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Transformative Engaged Scholarship in Migration

Toward a Co-creative, Caring, and Reflexive Migration Studies

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Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki · Elena Ponzoni
Editors

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Transformative, Critically Engaged Migration Studies

Halleh Ghorashi, Tara Fiorito, Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki, and Elena Ponzoni

There is a global call for academics to investigate and invest in contributing solutions to growing structural inequality, social exclusion, and disconnection. The demand for scholarship with a greater societal impact is rising, along with a growing sense of urgency to communicate academic knowledge to broader communities (Burawoy, 2004; Holland et al., 2010; Motala & Vally, 2015). In the past decades, critically engaged research with a social justice orientation has emerged and has invested in bringing together scholarly investigation and community accountability (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013; Motala & Vally, 2015). Critically engaged scholars have been active at the intersection of theory and practice, addressing issues of injustice produced through power differences (Essed, 2013). These studies plead for academia to be a space of social critique and reflection that contributes to unpacking visible and subtle forms of power and exclusion in order to rethink lasting conditions for inclusion.

Simultaneously to the increased attention for critically engaged scholarship, migration and refugee studies have undergone redefinition and critique over the past decades. Traditional mainstream migration and refugee research has been criticized for being complicit in (re)producing discourses and practices that essentialize migrants and refugees as problems to be solved through academic and policy interventions (Favell, 2022; Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2017). This complicity manifests

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in the following ways, among others: reproducing "the national order of things" (Malkki, 1992; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and coloniality within migration regimes (De Genova, 2017; Schinkel, 2017; Wyss & Dahinden, 2022); methodological nationalism (Glick Schiller et al., 2006); and categories and representations of migrants and refugees as weak or lacking (Ghorashi, 2021). This has led to a rise in critical and reflexive migration and refugee studies around the globe (Amelina, 2017; Dahinden, 2016; Espiritu, 2014) that aim to contest this legacy and transform the discipline from within. The IMISCOE standing committee on Reflexivities in Migration Studies is a good example here.

In addition, there is a growing interest in (co-)creative methodologies with epistemic justice at their core (Groot et al., 2022; Khau et al., 2013; Paphitis, 2018; Tuck, 2009). Conventional methodologies have been increasingly criticized for their lack of meaningful engagement with societal actors that strives to include their perspectives and knowledges in the process of research. Emergent scholarship is therefore challenging traditional notions of knowledge production as objective and decontextualized (Kajner, 2013). In an effort to promote epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013), such scholarship examines the parameters of knowledge production (including epistemic assumptions, methodological choices, and relations between researchers and community) and questions the hierarchies of knowledge. Such issues have been central in community-engaged research methodologies such as participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 1992; Kemmis et al., 2014) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which were developed in countries from the Global South and have been growing in importance in the Global North. Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck (2009) and Smith (1999/2021) have also critically addressed the damaging effect of research approaches, despite good intentions, on the communities being studied. Tuck (2009, p. 413) finds that the danger of such damage-centered research is in its "pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community." In the introduction of her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999/2021), Smith refers to the word research as "probably one of dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" (p. 1). For that reason she proposes the need for "'researching back,' in the same tradition of 'writing back' or 'talking back'" (p. 8). This means asking about who owns, benefits from, and designs the research, and what its frame is (p. 10). And this means then to rewrite histories by including the lifeworlds and imaginations of disadvantaged communities through (art-based) co-creative and participatory methods. Doing so will allow for the epistemic inclusion (as opposed to epistemic injustice) of embodied knowledges and community wisdoms in co-producing knowledge. In this process, the role and the epistemic value of insider-outsider perspectives of scholars from disadvantaged backgrounds are argued to be essential in non-dominant scholarship to unsettle the hegemonic status quo that has silenced the perspectives of marginalized communities rendered as insignificant (Hill Collins, 1986).

This edited volume combines all these developments to discuss the role of transformative engaged scholarship that unsettles exclusionary discourses and presents inclusive possibilities, particularly for (forced) migrants. The contents of this volume came together from collaborations emerging from the NWO-VICI research project

Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change,[1] a transnational collaboration exploring engaged scholarship and refugee inclusion in the Netherlands, South Africa, and the United States. Developed by a transcontinental team of emerging and established scholars, this project started in 2018 with the ambition of theorizing and deepening understanding of the challenges and possibilities of engaged scholarship that aims to be transformative, that is, meaningful and inclusionary for (forced) migrant communities in precarious conditions. Using co-creative qualitative research methodologies, the project engaged with forced migrant and refugee communities in the three different contexts to stimulate on-the-ground collaborations between academics and communities to further the discussion on the societal contribution of such scholarship in the context of the structures of exclusion and inequality.

We tried to uphold our claims of epistemic justice by co-authoring book chapters with members from different (forced) migrant communities (Holle et al.; Kazadi & Koskimaki; Ocadiz Arriaga et al.; Ponzoni et al.). Alongside co-creating this academic volume, we worked on non-academic artistic and textual products desired by and co-created with research participants. These include projects developed during COVID-19 that sustained the livelihoods of the refugee/migrant communities we worked with by focusing on joy, art, food, care, well-being, storytelling, youth leadership, community relationships, and critical roadmaps to inclusion. In some of the following chapters, we explicitly describe and reflect on these co-creative projects that centered and privileged care and community above academic outputs (Holle et al.; Ocadiz Arriaga et al.; Powlick & Vlasman). More information on these projects can also be found on our website.[2] During the NWO-VICI project, we also deliberately created, shared, and posted on our website newsletters, blogs, and reflective texts about our core concepts and inspirational scholars in more accessible language to communicate to and inspire non-academic publics. Furthermore, our project's final conference which took place in South Africa, centered community perspectives and decentered the more mainstream practices of academic conferences. In addition to addressing non-academic publics by co-creating artistic and textual products in accessible language, this book specifically targets academics working with disadvantaged communities. Our choice for an academically oriented book thus stems from the recognition that the academy has significant work to do in embracing and promoting equitable, relational, and care-oriented research practices. We hope this volume not only strengthens (migration) scholars' reflective capacity but also helps academics in dealing with the challenges inherent in community engaged scholarship with transformative ambitions.

[1] www.engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org

[2] www.engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations/routes-for-change

1.1 Beyond the State of the Art

This edited volume has three main objectives. First, it provides insight into the challenges and possibilities of academia to improve the human condition through co-production of knowledge that takes place at the nexus of engaged scholarship and reflexive migration/refugee studies. Given the relevance, responsibility, and growth of migration studies, it is essential to have a strong focus on reflexivity in collaborative engagement by and with migrant communities (see, for example, Dahinden & Pott, 2025). We address being reflexive in this volume as investigating how knowledge on migration is produced, circulated, and utilized by all actors involved in the field of migration in relation to power structures (Nyamnjoh, 2007). There is an urgent need to discuss conditions for developing meaningful relationships through and within critically engaged scholarship with communities and societal actors. In light of the growing interest in the societal impact of academia, we interrogate the notion of that impact and advance the understanding of how critically engaged scholarship could contribute to transforming exclusionary conditions (of forced migrants) through profound engagement with societal actors/players (including migrants themselves).

Second, the contributions in this volume go beyond general definitions of engaged scholarship by showing that to be transformative in practice, engaged scholarship needs to combine a critical lens with contributions to the development of sustainable conditions for epistemic and social justice in which experiential, community, and indigenous knowledges are valued as significant ways of being and knowing in the world. Such sustainable conditions include continuous reciprocal relationships of care as well as engagement with and epistemic inclusion of the communities we work with that goes beyond the scope of the research project. However, enabling these conditions also means questioning the institutional context of decreasing academic resources. This volume thus looks into the relational components of such conditions for sustainable, transformative critically engaged research, as well as the institutional contextual conditions it had to deal with. Despite the growing critique of academia's ivory tower position and the increasing interest in societal impact and engagement with disadvantaged communities, most such efforts fail to address deeply rooted power structures as sources of reproducing societal and academic inequalities. Conventional academics define societal impact mainly according to quantified assessments of what certain research can contribute to society. Many engaged scholars have traditionally focused on empowering disadvantaged groups through academic knowledge. Both approaches are generally informed by academia's unquestioned authority. Chapters in this edited volume distinguish themselves by questioning the normalized structures in both society and academia. In this regard, Kajner's distinction between reform and transformation is important to consider in identifying societal change: "Reform often involves working to help a marginalized group gain access to rights and privileges that others enjoy, rather than a critical appraisal and transformation of the structures that enable privilege and exclusion in the first place" (Kajner, 2013, p. 12).

Thus, in this volume, we understand being critical as a constant commitment to reflect on the relationship between power and knowledge, which is often taken for granted. This includes reflecting on academics' positionality and role in processes of knowledge production and on the societal value and use of the knowledge produced (Motala, 2015). In our conceptualization and enactment of critically engaged scholarship, we aim to go beyond theoretical potentialities and engage in actual change-making processes and practices, focusing on different forms of transformation at individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels. Transformation is thus about the people involved in the research trajectory, meaning the research participants and academics and the relationship between them in the context of their engagement. It concerns the types of knowledge produced related to epistemic justice and the importance of experiential and indigenous knowledges that contribute to a more comprehensive view of the issues at stake. And it tackles the transformational capacities of institutions (academic structures, NGO's, government organizations/departments, migration policies). Finally, it addresses the possibilities for disrupting societal exclusionary discourses and contributing to pathways toward inclusion. We show this through empirical cases from three different contexts (the Netherlands, South Africa, and the United States). By arguing for the importance of caring partnerships in creating and sharing various forms of knowledge, this volume explores academia's possibilities and limitations in co-producing transformative practices that are meaningful for (forced) migrant communities in precarious conditions.

In this book, we therefore propose a concept of transformative engaged scholarship that combines the following principles: (1) it is committed to social justice and social change; (2) it is dedicated to the democratization or decolonialization of knowledge production and dissemination; (3) it is community needs-driven and centers communities' lived experiences; (4) it centers reciprocity to disrupt exploitative, extracting research and the unidirectional flow of knowledge; (5) it is relational and processual based on the conviction that relationships with non-academic actors (in particular, disadvantaged communities) are crucial and inherently meaningful for research; and (6) it is a kind of scholarship that is boundary-crossing because it cuts across the missions of teaching, research, and service.

Finally, this volume's third objective is to broaden and deepen existing knowledge on (co-)creative methodologies that go beyond mainstream qualitative methodologies. This requires focusing "on process, which is reciprocal and respects difference, and purpose, which is seen as that of enhancing a public culture of democracy on and off campus and alleviating public problems through democratic means" (Kajner, 2013, p. 11). This means that "[a] critical praxis is needed to reveal and transform the relations that constitute the social contradictions inherent in knowledge production if the structures that make inequality possible are to be transformed. [...] Given the tight connection between knowledge and being, a socially transformative engagement also depends on examining the relationally constituted subject positions held by each partner" (Kajner, 2013, p. 13). In the social sciences and humanities, co-creation is increasingly done through collaborations with various societal actors who have different forms of knowledge (experiential/insider knowledge, professional knowledge, institutional knowledge, and academic knowledge). If

the aim of knowledge co-creation is to contribute to societal change, it is necessary for academics to collaborate with different types of knowledge in a dialogical way that allows for *mutual learning instead of being unidirectional*. Co-creation thus requires a better understanding of how to create sustainable reciprocal collaboration based on non-hierarchical approaches toward different kinds of knowledge, toward epistemic multiplicity. This means an acknowledgment of the epistemic value of disadvantaged communities' insider/embodied knowledge combined with the willingness of people in positions of power to allow the occasional disruption of normalized exclusionary practices so that they stop being thoughtlessly reproduced.

While, inspired by the work of black feminist standpoint theorists and indigenous scholars, we argue for the epistemic value of "insider knowledges" (or knowledges from the margin/from below), we do not mean to claim that community knowledges will by de facto produce alternative, non-dominant discourses). As some of the chapters show, individuals from marginalized groups are not necessarily immune to internalizing dominant discourses (see Kazadi & Koskimaki; Rast et al.). Engaged, co-creative research must therefore remain reflexive, recognizing both the epistemic advantages of marginality and the complex ways in which dominant ideologies can permeate different social locations. This means collaboratively exploring how differently positioned people may reproduce, resist, or reconfigure dominant narratives in unexpected ways. That being said, we focus explicitly on the importance of marginality and of the insider/outsider position to create the necessary distance from the status quo to allow the *potential* of originality. It is the combination of this distance from the status quo and the intimate knowledge of a specific way of life and history that makes this form of knowledge distinctive for studying societal issues. Our main argument is that doing research co-creatively helps make the normalized power of dominant discourses visible and using differences in positionalities in relation to dominant discourses as a multiple lens helps to analyze societal conditions without reifying marginalization.

This process acknowledges the relevance of a multiplicity of knowledges that can make a difference and includes more perspectives in knowledge production. Thinking in multiplicity enables *thinking thick*, which means engaging with a diversity of knowledges, adding layers of knowledge so that knowing becomes *thicker* than it initially was (de la Bellacasa, 2012). Inspired by this line of thinking, the chapters herein present a variety of (co-)creative methodologies (situated within narrative research methodology) as a means to unsettle power and strengthen epistemic multiplicity, that is, the practices are ones in which different types of knowledge are recognized as valuable. In contrast to advocating *paternalistic and individualistic* forms of care, we argue for placing non-hierarchical, *reciprocal* caring relationships at the core of co-creation. Devi Dee Mucina (2011), for example, describes how, in Ubuntu philosophy, "storytelling is an important faculty for engaging critical regeneration and honest self-criticism while offering a collective vision for a community's manifest destiny" (p. 7), thus making knowledge production a more democratic process of (co-)creation. Inspired by indigenous scholarship (Albarrán González, 2022; Brown & Strega, 2005; Tuck & Yang, 2014), we address the importance of humbled scholarship. The humble positioning of academic knowledge puts

it on a more equal plane with community wisdom and enables research participants to develop co-ownership of the process. By engaging with art practices, storytelling projects, and activities, such as sharing a meal or dancing together, that invite us to sense our thinking bodies in community with others, the chapters in this book show how expanding our research practices contributes to deepening co-creative possibilities.

1.2 Transformations with and Beyond the Local

Despite increasing awareness regarding the necessity of engaged scholarship, the transformative contributions of such scholarship have rarely been presented in a comprehensive perspective. Most knowledge about engaged forms of scholarship is rather scattered and short-term oriented. It rarely goes beyond the local context. The production of supralocal and transnational knowledge from the Global South and North, in addition to theoretical and methodological creativity, is often overshadowed by the focus on local change in this kind of research (Park, 1999, 2006; Svensson et al., 2007). Our volume fills this gap by presenting reflexive accounts of collaborations between transnational engaged academics, (forced) migrant communities, migrant-led organizations, and other societal actors to envision and enact possibilities for inclusive structures. These contributions deepen theoretical discussions on engaged scholarship by situating it in connection with debates on epistemic justice, decoloniality, desire-based research—as an alternative to damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009)—and solidarity shaped by reciprocal caring relationships. Such scholarship aims at co-producing knowledges that make a difference in the lives of (forced) migrants and seeks to contribute to meaningful social change.

Bhattacharyya and Murji (2013, p. 1362) argue that the most influential ideas in imagining change have come from outside the academy (providing examples such as Biko, El-Sadaawi, Fanon, and Lorde). Given the growing importance of academia's societal contribution and impact, re-envisioning and rethinking the relationship between academia and society is timely. Cases and discussions presented in this volume thus differ from traditional approaches to engaged scholarship by considering engagement in a more critical, caring, relational, and transformative sense (see also Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013; Essed, 2013) and with specific epistemological and ontological implications, such as a focus on process that is reciprocal and relational and respects difference (Davids, 2019). With these aims, the volume is grounded in the ontological aspect of engaged scholarship. By this, we refer not only to acknowledging and respecting the wisdoms of historically oppressed communities and actors (epistemic justice) but also to honoring and uplifting the very existence of these communities as contributors to structural change. Situating our engagement within the context of academia, we seek to enable a dialogue between diverse epistemologies—from the Global South and North—as a way to embrace different ways of being in the world (ontology) (Davids, 2019; Shultz & Kajner, 2013).

At the intersection of the ontological and epistemological aspects of critically engaged scholarship, this volume follows the path of "strong objectivity" as proposed by Sandra Harding (1993). By accepting the historical situatedness of researchers themselves, standpoint epistemologists propose "strong reflexivity as a main source of objectivity," as opposed to value blindness, which is propagated by "value-free, impartial, dispassionate research" (Harding, 1993, pp. 71–70). This means that "[a] critical praxis is needed to reveal and transform the relations that constitute the social contradictions inherent in knowledge production if the structures that make inequality possible are to be transformed" (Kajner, 2013, p. 13). Given the entanglement of knowledge and being, a socially transformative engagement must go beyond binary, identity-based reflexivities. It must instead recognize reflexivity as mutual, contextual, and power-ridden (Nagar & Ali, 2003; Sultana, 2007) but also as something that must be *practiced,* for example, through acts of decentering, humility, and care. In short, reflexivity must be translated into action.

Co-creation with historically and systemically excluded communities, however, is not without its challenges and dilemmas. That is why, in this volume, we seek to present a humbled and nuanced account of the promise and possibilities of transformative scholarship while honoring the limitations and challenges of such research. In sum, this volume attends to practices and processes rather than just to outcomes. Transformative scholarship, then, is not a single story (Adichie, 2009) of creating space/giving voice to so-called others. It encompasses polyvocal narratives in which the perspectives, experiences, subjectivities, and agency of all involved are broadened and transformed. This includes forced migrant communities, migration researchers, (powerful) stakeholders, institutions, and public discourses. As our empirical cases show, we aim to argue that transformation is only possible when sustainable, profound, and caring relationships are combined with imaginative methods of expression and collaboration, including investing in co-ownership of the spaces and processes of research. According to Farias et al. (2017) "transformative scholarship provides a space for combining participatory processes in which community partners reflect on their diverse experiences of injustices, and critical examination of the broader social, economic, and political forces that shape these experiences" (p. 7). This calls for transdisciplinary work that centers reciprocal care practices for the communities within which research takes place. Farias et al. (2017) claim that "transformative processes can combine critical examination of local issues in relation to broader social processes to not only point out 'what is not right' but also express a commitment to people's significant knowledge and capacities to (re)negotiate their position within power relations, and design actions that are suitable for their particular context." This is the kind of commitment this volume speaks to.

In the same vein, Fassin (2013) argues for a critical and public ethnography beyond disciplines that allows for a "presence both involved and detached, inscribed in the instant and over time, allowing precise descriptions and multiple perspectives, thus providing a distinctive understanding of the world that deserves to be shared" (p. 642; see also Abu-Lughod, 2016). Such transformative scholarship that expands how we perceive and engage with the world speaks back to the visible and normalized structures of exclusion. Through reflection, care, and (co-)creativity, transformative

engaged scholarship aims to unsettle and reconstruct historically unequal relationships between power and knowledge by addressing how oppression operates through and is compounded by intersecting axes of race, class, gender, ability, nationality, and ethnicity (Tamale, 2020). Inspired by the struggle to undo intersecting sources of oppression, this volume takes up the challenge of "interrogating the obvious" and "illuminating the unknown" (Fassin, 2013, p. 642) at the nexus of academia and society. Given this, we present the reflective, (co-)creative, and caring journeys we took with critically and community engaged scholars, communities of (forced) migrants, and other societal stakeholders in rethinking the conditions for transformative scholarship toward societal inclusion. By bringing transnational narratives of (forced) migration and displacement together with possible solidarities forged against displacement in contexts that usually do not come together in one book, we draw upon examples of (co-)creative methodologies that have enabled a deeper level of co-productive engagement, including addressing challenges and opportunities to make such engagement durable.

1.3 Caring Structures in Troubling Times

This volume addresses the challenges and contributions of critically engaged scholarship in co-creating transformative conditions toward the inclusion of (forced) migrants. The urge for transformation became even more evident soon after our Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change project started. Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many researchers to consider the deeper consequences of engagement with historically and systemically oppressed communities, particularly when the level of precarity is magnified and possibilities for collaboration become limited but the need to give and receive care grows. Importantly, the pandemic forced our researchers to reconsider not only what engagement looks like under such conditions but how our project could be reshaped to respond to the needs, desires, and expectations of community partners. In some cases, this meant departing from a project's original ambitions. These limitations, however, enabled a higher level of reflection from the research team, including examining the role, responsibility, and complicity of academia during times of crisis. They also stimulated more profound ways of engagement through collaborative, critical, and (co-)creative methodologies under what seemed to be impossible conditions for doing engaged research in a respectful, mutual, and non-exploitative way. Despite serious struggles concerning the paradox of doing research in precarious situations with historically and systemically oppressed communities, this experience made the researchers greatly reflexive about their position as engaged scholars, the importance of (community) engagement, and the need for rethinking critically engaged scholarship in connecting to an ethics of care.

Yet, if we researchers consider our own lives and the stories of our communities, we might notice a recurrence of "crisis." Berlant (2011) describes this state of systemic crisis, of living with the unlivable every day, as "crisis ordinariness," arguing

that "the genre of crisis can distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional" (p. 7). Through this lens, precarity and crisis cannot be framed as exceptional but instead need to be recognized as conditions of our time (see also Tsing, 2015)—endemic rather than episodic, particularly for those who are structurally violated, socially marginalized, and poor (Vigh, 2008). Indeed, processes of precarity manifest differently, unevenly, and more distinctly in the experiences of (forced) migrants than they do in academia—and yet, the two are linked. By recognizing our mutual interdependencies and the pervasiveness of precarity, while not flattening the different positionings, this volume aims to unravel processes and practices of precarity that connect us all yet simultaneously seek to divide us. In doing so, it advocates a deeper engagement with reciprocal care in a careless world (The Care Collective, 2020).

This is in line with feminist scholars' call to approach care as a critical strategy for dealing with crisis. African feminist scholars, for instance, have developed an understanding of care as relational, respectful, responsive, and reciprocal, resulting in the well-being of individuals, communities, and the environment alike (Gouws & Van Zyl, 2015). During a pandemic, when inequalities are exacerbated, a feminist perspective on care means paying close attention to how the processes and results of scholarship contribute to the long-term well-being of all agents involved in knowledge cultivation, particularly those in precarious positions. To achieve this, it is crucial to involve the concerns and worldviews of communities historically excluded from academia, thus embracing the decolonial aim of making the process of knowledge production a dialogue among diverse epistemological and ontological positions (Davids, 2019). Indeed, epistemic justice, which involves the active recognition of and engagement with previously silenced views and experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, is a crucial condition for enabling the co-production of knowledge with societal stakeholders throughout the research process. This volume demonstrates the challenges that come from this level of engagement and argues for humbled scholarship and (co-)creative practices as ways to make it happen. We show the importance of co-creating daring/safe spaces that stimulate non-hierarchical reciprocal forms of care and partnership (versus the patronizing caring practices migrants often experience). We also show the necessity of creating reflective spaces and institutions that involve people in positions of power becoming more receptive toward the needs, desires, and capacities of (forced) migrants instead of fixating only on their problems.

Braidotti (2019) uses the term "affirmative ethics" in speaking of the meaningful inclusion of (forced) migrants, defining affirmative ethics as "the pursuit of affirmative values and relations" (p. 136) to enact a collective, political praxis of hope, compassion, and transformation. Enacting an affirmative ethics through practices of care involves recognizing the pain and suffering situated in current conditions of precarity, while also considering imaginaries for collective actions that forge new possibilities. In this, it is constructive to unsettle reified binaries and create meaningful connections that are transformative in practice and context specific. Doing so enables a process that invests in different knowledges, subjectivities, and ways of living together. In this volume, we present the possibilities for resistance when power works in a normalizing manner that makes us all (scholars included) complicit

in its reproduction. And we use engagement, care, and humbled scholarship as key concepts in positioning academia in relation to other societal actors (and in the co-creation of knowledge).

The three sections in this book will thus address the entanglements of precarity and the role that critically engaged scholarship could/should play in exploring the limitations and possibilities of caring and reflexive collectivities (including institutions) to enable alternative imaginations and to stipulate conditions for structural transformations. In a world in which carelessness (rather than crisis) dominates (The Care Collective, 2020, p. 1), we engage with conceptualizations of different possibilities for academia to use more care in close relationships with excluded groups (in particular, with refugees and forced migrants). At the same time, we advocate for openness and vulnerability in reflecting on the ongoing challenges, pitfalls, and paradoxes that hinder a transformative engaged scholarship.

1.4 A Unique Contribution

This unique volume combines transformative and caring forms of engaged scholarship (based on a South-North contextual focus on epistemic justice) with reflexive migration studies and (co-)creative methodologies. In particular, it integrates different bodies of literature and narratives, including indigenous scholarship and (forced) migrant community perspectives, concepts, and experiences, that are often presented separately. Co-producing narratives of change together with engaged scholars and historically and systemically excluded communities has shown us the power of creative methodologies, not only in broadening academic horizons, but also in addressing epistemic injustice by including research partners as rightful and resourceful co-owners of the project. Epistemic justice here also speaks to the kind of knowledge and theories that are produced through these co-creative methods. We get to see, hear, and experience theories such as the "pedagogies of craving" that LGBTQI+ forced migrants in South Africa deploy. Without co-creative methods, this kind of theory would not have emerged. This rings true for many other theories produced in this book such as "refugee home-making," "healing through stories," and more. These theories will hopefully grow and multiply as others who relate to them work with them in their (engaged) scholarships on migration and other areas.

