinga, as an engaged scholar, noted in her work with participatory art projects that elements such as food, pleasant smells and music were important for creating an engaged space a place where interlocutors wish to spend time together, which aligns with Mohale's account. This understanding of enjoyment is central to *corazonar*, as it places the body at the core of social transformation (Albarrán González 2022). The body is particularly significant when working with marginalized migrant communities, whose bodies have historically been subjected to oppression and violence (see also Shefer 2019). Caring for the body by enabling emotions and sensations of happiness, pleasure and joy is therefore essential to supporting social struggles. This can be understood as a historically meaningful way of cultivating resilience, as enjoyment in the face of oppression is, within Indigenous wisdoms, an expression of dignity and the "right to happiness, love and tenderness" (Guerrero Arias 2010: 466). Furthermore, Njinga emphasized that enjoyment is not limited to positive emotions, but rather involves creating spaces where people can be themselves, and where their stories can be heard and approached in ways that feel authentic to them.

Enjoyment is thus a relational experience in which reconnection with the self occurs through reconnection with others, particularly for marginalized communities (Matchett and Mbasalaki 2020), such as racialized migrants for whom belonging has been disrupted. Everyday experiences of joy help to nurture relationships between migration studies scholars and participants, as illustrated by Farah and Mohale. When those involved in research feel and share joy in each other's company, they can more easily recognize one another beyond the roles of researcher and researched, fostering a restored sense of togetherness grounded in ubuntu and *corazonar*, which in turn contributes to decolonial love.

Still, we remain aware that practices of care do not eliminate power imbalances. Even within decolonial efforts grounded in good intentions, power struggles persist at both structural and relational levels. Hondo emphasized the importance of honesty as an expression of

respect, noting that migration studies scholars must manage expectations and be transparent about their intentions and limitations. He described how migrant communities often feel over-researched yet under-served, with promises of future change that rarely materialize. This echoes Tariro's critique of extractivist research, highlighting the need to remain critical of how structural inequalities shape, hinder and sometimes stops practices of care.

We argue that addressing power imbalances between researchers and forced migrants requires ongoing commitment to fostering safety and enabling enjoyment, allowing open critiques and even rejection (Raghuram and Sondhi 2026). Corazonar and ubuntu offer a lens through which knowledge production is rooted in processes of dehumanization that prioritize the wellbeing of forced migrants. In doing so, they support engaged scholars in strengthening ethical relationships while contributing to the broader project of decolonizing migration studies.

Conclusion

The notion of care is somewhat at odds with academic settings and knowledge production. This article has foregrounded practices of care in a context like South Africa, rife with inequalities, as a central tenet of engaged scholarship and decolonial efforts or border work in migration studies with forced migrants. We argue that ubuntu and corazonar can contribute to both the epistemological and ontological dimensions of engaged scholarship and decolonial efforts in migration studies. As discussed throughout the article, Indigenous wisdoms position the everyday encounters between migration studies scholars and migrant communities as a point of departure for micro transformations. This requires recognizing the existence and lived realities of marginalized migrant communities in order to enable processes of co-creation. In doing so, migration studies scholars have possibilities to foster engagements where 'the decoloniality of knowledge and power has to be preceded by a decoloniality of being' (Davids 2019: 117).

This perspective builds upon the project of decolonial love, whereby migration studies scholars and migrant communities recognize each other as fully human and cultivate ethical relationships grounded in trust, reciprocity, empathy and responsibility. In this sense, theory is translated into practice through the codesign of more critical and relational research processes. As illustrated in this article, particularly through the narratives of professionals who are Black migrants, knowledge cultivation becomes a communal process of storytelling, where practices of care begin with acknowledging communities' experiences as foundational. This, in turn, allows for the development of scholarship that is responsive to migrant communities' needs and concerns, and fosters a sense of connectivity that is particularly significant in contexts marked by xenophobia and epistemic injustice.

Drawing on the narratives presented, we make the case for Indigenous wisdoms, in dialog with feminisms from the South, as critical frameworks for advancing decolonial efforts in migration studies. In dialogue to relevant decolonial critiques in migration studies (Amelina 2021; Raghuram and Sondhi 2026; Vanyoro 2026), we argue for the recognition of decolonial or "loving" approach to knowledge production—one that seeks social justice through ethical and relational practices of care, while critical of rising oppressive structures and xenophobic discourses. Within this framework, ubuntu and corazonar enable practices of care as proactive efforts to disrupt power, fostering what Swanson (2007) describes as a "humble togetherness", where scholars and migrant communities can unsettle, and potentially transform their positionalities and cocreate knowledge.

At the same time, the narratives analyzed in this article demonstrate that care is not a straightforward or stable solution. While it can act as a counter to the inequalities produced

by grammars of differentiation along lines of race, class, gender, and nationality, it is also constrained by these very structures. The labor of care can reproduce, or remain complicit in, existing power relations, particularly when structural inequalities are not adequately addressed.

This tension highlights the ongoing challenge of balancing individual autonomy and the communal good within critical engaged scholarship. As shown in this article, such a balance is often hindered by entrenched power asymmetries, rendering care unstable and, at times, only partially achievable especially in contexts where safety is compromised. Ultimately, this underscores how relational practices of care are continuously disrupted by persistent structures of differentiation in South Africa, even as they remain central to the project of decolonizing migration studies.

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Ethical approval

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Notes

1. We make a distinction between Ubuntu with a capital letter that refers to the Ubuntu ideology and Ubuntu capital, and ubuntu with a lower case that refers to ubuntu praxis (Mbasalaki 2018). This article makes use of ubuntu praxis, and thus we use the lower-case format. A more detailed distinction of Ubuntu ideology and ubuntu praxis is elaborated in the theoretical framework.

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