Our project began with critical theory and feminist epistemologies, which were fundamental in shaping the basic theoretical and methodological steps in our thinking. To these we added studies on epistemic justice, indigenous knowledges, and participatory and creative practices (such as arts-based research methods), which enabled us to accentuate this volume's experimental and innovative spirit and to go beyond the obvious to produce alternative trajectories of inclusion. In addition, combining scholarly humility (in relation to experiential and indigenous knowledges) and strong reflexivity throughout our research process guided our efforts to create space for the production of interconnected voices while capturing the "invisible and local-based individual actions and collective modest struggles which are at the root of all larger

social change efforts" (Stall, 2010, p. 546). This inspired us to see the significance of the "elusive process of resistance that is taking place beneath the surface" and helped us "to illustrate the possibilities of significant change from below" (Stall, 2010, p. 547). The collected narratives presented in this book serve as a foundation to stimulate academic and societal imaginations and will be used to engage in conversations with various actors in the field (with the purpose of co-generating knowledges) in order to stipulate and stimulate the conditions necessary for addressing and undoing barriers to migrant justice. Furthermore, this volume is the first of its kind to explore the socially and academically embedded challenges and possibilities of engaged scholarship with a transformative potential within three different national contexts. This comparative angle is essential to broaden debates on academic engagement and impact beyond Europe, considering the contextual particularities as sources of reflection. In the context of South Africa, post-apartheid governments in 1994 committed themselves to a transformation agenda for both society and academia by making engaged scholarship one of the three central pillars of academic practice (in addition to research and teaching). A key challenge was (and still is) transitioning from institutions segregated by race to democratic, inclusive institutions (Soudien et al., 2008, p. 8), including curriculum redevelopment and research. In the same context, progressive ambitions were formulated to support refugees and ensure refugee rights. However, the reality of the last decades has shown a lack of actual implementation of this commitment in a transformative manner (Akpan et al., 2012), resulting in the reproduction of systemic inequalities, both in society and in academia. Empirical chapters in this volume argue that critical knowledge creation and engaged scholarship can only be transformative if they recognize and deconstruct power inequalities within academia to seek a meaningful engagement with (forced) migrant communities that were historically excluded by colonialism and apartheid and that still face xenophobia, violence, and systematic institutional exclusion within contemporary South Africa. Inspiring examples of transformative engaged scholarship in relation to (forced) migrants in South Africa are found within indigenous and feminist community-engaged research traditions and in collaborations between oppressed communities, academia, and movements such as decolonization in higher education and #FeesMustFall.

In the United States, which has been mythologized as a nation of immigrants, a land of opportunity, and a refuge for the poor and persecuted, geopolitical and policy considerations have in fact produced very different opportunities and life outcomes for different groups of (forced) migrants (Espiritu, 2014; Menjívar, 2006; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). At the same time, the historical connection between social movement activism, counterhegemonic intellectual traditions, and the development of interdisciplinary academic departments such as gender studies, ethnic studies, critical race and black studies, Chicanx and Central American studies, labor studies, and queer studies—as well as the United States' recognition of its position as a settler state on indigenous territory—has given extra impetus and a distinct character to the development of engaged scholarship in that country. These have fueled inspiring forms of community-engaged scholarship and (co-)creative/participatory methodologies and have spurred academic kinship practices of care as well as on-campus

care and healing practices within marginalized student communities. However, the US context has also been crucial in establishing a neoliberal model in academia. Despite the country's rich history of scholar and campus activism and the widespread recognition of engaged scholarship within academic rewards and promotion criteria, engaged scholarship still has a limited influence in relation to the dominant model of conventional social sciences in neoliberal academia, which promotes a supposedly "value-free" and "professional" positivist and policy-oriented paradigm (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Romero, 2020).

Finally, the Netherlands is a welfare state democracy that promises to help weaker groups in their path to inclusion. This has led to a strong focus on deficit categories that problematize specific groups, including groups of migrants and refugees, a focus that has remained strong (not only in policy but also in academic research and public discourse) even as the actual welfare structures of the state have weakened over the past decades. Large numbers of (forced) migrants are therefore often marginalized by integration policies that consider them in need of help and not as a group that has something to offer (Ghorashi & Van Tilburg, 2006; Ponzoni et al., 2017). Despite a strong tradition of policy-related research that follows government-articulated orientations (Entzinger & Scholten, 2015), the norms and standards of "good social sciences" in Dutch academia have increasingly become dominated by the US model of conventional social sciences (such as tenure, blind-refereed international publication norms, prevalence of academic research funding), thus marginalizing more engaged forms of scholarship. Within the contemporary academic Dutch landscape, there is a loud call for increasing the societal impact of research. That call, however, echoes a neoliberal vision of knowledge marketability by promoting the "valorization" of knowledge (De Vries, 2015). Though the social sciences has seen scholarly activism and action research movements in the past (Boog et al., 1996), the contemporary attention on impact in the social sciences barely taps into those historical sources, which have been largely criticized as "being too politicized." Thus, in Dutch academia, engaged scholarship in migration studies was and still is rather marginalized, although specific (facilitating) spaces exist in which engaged practices are more common or supported (Rast, 2021). In the comparative chapter following this introduction (Fiorito, Ghorashi, & Ponzoni) we dive further into the contextual differences of engaged scholarship in South Africa, United States and the Netherlands and we provide some historical background to these differences.

With the contributions in this book, we hope to strengthen knowledge about the importance of engaged forms of scholarship as well as engaged scholarship's contemporary positioning in relation to the increase of managerialism and marketization in academia (Diefenbach, 2007). According to Burawoy (2007, 2014), public or engaged scholarship's main concern is to stimulate debate concerning academic knowledge's contribution to understanding key societal problems. This is in contrast to professional or conventional social science, which is based on abstracted empiricism and grand theories and which follows publication and impact norms that often suffocate innovative critical research (Burawoy, 2007). We show that "engaged scholarship calls for an epistemology that challenges traditional notions of scholarly expertise, knowledge as objective and knowledge as decontextualized," and

focuses on "the potential for engagement to disrupt traditional academic knowledge schemes" (Kajner, 2013, p. 14). One of the ways we do this is by infusing literature on engaged scholarship with decolonial and indigenous scholarship, including voices and concepts from the Global South.

In sum, we show that critically transformative engaged scholarship entangled with mutual caring relationships in academia and in society can create academic and societal imaginations for actual transformations toward the durable inclusion of disadvantaged communities. But we also show that many critically and community engaged scholars encounter barriers within institutional cultural contexts that are dominated by conventional social scientists (Vogelgesang et al., 2010) or even find that their voices are silenced in those contexts (Kajner, 2013, p. 16; Nyamnjoh, 2007; Romero, 2020).

While all the scholars contributing to this book are qualitative researchers using participatory, artistic/creative, and narrative methodologies and community-centered approaches, we do not necessarily believe that engaged scholarship is solely possible with qualitative methodologies. In fact, in the context of our project, we organized a seminar in which we also invited engaged scholars using quantitative and mixed methods approaches. Moreover, the Co-creation Lab for Inclusive Knowledges that developed at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam out of this project also includes quantitative scholars who work with a caring and engaged mindset. Thus, there are indeed engaged and critical quantitative scholars who co-create research questions, concepts, and methods, such as surveys, with the communities they study. Moreover, there are quantitative researchers who purposefully create academic and non-academic products that promote social justice and enhance societal change for marginalized communities. However, in these engagements, we do experience a gap between qualitative and quantitative researchers regarding the ways in which we communicate and engage with each other, the relationships we develop with communities, the vocabularies we use, and the differential positioning of certain epistemic issues as central to our research designs, methods, ethics, and output. This has made us even more aware of the importance and the challenges of broadening our academic and methodological networks to consider the potentials of community engaged scholarship to bridge methodological gaps when possible.

1.5 Part I: Complexities of Engaged Scholarship

Practicing transformative engaged scholarship and co-creation with marginalized (forced) migrant communities can be challenging in multiple and divergent ways. The chapters in this section therefore not only show the transformative potential of engaged research with (forced) migrants and refugees in various ways, but also address the challenges, tensions, and complexities of doing engaged scholarship in practice. They engage with the question of how engaged scholars build relationships within and outside the academy to collectively imagine and work toward a better world. These chapters show the importance of critical intellectual, emotional and

embodied commitments to contribute to collective (forced) migrant justice through research. They do so by analyzing the political commitments of critical refugee studies scholars through the prism of academic kinships (Greene), the narratives of research participants/knowledge co-creators with a refugee background in the Netherlands (Rast, Ponzoni, & Ghorashi), the autoethnographic narratives and reflections of a refugee researcher working with refugees in South Africa (Kazadi & Koskimaki), and how the emotional and embodied praxes of engaged research necessitates a non-idealized approach to care that attends to boundaries (Holle & Greene). This collection of differently epistemically positioned narratives shows that the complexities of engaged scholarship include (1) challenges that arise due to pressures and demands from institutional, academic, or societal contexts; (2) tensions that come with maintaining intimate, intensive, emotional, and caring relationships with research participants; and (3) power issues and negotiations that arise within research relationships and practices.

The first set of challenges stems from the particular academic and societal context within which the research is conducted. Some chapters (Greene; Fiorito et al.; Kazadi & Koskimaki) address the challenges of the *academic context*, stressing the impact of neoliberal (individualized and competitive) political-economic structures that translate into strong publication and acquisition pressures, that promote and reward market-driven agendas, and that create conditions for austerity and burnout at the expense of community engagement. These chapters show how such academic pressures and demands are particularly challenging for scholars whose positions are marginalized within the academy, such as women of color, refugees, and first-generation scholars. These scholars are made to feel that they must juggle their relational vision of care—encompassing personal, emotional, ethical, and political commitments—with academic responsibilities that encourage competition and publication, often at the expense of fostering engaged and caring relationships with other scholars and community members. Particularly in the context of South Africa, prevailing inequalities between historically black and historically white universities (Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025; Swartz et al., 2019) often cause (refugee and black) scholars at historically black universities to be under-resourced, thereby increasing teaching load, limiting research time, and heightening time pressure and mental stress. Given this, it is necessary to interrogate the social and political historical contexts that shape academia presently and attend to praxes of solidarity and relationship-building as a form of care (Greene).

Other chapters within this section (Kazadi & Koskimaki; Rast et al.) point toward the challenges of the *societal context*. In the context of the Netherlands, like in other late-modern societies, societal power works particularly through subtle and invisible ways: that is, through dominant, normalized exclusionary discourses that become internalized and reproduce taken-for-granted inequalities, thereby contributing to epistemic injustice by creating regimes and hierarchies of knowledge that marginalize certain experiences, memories, and perspectives deemed less relevant in the social order of things. This societal context can make it challenging for Dutch co-creative and reflexive migration scholars to engage with various forms of knowledge through humbled scholarship and arts-based research methods and to produce different types

of output, as they have to compete with more mainstream policy-oriented and oftentimes quantitative forms of migration research and operate in a context that privileges academic knowledge and output. In the societal context of South Africa, the post-apartheid societal focus on social justice for historically marginalized and oppressed local (i.e., South African) poor black communities creates a hierarchy of justice that makes conducting research on/with (forced) migrants unpopular and controversial (Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025). Moreover, besides having to deal with more subtle forms of power, such as normalized discriminatory discourses that frame (forced) migrants and refugees as "criminals" and "threats to society," researchers in South Africa also have to deal with "hard" forms of power. Within communities where many migrants live, there have repeatedly been outbursts of xenophobic violence toward (forced) migrants, making South Africa an emotionally challenging and dangerous place to conduct engaged research with (forced) migrants and refugees. This is particularly the case for refugee researchers who risk being attacked themselves, especially because of their often limited resources to travel in and across refugee spaces by safer means of transportation (Kazadi & Koskimaki).

The second set of challenges relates to the emotional labor often involved in engaging in and maintaining intimate, intensive, emotional, and caring relationships with research participants. Several chapters (Greene; Holle & Greene; Kazadi & Koskimaki) raise the topic of how to deal with emotional fatigue, personal limits, and boundaries of care and intimacy within their engaged research projects. For many engaged researchers, their research projects are intensely personal, oftentimes also because they have experienced exclusion firsthand (or through their loved ones) in both society and academia. This strongly motivates such scholars to subscribe to a feminist and indigenous ethics of care committed to societal inclusion, dignity, and justice. For engaged scholars, engagement thus means building, honoring, and respecting honest, long-term, respectful, and sustainable non-hierarchical relationships of care and personal involvement, with a correlating focus on process and relation rather than on outcome. It often means putting research participants' needs and desires before research targets. However, establishing such critical, co-creative, caring, and transformative research practices can be particularly complex and challenging, as they can be a lot more emotionally demanding and time intensive than conducting more mainstream research in which there is more distance between researcher and participants and the researcher's main focus is obtaining academic targets. Engaged scholars can thus find it particularly complex to balance the needs, wishes, and expectations of (forced) migrant research participants and other societal stakeholders while remaining productive within and accountable to an increasingly neoliberal institution that predominantly expects academic output.

There are also examples of research relationships evolving into profound friendships (Holle & Greene), that is, into intimate relations that are enriching on a personal level and on the level of co-creating knowledge but that also come with conflicts and stir feelings of frustration, anger, confusion, and sadness. Within engaged research, the boundaries between "work" and "private life" often become blurred. While this intimacy and personal involvement is what makes engaged research so meaningful, fulfilling, and joyful, it can become both emotionally and time intensive and can

significantly influences people's work-life balance. Moreover, engaged researchers who work with marginalized and sometimes traumatized groups such as refugees/(forced) migrants can also feel that they need to take on the role of counselor, therapist, social worker, conflict mediator, or legal aid worker—professional roles they are not necessarily trained for—to cater to the needs of and provide the necessary support for the people they work with and care about. Of course, the researcher's positionality matters here. For refugee researchers (or insider researchers), conducting research with fellow refugees can stir shared painful memories of war, conflict, violence, the process of fleeing, and the asylum procedure (Kazadi & Koskimaki) and induce post-traumatic stress. Researchers who do not share those lived experiences (outsider researchers) can experience vicarious traumatization and disaster fatigue. For both types of researchers, the societal, historical, and academic contexts also matter. The services provided by the host society and the level of violence toward (forced) migrants within it, the harshness of the migration system and asylum procedure, and the personal histories and lived experiences of (forced) migrants all influence research participants' quality of life. They therefore also influence the intensity of the research process and the level of (institutional) support needed for both the research participants and the researchers. Thus, the emotional intensity of the research can become overwhelming for both insider and outsider researchers, particularly when there is no institutional/academic support structure in place for this type of work.

The third set of challenges originates from the power issues and negotiations that arise within research relationships and practices for both outsider and insider (refugee) researchers. In Rast et al.'s chapter, the narratives of knowledge co-creators with a refugee background show that co-creative research can be transformative on personal, interpersonal, and societal levels, but research participants with or without a refugee background both reflect on the power issues that can challenge co-creative research processes. Issues such as hierarchical differences, "tokenism," and dynamic power relations between participants and researcher influence who is asked to participate in the research (and who is not) and who owns, decides upon, and controls different elements of co-creative research processes. Moreover, refugee/(forced) migrant researchers can also reproduce harmful dominant and taken-for-granted discourses. It can therefore be challenging for engaged, reflexive, and co-creative researchers to know when to take control and lead the way and when to let others (research participants/co-creators) determine the direction or outcome of the research, particularly within an academic context that also demands normalized academic output. Knowledge co-creators stress that one of the main challenges (and also the transformative potential) within (co-)creative research lies in creating a safe enough space to be able to clash and unsettle normalized power relations and discourses.

Finally, the autoethnographic narratives and reflections of a refugee scholar conducting research with fellow refugees in South Africa (Kazadi & Koskimaki) complicate and unsettle the insider/outsider dichotomy by showing and stressing that refugee communities are not homogenous but constituted by a range of different ethnic and regional identities, language preferences, political affiliations, and differences related to gender, class, and sexuality. Even when the researcher identifies

with and feels part of a particular community, perceived power imbalances and identity affiliations within that community can influence who the "insider" researcher has access to, thereby challenging the possibilities of conducting transformative engaged research.

By reflecting on the different types of tensions, challenges, and complexities of engaged research for differently positioned engaged researchers and participants across different contexts and countries, this section underscores the volume's relational and reciprocal perspective on engaged scholarship and recognizes our mutual interdependencies. With its chapters showing the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by engaged researchers, this section seeks to move beyond traditional academic, paternalistic, and unidirectional outreach and service practices of care, arguing instead for the need for non-hierarchical, reciprocal relationships of care for all involved.

1.6 Part II: Embodied Healing at the Nexus of Academic-Community Engagement

This section unpacks the transformative aspect of care by focusing on scholars' communal efforts in their relational encounters with (forced) migrants when well-being or wellness is centralized then healing becomes a form of engaged scholarship. It begins from the argument that affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2019) is articulated through collective encounters and relationality. When we home in on relationality and affirmative ethics, what shape or form does healing and well-being take with forced migrant communities in contexts such as the United States, South Africa, and the Netherlands, in which (forced) migrant communities are increasingly facing hostile nationalist and anti-migration environments? Focusing on healing or well-being within holistic frameworks that are not purely rooted in the biomedical model has the potential to open up great possibilities. Such possibilities offer a language of rewriting or reimagining in order to respond to sociopolitical provocations steeped in anti-migration sentiments and non-belonging to produce new and sustainable epistemologies of well-being. This includes holding space, which calls for being fully present in a physical, psychological, and emotional manner (Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2024). Some refer to holding space as providing a "container" for someone's emotions and experiences (WRSPC, 2023). Well-being includes basic needs such as housing and healthcare as much as a sense of belonging and connectedness (Matchett & Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2020; Zielke, 2021). This becomes especially important regarding forced migrants; for instance, it is known that non-belonging, from the micro-level to the macro-level (legality/citizenship), takes its toll on mental wellness. There are several examples out there, but one is that anxiety and depression have been reported as the most prevalent mental health problems faced by undocumented migrants in Europe, while post-traumatic stress disorder more frequently affects migrants with a former asylum seeker or refugee background (Fakhoury et al.,

2021). This section therefore presents the navigating of being an undocumented or (forced) migrant in hostile environments in the United States, South Africa, and the Netherlands through the prisms of healing, care, and community that extend to kinship and by seeing these as new and sustainable epistemologies produced through engaged research and co-created methodologies. All these form integral elements of alternative imaginings of forced migrants' lives in order to recode well-being.

Community becomes central in reimagining the nexus between academia and society using embodied and co-creation methodologies. This is of particular importance for forced migrants because embodied forms of knowing ground people in their own humanity in ways that counter the dehumanizing narratives of neoliberal immigration policies. For this section, it is helpful to define community as it is understood by indigenous wisdoms such as Ubuntu: Community is where all exist in equal importance within a cosmology of relationality with the ecological system. In research, it is possible to enact such relationality through community care as a practice of tending to one's humanity in collective actions that are meant to sustain the group's well-being (Abrego & Fiorito). In their chapter, Abrego and Fiorito demonstrate that community care was particularly meaningful for undocumented youth in the United States, where illegality is constantly reproduced through stigmatizing public discourses and practices that filter into their everyday lives. Against this backdrop, community care practices make affective and cognitive healing possible for undocumented youth in that country. In the Netherlands, LGBTQI+ forced migrants articulated community care through embracing interdependencies, that is, by establishing mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and caring relationships, which was a central tenet of their research collaboration (Holle, Jelenjev, Loenen-Ruiz, & Salmanpour). Holle et al. present this as a counternarrative that is especially important given the Dutch context—what they call carelessness amid a right-wing white supremacist political regime that violently alienates the non-Dutch other/outsider, the refugee/migrant. These narratives form "a single story" about migrant communities in the Netherlands as the dangerous outsiders who have no place in Dutch society (Korstenbroek). Korstenbroek further adds that through this "single story" of (the "Dutch" versus) the "non-Dutch," epistemic injustice occurs as certain kinds of knowledge, especially those related to particularly situated social experiences and imaginations, are dismissed as irrelevant or marginalized as a viable source of knowledge.

These articulations of community reimagine deep ethical relations with humanity and the environment—with other humans and non-humans—as a manifestation of care. Another articulation comes through giving special attention to a context in which white, capitalist, neoliberal, heteropatriarchal systems aim to separate, oppress, and destroy those who are relegated to the margins—the "non-human," the wretched of the earth (Fanon, 1968). Indeed, these structural inequalities manifest in the lived experiences of forced migrants through violence, trauma, alienation, and lack of access to capital, resources, services, and opportunities. A version of this exists in South Africa, a post-colony, where African forced migrants bear the brunt of violence while competing for minimal (economic) resources that are also denied to black South Africans. In the context of heightened xenophobia and homophobia

toward forced African LGBTQI+ migrants in South Africa, pedagogies of craving—the hunger for both social justice and nourishment through food practices—produced moments of community care and well-being (Ocadiz Arriaga, Shamuyarira, & Kisubi Mbasalaki). Through the Chakalaka cooking sessions, Ocadiz Arriaga et al. present how enjoyment is foregrounded among a group of LGBTQI+ forced migrants in South Africa through, for instance, not only affirming the gender of a trans woman but also connecting "good food" to sexual pleasure.

What this discussion shows is that affirmative ethics connected to co-creative methodologies deploys meaningful collaborations that do not ignore or gloss over pain, trauma, and suffering but instead directly engage with them to create ways of doing and acting differently through practices of care. Enacting affirmative ethics sometimes calls for processing pain and suffering situated in current conditions, but it mainly involves rethinking imaginaries for collective actions that generate shared knowledge that can be used to forge transformative possibilities. One such possibility of re−/co-construction is through embodied processes that dislodge architecture brought on by structural inequalities and that (re-)create bonds through intimacy and kinship. In this way, re−/co-construction can contribute to a holistic form of wellness and healing for those on the periphery, who are usually neglected by society, such as forced migrants and refugees.

While being mindful of not simplifying the vast violence, neglect, and multiple forms of legal and cultural alienation that forced migrant communities experience in the United States, the Netherlands, and South Africa, we highlight several important take away points deployed as counter narratives in community and healing. For instance, this section underscores the transformative nature of community care. Abrego and Fiorito tease this out with undocumented youth in the United States, finding kinship, community care, and critical consciousness within activist groups as crucial to the disruption of ideas. These practices allowed undocumented youth to witness their complex humanity and the social-structural conditioning of their community, which proved to be "so much more" than the negative stereotypes that go with being undocumented. In their collective work, these youths felt the love that grows from activism that then helped them reframe their understanding of self, community, and society.

Holle et al. foreground this transformative nature through a carefully curated workshop with a group of LGBTQI+ forced migrants in the Netherlands. In this workshop, care was centralized and collectively named or practiced as sensing each other's feelings and needs, supporting one another, and paying attention to what someone may be going through, but it also referred to feeling safe and valued by the group and being there for each other, whether by helping, offering a smile, or even providing a hug. By constructing care collectively, mutuality and relationality was highlighted, thereby avoiding paternalistic care practices.

Another articulation of the transformative nature of community in the Dutch context is offered by Korstenbroek who explores storytelling as a way of making space for one's home-of-the-past in the locality of the present, of trying to feel at home in new physical spaces that are unfamiliar, and sometimes even hostile, to migrant bodies. The act of telling, retelling, and connecting stories within certain spaces

(either discursive or physical, or both) strengthened feelings of being-at-home and belonging to a space, especially among estranged or marginalized forced migrants. Here, the power of storytelling was directed internally, toward the community.

Finally, Ocadiz Arriaga et al., through the Chakalaka cooking sessions with a group of African LGBTQI+ forced migrants in Johannesburg, explored the connection between food, memories, and kinship as a manifestation of the pedagogies of craving. Here, food practices and the (re-)creating of food dishes allowed participants to reflect on their identities, for instance as a Nigerian, a transwoman, and a forced migrant. Cooking was therefore more than preparing food; it was also a way of learning about hunger for connection and belonging.

An important part of community care, which extends to kinship, is healing and well-being/wellness amidst multiple forms of violence and alienation. The chapters in this section suggest that this, too, is perhaps an articulation of affirmative ethics within engaged scholarship. Healing takes on several forms. For example, the chapters highlight that healing is connected to social justice, which was realized by some undocumented migrant youth through grassroots organizing in the United States (Abrego & Fiorito), as well as to storytelling accompanied by the making of objects, where those objects and accompanying stories took on the deep meanings of love, healing, and connection for LGBTQI+ forced migrants in the Netherlands (Holle et al.). Recognizing the interplay between individual and shared stories enabled reflection on systemic inequities in creating a collective narrative of solidarity. This form of storytelling was also a way of disrupting the "single story" of outsiders, or non-Dutch, and creating stories about home and home-making in the Netherlands for a group of forced migrants (Korstenbroek). While in South Africa, the power of food evoked and provoked pleasure, which aligns with African feminists' argument that food can be used both to impose power and to draw unexpected forms of resistance (Ocadiz Arriaga et al.).

The chapters in this section therefore present various forms of engaged scholarship that draw on creative/curatorial praxes and embodied processes that lead to new and sustainable epistemologies recoded through radical forms of kinship and community care against a backdrop of non-belonging and various forms of alienations from legal rights. The contributors elaborate on (co-)creation and transformative forms of community, particularly in opposition to the individualistic accounts of care entrenched in neoliberal structures. This section thus offers a space to problematize the delicate balance between individual well-being and communal good as processes that humanize the non-human/wretched of the earth (Fanon, 1968), as well as a space to "commune" with other non-humans within environmental cosmologies. Without oversimplifying the complexity of relationality, this section presents relevant engaged scholarship that focuses on communal efforts to enact and enhance transformative forms of care with, by, and for forced migrants and refugees.

1.7 Part III: Transforming Institutions Through Epistemic Multiplicity

Engaged scholars have historically been engaged in localized and intense relationships with marginalized individuals and communities. The transformative ambition of such scholarship on the macro level has often been to make subaltern voices visible (based on engaged research on micro and meso levels). Transformative engaged scholarship as we define it, hinges on reciprocal, regenerative relations centered on community needs and experiences, but also has the ambition to contribute to social justice and structural change. For these boundary-crossing, decolonizing and transformative ambitions of engaged scholarship it is important to think how this form of scholarship could also shape reciprocal engagement with people within institutions in power. The third section therefore addresses the challenges and opportunities of engagement with institutions to transform exclusionary institutional structures. In this context, a critical praxis of change requires key players in the institutions and formal structures regulating and affecting the lives of (forced) migrants to (1) become involved in networks of transformative scholarship that can increase their awareness of explicit and implicit structures of exclusion in connection with the lived experiences, perspectives, needs, and knowledges of (forced) migrants themselves; (2) formulate conditions for change based on these exchanges; and (3) facilitate/support each other creating alliances that enable them to enact those conditions. Ideally, a transformative engaged scholarship can contribute by creating connections, possibilities for learning, and alliances between players at different levels, helping them to engage with theoretical and empirical knowledge rooted in co-creative methodologies.

Such engaged transformative research requires the ability to work together with disadvantaged communities, to create a continuum between shared spaces of knowledge creation, with the communities on one side and institutions and formal structures on the other, claiming space for polyvocal narratives about what institutions do or can do. In this imagining, the institutions and formal structures would take embodied knowledges from migrant communities as a relevant point of departure for a critical praxis of change. The chapters in this section explore possibilities and impossibilities of working in this direction, with different types of institutions, including local and national governments responsible for migration policies (Koskimaki & Tyhali; Ponzoni, Ghorashi, Ghidei, & Badran) and academic institutions that researchers are themselves part of (Dadoo & Vally; Powlick & Vlasman) or that they create collaborations and partnerships with (Dadoo & Vally; Vang & Espiritu).

Through the lens of these chapters, we see different institutional levels at play that can produce and reproduce visible and invisible forms of oppression. These include (implicitly) assimilatory policy frames; legal and humanitarian regimes that reduce refugees to victims expected to embody gratitude, fear, and helplessness; and institutions producing explicitly xenophobic and visible forms of oppression, exclusion and violence. Transformative efforts in the chapters of this section concern people within institutions engaged in resisting or questioning these (more or less

explicit) structures of exclusion by connecting to collective knowledge from refugee communities and co-creative engaged research. This is made difficult by deeply engrained colonial logics and hierarchies of knowledge that tend to disenfranchise community knowledge as a legitimate source of epistemic multiplicity. What are possibilities and openings that provide directions for action in this context?

The examples of engaged scholarship in this section show the contextual complexities of striving for institutional change. These collaborative projects and the collaborative writing of chapters with forced migrants and non-academics illuminate refugees' complex lifeworlds and help in picturing directions to move forward even in contexts in which direct transformative collaborations with institutions are hard to imagine. Dadoo and Vally reflect on the role of political activist research in relation to the municipal migration policy in Johannesburg. They depict an explicitly dehumanizing context, one in which harshening policies at the national and local level lead to a "necropolity," which legitimizes the criminalization, dehumanization, and violence toward (forced) migrants. Their chapter explores the role of scholarly research embedded in activist collectives of resistance, including migrant community groups, migration scholars, urban policymakers, and human rights legal organizations working together toward a migrant rights coalition in the city. Rooted in such a collective, the researchers use qualitative interviews as an entrance to engage in reflective dialogues with municipal officers who, in this harsh political context, struggle with everyday choices, dilemmas, and life decisions that have a huge impact on the lives of individuals. Exploring the discursive layeredness of municipal officers' reality, Dadoo and Vally give us a glimpse of epistemic sources of dissent and subtle, everyday possibilities of resistance from people embedded in institutions within a context of structural violence.

Possibilities for epistemic resistance at the institutional level are further explored by Ponzoni et al., who look at engaged scholarship projects connecting refugee-led advocates, researchers, and local and national government policymakers in the Netherlands. In these collaborative spaces, refugee advocates' embedded knowledges form a source of reflection on implicit hegemonic structures that reproduce exclusion and marginalization. Though the current Dutch context presents a swift harshening of policies that feature more and more explicit racism and xenophobia, at the time these collaborations took place, exclusionary structures in Dutch policy were more subtle, so the focus in these projects was on the reproduction of exclusion despite policymakers' inclusionary intentions. The chapter examines the role of both emergent refugee-led organizations and refugee advocates in engaging with policymakers to increase epistemic multiplicity in policymaking. However, in absence of a serious recognition of refugee perspectives as legitimate sources of knowledges, the transformative impact of refugee narratives remains limited. Addressing hierarchies of knowledge stemming from historical systems of oppression requires decolonial resistance from within institutions, which is a difficult endeavor for government officials working within structures that reproduce a "coloniality of power." It requires chains of connection between people closer and further away from these structures that allow for embracing and cultivating in-between positions against the pressure to conform to discursive and institutional norms. For refugee advocates working

more structurally together with institutions, this pressure to conform bears the risk of losing their connection with the embodied knowledges of their community. This calls for supporting regenerative connections between refugee advocates' networks and communities, as the interconnection of different stories and marginal experiences emerging in these networks helps refugee advocates who work with institutions to ground themselves in community wisdom.

Institutions for (higher) education and research have a peculiar role in this context, forming the institutional context in which engaged scholars with transformative ambitions operate. Their role is connected with political histories and the part that research and education have played in political struggles. Writing from the South African context, Koskimaki and Tyhali dive into the possibilities and limitations of academic institutions to create transformative practices that are meaningful for refugee and migrant students in precarious conditions. They reflect on the context of the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town, a university with a history of community engagement and anti-apartheid political activism, and stress the crucial need to increase refugee and migrant students' access to the university's participatory structures through collaborative forms of engaged scholarship and material support for forced migrant students. Harsh economic and legal precarity severely hinder the participation of these students. The authors advocate for engaged scholarship with and for (forced) migrants to articulate common political struggles related to rights and dignity, across different layers and social justice movements, as an extension of the institutions' legacy of social transformation, which in the past has been strongly rooted in community struggles. They argue for the necessity to strengthen structures for academic "institutional solidarity," based on connections between different civil society movements, migrant and refugee organizations and academic institutions, where reciprocal engagement becomes an integral part of the universities core activities (education and research).

Meaningful support for (forced) migrant students through networks of institutional solidarity is however hampered by various factors, which include the implicit heritage of colonial structures producing "systems of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties" (Mbembe, as quoted in Koskimaki & Tyhali). In addition to chapters that focus on the involvement of institutional actors or people in power positions in collaborative engaged scholarship, this section also includes examples of collaborative practices that put less emphasis on the direct role of these actors and instead create alternative spaces for articulating knowledges, shared experiences, and community wisdom that are relevant for transforming institutions of higher education. These engaged scholarship projects do not address directly formal changes to institutional structures. Instead, they work within the context of such structures and contribute horizontally to the capacity building of professionals operating in them to connect with above mentioned knowledges rooted in experiences or marginalisation and exclusion. Powlick and Vlasman present the work that has been done in the The Youth Leadership and Resilience Project in the Netherlands: a small-scale, deeply collaborative series of art-based workshops with undocumented youth. Starting from a covenant signed by the Amsterdam municipality and academic institutions to provide undocumented students access to the

university, this project allowed intergenerational relationality and engaged pedagogy centered on the experiences of undocumented youth in Dutch higher education. Undocumented youth, students, researchers, activists, community workers, and adult leaders from undocumented communities engaged to create non-hierarchical collaborative spaces that were both safe and daring, following principles of youth-adult partnership. Though participants in these spaces do not hold positions of power within the institutional structures, experimenting with intergenerational collaborative practices has the potential to travel throughout institutional layers, thanks to the networks and resources of researchers and other (adult) participants with influential networks.

Similarly, Vang and Espiritu describe intergenerational spaces for collaborative storytelling and refugee teaching workshops, which address institutional failures to incorporate refugee knowledge, history, and wisdom in refugee students' education, thus reproducing disempowering humanitarian regimes. Working with refugee students, parents, community leaders, and teachers in the context of storytelling workshops and professional development for teachers, these projects articulated the importance of teaching by refugees and contributed to building capacity for curriculum adjustments in response to students' needs. Vang and Espiritu highlight the importance of creating educational spaces that reach "simultaneously within and beyond the classroom" to increase the capacity building of institutional actors. They also stress the value of horizontal partnerships with teachers, especially teachers of color who face personal struggles with normative schooling structures and Eurocentric curricula, amplifying their critical pedagogies and decolonizing practices and foregrounding "geographies of difference" that intersect differently located stories in histories of oppression as sites for recognizing shared experiences and common struggles.

The potential of engaged scholarship that emerges through these chapters is that of both claiming space for multiple sources of knowledge as a legitimate basis to imagine institutional change and also pushing for that change by nurturing epistemic multiplicity in the connections between different hierarchical levels within institutions: that is, creating possibilities for learning across different levels and between different types of players and knowledges. This involves the small, everyday work of creating supportive connections and spaces of resistance for recognizing previously silenced views and experiences, nurturing intragroup solidarity based on common struggles, and creating chains of reflective exchanges that connect perspectives outside and inside the system of institutions.

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Part I
Complexities of Engaged Scholarship

Chapter 2
Supporting or Transforming the Status Quo? Engaged Scholarship in South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands

Tara Fiorito, Halleh Ghorashi, and Elena Ponzoni

2.1 Introduction

We begin with some fieldwork reflections on race and positionality across three countries/continents:

Engaging with Poor, Black Communities in South Africa

> Being disturbed and unsettled is the best place to be, it means you are growing, learning, reflecting. When you feel comfortable, certain, then you are in trouble," responded Brent, a black engaged sociologist from South Africa, following Tara's story of repeatedly being questioned about her racial and geographical positionality in South Africa. He continued, "You know, I align myself with the working class, but I am actually middle class. It is important to declare your position, right from the start. The first thing you should do as a white person is declare your whiteness. Although I identify and align myself with the working class, and I am very present in the community, a community member rightfully said, 'But Brent, you don't wake up in the shack.'"[1]

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[1] Shacks are simple huts, often made from corrugated iron sheets attached to a basic wooden frame. They often have no electricity, sanitation, or refuse collection. Their emergence began during apartheid, when millions of black South Africans were evicted from their homes and relocated to

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Engaging with Undocumented Latinx Youths of Color in the United States

> From the very beginning of my fieldwork in the US, it was clear that I [Tara] was navigating a highly politicized context, one in which people were outspoken about issues of privilege and marginalization. Sensitivity toward positionality and subjectivity vis-à-vis others was not only a vital part of my research ethics and epistemology but was also repeatedly expected of me—sometimes explicitly, oftentimes implicitly—by directly impacted people in the field. Although I discovered this to be a rewarding learning experience, it could also be uncomfortable and unsettling. In my attempts to address my positionality, I would often openly ask during interviews, sometimes stammering uncomfortably, how people felt about it, as exemplified in this excerpt: 'And am I allowed, uh, I mean, uh, do you think it is okay for me to write about or, uh, represent, the undocumented experience, while I have never been undocumented myself? I mean, uh, for me, uh, as a white sociologist. How do you feel about that?'

Engaging with Refugees in the Netherlands

> We had just finished a lovely dinner and were still sitting around Halleh's dinner table when we started discussing our comparative research project on engaged scholarship and narratives of change. Inspired by discussions with one of our colleagues working with refugees in the United States, we reflected on our experiences working with refugees in the Netherlands. How often had research participants questioned issues of positionality, race, class, and privilege. We realized that in the Dutch context, researcher's positionality is rarely questioned. Elena, for instance, shared that her trajectory of migrating from Italy and becoming a scholar in the Netherlands working on migration was received positively in most contexts, while the privilege connected with being a white EU migrant was rarely a point that received any attention in the way others addressed her. However, Halleh mentioned that when she started her research about refugees in the Netherlands, she was repeatedly questioned about her assumed lack of "objectivity" because of her own refugee background. What frustrated her at the time was that white researchers were barely questioned about their possible bias because of their lack of embodied, experiential knowledge as a refugee.

These vignettes illustrate inconsistencies between our team members' experiences researching engaged scholarship in three countries. In both South African and US contexts, when doing research on topics such as social inequality, (forced) migration, or marginalized communities' position, researchers' personal backgrounds and motivations are scrutinized, and "insider researchers"—that is, researchers who come from the marginalized communities themselves—are generally considered best equipped to understand those communities' issues, experiences, and perspectives. In the Netherlands, however, insider researchers are often regarded with suspicion as they are deemed too involved and attached to produce "objectively sound" accounts. Generally personal involvement is assumed to jeopardize objectivity and should therefore be avoided.

This observation prompted us to dive into the context of research in the three countries, which frames scholars' work on (forced) migration, (racial) inequality, minorities, and the effects of colonial histories, to better understand the roots of

townships on the outskirts of cities. Today, millions of poor, black South Africans and migrants still live in shacks.

these differences. In this chapter, we give a short historical overview of the three contexts, which will be helpful in contextualizing the different experiences with critically engaged research presented in this book. How did these contexts shape the (im)possibilities for scholars who critically engage with social justice and transformative research to establish critical research streams? In alignment with the rest of this book, we define engaged scholarship here as a critical, reflective, and transformative form of research geared toward achieving social justice goals to combat explicit and implicit forms of exclusion such as structural inequality, discrimination, and racism.

To historically map how engaged scholarship has evolved in the three contexts, we conducted a literature review of the historical academic developments in relation to social-political developments and engagement in the respective contexts. Our review included seminal works regarding the development of engaged scholarship in the specific contexts and the literature referenced in these key publications. Based on this review, the chapter (1) explores the space that emerged in these three contexts for engaged and transformative forms of research and (2) connects research developments on social justice-related topics to broader historical sociopolitical developments within the respective countries.

Knowledge of the different political histories in the three countries is crucial for understanding how critically engaged researchers have been differently positioned and have encountered different challenges over the past decades. However, recent developments are also altering the patterns that emerge from our historical analysis. For instance, in this chapter, we argue that the Dutch academic context presents a low level of reflection regarding whiteness because, in the Netherlands, the connection between academia and anti-racist movements has been weak. In South Africa and the United States, this connection has been stronger, and consequently, researchers working on social justice topics in those countries have often been expected—by academia and civic organizations alike—to decolonize processes of knowledge production and reflect on issues of power, privilege, race, and positionality. In recent years, the Dutch context has been changing in this respect, as issues of racism, white privilege, positionality in knowledge making, and the colonial legacy in its institutions are rapidly becoming topics of discussion, awareness, and research in various settings. Meanwhile, all three contexts are seeing the simultaneous rise of exclusionary discourses and politics.

It is also important to consider that despite our different positionalities, we authors are all based in the Netherlands. We realize that our gaze might be particularly critical toward the Dutch context because of our proximity and personal embeddedness.

2.2 Engaged Scholarship in the Context of South Africa

Engaged scholarship in South Africa is strongly connected to the history of apartheid and the transition to democracy. This political transition, marked by the 1994 elections, was the beginning of a complex process of social transformation from a racially

segregated and vastly unjust society to a more inclusive democratic society. One area requiring far-reaching transformation was that of higher education. Soudien et al. (2008, p. 6) argue this sector "has inherited the full complexity of the country's apartheid and colonial legacy. Racism, sexism and class discrimination continue to manifest themselves in the core activities of teaching, learning and research." They suggest that to "become an accessible space to, and operate for the benefit of all South Africans," the sector must "shed its colonial and apartheid baggage" (Soudien et al., 2008, p. 6). Social, political, and economic discrimination as well as class, race, gender, spatial, and institutional inequalities have and continue to profoundly shape South African higher education (Badat, 2010, p. 2).

Academic research during the apartheid period (1948–1993) has been described as a bourgeois, service discipline in which social scientists conducted government-funded research aimed at promoting apartheid policies while simultaneously characterized as being geared toward counterhegemonic resistance and liberation (Hendricks, 2006; Jubber, 2007; Mapadimeng, 2012; Sitas, 1997; Soudien, 2015). Notwithstanding this dual history, academia's reputation in South Africa is understandably tainted by the central role that Afrikaner social scientists (and politicians) Verwoerd and Cronjé played as apartheid ideologists and architects and in shaping and intensifying racial oppression in South Africa. These academics explicitly used and leveraged insight, theories, and essentialist categorizations from applied psychology, philosophy, and sociology to craft and legitimize the apartheid ideology and regime. The 1950s and 1960s brought a division between the white Afrikaans (speaking) universities that supported the regime and the English-speaking white and black universities that opposed it (Hendricks, 2006; Jubber, 2007; Mapadimeng, 2012; Sitas, 1997; Sooryamoorthy, 2016; Soudien, 2015). Whereas the well-funded Afrikaans universities supported white, male scholars using quantitative methodologies and structural functionalist theories to study family life, church institutions, social stratification, and intergroup relations and dynamics, the English-speaking universities housed white and some black scholars that espoused a more radical, oppositional, and liberal social theory, using more qualitative methodologies and critical, neo-Marxist theory to study issues related to class struggle and social change. Moreover, the 1959 Extension of Universities Act institutionalized racial segregation in higher education and created separate universities for the major indigenous ethnic groups (Zulu, Xhoso, Sotho, Indian) and "colored" populations, which fueled the development of more critical and radical orientations. This historical legacy of apartheid within the institutional structure of higher education—that is, the division between historically white universities (HWU) and historically black universities (HBU), and between Afrikaans and English universities, still shapes the current infrastructure of academia in South Africa, leaving its intellectual community still deeply fractured and racialized (Hendricks, 2006).

For higher education institutions, the democratic, or post-apartheid, period (beginning in 1994) signified an important transition from racially segregated and politically policed institutions to more democratic and inclusive institutions (Soudien et al., 2008). The post-1994 transformation agenda covered a range of different policy initiatives (in governance, funding, quality assurance, and academic structures and

programs) and a major restructuring and reconfiguration of the higher education institutional landscape and the institutions themselves (Badat, 2010, p. 3). In this context, the higher education sector was explicitly endowed with social purposes and a social justice mission, and community engagement was recognized as one of the three central pillars of higher education. Landmark policy documents regarding higher education—the 1997 Higher Education Act and the *White Paper: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation*[2]—echo this ambition. The 1997 Act created a coordinated higher education system and launched a social justice agenda aimed at redressing past discrimination and ensuring representativity and equal access (Badat, 2010, p. 3). The White Paper was particularly explicit in formulating various social purposes that higher education was intended to serve and in mandating that universities "venture into activities that reach beyond their traditional function" (Akpan et al., 2012, p. 1). It specifically stated that universities must "promote and develop social responsibility and awareness amongst students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes" (Akpan et al., 2012, p. 1). Thus, Lazarus et al. (2008, p. 58) argue that the White Paper "laid the foundations for making community engagement an integral part of SA higher education." The 2001 National Plan for Higher Education affirmed this commitment and made knowledge-based community service one of the three areas for accreditation and quality assurance in higher education, along with teaching and research (Lazarus et al., 2008, p. 77).

Despite this strong commitment, in 2010 the Council of Higher Education in South Africa lamented that "community engagement remained a marginal, uncoordinated necessity in South African universities" (in Akpan et al., 2012, p. 1). This is mostly due to three factors: (1) HBUs with black scholars, who do most of the work on community engagement, are underfunded, (2) there are relatively few black researchers in universities (a legacy of Bantu education), and (3) HWUs (and thus white scholars, who are still the majority), which are well resourced, do little community engagement. Others note an emphasis on economic development at the cost of more social purposes. Singh writes, "In the restructuring process many universities have chosen an entrepreneurial path" (Singh, 2001, p. 14). Singh points out that developing consensus on the question of "the public good" is difficult in South Africa. There also seems to be a disjunction between policy development and implementation (Soudien et al., 2008, p. 11). Vally (2023a) argues that for reimagining an engaged academia in South Africa, "community engagement" needs to go beyond "political symbolism" or "corporate branding strategy" to enable necessary reflections for institutional change. Vally observes that such engagement has been reduced to a "box-ticking" practice in the context of the neoliberal university in South Africa. According to Vally, such a limited approach to engagement fails to address the power issues at the center of social relations and the institutional culture and structure of academia.

[2] By the Department of Education.

Furthermore, social movements in South Africa have not only held higher education accountable for its actions but also criticized the one-directionality of universities' community service and outreach. There has been a long history of student engagement, which during the transition prior to 1994, created a strong foundation for students and academics to collaborate with civil society and grassroots structures (Motala & Vally, 2022). However, community engagement in South Africa has been criticized for not always considering communities as worthy partners in co-shaping the new structures for justice; instead, they have been considered mainly in the context of precarity, of needing universities' help. In her dissertation, Busisiwe Ntsele (2024) distinguishes three types of engagement between universities and communities: (1) academically oriented, (2) responsive, and (3) co-creative. Academically oriented engagement is one-directional, aiming to bring knowledge to communities. Responsive engagement, which has more sensitivity toward communities' perspectives in its design, is bi-directional, although reciprocity may still be restricted. This means there is space for multiple perspectives and mutual learning in developing the content and process of engagement, yet it is limited in acknowledging the value of community knowledges in reimagining academic engagement. Finally, co-creative engagement is based on a reciprocal and non-hierarchical approach to community knowledges. This refers to a "framework which is centred on knowledge from the 'other side of the line'" that aims to bring the capabilities and aspirations of communities and universities together (Vally, 2023a). As these studies show, most historical and contemporary engaged community programs in South Africa are based on the first two forms of engagement.

Despite the limited presence of co-creative engagements with communities, critical scholarship has a long history in South Africa, emphasizing social justice dilemmas during apartheid and in the post-apartheid era. Inspired by black consciousness and radical anti-capitalism movements, various academic disciplines examined the class, racial, and gendered aspects of academic engagements with communities. Critical scholar Neville Alexander (Alexander, 1985, 2010, 2012) furthered neo-Marxist approaches to the nexus of class and race, coining the concept of racial capitalism. He uses this concept to explore the deep connection between racism and capitalism, showing the accumulation of racialized dispossession as an ongoing and structural feature of capitalism in South Africa (Clarno & Vally, 2023, p. 3432). Alexander's use of this term and his analysis of educational and other societal issues acknowledges the weaving of structural racism into the fabric of South African capitalism without eliding the primacy of class. Using the racial capitalism lens, Vally (2023b) shows the nexus between "race" and class and the unfulfilled promise of a quality public education in South Africa. According to Vally, the combined weight of apartheid's legacy, exacerbated by neoliberal policies in the post-apartheid period, has meant that the hopes of those who supported the liberation movements' pledge to create "a better life for all" remain a chimera. The "new" South Africa has largely benefited traditional white South African capitalists, global capital, and a thin layer of a new black elite. South Africa is consistently ranked as one of the most unequal countries in the world, and inequality remains South African society's most salient feature. Although an elaborate system of social grants has mitigated protracted

poverty levels under ANC rule, incomes, wealth, and unemployment remain racialized, gendered, and spatialized, as they were during apartheid. While some critical and engaged scholars and academic movements scrutinize and seek to alleviate such racialized, gendered and spatialized inequalities, academia's racialized and economic structuring itself tends to reproduce rather than counter such profound patterns of inequality.

A recent critical and transformative intellectual and political movement within contemporary post-apartheid higher education in South Africa concerns the decolonization movement, also known under the banners #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall, which originally started in 2015 as a political campaign to remove a statue commemorating the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. The decolonization movement problematizes and protests colonial and apartheid legacies within academia and builds upon the People's Education Movement of the 1980s in its call for democratization and student representation. It argues for fee changes (#FeesMustFall) to make universities more accessible for the black majority and demands better working conditions, particularly for non-academic workers such as cleaners and janitors. Moreover, the decolonization of academia should result in more black staff members and students and more recognition, appreciation, and use of African theories, philosophies, languages, and different modes of knowledge production, such as oral traditions. Within this movement, feminist scholars have been fundamental in unsettling racialized, gendered, and classed power relations between researchers and participants and in introducing more transformative forms of knowledge production through creative and participatory research projects and through critical, decolonial pedagogies and methodologies that center marginalized communities' needs, experiences, definitions, and knowledges (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2017; Lewis & Hendricks, 2017; Omarjee, 2018). By centering power relations and questioning white hegemony, these movements have been addressing dual hierarchies in academia: the privilege of white mainstream academic work that claims objectivity and the dominance of academic knowledge above community knowledges. Within these debates on transformation and engagement in South African higher education, commonly used ways to assess transformation progress (such as access and equity criteria) are considered insufficient, which means a more fundamental process of knowledge transformation is necessary. Soudien (2012) argues that the university should reimagine itself by "deliberately seeking out and imagining identity possibilities—languages and frameworks of self-description beyond the vocabularies of race and hegemony—that are not yet known, that are yet to be described and that await construction" (p. 32). "From such a position we can develop a project of emancipation that is fundamentally conscious of the complex ways in which we are positioned and position ourselves" (p. 40).

Feminist scholars in general and South African feminists in particular (Tamale, 2006, 2020) have been pivotal in decentering mainstream scholarship while also addressing patriarchy and its intersection with colonial, apartheid, and capitalist systems of oppression (for more, see Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025). Thus, despite consistent forms of structural exclusion and visible violence (specifically against forced migrants) in South Africa, the combination of vital social movements, feminist

scholarship, and the persistence of strong critical scholarship by legends such as Neville Alexander (Vally & Motala, 2018; 2023) has provided strong voices in academia for reimagining engagement with communities. These developments have also contributed to interrogating the normalized positioning of researchers in the field. There is still far to go to embrace engaged scholarship that is co-creative and that questions hierarchies of knowledge, and real critical engagement is still limited because of underfunding of black feminist scholars/black universities, who do most of the co-creative engagement taking place. Yet, academics' fight against the racial segregation of higher education during apartheid, social movements' continuous calls for democratization and decolonization, and black feminist's call for more co-creative community engagement have brought discussions of reciprocity, race, social justice, epistemic justice, and positionality within academia-community relations to the forefront. This has happened in the context of academic institutions' neoliberal turn, which has increased the pressure on researchers to foreground fundraising and has reduced social justice and transformative goals to superficial tools to increase attention for research and its marketability (Fraser & Taylor, as cited in Vally, 2023a).

2.3 Engaged Scholarship in the Context of the United States

The debate on engaged scholarship in the United States has been greatly influenced by Ernst Boyer. In 1996, Boyer called on US universities to reaffirm their historic commitment to what he then called the scholarship of engagement. He also argued that the academic rewards system, which he said emphasizes writing for peers only, encourages disengagement. Thus, the "overall work of the academy [was] not seen as particularly relevant for the nation's most pressing civic, social and economic problems" (Boyer, 1996, p. 14). Boyer also pointed to universities' lack of focus on their urban surroundings, claiming they continue to function as "islands of affluence, self-importance and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence and despair" (p. 19). He argued that this contrasted the tradition of so-called land-grant universities in the nineteenth century: "I'm convinced that in the century ahead, higher education in this country has an urgent obligation to become more vigorously engaged in the issues of our day, just as the land-grant colleges helped farmers and technicians a century ago" (p. 17). Kruss (2012) observes Boyer's influence in the "resurgence of the tradition of land-grant universities in the US." According to Khoo (2013, p. 24), these reassertions of engagement can be viewed as responses to a sense of crisis within American higher education in the 1990s, with public confidence declining and universities losing their relevance in public policy and public affairs. Universities thus developed a framework for community engagement, defined as "collaboration between universities and their communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" (Driscoll, 2008, p. 39).

Kajner (2013) suggests that activities labeled as engaged scholarship have expanded enormously since Boyer's, 1996 call. Defining what engaged scholarship is

has become even more difficult, however, given the broad spectrum of "community-based and university-based practices" that are thus labeled. What all of these activities have in common, according to Kajner, is "an orientation to community interests, as well as a way of interacting with communities that goes beyond the one-way dissemination of knowledge" (2013, p. 10). This perspective was also used in a 1999 report by the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, which defined engagement as "reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships; two-way streets defined by mutual respect for what each partner brings to the table" (Kajner, 2013, p. 10). Calhoun (2006, p. 8) argues that engaged scholarship should be about more than a separate pillar of "community service" or about issues of access and equity. It should include more fundamental reconsiderations of the construction and role of knowledge in our societies and academia's contribution to the public good. The pursuit of excellence and having market and ranking systems are serious dangers to a kind of scholarship that aims to be engaged and most importantly transformative (Calhoun, 2006).

Like in South Africa, a history of social movements has been another essential factor in academic engagement with US civil society. Khoo (2013, p. 25) argues that Boyer's idea of a scholarship of engagement was "rooted in Higher Education's need to renew its intellectual and civic role," while the importance of social movements was connected to a new understanding of civic engagement. Inspired by anti-colonial movements in the Global South, student movements in the late 1960s demanded ethnic studies courses and greater access to education for underprivileged groups. This led to the first ethnic studies departments in US universities, while broad coalitions of student protesters emphasized the importance of social justice education in such studies (Yep & Mitchell, 2017). The (black) student movements in the 1960s aimed to create an educational environment for students to challenge constructed negative societal myths about their position in society. The focus thus moved to imagining alternative ways of considering their position in the context of societal power relations regarding the intersection of race and class. Black feminists such as Patricia Robinson, Patricia Haden, and Donna Middelton, inspired by Frantz Fanon's critique of structural bases of subordination, considered education to be a strong foundation for transformation and struggles against racism and class-based deprivation (Kelly, 2016). These developments resulted in framing "civic engagement" as much more than service to the community; instead, it is a set of processes that involves communities and the wider public in the very production of knowledge itself (Khoo, 2013, p. 27).

This kind of civic engagement is at odds with the dominant academic values of entrepreneurialism and individualism, which are transforming academia into "academic capitalism" and the university into a "corporate university" (Barnett, 2007, as cited in Khoo, 2013, p. 36). It has been argued that engaged scholarship with a transformative potential needs to address the power relations in academia. Such scholarship was developed in critical interdisciplinary departments in the late 1960s and early 1970s and still continues to expand and differentiate, including fields such as women's studies, ethnic studies, black studies, Chicana/o studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, labor studies, and disability studies. These studies combine

political engagement with centering community and indigenous knowledges, ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies (Yep & Mitchell, 2017). As mentioned above, the development of these studies has been strongly shaped by transformative social and civil rights movements and in response to an intellectual turn within academia aimed at countering hegemonic and oppressive discourse, increasing social justice, and politicizing academia. In addition to embracing community and indigenous knowledges, they build upon different theoretical and epistemological traditions but have a basis in *critical theory*, as propagated by the Frankfurter Schule (Horkheimer, 1972) and Mills (1959), which aims to critique and transform existing forms of domination, inequality, and social problems in society by exposing normalized forms of power and applying (theoretical) knowledge and insights from the social sciences and humanities.

Thus, despite the dominance of the detached, objectivist tradition in US social sciences, critical scholars of the 1960s, such as C. Wright Mills and Alvin Gouldner, propagated more socially engaged research and proposed a critique of conventional forms of academic research, which they regarded as shaped by conservative values and as legitimating existing power structures and different forms of oppression (Romero, 2020). However, their approach did not question the dominance of the white, male standpoint, and consequently, these scholars have been criticized for insufficiently inspiring and mobilizing women, those living in poverty, and people of color (Romero, 2020). Almost a decade later, feminist standpoint scholars, such as Dorothy Smith (1990/2008) and Hill Collins (2000), purposefully criticized mainstream positivist epistemologies and "objectivist" and "neutral" research traditions, arguing that research and knowledge can never be neutral, as it is always situated, partial, and gendered (Haraway, 1988). They critiqued the male, observational/realist, individualist, rational, and objectifying gaze and contrasted it with the female, sensuous, negotiating, emotional, communal, subjectivist, and reflexive perspective (Pink, 2013). Feminist engaged scholars have shown how women's lived experiences have systematically been overlooked within academia because social life has traditionally been studied by and from men's standpoint. Standpoint theory (Smith, 1990/2008) argues that social life should instead be studied from women's perspective or standpoint because women can see and understand more and different aspects of social life than men can from their position of dominance. Black feminist scholar Hill Collins (2000) added that black women's unique experiences and histories regarding intersecting systems of power and oppression provide an essential window into processes of domination for other social groups.

Furthermore, black feminists engaged with *critical race theory* (CRT), developed in the 1970s as a response to Eurocentric perspectives and epistemologies and aimed at dismantling racist structures within society. CRT is the counterhegemonic response to racialized discourses and practices in the United States and shows that racism is a regular, everyday feature of social life. It has its roots in anti-racism and black liberation movements and in critical legal studies (Crenshaw, 1988; Crenshaw et al., 1995). CRT uses the concept of "intersectionality" to show how race, class, gender, and sexuality (among others) interconnect and create myriad, compounded forms of oppression and discrimination. It shows how policies, legal frameworks, and politics

contribute to the proliferation of intersecting forms of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization, for example by showing that primarily white people—and not people of color—have benefited from civil rights legislation. Many engaged scholars working with CRT have a methodological preference for storytelling and narrative analysis because it centers the voices and lived experiences of people of color and other marginalized groups. Black feminists have also argued for the need for safe spaces, that is, exclusive black women's spaces where black women can construct and celebrate independent, counterhegemonic self-definitions that resist oppressive definitions and objectifications as the Other (Hill Collins, 2000).

In sum, US history shows a divide between a more detached, value-free research tradition in which rigid empiricism and objectivity are seen as the epitome of good research and an engaged scholarship that prioritizes community perspectives and concerns and is geared toward social change for a better world (Burawoy, 2004, 2007; Romero, 2020). It has been argued that the detached, objectivist style of research has marginalized and distanced social scientists from communities and discouraged researchers from engaging with applied research and social justice issues. Moreover, the dominant discourse on academic excellence and the dominance of neoliberal politics has created a corporate culture within academia in which performance pressures have led to an academia more engaged with publishing papers on internal, professional debates than on community-defined concerns (Gould, 2003). However, cutbacks in welfare provisions and funding for educational initiatives that counter inequality (Burawoy, 2004) have also created a breeding ground for engaged scholarship as a counter-discourse in the United States. Thus, despite the strong presence of conventional research, the combination of robust social movements in the United States and (interdisciplinary) work with communities that emphasizes the importance of engagement has created a durable foundation for critical transformative forms of research that have questions of power and positioning at their center. Yet, the decolonization of knowledge production that has been increasingly taking place in US academia, despite strong resistance from mainstream scholarship, is under serious attack in the context of new political developments in the country.

2.4 Engaged Scholarship in the Netherlands

The development of more critical and transformative forms of engaged scholarship in the Netherlands is also connected to the political developments and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when Dutch academia was confronted with an authority crisis challenging the hierarchical and conservative position of academia and its disconnection from society (Kennedy, 2022). From their initiation in the late nineteenth century onwards, the social sciences and humanities mostly aligned with mainstream social and political developments, following the research orientations articulated by government (Gastelaars, 1985). Such disciplines were dominated by positivist, objectivist, and quantitative research oriented toward issues related to social order, moral cohesion, and planning, which served and cemented the status

quo. Qualitative methods were deemed irrational and unscientific by the more mainstream academic community, and research on social justice issues had a low academic status (Gastelaars, 1985; Houtman, 2010). The dominant stream in the 1950s was more sociographic and focused on describing the populace and on how to restore "the community" and the education of what were labeled "anti-social" individuals and families (Dercksen & Verplanke, 1987). This discontent with so-called *onmaatschappelijken* (anti-socials) was accompanied by a tendency to isolate these groups and then transform them into decent citizens (Lucassen, 2006).

The marginalization of critical and engaged forms of scholarship changed in the late 1960s—with 1968 as its culmination—when more attention was given to the need for democratizing academia. Fueled by student protests, there was a substantial shift within Dutch academia toward more socially engaged research, such as socially engaged science shops (*wetenschapswinkels*), and developing institutes for socially relevant research, which were all founded on democratic, participatory ethics (Pennings et al., 1987). During that time, there were approximately 100 research groups working with (participatory) action research in the Netherlands, all propagating a more critical, emancipatory perspective on research, developing research designs and interpretations in dialogue with societal partners, and producing outcomes that were actionable, empowering, and transformative (Boog, 2007; Boog et al., 1996). Researchers started to care about working with participants as co-researchers and co-theorizers, establishing relationships based on respect and equality. Yet, "this democratizing process could go hand-in hand with an elitist sense of mission (*elitair zendingsbesef*)" (Kennedy, 2022, p. 5) and a patronizing approach toward disadvantaged communities.

In that same period, an intellectual counterculture developed in Dutch academia that aligned itself with Marxist theory and with new social movements, such as the women's rights movement and the gay rights movement, though less so with the decolonization movement. Most intriguing in this context has been a powerful academic movement of solidarity with international liberation movements fighting for independence from imperial powers in the Global South. One such example is the work of Gerrit Huizer, the founder and first director of the Third World Center at the University of Nijmegen in 1973. For a long time, the center represented critical Third World studies in the Netherlands (Baud, 2018). In addition, there was strong engagement with the rights of indigenous people in the Americas in the 1980s (Baud, 2018). Such initiatives led to the development of strong "Global South area studies" at various Dutch universities. However, this strong international justice-oriented focus did not lead to sustainable university engagement with communities of migrants and refugees from the Global South in the Netherlands.

The work of these critical and globally engaged scholars became debated and their politization is argued to have resulted in research being less rigorous in its scientific methods and intellectual endeavors (De Vries, 2015; Houtman, 2010). Politically engaged research, such as action research, became disreputable and controversial (Boog, 2007). Until the recent decade, the connection between socio-scientific work and personal/political values was regarded with high diffidence in much of the Dutch academy. Despite the intertwining of academia and policy, the norms and standards

of social science research were often dominated by the empirically based model of conventional academic research. This trend has been strengthened by the increase of managerialism and marketization in academia since the early 2000s (Diefenbach, 2007), accompanied by a focus on individualized excellence and increasing output demands (Bal et al., 2014).

The field of research about migration, minorities, and inequality in the Dutch context has three remarkable aspects compared with the US and South African contexts. The first is the tight entanglement between research and policy that has characterized much of the research on such issues. The second is, at least until recently, the striking lack of attention to the Dutch colonial past and the consequences of colonial histories in the Netherlands, leading to the decades-long ignoring of institutional racism and to the normalization of notions of race neutrality and colorblindness in research. The third is the strong marginalization of critical engaged scholarship (as a transformative force in connection with communities and social justice movements) and especially of engaged scholars of color with or without a migration history.

Various scholars have highlighted how much of the publicly acclaimed Dutch research on social inequality, marginalized communities, and migration has developed in tight connection with policy rather than through a focus on community interests, experiences, perspectives, and epistemologies. For instance, Scholten (2011) describes the "research-policy nexus" through which Dutch socio-scientific research on "ethnic minorities" has developed following the frames of welfare state policy. As with other strong welfare state societies (such as Scandinavian countries), policy engagement by social scientists in the Netherlands has predominantly been directed toward supporting and strengthening the welfare state systems' policies in combating inequalities. Scholars thus participated in the national welfare project of identifying vulnerable groups for policy. Beginning in the 1980s, the focus lied particularly on migrant groups and their economic-cultural "deficits," resulting in what has been referred to as the "Dutch minority research machinery" (Essed & Nimako, 2006). In this process, boundaries between policy and academia became blurred, with public and civil servants frequently being given academic appointments in charge of conducting policy research within universities (Essed & Nimako, 2006, p. 284), while social scientific research became increasingly dependent on government funding (Engbersen, 2009). This led to the dominance of research categories and definitions that were in line with policy frameworks, with less attention given to the experiences and self-definitions of people targeted by the policies. The space for critical engaged scholarship was therefore very limited.

The marginalization of critically engaged research with migrant communities and the parallel silencing of Dutch colonialism and racial inequalities can thus be at least partly related to the collaborative dominance of research with governmental actors (see also Ghorashi, 2024). Researchers' trust in the welfare state's ability to address injustice and inequality might also have diminished the urgency to engage with community knowledge and to start emancipatory collaborations with communities or social movements. But there was also an explicit fear that collaborating with communities through co-creative methods and articulating collective concerns would damage the objectivity and quality of research. For instance, the Dutch sociologist

Engbersen (2009), who conducted much of the policy research used to guide the Dutch government, criticized Burawoy's call for a "public sociology" that engages with civil society, claiming that this risks politicizing research. In contrast, Essed and Nimako (2006) critiqued mainstream white scholars' epistemic privilege within the Dutch policy-research nexus and the heavy exclusionary presence of the strong Dutch minority research machinery. The intertwining of policy and academia and its focus on conventional forms of research, in addition to Dutch academic research's strong dependence on government funding and the small size of Dutch policy and academic circles, had a largely homogenizing and thus marginalizing impact on the development of other kinds of critical scholarship in the Netherlands (Engbersen, 2009).

These developments not only marginalized critically engaged scholarship for decades but also blocked the development of critical race studies in the Netherlands. Renowned critical race scholar David Golberg provides an example of this in his conversation with Paul Gilroy: "And then you think of CRES, the Centre for Race and Ethnic Studies in Amsterdam, that was so productive and then closed down because it was too critical for the Dutch state; [...] it destroyed the possibility of a generation of critical thinking around race in the Netherlands" (Sarah Parker Remond Centre, 2020). In the second half of the 1980s, not long after its establishment, CRES, the only institutional house for critical race studies in the Netherlands, was disqualified and abolished. One of the arguments for this, at that time, was that racism is not a Dutch problem, that it is mainly a "'US and UK import' [... and] an insult to the 'uniquely Dutch character trait of tolerance'" (Essed & Nimako, 2006, p. 285). This long denial of racism, which Wekker (2016) coined "white innocence," is shaped by the "colonial cultural archive" in which the dominant image of the Dutch as open, tolerant, and philanthropic is normalized (see also Ghorashi, 2014). This was mirrored in a reluctance to acknowledge the presence of institutional racism within Dutch academia itself. The privileged position of white (predominantly male) academics remained unquestioned for decades while the position of non-white scholars who addressed issues of race and racism was severely challenged (Essanhaji, 2023; Ghorashi, 2024; Wekker, 2016). This explains the lack of academic resistance when CRES—which was headed by a black scholar—was replaced by a new institute without race in the title, the Institute of Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES), and with more financial support and with a white scholar with strong policy connections as its director (Essed & Nimako, 2006). The IMES focused on "ethnicity" rather than "race" and did not engage in critical race studies, as this was considered "too controversial." This also strengthened the exclusion of engaged scholars (particularly scholars of color) for being too engaged or not "objective enough" (Essanhaji, 2023; Ghorashi, 2024; Schinkel, 2018). Till recently, the mainstream research that got funded focused on the economic, political, and social integration of ethnic minorities and downplayed or ignored institutional racism and the consequences of colonial histories (Essanhaji, 2023; Ghorashi, 2024; Schinkel, 2018; Van Reekum, 2014; Wekker, 2016).

Moreover, the past decade has seen growing attention on what is called the valorization of research in Dutch academia. A Dutch Academy of Science (KNAW) report mentioned a growing concern about the one-way, quantitative evaluation

of the quality of Dutch social science research (KNAW, 2013, p. 9). In addition, since 2018, the NWO (the Dutch Research Council) has been commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) to implement the so-called National Science Agenda (NWA) research program, which aims to propose research projects in collaboration with governmental and societal actors. However, most of these initiatives seem to use a narrow approach to valorization without the necessary inclusion and appreciation of community perspectives within civil society. This conflicts with the increasing expectation for universities to become more responsive to the needs of "societal actors," which has led to, for instance, community service learning initiatives in educational programs (Snijder et al., 2022). Yet, Koekkoek et al.'s (2024) recent study shows that the growing attention to the importance of "university-community engagement" at Dutch universities is often tied to a logic of marketization. "Community" in university policies is a broad concept that also encompasses corporate and state actors. The authors explicitly link the notion of community engagement to that of corporate social responsibility and the marketization of higher education.

Despite these constraining factors, there are also new developments toward (and renewed pleas for) a more engaged scholarship that builds upon the historical Dutch foundation of (participatory) action research and new transdisciplinary programs (De Vries, 2015). In his inaugural lecture, James Kennedy (2022) calls for community-engaged learning in academia that focuses on co-creation with societal partners. In his view, community engagement requires constant balancing of involvement and distance while engaging with academic and community knowledges. Moreover, discussions on racism within Dutch academia have recently become more prominent within Dutch academic spaces, even in prestigious public bodies such as the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences. Various social movements such as the Kick Out Zwarte Piet movement (McDonald-Gibson, 2020) and the Black Lives Matter movement in the Netherlands have arguably led to an increase in the number and weight of discussions on structural racism taking place in Dutch public spaces, in public administration, and in academia (Ghorashi, 2023). In line with this development, an increasing number of young academics, inspired by intersectional black feminists, such as Philomena Essed and Gloria Wekker, are questioning the normalized white dominance in academia and calling for more engaged and reflective academic research (Essanhaji, 2023; Holle et al., 2024; Schor, 2023). This type of research co-creates knowledge with diverse societal stakeholders, centers the needs, desires, and epistemologies of marginalized communities, recognizes the impact of colonial histories in contemporary power relations, and includes research on social justice topics related to race and racism.

2.5 Discussion and Conclusion

These three historical trajectories regarding the space for societal engagement within academia show interesting historical similarities across the three countries (and continents). First, in all three contexts, academia has both worked in service of government and industry (thereby supporting or solidifying the status quo) and sought to counter hegemonic power by centering community experiences and knowledges and working with social activism (thereby opposing or transforming the status quo). Thus, on the one hand, academic research has repeatedly been criticized for aligning itself with the interests, policies, research orientations, and conceptual categories of governance (Hendricks, 2006; Essed & Nimako, 2006; Smith, 1990/2008), thereby contributing to experiences of epistemic injustice and conceptual exclusion amongst (marginalized) communities. While, on the other hand, it has been celebrated for promoting social reform, inspiring counterhegemonic liberation, and critiquing social inequalities caused by government policies. In all three contexts, academic research has been influenced by student activism and the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s and most recently by movements calling for more decolonial, democratic, and participatory forms of knowledge production (Boog, 2007; Romero, 2020; Sitas, 1997). Moreover, a relationship between academia and civil society has existed in all three countries.

A second reoccurring pattern concerns the dominance of the "pale males" or "White patriarchs" of academic research that propagated a more detached, quantitative, "objectivist," professional social science that does not instigate societal engagement or progressive social change (Essed & Nimako, 2006; Romero, 2020; Sooryamoorthy, 2016). However, in all three countries, the supposed objectivity and universalism of these (white, male, middle-class) accounts was then unmasked by feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial scholars for "universalizing the experiences of particular societies, namely Europe and the United States, and even more narrowly of hegemonic groups within these societies" (Burawoy, 2007, p. 138).

Third, across the three contexts, we see a divide between different forms of engagement. On the one side stands the more conventional (often positivist and/or quantitative) form of academic research that considers itself socially engaged by being reflective and critical about the harmful effects of policy measures, capitalism, and the decline of the welfare state. On the other side stands the more transformative form of engaged scholarship—that connects to the type of research centered in this book—that seeks to unsettle the privileged position of academic knowledge and establish co-creative forms of knowledge production with (marginalized) communities and societal stakeholders through co-creative and arts-based methods, centering the experiences and concerns of communities and establishing and honoring meaningful relationships of care, humility, and reciprocity. The major similarity in all three contexts is the effort of black (feminist) scholars who connected justice-driven activism and engaged forms of scholarship.

Considering these similarities, how can the mirroring of these different histories of academic research (and its societal engagement) help shed light on some of the

differences between the three countries? While in all three countries, engaged scholarship entailed an alliance with social movement activism, the countries differed in the type of social movements that developed. The United States witnessed the development of the Black Power movement, the Third World movement, the women's rights movement, the labor movement, and the gay rights movement. South Africa predominantly experienced the flourishing of the anti-apartheid movement, the black consciousness (or liberation) movement, and the labor movement, but women's or gay rights movements were less publicly visible. In the Netherlands, women's, gay, and labor rights movements were strongly developed, while the anti-racist movement barely surfaced. Thus, while in the United States and South Africa, academia was strongly influenced by and connected to social justice movements concerned with race and class (and also gender and sexuality in the United States), Dutch academia was predominantly connected to social movements concerned with class, gender, and sexuality, but less with race. Academia in South Africa and the United States has therefore been more explicit in recognizing the continued legacy of colonialism and racial segregation within both academia and society, which is particularly evident in the divide between HBUs and HWUs in South Africa and the continued existence of historically black colleges and universities in the United States (Gasman et al., 2007; Ocadiz Arriaga, 2025). Moreover, within both Dutch academia and Dutch society, the denial of 400 years of Dutch colonialism, the taboo about race, and the discourse of colorblindness have led to a predominant focus on studying ethnicity (rather than race) within much social research and to the silencing of racism. However, as mentioned above, in the current decade, race and racism are increasingly being recognized both in Dutch society and academia.

Understandably, these developments have influenced epistemological practices and methodologies within the three countries. American (black) feminist standpoint theorists' critique of the traditional detached, positivist, and objectivist sociological tradition led to an increase in more transformative knowledge production practices: that is, in research that centers community concerns, insider perspectives, and experimental knowledge by co-creating research and knowledge through participatory research methodologies. Though in South Africa the influence of intersectional feminist epistemologies and "critical decolonial pedagogies" within academia is a more contemporary development (Lewis & Hendricks, 2017; Omarjee, 2018), post-apartheid South Africa is an extremely politicized context in which commitment to decolonization, non-racism, affirmative action, and black empowerment has increased pressures for researchers to reflect on and engage with issues of race, identity, positionality, and more transformative and just knowledge production. By contrast, in the Netherlands, the often unquestioned whiteness—and supposed "objectivity" through detachment—of Dutch researchers has been so normalized that even white feminist scholarship in the Netherlands, which does question the notion of gender positionality in relation to knowledge production, often did not address the racial positionality and bias of white Dutch researchers (Wekker, 2016). Thus, this historical comparison provides an explanatory narrative for our observation—illustrated by the fieldwork vignettes in the introduction—that Dutch academia has long had a weakness when it comes to race (and the value of insider perspectives)

in relation to transformative and epistemically just knowledge production processes. This blind spot has weakened the transformative potential of research that aimed to be critical and transformative in the Dutch context because it failed to address the different intersecting layers of sources of inequality and exclusion in both policy and research. There is, however, a growing acknowledgement of colonial legacies and institutional racism in academia and by research funding agencies. But, in all three contexts, it remains to be seen whether such new developments will prove to be sustainable given growing racist and anti-migrant movements and heavy financial cuts for universities.

That being said, the Dutch research-policy nexus within the context of the welfare state does offer important societal opportunities and benefits, as academic research in the Netherlands is directly involved in developing and evaluating social policies geared toward vulnerable populations. Consequently, in the Dutch context of the welfare state, research-supported governmental policies aimed at protecting and assisting vulnerable groups do offer basic protections against extreme forms of socioeconomic and racial-ethnic inequalities, which, in comparison to the United States and South Africa, contributes to lower levels of social inequality and exclusion. However, the perverse, unintended effect of this type of policy-engaged research is that it lacks transformative capacity and a critical edge because it often does not question normalized hierarchical relations between "the generous givers" and "the needy receivers." Because such harmful effects of normalized power and normalized whiteness in the Netherlands are a lot more subtle and subsequently less visible that in the other two contexts, it becomes more difficult to question how these subtle forms of power reproduce the status quo. Instead, in the United States and South Africa, where the sources of exclusion, exploitation, and inequality are more direct and visible, research tends to be more directly involved in questioning oppressive forms of power and countering the status quo.

Despite these historical differences, there are some contemporary cross-continental convergences that influence academia worldwide. All three contexts have a tension between the neoliberal currents within academia that enhance individual publication pressures and push for more positivist, internally oriented research, on the one hand, and the new waves of commitment to slow science, scholar well-being, and socially engaged research that co-creates knowledge with and for communities, on the other. Moreover, in all three countries, black liberation and decolonization movements—such as Black Lives Matter (in the United States), Rhodes Must Fall (in South Africa), and the anti-racism or Kick Out Zwarte Piet movement (in the Netherlands)—have penetrated the ivory tower of academia and have put the centrality of race and representation on the research agenda, furthering calls for more transformative and epistemically just academic research—that is, for engaged academic research that acknowledges systemic racism within academia, reflects on racial positionality and unquestioned normalized whiteness, and centers the lived experiences of black and otherwise marginalized communities within knowledge production processes. This book aims to be a part of these transformational engaged research efforts.

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Chapter 3
Academic Kinships: Relationship-Building as a Political Form of Care

Alexandra Greene

3.1 Introduction

> The Critical Refugee Studies Collective is such an important endeavor for me personally, because it speaks to aspirations for what I envision as collective social justice. That's where my heart lies. (Lan Duong)

Why do we, as engaged scholars, build relationships within the academy? Perhaps, as Lan suggests, we build relationships to contribute to a shared vision of collective social justice. Driven by both conviction and passion, she hints at solidarity as a political form of love (Vilkomerson et al., 2024). Yet, how do we recognize the depth and substance of these relationships in our lives? Scholars like McConnell (2012) offer the concept of academic kinship, arguing that framing academic relationships as "kin" acknowledges their significance. While the literature on academic kinship remains limited, it emphasizes the importance of ethical commitments in sustaining scholarly communities. However, for engaged scholars like Lan, political commitments are also vital to nurturing and sustaining these relationships. Given this, I wish to enrich existing conceptualizations of academic kinship by integrating political commitments. Doing so is not only valuable for understanding the motivations behind engaged scholarship, but for illuminating why and how we, as engaged scholars, build relationships within the academy—as well as outside of it.

In this regard, it is important to clarify what I mean by political commitments. For me, politics and the political emphasize struggles for power, present in both formal institutions and everyday life. According to Young (1990), politics involves daily practices and interactions where power dynamics play out and social change can begin. Harney and Moten (2013) highlight the importance of collective organizing and "fugitive planning" to create spaces outside traditional structures. They contend that these spaces allow people to come together to imagine and enact alternative ways

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of living and being, ultimately aiming for a more just and equitable world. Given this framing of politics and the political, I understand the scholars in this study as *politically committed* to foregrounding the experiences of marginalized groups, addressing structural inequalities, and creating communal ways of contributing to social justice. Yet, community is complex and often contradictory; community can be a source of inclusion, as well as exclusion. When we commit to making kin, we commit to engaging with this complexity and contradiction, knowing that it might be messy at times. We do so in an effort to cultivate durable and dignified relationships that enrich academic life, critical thinking, and the communities to whom we hold ourselves accountable.

To guide this inquiry, this chapter begins with a theoretical framework of academic kinship, followed by a discussion of the entwinement of activism and academia in the US context. Next, I discuss my research approach. Finally, in order to tease out the political commitments of academic kinship, I turn to the Critical Refugee Studies Collective as a case study, drawing upon narrative interviews with scholars exploring the possibilities and limitations of engaged scholarship in the lives of refugees. Focusing on four motivations for academic kinships—to collectively imagine a better world, to feel safe, to engage community, and to create sites of life—I articulate relationship-building as a political form of care. Additionally, by expanding the concept of academic kinships, I reflect on the complexities and contradictions that are part of engaged and collaborative work. Making kin is messy.

3.2 Academic Kinships

Traditionally, models of kinship have been rooted in the idea of genealogy and the metaphor of the "family tree" (Buehler & Samer, 2018). However, these models have been critiqued for reinforcing Eurocentric, heteronormative, and patriarchal structures (Herzig, 2023). Kinship scholarship has thus shifted from traditional, biological frameworks to more nuanced views recognizing "cultures of relatedness" (Carsten, 2000). This redefinition acknowledges the complexity and socially constructed nature of relationships, shaped by practices, choices, and shared experiences rather than predetermined biological connections. Furthermore, this redefinition encourages reflection on the motivations behind *why* we "make kin."

Feminist and queer approaches to "making kin" (Butler, 2000; Haraway, 1997) emphasize ethical commitments and advocate non-traditional and non-hierarchical forms of connection. This body of work foregrounds an ethics of care (Donner & Goddard, 2023), where relationships are defined not merely by their formal structure, but by intentional acts of nurturing and support, inviting us to rethink and reimagine how relationships are formed and sustained (Nyong'o, 2005). Halilovich (2022) highlights how academic kinship networks often span multiple generations, creating "a multidirectional flow of ideas, values and knowledge beyond our direct social relationship" (p. 4). These connections link scholars across time and space, allowing ideas to evolve and adapt as they are passed from one generation to the next. Yet, the

preservation of this legacy depends upon the strength of the relationships that sustain it (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 179–180). As an alternative to traditional maternal or paternal metaphors of kinship, Ellingson and Sotirin (2008) propose "aunting" relationships, promoting flexibility, mentorship, and care. Buehler and Samer (2018), meanwhile, suggest *queering* academic kinship models to map uncanny relations within the academy.

In a critique of recent theoretical conceptualizations of "making kin," Isaac et al. (2024) argue that settler scholars have created overly abstract kinship concepts that are disconnected from the "practical," "hands-on" responsibilities of sustaining kin (p. 2). They also point out that many kinship concepts fail to acknowledge their origins in indigenous knowledge systems (p. 2). According to Isaac et al., without understanding or engaging with these practical and ethical dimensions, academics and institutions risk missing crucial lessons about balanced kin-based relationships and their obligations within social networks (p. 2). They emphasize that for kinship to transcend "academic jargon," a committed effort toward "being and *sustaining* good relations" must accompany the rhetoric (p. 1, emphasis in original). Their critique also points to the politics of knowledge production and the ways in which knowledge is always intersectionally situated within relations of power and privilege (Hill Collins, 1990).

According to McConnell (2012), kinship takes on a distinctive form within academia, shaped by institutional structures and personal connections. She notes that while universities may recognize the importance of collaboration, they often lack support systems and concrete policies to nurture or reward these relationships (pp. 27–28). In practice, academic kinships do not emerge through formal structures, but through deliberate actions. According to McConnell, academic kinship often starts when scholars make an intentional choice to collaborate. Their relationship then evolves through continued acts of intimacy, interactions, rituals, and shared experiences. This relational labor reflects the often-invisible emotional efforts that underpin meaningful academic collaborations (p. 25). Stressing the importance of ethical commitments (p. 15), McConnell emphasizes that academic kinships are not merely intellectual, but deeply embodied and emotional, involving time, shared purpose, and mutual reliance. These relationships do not endure naturally but must be actively cultivated (p. 24).

While this body of literature on academic kinship highlights the importance of practical and ethical commitments, it does not thoroughly engage with the role of political commitments in shaping and sustaining academic communities. Yet, for engaged scholars, who challenge the idea that academic work is disconnected from real-world implications, understanding how political commitments shape academic kinships is vital. As the next section will show, activism and academia are deeply intertwined.

3.3 Engaged Scholarship and the Entwinement of Activism and Academia

> At the start of every course, I begin by asking students two simple questions: where did we come from and how did we get here? One of the things that ends up having to come up are the monumental social movements of the 1960s in the United States. These movements allowed for people of color to come into the university, allowed for rising numbers of women to come into universities, allowed for more classes—like ethnic studies—to even be taught through the university. (Loubna Qutami)

In the United States, the history of engaged scholarship is deeply intertwined with struggles for social justice, emancipation, and educational transformation. Amid the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements of the 1960s, students, staff, and faculty organized to resist institutional racism, sexism, and imperialism (Wheatle & Commodore, 2019). These primarily student-led protests contributed to politicizing US campuses, culminating in the formation of critical academic disciplines like ethnic studies and the development of community-engaged research practices. In 1964, the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at the University of California, Berkeley arose in response to McCarthy-era university restrictions on political activities, particularly during the civil rights movement and Vietnam War (Savio et al., 1965). FSM was marked by large-scale rallies, sit-ins, and widespread student arrests, and succeeded in overturning the university's restrictive policies (Cohen & Zelnik, 2002). A few years later, in 1968, student strikers—led by the Third World Liberation Front, a coalition of black, Latinx, indigenous, and Asian American student groups—protested for 5 months against institutionalized racism at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) (Whitson, 1977). Their demands included increased admissions for underrepresented students, the hiring of more black and brown faculty, and curricula that reflected the experiences of black, indigenous, and students of color (Whitson, 1977). Their activism led to the creation of the nation's first College of Ethnic Studies and Black Studies department, and inspired similar movements at other institutions (Epstein & Stringer, 2022), contributing to the establishment of Chicana/o Studies, Asian American Studies, Critical Race Studies, Native American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies programs across the country (Butler & Schmitz, 1992).

In the 1990s, the relationship between activism and academia was further institutionalized through community-engaged research and service-learning programs. Supported by legislative initiatives and funding, service learning became a common strategy for civic engagement in US higher education (Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023, p. 3). However, these programs have faced significant criticism. Traditional service-learning has been critiqued for failing to address "the systemic oppression undergirding conditions of need that require service in the first place" (Mitchell & Perrotti, 2023, p. 3). This oversight risks reinforcing race and class hierarchies, exploiting marginalized communities for the benefit of otherwise-privileged students and their

institutions (Cann & McCloskey, 2017). Scholars thus stress the importance of critical approaches to community learning that foreground power, positionality, reciprocity, and life-making (Irwin & Foste, 2021). These approaches address systems of oppression, and seek to leverage academic resources and expertise to tackle social issues while also enriching academic research with the knowledge and experiences of community members (Mitchell, 2007). In doing so, these programs challenge traditional notions of value-neutral science, instead emphasizing the importance of care in collaboration, knowledge democratization, and social responsibility.

Together, this interconnected history of student movements, critical disciplines, and community-engaged research in the United States underscores the power of collective action and the ongoing struggle for equity and inclusion in higher education, while simultaneously reflecting the broader social and political movements of the time and their enduring impact on US society and academia—a living history that continues today. Recent examples of activism and academia's entwinement include the undocumented student movement (beginning in the 2000s), the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (beginning in the 2010s), and the student encampments organized in solidarity with Palestinians resisting genocide and occupation (beginning in 2024). Yet, the past persists in the present. The rise of right-wing authoritarianism in the United States and beyond, which portrays the university as a "cesspool" of left-wing "woke" ideologies and radicalism (Giroux, 2023), conjures the McCarthyism that preceded the movements outlined above. Within this context, student movements, critical academic disciplines, and community-engaged research face ongoing challenges, such as criminalization, misrepresentation, and debates over their place within the academy (Crenshaw, 2022). Simultaneously, rising repression on US campuses, as evidenced by the violent police evictions of Palestine solidarity encampments in 2024 (Giroux, 2024; Gould-Wartofsky, 2024) serve as reminders that freedom is a constant struggle (Davis, 2016). Sixty years after the Free Speech Movement, engaged scholarship remains vital to academic freedom and the social and political life of democratic societies.

3.4 Research Approach

> Refugees tell stories all the time. And we would do well to listen and to interpret and to read what it is that they're saying. (Lan Duong)

> I think that we can spend all day critiquing ideas, but if we are not creating new ways of thinking, then the critique might not be as productive. (Ma Vang)

This chapter draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Southern California between 2020 and 2022, highlighting the narratives of eight scholars connected to the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), an interdisciplinary group of researchers advocating refugee rights as human rights. Embodying the political principle of "nothing about us without us," many members of the CRSC are not only scholars of refugee issues, but are refugees themselves, with longstanding ties to

refugee communities in California and beyond. Committed to community-engaged scholarship and an approach that merges "the critical and the creative," their work centers refugees' stories, agency, aspirations, experiences, and knowledge (Espiritu et al., 2022).

Taking a narrative approach, I conducted one-on-one interviews of around 60–90 minutes with scholars connected to the CRSC—either as (founding) members, through mentorship, or as recipients of CRSC grants. These interviews focused on the following topics: their personal development as scholars; their conceptualization and praxis of engaged scholarship; their engagement with refugees, migrants, and/or the diaspora; examples of structures that constrain and enable their engagement (within and outside of academia); and future plans and aspirations. Scholars were given the option to use their full name or a pseudonym; the text reflects those wishes. Anita Casavantes Bradford is a first-generation Latina scholar and historian of US foreign relations and immigration and refugee policy. Her research examines how law and policy impact the lives of displaced children and their families, with a focus on the intersections of refugee experiences and structures of the state (see Bradford, 2022). Interlocutor 3 is a community-engaged scholar whose work is rooted in refugee and migrant justice. She approaches critical refugee studies as a lived principle, emphasizing relational accountability and transformative praxis. Lan Duong is a poet, storyteller, and scholar whose work is grounded in refugee lifeworlds and transnational feminisms (see Espiritu & Duong, 2018). Through "the critical and the creative," she foregrounds *the refugee* as both a figure of critique and a bearer of creative expression and agency. Lila Sharif is a Palestinian feminist who reimagines refugee historiographies through a deeply personal and politicized lens. Focusing on Palestinian displacement and indigenous foodways, she explores everyday acts of memory, resilience, and life-making (see Sharif, 2024). Loubna Qutami is a Palestinian organizer and scholar dedicated to transnational solidarities among refugee and migrant communities (see Qutami, 2021). Her work weaves together research, advocacy, and organizing to strengthen connections across borders. Ma Vang is a scholar whose work centers critical Hmong perspectives, fugitive histories, and community engagement (see Vang, 2021). Her approach to critical refugee studies seeks to honor the beauty, complexity, and imagination within community life, while remaining attentive to its challenges. Mellissa Linton-Villafranco is a queer community organizer and first-generation Salvadoran scholar whose work centers Central American diasporas in the United States (see Linton-Villafranco, 2024). Through her scholarship, she challenges extractive research practices, foregrounds migrant voices and lived experiences, and advocates ethical collaboration. Thúy Võ Đặng is a researcher, oral historian, storyteller, and arts advocate committed to disrupting dominant narratives about refugees through approaches grounded in care, nuance, and intention (see Lewinnek et al., 2022). She brings together creative and scholarly practices to reframe refugee representations and preserve community histories.

> The reality is we are equal in our dignity. But we are not equal in our positioning, in the resources that are available to us, and in the power that we yield. (Anita Casavantes Bradford)

While this chapter will address the question of why *we* (collectively as scholars) build relationships within the academy, I believe it is also important to clarify why *I* build relationships within the academy, and more specifically, why I have chosen to do so with the scholars in this study. Heeding Lorde's (1984) call for feminist alliances built upon non-dominant differences, I view this chapter as a power-sensitive praxis of solidarity. Positioning myself in relation to the scholars in this study, it is important to attend to our different stories of migration. As a dual Canadian-Irish citizen, my migration story is a privileged one, and I have moved with relative ease between Canada (where I was born), the Netherlands (where my PhD is based), and the United States (where I conduct my research). Meanwhile, the migration stories of the scholars in this study are shaped by (family) histories of displacement; many of my interlocutors have lived experiences as refugees. Despite these differences, but also because of them, we approach engaged scholarship with a commitment to collective social justice—equal in our dignity but not in our positioning, in the resources that are (or have been) available to us, or in the power that we yield. Given these different positionings, our research relationships involve trust, vulnerability, and a mutual understanding of intersectionality as a prism for recognizing the intricacies and interconnections of power and privilege (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1982; Crenshaw, 1989). I do not take this for granted. By engaging with knowledges created through struggles, as well as actively thinking from the perspective of struggles (de la Bellacasa, 2017), I hope my research will serve as an expression of solidarity that contributes to a shared vision of social justice.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that several years have passed since I conducted the interviews that inform this piece. During the writing process of this text, several of my interlocutors noted in our email exchanges that much has changed since our original interviews, specifically highlighting the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Given this, it is important to acknowledge the uneven temporality of research. In my case, the slow, deliberate, and often delayed pace of writing has struggled to keep up with the unfolding of political events, particularly violence that feels simultaneously slow (historically situated, ongoing) and sudden (targeted and escalating). Despite the temporal deferrals between my research, writing, and this chapter's eventual publication, I believe the insights shared by the scholars I interviewed remain deeply relevant today. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that the geopolitical landscape in which we, as academics, live, work, and collaborate has shifted significantly. The world in 2025 is not the same as it was in 2020. Yet, the reflections from those earlier moments continue to speak meaningfully to the present.

3.5 Motivation #1: Building Relationships to Collectively Envision a Better World

> One of my friends and colleagues calls it "dreaming." So how do we dream? But dreaming as something that we do together instead of something that we do as an individual—like the quote-unquote "American dream."
>
> She's also Hmong American, and for us, the understanding of dreaming is that it is a community-based activity. It is something that our parents' generation and our grandparents' generation have always done, which is to dream when they face difficult times—whether they're dreaming of a better afterlife, or whether they're dreaming of a better future. And so, I think that it's something that we try to emulate, and part of that emulation is to do it together, because otherwise, it gets lonely. I think that not just in academia, not just in the job, but also within our society, the ongoing push to progress toward a more individualistic worldview can be isolating and lonely. So that's the other part—to not be lonely—and to do it together. (Ma Vang)

Connected to Lan Duong's vision of collective social justice (which opened this chapter), Ma Vang articulates *dreaming* as a communal practice emerging from refugee lifeworlds. More than a solitary act of fantasy, dreaming involves communities using the power of their imaginations to cultivate hope. In her reflection, Ma describes dreaming as a tradition passed down through generations, where dreaming during "difficult times" has been a way to envision "a better future." She emphasizes dreaming as a practice deeply rooted in shared vision and mutual support—by engaging in collective dreaming, communities seek to combat loneliness and foster a sense of togetherness. Furthermore, she emphasizes the interconnection of communities both within and beyond academia and the importance of building relationships to counter the individualism of academic life and broader social life.

Ma's concerns around "the push to progress toward a more individualistic worldview," particularly in the context of academia, were also expressed by Lila Sharif:

> Academia really thrives on making faculty into productive neoliberal workers for the institution. That is not why I came into academia. I came into it for very different reasons. I always thrived on collaboration. I always wanted to see myself as part of a community working towards a common goal and that goal being social justice.

In contrast to the individualism of academia, Lila highlights the importance of collaboration, community, and communalism in her view of scholarship. She describes how, when she imagined herself in academia, it was as part of a community with shared political commitments to social justice. Her reflection thus illustrates the struggles of scholars who are motivated by collectivism and social justice, but often find themselves in environments that contradict these ideals.

Despite these challenges, scholars identify dreams, visions, and aspirations as important sources of motivation. In my interview with Lan Duong, she connected dreaming to envisioning possibilities for social justice. She offered the following example to illustrate how scholars can contribute to addressing social issues in their work: "The next step for me intellectually, for the Collective [CRSC], is to have us

think through what a transformative justice model would look like for the globally displaced." She explained that this would involve intertwining transformative justice, abolition, and critical refugee studies to address issues of incarceration, deportation, and the criminalization of movement. This holistic approach would entail reimagining justice by shifting away from the current legal system and its punitive measures, and instead focusing on community care, mutual aid, and abolishing structures that limit freedom of movement. Through this example, Lan illustrates how dreaming can encompass community practices, scholarly contributions, and collective aspirations for a just and equitable society: "The goal is to come up with a document that we [the CRSC] could present to UNHCR at Geneva. That's our aspiration." In this way, dreaming *together* fosters a sense of possibility, transforming the process of envisioning better futures into a shared, sustaining effort.

Together, Ma, Lila, and Lan highlight the transformative potential of collective aspirations in envisioning a just and caring world. In doing so, they reflect their political commitments to elevating the experiences of marginalized groups, addressing structural inequalities, and contributing communal solutions to social issues.

3.6 Motivation #2: Building Relationships to Create Safety

> The US academy, as many others, is not a safe space. It is one that is overrun by toxic dynamics, competitiveness, ideas about neoliberal individuality and success. And, unfortunately, these kinds of dynamics are very structural. They're rooted in the increased corporatization of the university. Our university has corporate partnerships that make it complicit in many of the kinds of structures of power that I critique in my work. So, I want to begin by expressing that contradiction. My university[1] also sits and occupies native land, so it is also complicit in settler colonial structures that I critique in my work. So, I just want to also point out that contradiction. (Lila Sharif)

By highlighting the university's toxic dynamics, competitiveness, and neoliberal ideals, which she identifies as deeply rooted in structural issues such as corporatization, power structures, and settler colonialism, Lila foregrounds safety as a central concern. She emphasizes academia as a space of contradiction, while demonstrating the value of naming these contradictions, their impacts, and how engaged scholars can navigate them.

> When I think about what I can do given this contradiction, a lot of that has to do with mentorship and building relationships with my students to feel safe. Safety, now, is not just about physical safety but it's also about mental health. It's about gender and sexual violence and racial discrimination and settler colonialism and indigenous experiences.

[1] At the time of our interview, Lila Sharif was an assistant professor at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She now works at Arizona State University, which is also situated on the ancestral lands of indigenous peoples.

Addressing the contradictions within the university, Lila focuses on possibilities for transformation, highlighting the value of mentorship and building relationships with students to create safety. For Lila, a holistic understanding of safety encompasses not only physical protection, but also mental, emotional, and social well-being. Furthermore, addressing interconnected social issues, such as gender and sexual violence, racial discrimination, and settler colonialism, contributes a more comprehensive understanding of safety, which includes not only the absence of harm, but also the presence of well-being, justice, and support for all. Safety is thus a key motivation for relationship-building and mentorship. Yet, as Lila notes:

> [In academia] mentorship is not really coveted—meaning to mentor and to be mentored are seen as additives to your work, as something you have to do because it's part of a structural commitment that you've made—but it's not really taken seriously. And I don't mean hand-holding through a program, but I do mean treating somebody like a whole person.

While mentorship may be built into existing university structures, Lila describes how it is neither prioritized nor valued as a meaningful part of academic life. Yet, mentorship can profoundly impact scholars' experiences in academia, particularly young scholars, scholars of color, first-generation scholars, and immigrant and refugee scholars. In this regard, Lila reflected on her own PhD trajectory, sharing one of her first memories with mentor Yến Lê Espiritu: "She said, 'There is a place for you to share your story. There is a place where people are doing something different, producing different kinds of knowledge that's based in these stories." Yến and Lila would later co-found the Critical Refugee Studies Collective, along with Lan Duong, Khatharya Um, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, Nigel Hatton, and Mohamed Abumaye. In this reflection, Lila highlights the significance of recognition and possibility—of being seen as a whole person, as a knowledge producer, and as a member of a community.

Other scholars echoed Lila's emphasis on mentorship. Ma Vang and Mellissa Linton-Villafranco, who were also mentored by Yến Lê Espiritu, highlighted their training in ethnic studies and how insights from faculty, peers, and community members were vital in shaping their critical thinking, approach to engagement, and a shared vision for "the world that we want to live in," as Ma put it.

Yet, scholars also reflected on the challenges of mentorship within academic environments that prioritize research output over meaningful connections. Given the few faculty of color, first-generation faculty, and immigrant and refugee faculty, Anita Casavantes Bradford observed how "the desire for connection" from students with shared positionalities can be "overwhelming and exhausting," often pulling scholars away from "the one currency that a research university values, which is research production." Her reflection highlights the tension between institutional expectations and the relational labor required to support and mentor students. Along these lines, Mellissa Linton-Villafranco highlighted the "high-stress environment" of academia and the urgent need to address mental health challenges, including substance abuse (see McCann (2022) for a reflection on this). She called for an end to the "culture of silence" that surrounds these issues, advocating for more open and supportive academic communities.

> If we can't be healthy for ourselves, it's very difficult to help guide younger students, and to show up in our work, and do it well, when there's so much weighing on us. But that's going to take a lot to break down the culture of academia, which is very individualist. It can be really hard to just figure out the most basic things.

In this regard, Mellissa highlights the importance of vulnerability and transparency regarding personal struggles, arguing that a compassionate and holistic approach is necessary to create a safe and supportive environment for students and colleagues.

That said, the academic terrain is not levelled, and balancing (emerging) scholars' needs for connection and support and the university's demand for research productivity disproportionately affects those who are already marginalized within the academy. As Interlocutor 3 recalls:

> I remember when I was going up for tenure, someone would say, 'You just gotta give up some of the community stuff. You gotta focus on that book, you gotta focus on all of the stuff that you need to check off to be able to get tenure.' And I remember sitting there and thinking 'That's just like asking me which arm would I like to have cut off. How do I do that?' And I remember trying very hard, because I knew how important it is for us to survive in these institutions, in these places, so that we can open doors for others. If we're not present, the doors will remain forever shut or tight to get through.

Like Anita and Mellissa, Interlocutor 3 highlights the significant pressure on faculty of color, first-generation faculty, and immigrant and refugee faculty to balance personal and professional commitments, while recognizing the critical role their presence plays in creating opportunities for future generations within academia. Her analogy starkly illustrates the impossibility of choosing between community engagement and fulfilling academic tenure requirements. By likening the suggestion to "give up" community work in favor of focusing on tenure to being asked which arm to cut off, she conveys the unreasonableness of such a choice—underscoring that, for engaged scholars, giving up community engagement would be as painful and unthinkable as losing a limb.

Finally, Lila highlights an additional motivation for creating safety within the academy, this one "more political in nature." She explained how scholarship that "tells a story that maybe is not fit for the political climate" often faces censorship or is rendered invisible within the academy—"and I'm speaking specifically about Palestine." By highlighting the exclusion of politically contested work, Lila underscores the ongoing tension between academia's mission to contribute knowledge for the social good, and the political forces that influence what knowledge is silenced, what knowledge is legitimized, and how knowledge is produced within academic structures. Within this context, mentorship and relationship-building with those who share political commitments to social justice become crucial for creating safety within the academy.

Through their narratives, Lila, Anita, Mellissa, and Interlocutor 3 emphasize the necessity of relationship-building to create safety, while also acknowledging its challenges. In doing so, they demonstrate the ways in which politics and political commitments are embedded and embodied in academic connections.

3.7 Motivation #3: Building Relationships to Engage with Communities

> I remember getting a call very early in the morning one time—around seven o'clock—from a young mother who said, 'You don't know me, but I don't have anywhere to go.' Now, this was seven o'clock in the morning, I was running into a meeting with a major deadline. What could I do? I can't just hang up and say, 'Okay, I'll take care of this tomorrow.' No. And those instances happen a lot, to be honest, and I'm sure it happens to many of my colleagues in the same situation. So, for us, there's no separation between advocacy, our political life, and our intellectual life—it all informs everything that we do. And it takes up the 24 hours in our lives. It's not something where you say, 'Okay, I'm going to write for three hours, and I'm going to go do community service for three hours.' It doesn't work that way. It's all the different pieces of us. (Interlocutor 3)

For engaged scholars, advocacy, political life, and intellectual life are inseparable and interconnected. Interlocutor 3's example of receiving a distressing call from a young mother, despite having pressing professional commitments, exemplifies the tension between community responsibilities and institutional demands. This interconnectedness shows that the roles and responsibilities of engaged scholars—"all the different pieces of us"—cannot be neatly separated. Instead, they come together, taking up "the 24 hours in our lives." She argues against the unrealistic expectation to compartmentalize community engagement and scholarship, emphasizing that, for her, community-engaged scholarship is simply "good scholarship." Through her reflections, she advocates for a more holistic understanding and valuing of scholars' contributions beyond just research output: "Why do we have to feel fractured? Why do we always have to feel that we have to pick one or the other?"

Along these lines, Mellissa Linton-Villafranco stresses the importance of community engagement and embodying solidarity. As an example, she describes how Central American professors are often called upon to serve as expert witnesses in asylum cases, using their academic expertise to verify the validity of asylum seekers' claims. According to Mellissa, this is a concrete way that scholars can bridge the gap between academic research and tangible, impactful outcomes in people's lives.

> Instead of just writing about it, you need to show up. In court. On a Saturday. When you don't want to be there. That's part of the work, that's part of you showing up. That's part of you showing up wholly—not just for the moment of the interview—but the in the moments when it's not convenient. In the moments when it's cutting into your personal time.

Mellissa thus argues that scholars must actively participate in their communities and engage with real-world issues beyond academic writing. According to her, showing up "wholly," not just during "convenient" or planned moments, demonstrates scholars' commitment and solidarity. Like Interlocutor 3, Mellissa makes a powerful argument for community-engaged scholarship, emphasizing that advocacy and scholarship are mutually reinforcing.

Furthermore, the narratives of Interlocutor 3 and Mellissa offer a critique of scholars who overlook the connection between the dignity of individual lives and

social impact, emphasizing that academic work must be grounded in the lived experiences of those it aims to serve. This argument is made concrete by their own involvement in community advocacy, which they see as inseparable from their academic work. By foregrounding their political commitments, they challenge the notion that academic work is detached from real-world implications. In doing so, they emphasize solidarity as a political form of care.

That said, community engagement not only encounters challenges within the academy but also within community—making kin is messy. During our interviews, scholars reflected on community politics—the political dynamics and dominant discourses shaping (imagined) collective identities (Đặng, 2005; Duong & Pelaud, 2012). As an example, Thúy Võ Đặng explained, "There's a lot of ways that the cultural politics in my community are expressed through anti-communism, conservatism, and even anti-Blackness." Although these issues can be judged as problematic, Thúy emphasized that it is crucial to consider their historical contexts, the "ruptures" that shape them, and the ways communities "renegotiate and reconstitute" their identities following displacement. With regards to anti-communism specifically, Thúy emphasized the importance of critically examining and understanding the nuances of anti-communism in the Vietnamese American community, rather than reducing it to "a paradigm."

> What I was seeing with anti-communism in the Vietnamese community was how scholars in political science or scholars in sociology would be dismissive of a Vietnamese tendency to vote Republican as, "Oh well, it's because under a Republican leadership, they were allowed to come to the United States, and so there's a debt of gratitude to the nation." I said, "Well we need to unpack that sense of debt and gratitude further." We need to understand how folks are even strategically deploying anti-communism. They're not just sheep following some kind of trend. Oftentimes, people are very savvy about their public expressions, because they understand that they can only be heard, or written about, or even viewed as significant when they articulate things in a certain fashion.

As Thúy highlights, communities possess a rich and complex humanity that cannot be fully understood through simplistic or one-dimensional narratives (Gordon, 1997, pp. 4–5). Instead, the stories people tell about themselves and their social worlds are intricate, weaving between reality and aspiration. As Thúy explains, when people see that certain narratives enhance their visibility or perceived value in society, they are more likely to adopt these narratives, even if they are problematic or harmful. Rather than rushing to judge or dismiss people in these moments, Thúy argues it is crucial to unravel the narratives that support these harmful power dynamics. In this regard, Thúy urges empathy, compassion, and patience when navigating community politics, recognizing the inherent dignity of every person.

Thúy described a similar process following the murder of George Floyd. In this case, co-writing with two other scholars (Đặng et al., 2021), "grounded in our own shared identity as Vietnamese American women who care deeply for our community but want to call out the anti-black racism in our community" was crucial. Rejecting the romanticization of community became a way to honor her community's complexity. She described how the process of co-writing helped her to unpack the intricacies of community politics, engage in "radical care work," and contribute to a shared "vision

for an anti-racist future from within our community." Thúy emphasized, "I don't think that we can truly do this kind of cross-racial solidarity work without addressing what's deeply troubling to us about our own community." Emphasizing cross-racial solidarity, Thúy explained the need to understand "the ways that we as refugees have been positioned against black communities by a system that works against us at the same time. There's anti-blackness and then there's anti-Asian xenophobia."

The importance of cross-racial solidarities and shared histories of struggle was also emphasized by Ma Vang. For Ma, the involvement of a Hmong American police officer in the murder of George Floyd "was difficult because, first and foremost, I was angry at the murder of George Floyd, and then angry at this Hmong man, that he was a part of this murder." In our interview, Ma highlighted the complex community ties between herself (as a Hmong refugee) and the police officer (as a child of Hmong refugees). She described the ways in which the "convergence of the police state with the military state" necessitated reflection and engagement regarding the connection between US militarism and refugee displacement,[2] the different but interconnected struggles of black and Asian American communities in the United States, and the presence of anti-black racism within her community.

Despite shared frustrations with community politics, both Thúy and Ma expressed how their need for community persists. According to Ma, "Those complexities are for me how the messiness of life gets lived, and worked out, or thought through. It doesn't all get worked out, but at least lived. That's where possibilities can be imagined." Community is thus a space of tension and transformation. Together, the narratives of Thúy and Ma underscore the complexities of community, involving navigating emotions, relationships, personal stakes, and political commitments, particularly when confronting racism. Through their reflections, Thúy and Ma explore the intricacies of power within community politics and stress the interconnectedness of local and global struggles. By adopting approaches like co-writing and radical care, Thúy foregrounds the necessity of solidarity in working toward an anti-racist future. Despite the complexities and challenges inherent in community engagement, both scholars stress that rejecting their communities is not an option.

3.8 Motivation #4: Building Relationships to Create Sites of Life

When I asked Anita Casavantes Bradford how she defines engagement, she chuckled and replied, "That's sort of like asking me how do I define breathing?" Framed in this way, engagement reflects an intuitive, embodied, and life-making practice. Similar views of engagement were expressed by other scholars. In our interview, Lila Sharif explained that her research focus on "food and life-making" was not only "an ethical, methodological choice," but also an approach that felt "much more compelling,"

[2] For a detailed study of the connections between US militarism and refugee displacement, see Espiritu (2014).

"holistic," and "telling." By focusing on food and storytelling and asking questions such as, "Where did you learn to make this jam?" rather than potentially retraumatizing questions directly about the Nakba,[3] she was able to uncover rich stories of alternative geographies and enduring connections to lost places and communities. As Lila explains:

> The critiques of settler colonialism, stories about violence—militarized violence in particular—certainly come up in my work. But it is also always attached to stories of resilience—not just survival. I think survival is a word that we use so much. But also thriving. In spite of these genocidal histories, there has been a push to maintain an existence. There is a Palestinian quote that folks that are activist often say, which is 'to exist is to resist.' And Palestinians love to exist loudly. We party loudly, we have rituals. We are very connected to food—we harvest different kinds of traditions that have sustained us and that bring us enormous senses of joy. A lot of times, when Indigenous folks and refugees are talked about, there is this idea that we're trekking along and we're doing these really tedious things because of our need to survive. But, in fact, we love our life, we love our land, we love what we do, and we love to eat [laughs].

Lila's narrative about Palestinian and indigenous lifeworlds emphasizes storytelling, cultural traditions, resilience, and communal joy, highlighting the importance of holistic narratives and research practices that affirm life. The quote "to exist is to resist" encapsulates the idea that living fully and "loudly" is a crucial act of resistance against attempts to erase Palestinian existence.

Writing this text in 2025—as Israel starves Gaza—I find that Lila's reflections on survival, resilience, food, and life-making, raise important questions for this chapter: Why center thriving and the generative acts of life-making while people resist genocide and fight simply to survive? How do I write about joy in the shadow of profound grief? Here, I turn to Tuck's (2009) framework of desire-based research, which challenges the prevalence of damage-centered approaches in studies of communities resisting oppression. Tuck critiques how damage-centered research often foregrounds harm, inadvertently pathologizing communities by defining them through their suffering. Although damage-centered approaches may be ethically motivated and strategically useful in the short term, they risk reinforcing narratives of brokenness and hopelessness. In contrast, desire-based frameworks seek to illuminate "loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, and the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (p. 417), offering more holistic accounts of both struggles and aspirations. While it is crucial to acknowledge the realities of systemic oppression, historical violence, and exclusionary nationalist projects, it is also vital to resist reducing individuals to these conditions alone. Desire-based approaches thus reject discourses of dehumanization and instead affirm the dignity of life. Lila's reflection embodies this orientation, offering a powerful reframing of dominant narratives of suffering. In the context of ongoing genocide, her narrative affirms the humanity, dignity, and defiant presence of the Palestinian people.

[3] The Nakba, meaning "catastrophe" in Arabic, refers to the mass displacement and violent expulsion of at least 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and homeland during the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. During the Nakba, numerous Palestinian villages, towns, and cities were destroyed. The Nakba is commemorated annually on May 15.

This commitment to life-making and sites of life is echoed in Lan's reflections on food and poetry. As she describes, revolution must be nourished to be sustained:

> It's always important for me that—when we think about revolution and liberation—we begin with poetry, we begin with food, and we begin with collectivity. I make a joke that the revolution begins with food and poetry, rather than, you know, talk and theory. Those are my priorities. And if you talk to Yến [Lê Espiritu], it's funny, because every time we have conferences or meetings, for both of us, we're really into catering and good food.

By prioritizing poetry, food, and collective experiences, Lan emphasizes the significance of enjoyment and nourishment in cultivating connection and inspiring change. Her narrative highlights how theory alone cannot effect change. Instead, liberation must be rooted in everyday sites of life where care, creativity, and community converge. Like Lila, she highlights the intimate, political power of communal practices connected to food and stories—not only as forms of resistance and connection, but as grounded, sustainable, and deeply humane ways of being and relating.

Together, Lan and Lila show how community practices, such as cooking and storytelling, can nurture "sites of life" through relationships of care. These practices hold space for grief and transformation, recognizing historical and ongoing violence, while inviting new ways of envisioning the future—resonating with the practice of "dreaming" described by Ma earlier in the chapter. A desire-based approach thus reflects a political commitment to life-making. By rejecting damage-centered frameworks and embracing life-affirming practices, engaged scholars foreground hope, possibility, and collective resilience.

3.9 Conclusion

Upon taking office on 20 January 2025, President Trump signed a litany of executive orders taking aim at collective social justice: ending birthright citizenship; declaring a national border emergency; creating a policy recognizing only two genders; leaving the World Health Organization; and withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement (Al Jazeera Staff, 2025). Looking toward the future, many are asking: how will we get through the coming years? As the narratives in this chapter show: we will do so together. Rejecting our communities is not an option.

In this chapter, I have promoted solidarity as a political form of care, focusing on four motivations for why engaged scholars build relationships within the academy and beyond: to imagine a better world; to create safety; to engage community; and to create sites of life. By exploring engaged scholars' motivations and ideals, and embedding them in the intertwined history of activism and academia in the United States, I have not only argued for the importance of politicizing academic life but shown that academic life has always been political. Political commitments and engaged scholarship are mutually reinforcing.

By focusing on how the positionalities of the scholars in this study—as women of color, refugees, activists, and scholars dedicated to collective social justice—not only shape their experiences in academia but also influence their approaches to

knowledge production and their capacity to build relationships within the academy, I have highlighted the importance of political commitments in creating and sustaining academic kinships. Academic kinships thus encompass social, emotional, embodied, intellectual, ethical, and political commitments.

Understanding the political commitments of academic kinships is particularly important for engaged scholarship, as these commitments shed light on how scholars approach research, engagement, and relationship-building. Of course, as the narratives in this chapter reveal, forming academic kinships is not without its challenges. Engaged scholars must navigate significant pressures to balance personal and professional responsibilities, community politics, academic structures, and obstacles such as censorship. Despite these challenges and the inadequacy of institutional support, engaged scholars are forging their own paths, collectivizing, and contributing ideas and approaches to community-engaged research that reflect their politics of social justice. In doing so, these scholars have established a basis for academic kinships grounded in shared political commitments to collective liberation. Although "making kin" within the academy is not easy, it is certainly worth the effort.

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Chapter 4
Exploring the Complexities of Transformative Scholarship Through Engagement with Refugee Knowledge Co-creators

Maria Charlotte Rast, Elena Ponzoni, and Halleh Ghorashi

4.1 Introduction

In late-modern societies, power is often present not only in visible forms of domination but also in invisible forms of normalization (Bauman, 2000; Foucault, 1977; Gaventa, 2006). This kind of power cannot simply be acquired, seized, possessed, shared, or (consciously and intentionally) controlled (Foucault, 1978). It operates through taken-for-granted dominant discourses that are internalized (Gaventa, 2006), in other words normalized, thereby shaping all our assumptions, perceptions, judgments, knowledge, and acts (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). The strength and danger of this kind of power lies in its invisibility and normalizing capacity. In a society with longstanding and multiple structural inequalities, people are often subconsciously influenced by dominant exclusionary discourses and unjust power relations (Young, 2001). Such invisible mechanisms produce and reproduce exclusionary structures and thus lie at the very heart of societal injustice.

However, these dominant frameworks not only cause taken-for-granted social inequalities, but also create injustices in whose knowledge actually counts and is validated. They create regimes of knowledges that push specific experiences, memories, or perceptions to the margins, or into "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault as cited in Medina, 2011). Such "subjugated knowledges" are rendered unqualified as

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legitimate sources and forms of knowledge in dominant discourses and structures. This form of injustice in which people are wronged in their capacity as knowers and in which their knowledge is structurally excluded from dominant frameworks is also referred to as "epistemic injustice" (Anderson, 2012; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013).

In the case of people with a refugee background,[1] dominant discourses on refugees as a danger as well as on refugees' otherness, deficits, and vulnerability/victimhood can create hierarchical differentiations and thereby feed exclusionary societal relations and structures (Ghorashi, 2005; Ponzoni et al., 2017; Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). Moreover, alternative narratives, especially those by people with a refugee background, often remain unheard and thus unable to challenge dominant exclusionary discourses and structures (Ghorashi, 2014). Invisible exclusionary mechanisms and epistemic injustice are therefore crucial sources of exclusion of people with a refugee background in late-modern societies.

Considering the taken-for-granted and all-encompassing way in which invisible power works, academic researchers are also unable to escape its effects (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998) and therefore might also be complicit in reproducing exclusionary structures through their work (Ghorashi & Wels, 2009). Academic research might, for instance, (re)produce discourses that problematize migrants and expect them to assimilate. This has been argued in the case of the Netherlands, where a strong research-policy nexus caused a dominance of instrumental, data-driven, and policy-serving research practices (Essed & Nimako, 2006). This dominance had a somewhat marginalizing impact on the development and acknowledgement of critical, community-engaged, and community-initiated research practices that challenge taken-for-granted mainstream paradigms (Entzinger & Scholten, 2015; Essed & Nimako, 2006; Rast, 2022). The Dutch case is therefore a good example for how, through dominant exclusionary paradigms, marginalized communities' alternative knowledges can come to be underrepresented, or subjugated, in both society and academic discourses.

This raises the question of whether and how transformative knowledge that challenges dominant discourses about a marginalized group can be produced. One way to do so is to involve people from that marginalized group more thoroughly in the research process (e.g., Caretta & Riaño, 2016). This is where engaged scholarship could play a crucial role, as it strives for social justice through mutually rewarding and horizontal engagement with marginalized communities (Franklin, 2022). Co-creative research methods that share control over the key dimensions of the research (Nicholas et al., 2019) seem especially promising in this regard. However, actual knowledge co-creation is not easily achieved given the various complex power issues that need to be negotiated throughout the whole research process (e.g., Grant et al., 2008), as will become evident in this chapter.

[1] In this research, we try to avoid labeling people as "refugees" and instead refer to them as "people with a refugee background," a term that recognizes a person's history and experience as a refugee while acknowledging that this is only part of their background, therefore leaving space for other experiences, perspectives and talents that define their identity.

Despite the growing number of studies providing reflective insights into negotiating power in research from scholars' own perspectives (e.g., Erel et al., 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; Riaño, 2016), there is a lack of empirical, systematic, and analytical research on how people from marginalized communities who were involved as knowledge co-creators themselves reflect on negotiating power issues inherent in knowledge co-creation. Our chapter is unique because it answers this question. During 13 interviews and 3 workshop sessions, we explored with refugee knowledge co-creators the complexities of co-creative research and learned more about how they reflect on (negotiating) power in co-creative research. Our chapter thereby demonstrates how people with a refugee background act as agentive and reflective co-creators of knowledge and how this shapes research contents and processes.

4.2 Complexities of Negotiating Power in Knowledge Co-creation

Co-creative research generally starts from the idea of researching *with* instead of *about* the people the research is about (Franklin, 2022), and it aims to utilize the insights that were co-created to change the outcomes and the environments of the people affected by and involved in the research (Nicholas et al., 2019). We consider co-creative research as a form of "engaged scholarship" when it (1) engages with the people affected, (2) has a transformative agenda to foster social justice, and (3) tries to establish mutually rewarding and horizontal relations (Franklin, 2022).

Of course, many conventional research approaches require research participants' engagement to some extent. The difference between conventional and co-creative approaches lies in the amount of control over and ownership of the whole research process: "in who defines research problems and who generates, analyses, represents, owns and acts on the information which is sought" (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1668). Sharing control and ownership can, for example, be done through adopting participatory research methods in which the research is carried out with and by people from the research population (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).

However, simply involving people from a marginalized group in research does not necessarily unsettle taken-for-granted dominant paradigms; it is therefore not automatically transformative in terms of social or epistemic justice. In fact, engagement or co-creation only has the transformative potential to change exclusionary structures when it addresses both visible and invisible power issues that permeate knowledge production itself (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Kajner, 2013; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Consequently, if the aim is to transform dominant exclusionary paradigms, the knowledge needs to be co-created in a reflective, democratic, and inclusive way (Kajner, 2013; Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

It is thus crucial that co-creative research practices with transformative ambitions critically reflect on and, through the co-creation, purposefully negotiate power issues permeating knowledge production itself (Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Grant et al., 2008).

This can be done through deconstructing conventionally hierarchical differentiations between researchers and participants (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; Saltmarsh et al., 2009) by valuing and incorporating those likely to be affected by the research as equal, knowledgeable, and resilient experts and co-creators of knowledge and societal solutions (Erel et al., 2017; Lenette, 2019; Nicholas et al., 2019; Riaño, 2016). Only then can participants' subjugated knowledges (Erel et al., 2017; Nicholls et al., 2010) and ways of knowing (Lenette, 2019) become more central in the research process and result in "alternative understandings of why and how things are and how they could be" (Franklin, 2022, p. 17). In this way, academic insights might be produced that go beyond dominant frameworks and possibly unsettle taken-for-granted exclusionary assumptions (Riaño, 2016). Reflective, democratic, and inclusive knowledge co-creation can then potentially contribute to epistemic justice (Melis Cin & Mkwananzi, 2022).

However, reflecting on and unsettling exclusionary power relations is a very complex endeavor. Hierarchical differences between researchers and participants are already at play due to complex and multilayered social relations (Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008). Researchers then make choices about who is a valid research partner, whose voices and experiences are heard and whose priorities and agendas are followed (Holt et al., 2019). Even the language used in the project determines who can participate in the research and who has the capacity to express themselves more eloquently throughout the project (Lenette, 2019). Moreover, researchers are often the ones who design the research, have more (financial) resources to invest in the research and have access to analyzing the data and publishing the output (Riaño, 2016). Their expectations, agendas, knowledge, interpretations, and envisioned transformations are thus still often privileged (Grant et al., 2008).

To co-create knowledge that actually unsettles exclusionary structures, researchers need to reflect on and unsettle their positionality, privileges, positions of power, and research relationships as well as their (Eurocentric and western) understandings, constructs, and methodologies (Caretta & Riaño, 2016; Grant et al., 2008; Lenette, 2019; Riaño, 2016). At the same time, participants' agency in negotiating aspects of the research needs to be acknowledged, such as the conditions of participation, role allocations, themes to be discussed, categories of analysis to be used, and actions to be taken (Riaño, 2016). When investigating power issues in research, it is therefore important to transcend the dualism between researchers and participants and instead acknowledge and foster dynamic power relationships (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; Riaño, 2016).

Co-creating knowledge, then, specifically entails acknowledging and incorporating participants' knowledge, skills, methodologies, counter-narratives, local values, traits, beliefs, and arts (Ferguson, 2019). Arts-based methodologies appear particularly useful for stimulating creativity and imagination, alternative interpretations, rich nuances, and non-rational (such as non-verbal, emotional, and embodied) ways of knowing, thereby creating space for alternative knowledges and methods that are meaningful to participants themselves (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Kaptani & Yuval-Davis, 2008; Lenette, 2019). Through such approaches, participants gain more

control over "the ways they want to explore, portray and represent their issues of concern and lived experiences" (Oliveira & Vearey, 2020, p. 220).

In sum, for co-creative research in academia to actually live up to its potential of producing knowledge with the transformative capacity to unsettle taken-for-granted exclusionary paradigms in research and society, it must challenge the hierarchical position of academic knowledge, decenter the role of academics, and create space for alternative knowledges coming from marginalized communities.

4.3 Methodology

The empirical data includes 13 interviews and 3 workshop sessions with people with a refugee background who had previously participated as knowledge co-creators in co-creative research on refugees' societal participation/inclusion (in the broadest sense). To connect to knowledge co-creators with a refugee background, we first contacted scholars practicing co-creative research by putting out a call in several academic networks. We also approached people with a refugee background who are or were part of our own research team's co-creative projects. We considered research as co-creative when knowledge co-creators had an increased amount of control over and ownership of the research (content and process) compared to conventional research approaches. Such research could take different forms: Eight of our interviewees were involved as research participants in arts-based research projects or interactive master classes that created, analyzed, and communicated knowledge together with participants; the other five interviewees were previously involved as remunerated co-/peer-researchers and had academic tasks such as collecting data, analyzing, and publishing.

To begin, the first author and a student assistant conducted interviews with the 13 interviewees to get to know them, build trust, collect data, and co-create our research process (we asked for their input regarding the design and content of the workshop sessions). The interviews were held online because of the outbreak of COVID-19.

With the aim of challenging conventional research paradigms, what counts as knowledge, and who produces, analyzes, and benefits from it (e.g., Edwards & Brannelly, 2017), we then incorporated several co-creative aspects in our research, as we will describe below. In doing so, we strived to approach our participants as equal and knowledgeable experts and co-creators of knowledge (e.g., Lenette, 2019) in order to make their knowledges and ways of knowing (Erel et al., 2017; Lenette, 2019; Nicholls et al., 2010) more central in the research process. Our initial plan was to organize a co-creative workshop in which we would work extensively with arts-based methodologies (such as immersive storytelling, theatre, creative writing, and visual arts). However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to create an online version of the workshop using an online collaboration tool and decreasing the arts-based aspects to a minimum. We did, however, continue collaborating with a storyteller facilitator (with a migration background), Petra Ardai, and a visual

artist (with a refugee background), Parisa Akbarzadeh Poladi, for the design and implementation of the workshop.

Using participants' input from the interviews as a guide, the first author collaborated with the storyteller facilitator and visual artist to organize three workshop sessions of 2.5 hours each. In designing the workshop, we agreed that the goal would be to co-create an online guide for academic, societal, political, and cultural stakeholders on "how to co-create with newcomers." The focus of the workshop was thus somewhat broader than the focus of this research (which looks at conditions for academic knowledge co-creation in particular) to make sure it aligned with the research participants' and collaborators' interests, aims, and perceived benefits. Out of the 13 interviewees, seven participated in the workshop, although two stopped after the first meeting due to personal reasons. The remaining five participants were very committed, critical, and enthusiastic. All sessions were facilitated by the first author and the storyteller facilitator. The visual artist created portraits illustrating participants' stories; these were also incorporated in the guide and given to participants as a present at the end of the project.

All interviews and workshop sessions were videotaped and transcribed in the language in which participants spoke (Dutch or English). For this chapter, Dutch quotes have been translated into English and are indicated as such with an asterisk (*). The quotes cited in this chapter stem from both interviews and workshop sessions (origination noted after each quote). The first author analyzed the interviews by assigning codes using Microsoft Word and making a preliminary overview of the most important conditions regarding "how to co-create with newcomers." This overview was shared with participants using an online collaboration tool as a means to co-analyze the data. During the workshop sessions, we reflected together on these conditions, shared stories to clarify them, and while doing so, adjusted, complemented, rearranged, and connected conditions in the online collaboration tool, thereby slowly working toward the development of our guide. For the writing of this chapter, the authors reanalyzed all the data referring specifically to co-creative research by reconsidering and reorganizing all insights during the writing process until we arrived at the topics presented here. Our findings thus emerged through an interactive research and analysis process through co-creation with participants and writing together as co-authors.

Finally, we acknowledge that our research was of course permeated with various power issues and that we were not exempted from complicity in reproducing exclusionary structures (Ghorashi & Wels, 2009). First, the switch from an arts-based methodology to an online collaboration limited physical and material interactions, among others, and participants' (spontaneous and self-initiated) contributions, thereby diminishing participants' control and ownership over the research to some extent. Second, the people involved in the research spoke many different (professional) languages. This sometimes made it difficult to verify whether everyone understood each other and whether everyone's perspectives were included properly in the guide, especially considering the limitations of the online environment. Third, although our aim was to establish an inclusive space, the space still sometimes felt exclusionary or not entirely safe. For example, we had prepared an introductory

exercise in which participants would draw and share a route they took often in their lives. The aim was for participants to introduce themselves in a playful but personal way that would stimulate trust. However, some participants instead felt unsafe, not knowing how safe it was to reveal personal information (e.g., their LGBTQ+ identity or refugee history) without knowing the other participants yet. Finally, sometimes tensions or clashes occurred (among participants, between participants and facilitators, or among facilitators). All these challenges required everyone involved to stay flexible and open to negotiations and compromises.

We engaged our participants as experts and knowledge co-creators. Therefore, they could chose whether to use their names, participant numbers, or pseudonyms in this publication. Publishing participants' names in relation to specific quotes required especially careful data management. Before the research, we obtained ethical approval from our department's Research Ethics Review Committee and informed written consent from all participants. All data was stored and archived (as "closed"; inaccessible) in a secure digital repository (https://doi.org/10.48338/VU01-4260BY). Finally, throughout the research, we kept close contact with our department's Privacy Champions, Data Stewards and Ethical Committee.

4.4 Reflections on the Complexities of (Negotiating) Power in Co-creative Research

During interviews and workshop sessions, participants shared reflections on the complexities of knowledge co-creation, including its challenges and opportunities. In this empirical section, we share their most important reflections on striving for inclusive co-creation, creating a safe space, and unsettling control over and ownership of the research (content and process), as well as on the meaningful impact of co-creative research.

4.4.1 Inclusivity

Participants stressed that the "refugee community" included people with very diverse backgrounds—such as age, gender, culture, ethnicity, nationality, legal status, gender identity, sexual orientation, level of education, and professional background. However, they observed that it was often the same group of (mostly highly educated, English speaking, cis gender, heterosexual, male) refugees who were involved in research and that this group was then expected to represent the whole "refugee community." To participants, then, inclusive knowledge co-creation with refugees meant including refugees with various perspectives (especially those who are often not heard), while also respecting that this group can never represent the whole

"refugee community" (for more on how to deal with this dilemma, see, e.g., Ponzoni et al., 2020).

> I really am only a small part of that refugee community. I would like us to [...] also involve other people, not only us highly educated people. We are people who can easily talk, people as representatives. The smallest person, the person that isn't heard by anyone, they should also be involved, just like us.* (Oumar Barry, workshop)

Participants also shared that various (research) projects reduced people with a refugee background to their identity and experience as "a refugee." Moreover, according to participants, this image of "a refugee" often had a negative connotation. They stressed the importance of reflecting on and redefining this conceptualization of "a refugee." Importantly, several participants were proud of their refugee background and in no way wanted to negate it. Challenging exclusionary images for them meant approaching and portraying people with a refugee background as people with multiple identities, experiences, talents, and skills.

> [Being a refugee is] not the only thing about them, they have other things, they might be artists, some of them writers, they might be working in a shop or something, they have other interests, and they are more than their backgrounds of how they came here. [...] I am always exiled, I am always a refugee. (Participant 10, workshop)

Several participants found that arts-based research methods in particular acknowledged their multiple identities and allowed them to explore, develop, and perform various skills (instead of reducing them to "refugees" or focusing on deficits). Some also said these methods enabled them to express themselves in ways that expanded traditional academic (rational) knowledge. One participant stressed the potential of expressing emotions in stimulating connections between people with various backgrounds.

> Experiences like loss, grief, happiness, and so on are universal. [...] It doesn't matter what you have experienced, but the feeling is always the same. [...] These were words from my heart. I think that this was also the strength of my story, that it touched many people. I had so many reactions from men, women, everywhere, all nationalities. And that is the key, I think.* (Mina Hosseini Nejad, interview)

Hence, participants noted that arts-based methods might be a means to unsettle normalized images of refugees and hierarchical differentiations between people with different backgrounds (both within research and with broader audiences). However, they also discussed that one particular danger of using arts-based methods is that they tend to focus on peoples' creative skills, while other (intellectual) talents might be neglected. They thus stressed that arts-based methods needed to be adopted in a critical and reflective manner.

> I'm a good salsa dancer. So they asked me, "Can you give salsa lessons?" I said, "Yes, but when I take a closer look, I learned salsa in only a couple of months, I think. But I did philosophy. I did Sharia. I did Arabic languages. These I naturally did my whole life. Can I maybe do something with these, not salsa dancing?" But then I realized that people actually look at me like a lower person. [...] when I have to do something scientific, they don't expect it from me.* (Oumar Barry, workshop)

In this section, we shared participants' reflections on what knowledge co-creation meant to them in terms of inclusivity: namely, including people with diverse (ideally unheard) perspectives and acknowledging the multiple experiences, identities, talents, and skills of people with a refugee background.

4.4.2 Safe Space

During interviews and workshop sessions, we reflected on relationships in co-creative research. While doing so, we discovered a tension between two requirements that participants deemed crucial for transformative co-creation. On the one hand, participants noted that co-creation required establishing a safe space, which implies that feeling comfortable is conducive to co-creation. On the other hand, participants emphasized that co-creation required that control over and ownership of the research (process and content) were unsettled. Co-creation, thus, also seems to entail that relations are challenged, implying that frictions are a necessary component of co-creation. These two requirements will be discussed in this section (Safe Space) and the next (Unsettling Control and Ownership).

Many participants stressed that co-creative research spaces required trust, respect, acceptance, equality, and non-hierarchical relationships as well as people taking each other seriously, believing in each other, helping each other, being honest with each other, and focusing on similarities. According to participants, such a safe space was a crucial condition for co-creation.

> If you also don't have a safe feeling, you can't work with a team, in a team. So there has to be a safe atmosphere. That's how it starts actually, a lot of things like acceptance, respect, safe atmosphere.* (Rania Abdulsattar, interview)

Some shared that in the co-creative research they participated in, they often socialized with each other informally by eating together, sharing (life) stories, dancing, or sharing other passions. Some participants (especially those with artistic affinities or language barriers) also said that the use of arts-based methods contributed to establishing a safe space, as it enabled them to express themselves in ways they felt more comfortable with and confident about.

> I think that music has a universal language [...]. And poetry. And that gives me a pleasant, safe space where I can be myself. And then it really doesn't matter to me anymore what others think of me or how they would evaluate me. I am who I am, regardless of whether others accept or reject me.* (Mina Hosseini Nejad, workshop)

This quote also reveals that when people feel confident enough to express themselves freely, they might feel comfortable enough to express views that challenge other people's (taken-for-granted exclusionary) perspectives. Similarly, Davies et al. (2013) claim a "safe" structure allows people "to take risks, to think creatively and critically, and to question" (p. 85).

4.4.3 Unsettling Control and Ownership

When reflecting on (negotiating) power in co-creative processes, participants in our research noted that simply involving people with a refugee background would not necessarily result in co-creation. One participant, for example, kept referring to the danger of tokenism, that is, people only being involved symbolically without real interest in their perspective and without allowing their perspectives to make a change (see also Fobear, 2017).

> There are not a lot of places to offer to a queer, a woman and non-binary person for their opinion. They ask them to be there to fill that criteria [of having a person with a specific background present] and that's it. But it's not about their voices and their opinions and their collaboration in the project. (Participant 10, interview)

According to participants, real co-creation required that they were actually heard and that their involvement could make a difference. They noted that control of and ownership over their own story enabled them to create something (knowledge or art) that reflected their actual experiences.

> Because you know, I love to create anything. So when I have the control to create whatever I want, it's... that's me, actually. So I shouldn't be in the situation that something controlled me to create something. No, I have to be somewhere that's just open. Just do whatever I want. (Participant 11, interview)

Control and ownership is also possible when researchers are flexible about adapting their initial ideas to participants' input. For instance, one participant shared an example about a study in which researchers wrote a book together with participants. When her story was adjusted by an editor in order to fulfill academic and publisher requirements, she insisted that her story needed to be written in her own words, a suggestion that the researchers were open to and in the end referred to as a crucial moment in the research process.

In fact, several participants noted that in co-creative spaces, people (especially researchers, who are normally in charge) needed to be open to perspectives that unsettled their own ideas. Many shared stories of how they negotiated new knowledge together by being open to learning from each other's perspectives and by letting others' perspectives unsettle their own.

> I think they always have to consider that the other thinks in a different way, and well, to really appreciate the other one's knowledge. It maybe is different knowledge, a different way of working, but it is also a good way.* (Ghadeer Udwan, interview)

Participants shared stories about how they negotiated, not only the research content, but also the research process, for example regarding the research's impact. One participant, for instance, said he would keep reminding his research team that they needed to fight more for actual societal change through their research, thereby negotiating more ethically responsible, impactful, and meaningful research.

> The massive number of research on refugees created a negative impact or negative narrative about research itself. [...] "Oh, we have participated in so many researches, but nothing

> changed." [...] So that's in our research team, I tried to bring this and I insist on it because I mean we owe [it to] ourselves, I would say that, and other fellow researchers, if they want to research refugees in the future, to create, to help them, also by building up a positive interaction or positive impression about academia among refugees. (Younes Younes, interview)

In sum, the previous sections revealed that co-creative research with transformative ambitions toward social and epistemic justice requires establishing a safe space in which people feel comfortable expressing themselves. In contrast, this section illustrated the necessity of conflicts, frictions, and negotiations in order for control over and ownership of the research (content and process) to be unsettled and for participants' different perspectives to actually make a difference. Establishing a safe space therefore seems not only a goal in itself but also a precondition for a space that allows for taken-for-granted perspectives to be challenged. Larruina and Ghorashi (2020) also argue that knowledge co-creation cannot be achieved simply by creating an inviting space and intending for it to be inclusive. According to them, for democratic practices to be inclusive, "*spaces, conditions,* and *practices* are needed that disturb normalized exclusionary structures" (p. 144, emphasis in original). This brings us to the final part of this empirical section, namely, participants' reflections on how co-creative research can make a difference.

4.4.4 Meaningful Impact

When reflecting on (negotiating) power in co-creative research, participants identified various ways in which the projects they participated in made a difference, that is, how the projects challenged (their own and other refugees') exclusion on the personal, interpersonal, and societal level.

4.4.4.1 Personal Level

Several participants found that participation in co-creative research had a meaningful positive impact on their emotional state. It could energize them or help them reflect on and process experiences, sometimes almost in a therapeutic manner.

> Everything, my mindset has changed my, I don't know how to explain, it was, it was more a spiritual awakening for me, so I see things differently. I see myself differently, the whole life has a different meaning for me. [...] So you know I have more hope. I'm sure that there is always a solution for everything. (Participant 11, interview)

This quote reveals the profound impact participation in a meaningful space (in this case, an artist's participation in an arts-based research) with like-minded people (in this case, other LGBTQ+ artists with a refugee background) can have for people who are excluded from multiple societal spaces. It can lead to a feeling of enlightenment and hope and, for some, also to a feeling of purpose, agency, or belonging/home.

Participants also recognized that participation in co-creative research enabled them to explore, learn, develop, voice, and get acknowledgement for their talents and skills. Some even considered it as a way of establishing/continuing their professional career in the Netherlands while also connecting their previous (academic or artistic) experience to their refugee experience.

> I am an artist, and I don't really have enough spaces to share this art. [...] I think other than here, I never had any other platform to share my art here in Holland. And if I want to share it, I also want to share it in a setting where it also has to do with my identity as a refugee. (Sadiqa, interview)

In sum, on a personal level, participants found participation in co-creative research improved their emotional state and promoted, acknowledged, and embraced a variety of their skills. Note that acknowledging people with a refugee background as resourceful co-creators of knowledge also challenges normalized exclusionary images of refugees as victimized and voiceless others in research and society (see also Lenette, 2019; Riaño, 2016).

4.4.4.2 Interpersonal Level

In addition to impacts on a personal level, several participants mentioned important interpersonal impacts, such as making friends and building trusting and equal relationships. Moreover, some participants noted that through participating in the research, they could share their experiences with others and have those experiences acknowledged. They stated that this is a chance that many other people with a refugee background never got.

> We also got room [...] to make a book and present it further. That was actually also a big present. Because, through that, I could also go to other groups with that book in my hand and tell my story. Thus, I actually had a sort of support that it really is something. [...] And that was wonderful to see. That was in fact a signal or proof that people were listening to us, you know. That was also what really helped us.* (Mina Hosseini Nejad, interview)

Finally, several participants said they aimed to help other people with a refugee background, or "give them little light," as one participant called it, through sharing their stories and possible solutions with them.

> Just imagine there is a tunnel. And it's dark and you have the light to see the way. You have to help people behind you, you know, people who don't have that light. You have to give them little light to find their way. (Participant 11, interview)

In essence, participants experienced meaningful interpersonal impacts because participation in co-creative research enabled them to establish relationships, help others, and express their experiences and have them acknowledged. Note that all these interpersonal impacts (the establishment of non-hierarchical relationships, the acknowledgment of multilayered lived experiences, and refugees helping others) also challenge normalized societal discourses and images of refugees as hierarchically lower receivers of help and victims with deficits (see also Erel et al., 2017).

4.4.4.3 Societal Level

Lastly, participants mentioned examples of how participating in co-creative research challenged their exclusion on a societal level. To start with, participants found that co-creative research was a way to incorporate the perspectives of people with a refugee background in research and to together negotiate knowledge and solutions that challenged taken-for-granted assumptions (of researchers and in academic or societal discourses).

> If that is without, for example, refugees or a specific group, then one has subconsciously the tendency to fill the story with his or her own assumptions. And that is where it goes wrong, actually. Ehm. Letting go of the assumption and then really being open for the person that stands in front of you. So only then you can hear the story. And as long as you start something without that person, then it really won't be alright.* (Mina Hosseini Nejad, workshop)

Moreover, participants mentioned that, through their participation, they gained a better understanding of societal problems, possible solutions, or the Dutch society. For example, several participants said they learned (through their participation in co-creative research as participants or co-researchers) that their personal problems were not their own fault but were actually caused by societal structures. They therefore gained a better understanding of their own personal situation within societal structures, as the following quote from a co-researcher reveals.

> And after every interview I feel, let's see, I feel a step further, I feel educated. [...] I don't get frustrated, my frustration actually diminishes because I realize that I am not the only one. So for me this means, "Hey, it is not your problem, there is nothing wrong with you, but the situation is like this." [...] Sometimes I think, "I can't do anything about it." [But I can] collect stories, and then bring those stories to students. And tell them, "Hey, this is how it goes." I think most students are unaware. [...] And if we can tell other [Dutch] students that other [foreign] students feel like this, I think they would, over time, change.* (Participant 1, interview)

This quote also illustrates that such insights can lead to participants feeling empowered to change their own and other people's situations. Another example of this was given by a participant who said that through her participation, she became reflective about people with a refugee background being portrayed as "pitiable" people in the dominant discourse. This motivated her to only tell stories that illustrated more nuanced and diverse sides to her refugee experience, thereby challenging dominant images. By doing so, she realized that peoples' image (of her) started to change.

> In the Netherlands, normally [also] in other countries, a refugee is a pitiful person. I was extremely against that image. I never felt like a pitiful person. I went through a lot, but I always felt powerful. [...] They only wanted to hear stories from me about having to go through a lot. But then I began to tell different stories, exactly because of that insight. [...] And then I started to also hear from my surroundings "Oh, what?" Yes, and then I also saw how their image changed.* (Parwin Shahbazy, interview)

Wright Mills (1959) calls this awareness of one's own personal situation within larger societal structures "sociological imagination." The quotes above illustrate that sociological imagination can change people's views on their own (im)possibilities

(their talents and qualities but also societal constraints), which might empower them to use their voice to change their own and other peoples' situations by sharing their own or collective stories that challenge taken-for-granted exclusionary discourses (see also Erel et al., 2017). Finally, participants recognized that their participation in co-creative research enabled them to participate (to some extent) more fully in society, either because they considered their research participation as societal participation or because the research opened doors for them to participate in society.

> I think in all respects simply blossoming. To dare to stay open and go open. And then finding new ways. Both during [the research] to being able to write further on what I had written, and also afterwards. Both in my own surroundings and in my work, in society. For me it really became a key to opening many doors. And look, I came here as a pitiful girl, I was actually really shy, I didn't dare to tell anything and I thought, well [I have] so many things behind me, [I] proceed with simply living. But through [the research], my life became an extraordinary life for me.* (Mina Hosseini Nejad, interview)

In sum, on a societal level, participants acknowledged co-creative research's potential to negotiate knowledge with people with a refugee background, to stimulate participants' understanding of their own personal situation within societal structures, to get people to feel empowered to change their own and other peoples' situations, and to facilitate the societal participation of people with a refugee background. Most participants spoke very positively about the meaning of co-creative research (that they had previously participated in) in their own lives.

It is important to add, however, that most participants said they ahoped (co-creative) research could have more (large-scale) impacts on exclusionary societal structures. Many doubted whether research would actually reach the "right" societal players, those who have the power to change societal structures, which most participants considered to be the media and policymakers. Others questioned whether those players would then act upon it, or they noted that societal change takes a very long time. Several participants therefore said that people with a refugee background might have false expectations or hopes about what they might get out of participating in (co-creative) research and that it was therefore important to discuss and manage participants' expectations from the very beginning.

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, we engaged with the complexities of (negotiating power in) knowledge co-creation from the perspective of people with a refugee background who had previously participated in research as knowledge co-creators. We shed light on some of the challenges, opportunities, and requirements for co-creative research to challenge exclusionary (societal and academic) structures.

Specifically, the chapter revealed how knowledge co-creators contemplate the complexities involved in making co-creative research inclusive. They stressed the necessity of countering negative images of refugees and stimulating more positive and diverse discourses. They also reflected on how to include diverse backgrounds

and, especially, unheard voices in research, as well as on the problematic expectations for participants to represent the whole diverse "refugee community" (for more on how to deal with this dilemma, see, e.g., Ponzoni et al., 2020). Drawing from our participants' reflections, we argue that co-creative endeavors seeking to challenge exclusionary structures should prioritize involving individuals whose diverse and alternative stories have the potential to expose and disrupt these structures, rather than relying on the usual participants typically involved in research or striving for representativity. Participants in our research also mentioned complexities involving the challenge of tokenism, that is, people only being involved symbolically without real interest in their perspectives and without letting their perspectives make a change (see also Fobear, 2017). They then identified two diverging requirements for co-creative spaces aiming to enable participants to actually make a change: First, the co-creative space must be a safe space in which people trust each other and feel comfortable in expressing themselves differently. Second, in order for alternative perspectives to actually make a difference in this space, control and power over the research content and process need to be unsettled.

Finally, our chapter shed light on some of the opportunities of co-creative research that participants identified, notwithstanding complex exclusionary structures. These findings show how co-creative research can stimulate participants' (and other refugees') inclusion on the personal, interpersonal, and societal level. By discussing challenges, identifying opportunities, and defining requirements, our research contributes to understanding and addressing the complexities involved in power issues in co-creative research. Our chapter is especially enlightening because it engages with the perspectives of people with a refugee background who had previously participated in research as knowledge co-creators instead of engaging with researchers' perspectives on their own co-creative practices (e.g., Erel et al., 2017; Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; Riaño, 2016).

Importantly, our chapter also illustrates that people with a refugee background are in no way passive and powerless research subjects; that and how they can be involved as active co-creators of knowledge. Our findings show the importance of acknowledging participants' reflective capacity as well as their ability to take well-considered actions, such as not sharing stories that reproduce exclusionary images. In addition to negotiating research content, knowledge co-creators actively shape research processes, for example, by advocating for more inclusive or impactful practices. In doing so, knowledge co-creators actively negotiate power issues in research, thereby expressing their agency. Our study therefore contributes to disrupting the dichotomy between "powerful researchers" and "powerless participants," not by discussing how participants' subjugated knowledges and ways of knowing (see also Erel et al., 2017; Lenette, 2019; Nicholls et al., 2010) can be integrated in research, but by focusing on the active role participants themselves play in shaping research content and processes as well as on the necessary conditions for this kind of transformative co-creation. In this way, our research sheds light on the complex, dynamic, and multidirectional nature of power relations during knowledge production (see also Oliveira & Vearey, 2020; Riaño, 2016).

Reflecting on our findings, we would like to stress that establishing a co-creative space to produce knowledge together with people with a refugee background can only lead to transformative knowledge if the perspectives that are involved actually challenge and unsettle exclusionary paradigms. However, transcending the dualism between researchers and participants and instead acknowledging dynamic power relationships also forces us to reflect on the way that participants might contribute to reproducing certain exclusionary structures, as they might—to a certain extent—also be socialized into dominant exclusionary discourses. In fact, invisible forms of normalization affect advantaged and disadvantaged people alike (Hardy & Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998). Exploring this further is beyond the scope and against the aim of this chapter. However, taking into consideration invisible and dynamic power relations, we argue that it is not just researchers, but everyone involved in co-creative research (including people from marginalized communities), who need to stay open to having their own taken-for-granted exclusionary assumptions unsettled while trying to unsettle other people's normalized exclusionary convictions.

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Chapter 5
Boundaries of Care: Reflections on Inter/Dependencies in Engaged Research

Fabian Holle and Alexandra Greene

I got jealous
I got mad
I got worried
I got curious
That's only because I *care*
(Nakimera Jackie[1])

In August 2023, during a PhD writing week somewhere in a rural green area in the center of the Netherlands, we, the authors, reflect on how to approach the content of this chapter. This week marks our initial return to writing after a particularly intense period. Fatigued of dealing with the many complexities within and around our research, we are casually perched on a wooden bench, watching goats, chickens, and a donkey go about their day in a large field. The sun shines and the chickens flock together and move around picking in the grass. The continuously chewing goats are on top of a wooden table structure in the center of the field. They have their gaze locked on us. We laugh because they seem to judge us for making life too complex. While we are discussing the feasibility of addressing our fieldwork experiences without romanticizing or rebuking our research collaborations, they seem to think that it is not that complicated.

[1] Nakimera Jackie is a research collaborator and member of the co-creative research project LIMBO and has consented in using her name here.

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5.1 About Our Research

Our fieldwork is situated in two contexts: one in the Netherlands and one in the US. Although our projects are different, they are both embedded within a broader comparative study exploring engaged scholarship and refugee inclusion in South Africa, the Netherlands, and the United States.[2] Within this study, engaged scholarship encompasses academic contributions to social change through knowledge creation and relationship-building (Kajner, 2013). In our projects, we both work closely with people who have refugee experiences, focusing on co-creating knowledge relevant to each context. In the Netherlands, Fabian Holle co-created LIMBO, a safer space for mutual learning where stories and reflections are shared through art practices by, for, and with LGBTQI+ refugees. In the United States, Alexandra Greene collaborated with refugee-led collectives to document their practices and processes of knowledge-creation and coalition-building. We each co-authored texts with our research collaborators, designed research approaches, and engaged in forms of co-creation and co-organizing, while sharing many moments of intimacy and friendship. Throughout this, ongoing dialogue, sensitivity to power dynamics, and the building and maintaining of trust have been essential. Together with our research collaborators, we have laughed, cried, and dreamed; some of our collaborators have become close friends or even chosen family.

Indeed, relationships profoundly shape a research process. Collaboration, community-building, and emotional engagement are not just vital—they transform how we understand and approach knowledge. Yet, while we recognize the ways in which intimacies have enriched our research, intimacy also carries the "ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune" (Fineman, 2010, p. 267). Given this, rather than exclusively focusing on positive emotions and experiences, in this chapter, we also engage research relations involving negative emotions, conflict, and discord as deserving of attention (Schneider, 2023). In the context of engaged scholarship, we believe that it is vital to explore how challenging dynamics are navigated, as well as how these challenges influence our research, analysis, and conclusions. Doing so invites us to rethink how we frame research relationships, considering not only their positive aspects but also the frictions and tensions that shape them—sometimes we do not know the extent that we are entangled with others until the relationship has been disturbed. Engaged research thus requires courage[3] and practicing heart-centered science (Kimmerer, 2013), particularly when there is conflict and/or personal and professional boundaries that must be (re)set.

Our exploration of this topic began in 2020—in one of our earliest conversations—and it has remained a central focus throughout our PhD journeys. Over the years, we have reflected on relationships, conflict resolution, guilt, and burnout in the context of academia. We have discussed the consequences of the choices we made—both positive and negative—and expressed gratitude, relief, anger, and regret. Our ongoing

[2] The Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change project is led by Halleh Ghorashi and funded by NWO-VICI [016.Vici.185.084]: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/

[3] The root of the word courage is "cor," the Latin word for heart.

dialogue has prompted deep reflection, challenged our perspectives on boundaries in research, and provided a foundation for this chapter's reflections on the complexities of care. For us, engaged research encompasses more than fieldwork or data collection, but entails how we build and maintain relationships, how we create and communicate knowledge, and how we write, cite, and share. We hope this text will resonate with (aspiring) engaged scholars, particularly junior researchers or those in a PhD trajectory who, like us, have struggled to navigate, negotiate, and feel their way around personal and professional boundaries.

5.2 Our Approach to Co-writing

Taking inspiration from Lugones and Spelman's (1983) collaborative text, in this chapter, we speak as an *I,* as a *we*, and sometimes as (vulnerable) *observers* (Behar, 1996). This is a way of demonstrating that unity and plurality can co-exist. Like with Lugones and Spelman (1983),

> The use of two voices is both central to the process of constructing this paper and to the substance of it. We are both the authors of this paper and not just sections of it but we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience. So when we speak in unison it means just that—there are two voices and not just one. (p. 573)

For us, co-authorship is not about collapsing differences into one unified voice. Instead, it is about recognizing and honoring non-dominant differences (Lorde, 1984) in experience, reflection, and expression. While Fabian's narrative seeks to describe a collective process involving many actors—research participants, supervisors, an art institution, and an academic institution— Alexandra's narrative reflects a personal process focusing on her emotions and embodied experience. This differing approach is intentional: it reflects our writing styles, but it also reflects the differing constraints under which we work. Whereas Fabian's case involved community discussions around boundaries, the confidential nature of Alexandra's case precluded community involvement. Out of respect for the privacy of Alexandra's collaborator, she did not involve community members in their process. Even when someone has crossed our boundaries, it does not give us permission to cross theirs.

Recognizing and respecting the trust of our research collaborators, as well as those discussed in the narratives we present (such as our supervisors), in this chapter, we unpack boundaries on caring research relationships *without* getting too specific and detailed about the events that prompted our reflections. Part of the writing process of this chapter included several rounds of feedback from our supervisors, who are part of the editorial group of this book. In this text, we try to integrate their comments. At times, there are tensions between us, such as when we have different perspectives of care related to our different positionings. We try to engage these tensions in dialogue. While this chapter reflects shared experiences, it is important to note that the perspectives presented in this text are partial and positioned and primarily told

from our perspectives—we cannot claim to speak for others, just nearby (Minh-ha, 1982).

In this regard, we adopt critical juxtaposition (Espiritu, 2014) as a method for deliberately bringing together seemingly disconnected perspectives. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate an inclusive approach to academic writing—one that values sharing, difference, and emotional engagement as integral components of knowledge production within the social sciences (Haraway, 1997; de la Bellacasa, 2012). It aims to counteract the isolation of academic work by actively generating a sense of shared experience and connection and (re)affirming that we are not alone in our perspectives and insights (Haraway, 1997; see also Ahmed, 2017, on the politics of citation). Critical juxtaposition is also a way of engaging with boundaries. By exploring different proximities and distances within ourselves, between each other, and with our readers, we aim to set, practice, and express boundaries of care in our writing.

5.3 Identifying, Expressing, and Practicing Boundaries: Fabian's Narrative

LIMBO is a creative workshop series co-created with queer refugee[4] artists and an art institute.[5] Its structure has evolved. In the beginning, we shaped the workshops with various remunerated (queer/ refugee/ artist) facilitators, bringing diverse perspectives and media. The workshops were free and open to anyone identifying as LGBTQIA+ with a forced migration experience. Later, we shifted to recurring facilitators due to the burden of care falling disproportionally on me (Fabian) but more on that later. The workshops focused on creative media, such as drawing, sculpting, writing, and photography, as tools for storytelling, sharing reflections, and co-creating knowledges connected to queer refugee experiences in the Netherlands and beyond. Throughout the project, which started in January 2022 and is ongoing,[6] we had different iterations of the organizing team, with whom we reflected after each workshop on how it went, implementing insights directly into subsequent sessions.

[4] The terms "queer" and "refugees" are contested and should be used with care. Many LIMBO members identify as queer, using the term to challenge societal norms (Jagose, 1996). However, some prefer other labels. In this context, we use "queer" as both an umbrella term and an activist stance. Being aware that the term "refugee" may have negative, essentialist connotations, we aim to challenge these connotations by emphasizing the positive aspects of displaced identities (Malkki, 1992).

[5] LIMBO originated in, and was hosted and financially supported by, the art institute Framer Framed. After the first eight weeks of the project, LIMBO was meant to finish. However, the community, Framer Framed and Fabian decided to continue because of a shared desire to do so. Framer Framed then got additional two-year funding from Fonds Cultuurparticipatie for the project "Through Art We Care," which LIMBO is part of. After this funding, LIMBO continued with one-year financial support of ILGA-Europe and moved to another location.

[6] The time of writing is November 2024. Our current ILGA-Europe funding allows us to continue until July 2025. It is yet unclear if we (can) continue after that.

Hence, we embraced a flexible, adaptive framework prioritizing participants' wishes and well-being.

Before LIMBO, in two previous creative research collaborations as part of my PhD research, I learned that many participants were often overwhelmed, isolated and dealing with depression. After collaborating in the creative research project Art for Change[7] in a one-on-one setting, some more soft-spoken participants expressed that they did not feel comfortable in a group setting, particularly when others in the group were taking up a lot of space. Since collaborating one-on-one was not sustainable on a large scale for me as project coordinator, I started asking queer refugee artists how we could co-create an attractive project that was inclusive of different types of voices, loud or soft, confident or shy. In close collaboration, we came up with fun creative workshops to keep one's mind off daily stress in a safer environment where one can let their guard down, without having to be social or strong or happy—encouraging mutual expressions of vulnerability. To lower the barrier of participation, participants were free to come and go as they pleased and we started each session by setting intentions to create a safer space. This was also a way to practice consent. We chose to use safer space—rather than brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2023)—because we followed the community's lingo. By adding the *–r* to safe, we acknowledged that although complete safety can never be guaranteed, we can commit to intentions of creating a safer space. Setting intentions became a practice of listening to and respecting each other's needs and wishes, in collectively deciding what safer means for us in that moment. Everyone was encouraged, but never pressured, to contribute, continuously reminded of consent (Bennett, 2018; Fanghanel, 2020).[8]

Each time, we prepared soup and snacks. We focused on joyful creative exercises, which consequently made it easier to reflect and share struggles. LIMBO grew into a space where everyone (both participants and facilitators) intertwined their creativity, work, and personal lives through various artistic practices, reflecting and sharing personal narratives, sometimes mundane and joyful, other times vulnerable and full of hardships. We saw how even the soft-spoken participants opened up and became more vocal about what they wanted within and outside of LIMBO. It was beautiful to see a lot of growth, both on the personal level and on the level of LIMBO as a collective (see also Holle et al., 2024). LIMBO emerged as a space for the full range of human emotions, where members actively engaged in caring for one another. Relationships deepened, and participants started referring to LIMBO as family. Many expressed that it felt like a place of hope and belonging. As the project grew, participants were further encouraged to take on leadership roles within (parts of) the workshops. Ideas and opportunities for collaborations with other organizations and festivals emerged; we organized semi-public events as platforms for artists to perform or sell and share their works, and there were multiple ideas from individuals within the group. To give

[7] More on this project here: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations/art-for-change

[8] We go more in depth about such practices in Holle et al. (2024) and in Through Art We Co-create Care, Chapter 8 in this book.

one of many examples, there was a desire to create a lifestyle magazine showcasing talents of the LIMBO community, including fashion, art, photography, storytelling and activism.

However, LIMBO's growth also brought challenges, such as the increasingly overwhelming task of listening to these ideas for projects or collaboration, which mostly came from *one* part of the organizing team. As project coordinator, I started setting boundaries, explaining that we did not have capacity to support the multitude of ideas and collaborations. Maintaining a safer space was becoming progressively difficult, particularly for the part of the team not involved in these ideas. The initiators acknowledged and understood the boundaries. Nevertheless, when conflicts and complications arose in those projects and collaborations, I was asked for guidance or mediation. I had built strong relationships of trust with everyone, which meant that in moments of conflict or confusion, all turned to me. Our team, which had gradually evolved into a support structure for the entire group, found *itself* increasingly in need of support. Witnessing all these dynamics, aware of my own privileged position, paired with the knowledge of how important LIMBO had become for its individual members, made it extremely difficult to continuously express my personal boundaries, as well as boundaries for the team and project as a whole.

At this point, I was completely entangled and enmeshed with the group as (best) friend, project coordinator, listener and carer. Eventually, the emotional burden of care, managing conflicts, and navigating mental health issues present in the group, coupled with my academic responsibilities in a period of mourning due to loss in my private life, led to my burnout, and necessitated taking a step back to reflect and heal. During this time, I had to stop working because of my health situation. I could hardly sleep. I could not stop thinking about how to best communicate boundaries, since my attempts had not been effective. I also worried about the burden of care falling too much on other members of the group in my absence. I panicked each time I got a WhatsApp notification, because this was our main mode of communication and the LIMBO WhatsApp group consisted of approximately fifty members at that time. I also worried about how the rest of the group would be affected, because we had not informed the group of the conflicts in order to protect everyone involved.

Meanwhile, the art institution expressed that they did not have proper capacity to deal with conflicts and issues related to mental health. Therefore, due to unresolved conflicts within the group —and me being on sick leave— the art institution, the organizing team, as well as my academic supervisors and myself, felt it was irresponsible to continue hosting the workshops without me being present. Thus, we temporarily paused the workshops in order to reflect and organize a proper support structure. One of my supervisors took over communication with some members in the group. In an attempt to keep supporting the group, other team members stayed connected via WhatsApp and encouraged the group to meet at other queer events.

The break came as a shock to the group since they were unaware of what was going on. It felt like a break from our strong focus on collectively making decisions and caring for one another. Even though the break was necessary, it felt like my fears of how it would negatively affect the group, were confirmed. Stopping these gatherings proved to be hard. It highlighted the profound interdependency within

LIMBO, because it affected individuals in the group and myself strongly. Several LIMBO members reached out to me asking when LIMBO would restart. One heartfelt message highlights this bond, expressing they were getting sick without LIMBO:

> Okay, I'm really so sorry to hear that you're still healing. I hope you soon get back on your feet. Fabian to be honest we need you, in your strong, energetic... yeah we need you and we really need LIMBO. I'm getting sick because LIMBO is part of us and we are not so sure when LIMBO gets back. For some of us, LIMBO really did a lot of great work. Now our lives, when we see LIMBO not back, we just get sick. But you started LIMBO, you did not start it for yourself. You started it for us, the refugees who don't have family here, but LIMBO became part of us, part of our family. Sorry I'm getting emotional. Yeah, I'm very sorry because I don't want you to feel how I'm feeling. It is my prayer that you feel well quicker and quicker, so that you get back onto your feet. We need you, and we need LIMBO. Get well very very soon, bye. (Voice message in WhatsApp, LIMBO member, 18 April 2023)

This message hit me hard. I was confronted with the significance of this space in the lives of its members. I knew that LIMBO served as a source of care for its participants, contributing to their overall well-being, but messages such as these revealed how enmeshed LIMBO had become in their lives—as well as mine. Before my burnout, the interdependency felt uplifting and healing, but while we were on hold, it felt detrimental. Many participants do not have a support network outside of LIMBO, so when it (temporarily) disappeared, it affected individuals in the group tremendously, which was heart-breaking for me. I felt powerless, worried and responsible for the well-being of (individuals in) the group. I felt guilt and shame—that I was prioritizing my own healing over that of the collective. And while I understood rationally that the situation was more complex, that is not how it *felt* at the time. By sharing this experience, I aim to practice a vulnerable methodology (Page, 2017) and shed light on the "shadow work" (Illich, 1980) of engaged scholarship—the emotional and embodied labor that is integrated in co-creation but is often written out of research findings. From this experience, we learned that finding a delicate balance and navigating between academic pursuits and community care can be extremely challenging, revealing the impact on both researcher and participants.

Even though the period of forced distance was very challenging, the physical and emotional distance made it possible to heal, critically reflect and understand the impact of these conflicts and transitions. For me, the period of disengagement and recovery from burnout was painful, but ultimately strengthened the project, and myself, in terms of sustainability and transparency. There is value in recognizing when disengagement is necessary, both for oneself and for others. Physical, emotional, and temporal distance can help manage the intensity of research relationships. Maintaining emotional distance can at times be necessary to express clear boundaries and protect oneself from becoming overwhelmed. After a break of 6 months, we continued with support in the form of new team members to rebuild trust and distribute care responsibilities. We established clear roles within the newly formed team, continuing to identify and include the group's desires based on their input. We now aim to share our responsibilities so that LIMBO can sustain as a vibrant thriving community without over-reliance on any one person. Moving forward, establishing clear structures and shared responsibilities remains essential for LIMBO's

continued journey. While I am grateful that LIMBO was able to recover from this period of uncertainty, I recognize that this is not always the case. Sometimes conflict in research causes collaborations to break down. Still, often these breakages reveal the intricacies of our relationships and interdependencies.

5.4 When Boundaries Are Transgressed: Alexandra's Narrative

Reflecting on my own academic trajectory, I recognize that (in the past) I have performed my assumption of "engaged researcher," believing that true engagement in the field meant saying "yes" to every research-related opportunity that came my way—even when I would have rather said "no." Indeed, boundaries are the hard part. Since all my fieldwork has taken place in locales I did not live long-term and contexts where I did not (yet) have a network of relations, I have approached fieldwork as a window of opportunity—intense and temporary, with no time to waste. In the process, I often pushed my personal boundaries when it felt necessary for my research or the relationships I cared about.

Yet, when my boundaries were *crossed*, in the context of a research collaboration with a close friend, I knew it—I felt it—immediately. The trust between us had been broken. While I will not delineate the specificities of this transgression, I will specify that I am speaking of emotional boundaries, which I understand as the limits we set to protect our emotional well-being. These boundaries help maintain a healthy sense of self, navigate relationships, and prevent emotional burnout or manipulation. In this narrative, I reflect upon this transgression's *somatics*—how it *felt*, how it was *embodied*—as well as how it rippled through other relations connected to my research, namely, my relationship with my supervisors. In doing so, I aim to show how research relations often extend deeper and broader than we realize. Individual ruptures cannot be isolated. Instead, they are always embedded, revealing the extent of our interdependencies. To trace these entanglements, I engage autoethnography and carrying as method (Puwar, 2021), attending to my body as a living archive.

To situate this narrative, I will first contextualize my research, which focuses on practices and processes of knowledge-creation and coalition-building in the context of the migrant justice movement in California. Between 2020 and 2022, I undertook fieldwork in San Diego, where I engaged participatory methods like ethnography and artistic co-creation—interacting with various community stakeholders, including refugee families, organizers, NGOs, university staff, and students.[9] During this time, I befriended a community organizer whose collaboration became vital to my project. While our relationship was initially characterized by reciprocity, inspiration, and care, it later became a source of alienation, confusion, and stress.

[9] An example of this research can be viewed here: https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations/education-for-change

In the weeks and months that followed, a pattern of setting boundaries—and then having them crossed—emerged. I felt disconnected from the community I was working with because I could not explain to them what was happening without revealing the details of the boundary transgression. I felt stuck and, to an extent, entrapped. My body was tense. I had intrusive thoughts that kept me up at night and made me feel physically ill: *I am a bad researcher. I am a bad friend. I am a disappointment. I am lazy. I will never finish my PhD. Why can't I just get over it and move on?* These thoughts went round and round. As I became further overwhelmed, I began isolating myself. I struggled to perform basic tasks, like getting out of bed in the morning. Everything felt impossible—and this sense of impossibility, which I experienced as a loss of creativity, hurt me deeply. I could only see limitations, especially my own. I felt stuck, and the more time passed, the harder it was to (re)start. In this sense, fieldwork was "an intensely personal experience" (Sultana, 2007, p. 380), and, at times, tremendously distressing.

When I communicated these issues to my supervisors, who were in the Netherlands, they suggested we set up a Zoom meeting as soon as possible to discuss my "plan B." Although meeting online was not ideal, it was necessary, since we were far apart. Going into that meeting, I hoped my supervisors would hold space for me to express my anger, frustration, and sadness, but the primary focus was whether the data I had already collected was still usable in the context of our project. *Had my research collaborator signed a consent form, what agreements had been made, were these in writing?* While I understood the importance and practicalities of these questions, I also felt that this procedural, problem-solving approach left little space for me to express my emotions and ask for support.

I remember feeling as though I had not met their expectations, that I should have known in advance that this research relationship would rupture, that I should have been better prepared for it. Yet, while the unpredictability of fieldwork can be expected to an extent, we cannot presume to know in advance how things will unfold. Not knowing is part of the fluid and evolving nature of fieldwork; it is also part of the fluid and evolving nature of boundaries and the relations in which boundaries are entangled.

After reading a draft of this chapter, one of my supervisors reflected that she might have misjudged the situation, since our communication lines were ineffective. From her perspective, her concerns about data were expressed in order to protect me and ensure that my PhD trajectory would stay on track. However, I did not interpret her intentions this way. Indeed, our differing expectations around how care is given and received highlight the subjective and contextual nature of care. When my boundaries were crossed, I needed care; when my supervisors offered care, I did not feel cared for. Yet, the incongruencies in how we experienced this event do not signal care's absence, but rather reveal care's complexity—particularly its ambiguous presence when a relationship is disturbed.

While it is challenging to write about (my own) vulnerability in an "academically respectable manner" (Fraser & Puwar, 2008, p. 2), I believe it is important to do so. Indeed, feminist scholars have long argued that the personal is political, and our

positionality—who we are, how we are, and where we are (sociopolitically) located—shapes our research. But the personal is also relational. In an article exploring her experience of sexual violence during fieldwork, Schneider (2020) writes: "The ways in which our embodiment conditions our access to knowledge is an epistemological and methodological question, not solely a feminist one" (p. 189). Reading Schneider's text after my boundaries were transgressed felt like an affirmation. *Our embodiment conditions our access to knowledge.* Indeed, but our embodiment does more than this—it also conditions our capacity to (co-)create knowledge and the knowledge that is able to emerge through research. Because you cannot cultivate upon scorched earth—at least not immediately. There must be a period of recovery. Still, sometimes, the relationship cannot be recovered—even with time, care, and mutual effort.

This was the case with my research collaborator and me. Although we continued to work together and I was able to complete my fieldwork and the projects that were underway with the community, there were many delays and I spent a great deal of time and energy worrying that things would completely unravel. Fortunately, this never happened. Our friendship, however, is another story. We have not recovered or transformed the relationship, though we have tried. This continues to be a source of pain for both of us. I feel the lasting somatics of this experience every day—in my body, in my writing, in the space between myself and my friend, myself and my supervisors. I feel it and it hurts. By feeling my way through a form of grief that comes when boundaries are transgressed and relationships break down, I have come to understand intimately the vulnerability and interdependency of research. Relationships that are part of research involve risk and require care.

5.5 Trust and Emotional Engagement

In both our narratives, trust emerges as a crucial factor—both the building and the breaking of trust. A foundation of trust and care thus becomes essential for sustaining research collaborations, allowing for flexibility and mutual understanding in times of (temporary) distance, or when trust has been broken and must be repaired. For each of us, the closeness of collaboration at times felt overwhelming, making it challenging to establish—and hold onto—boundaries. Yet, periods of disengagement highlighted the spatial, temporal, and emotional dimensions that shape our research relationships. We found that physical and temporal distance from the relationships in which we were enmeshed offered a sense of relief, reducing the urgency and intensity that close proximity can bring. We had to trust that things would resolve in their own time and that periods of distance or delays would not erode our sense of care and trust in these relationships. For Fabian, disengagement, grounded in a foundation of care, allowed their connections not only to endure but to transform. A shared sense of forgiveness and understanding brought flexibility to the ways they could step back and re-engage as the situation allowed. For Alexandra, the relationship did not resolve, though she holds out hope that there will be repair and transformation. For her, the "not yet" signals the "persistence of the possible" (Landman, 1993). Indeed, trust and care are

not guaranteed but must be created and maintained. At the same time, trust does not require constant proximity or engagement, but rather reciprocity—an ongoing and shared commitment.

The emotional weight of this process was undeniable. Engaged research demands a high level of emotional engagement, challenging us to *stay with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016). It asks us to lean into the challenges, holding space for our own emotions and those of our collaborators. This was not an easy task; the process was emotionally heavy for both of us, demanding constant reflection and adjustment. Through these challenges, however, we came to rethink our understanding—and praxis—of engaged scholarship and we came to recognize the value of emotional engagement as a form of commitment—to each other, to the research, and to the communities we work with. This process, while demanding, and at times painful, showed us what it means to care, to remain present, and to create knowledge in community with others—even when it is hard. Given this, how might we reimagine boundaries of care in engaged scholarship?

5.6 Boundaries of Care within the Context of Engaged Research Collaborations

Let's first unpack "boundaries," to then unpack "care" in the context of engaged research. Boundaries can be understood as lines of dis/comfort. These lines exist whether we tell others about them or not, though boundaries are more likely to be crossed if we don't communicate them. Plett (2020) describes boundaries as having a soft, permeable membrane, akin to the membrane of a cell. This metaphor suggests that boundaries are flexible structures that allow for exchange and interaction while maintaining a sense of separation and protection. In academic contexts, boundaries are typically defined by professionalism and formalized through procedural guidelines (Schneider, 2020). Yet, as the narratives above elucidate, community-engaged research often entails more porous boundaries, which do not begin and end with signing consent forms. Boundary-work, then, is part of building relationships of trust, and must also be understood in terms of emotions and affects. When we have intimate knowledge of our collaborators' vulnerability (and they of ours), we may feel a greater sense of responsibility—not out of duty, but out of care. In turn, this makes it difficult to disengage, even when boundaries are crossed. In engaged research, we must thus negotiate multiple dimensions of relationships, such as intuition, care, and risk management, as well as improvise our way throughout complicated situations. There are no preset guidelines.

On the one hand, scholarly community engagement entails a deep level of care and commitment to others, while, on the other hand, it necessitates recognizing personal limitations and the embeddedness of self-care. This balancing act involves staying informed and involved without becoming overwhelmed or burned out. The lines are unclear as there is a continuous flow between caring-about, caring-with, caring-for,

and being-cared-for. Fabian's case exemplifies this blurring of the multiple roles we embody as engaged researchers. Fabian felt completely entangled in both private and work-related issues, navigating the blurred boundaries between roles of best friend, project coordinator, researcher, mentor, mediator and so on. Despite foregrounding ongoing consent as one of the essential principles of LIMBO—and stressing to participants that consent can be revoked at any time, even without explanation—Fabian struggled when it came to establishing and maintaining their own boundaries. For Alexandra, the repeated transgression of boundaries combined with the fluid and evolving nature of fieldwork, created a sense of overwhelm. This uncertainty made decision-making challenging, but decisions had to be made in order to keep moving forward with the research. Doing so involved boundary-work—compressing and expanding, solidifying and dissolving, reinforcing and loosening.

Shifting our focus from boundaries, let's unpack care. Care operates within these boundaries, fostering connection, empathy, and mutual support. Fisher and Tronto define care as actions that maintain, continue, and repair our world, including our bodies, selves, and environment (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, in Tronto, 2010). Feminist ethics of care stresses the importance of relationships and interconnectedness, valuing personal involvement and emotional engagement (de la Bellacasa, 2017). For de la Bellacasa (2012), care is not just a moral obligation in research, but a vital affective state, an ethical imperative, and a practical labor. She specifies that care is inherently relational, dynamic, and shaped by connections. Care thus involves navigating the messy reality of relationships within societal structures, acknowledging both the labor and difficulties in sustaining care, as well as the conditional and insecure nature of collaborations. Similarly, Ellis (2016) describes relational care ethics as "ongoing, uncertain processes." Often, the "right" action in a given situation is not clear or may not exist, but decisions must still be made. Sometimes, we make mistakes or see better ways of doing things in hindsight. In fact, "most 'ethical reflection occurs after the fact' as we consider what we have done and the consequences it produced, and try to learn to do things better" (Ellis, 2016, p. 17). Applying care in engaged research thus involves asking "what do we do now?" It centers around relational autonomy—how our autonomy is shaped by and dependent on our relationships with others (Mackenzie, 2014). This encompasses a form of boundary-work that requires mutual vulnerability and trust, confronting difficulties together, and staying present with each other—even when we are not, or cannot be, physically present. We hold space in research but we also need space in research.

5.7 Relational Autonomy

Essentially, our experiences illustrate the complexity of relational autonomy in practice; when trust and communication falter, the shared responsibility of setting and respecting boundaries can become strained. Breakdowns in relationships necessitate finding ways to navigate decision-making and boundary-setting. This dynamic underscores a key insight from literature on relational autonomy: our identities are

deeply influenced by our interactions with others and the social contexts in which these relationships unfold. Relational theorists stress that our identities are formed, sustained, and revised in relational connections to specific others within specific social contexts (Mackenzie, 2014). These contexts include intersecting social categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class, which both enable and constrain our choices. Promoting autonomy involves (co-)creating conditions that enable individuals to lead self-determining lives, while recognizing that individuals are not isolated, self-sufficient entities but are fundamentally interconnected with others in their social and personal environments (Mackenzie, 2014). Relational autonomy suggests that our sense of self and our capacity for autonomy are continuously influenced and reshaped by our interactions and relationships. Mackenzie (2014) addresses the value of relational autonomy: first, to mitigate feelings of powerlessness and loss of agency; and second, to contest objectionable paternalism—when individuals or groups take actions on behalf of others without their consent or against their will, often assuming they know what is best (p. 45). Given this, what does understanding autonomy relationally mean for boundaries in engaged research?

It implies that setting boundaries is not just an individual task but a collective effort that must be adaptable to the evolving dynamics of relationships. Our boundaries are part of a dynamic interplay with those around us, where mutual influence and negotiation are key. Yet, as shown in our narratives, this interconnectedness often complicates the practice of setting boundaries and making decisions when research relationships—whether temporarily or permanently—break down. When a relationship deteriorates or boundaries are transgressed, it disrupts the collaborative decision-making process, potentially leading to feelings of isolation and resentment. This was the case for Alexandra, who felt stuck and unsure how to move forward. Community collaborations were postponed, her PhD trajectory stalled, and her relationship with supervisors declined, as she struggled to create new boundaries that would allow the research to continue. Within this context, Alexandra felt it was necessary to prioritize personal well-being, but she constantly questioned whether this arose out of a desire for care or a desire to feel in control. Boundaries were drawn and redrawn—a cycle that felt endless. This tension between care and control underscores the complexity of relational autonomy. For Fabian, mediating conflicting desires, directions, and points of view in a way that was mutually satisfying was incredibly challenging. It felt impossible to keep all conflicting parties content and engaged, while attempting not to exclude anyone. Fabian repeated their boundaries of not becoming involved in LIMBO-related projects, and the conflicts within those, multiple times. They saw how these conflicts affected the core task of co-creating a safer space together. Unfortunately, it took Fabian's burnout to force listening and adhering to boundaries. Even though the boundaries were expressed and acknowledged rationally before, the forced break became a painful emotional learning experience for everyone involved, which deepened understanding. Fortunately, through collective effort, the *care*ful re-setting of boundaries, distinguishing clear roles, and respecting autonomy and self-care, relations within LIMBO were repaired.

5.8 Vulnerability

The complexity of relational autonomy in practice, especially in moments of strained communication, brings us to the concept of vulnerability. Navigating these dynamics often exposes individuals to a heightened sense of openness and risk, as trust and shared responsibility rely not only on boundaries but also on a willingness to be vulnerable. Embracing vulnerability becomes essential in maintaining relationships and facilitating meaningful collaboration, even amid potential discomfort or uncertainty. Following Górska (2016), we understand vulnerability not as "the politics of living with open wounds but rather about the politics of life as being in a continuous process of ambiguous transformations towards change" (p. 302). This process is never fully complete but always in flux, encompassing ambiguities, failures, potentials, pain, pleasure, affinities, separations, empowerment, and weakness. This form of vulnerability is always contextually situated within global and local power dynamics (p. 303). Our awareness of our collaborators' vulnerability, as well as the images and narratives we construct about ourselves and others, adds another layer of complexity. Engaged scholars must stay reflexive about their own power and privileged positions—supported by institutions, supervisors, and financial resources—in relation to their research collaborators. That said, it is not only our collaborators who are vulnerable. Research encompasses a web of power relationships: between researchers and collaborators; PhDs and supervisors; supervisors and institutions. This list is not exhaustive. Within the relations mentioned, there are various constellations of privilege, responsibility, and vulnerability. These power relations are not distributed evenly, and recognizing these differing levels of responsibility and vulnerability underscores the ethical challenges in setting boundaries.

Page (2017) emphasizes the importance of ethical responsiveness in research encounters, particularly in acknowledging affective experiences and vulnerabilities, and poses the question: "And what if we do not know how to respond?" (p. 19). Her question highlights the uncertainty of co-creative work and hints at the vulnerability of collaboration. As the discord between Alexandra and her supervisors demonstrates, sometimes we do not know how to respond, how to offer care, or how to receive it. However, the inability to connect in such moments does not always signal the absence of care. Instead, it may reveal care's complexity. In these instances, Page reminds us that while emotional responses can provide valuable insights, we should not use them to speculate about others' motives. Ethical responsiveness then lies not in the affective reaction itself but in the ongoing commitment to *stay with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016)—and with each other.

5.9 Discussion and Conclusion

The interdependency among ourselves, our collaborators, institutions, and supervisors creates a network of relationships that fundamentally shapes our work. None of us operates in isolation; each step and decision we take impacts others. This mutual reliance is both enabling and constraining, providing opportunities for mutual learning and care while simultaneously demanding careful negotiation between distance and closeness. As we navigated these entanglements, we attempted to balance between our own needs and those of our collaborators and stakeholders, revealing how we depend upon one another.

Our research relationships transcended conventional professional boundaries, blurring into spaces of friendship, chosen family, and mutual care. But where do we draw the line of intimacy in research? The very nature of intimacy requires vulnerability, which is both a strength and a risk. Too much intimacy, or intimacy without boundaries, can destabilize relationships, challenging our ability to care. Managing relationships requires clarity around expectations, particularly in navigating asymmetries and power dynamics that shape fieldwork. From collaborators to supervisors, each relationship holds unique assumptions, fluid constellations of power, and shifting degrees of privilege. These dynamics often carry unspoken expectations that need to be surfaced and renegotiated over time. When taken for granted, these assumptions can lead to misunderstandings, with the potential to harm relationships or undermine the research itself. "Staying with the trouble" becomes essential here, allowing for discomfort and not rushing to resolve it.

Given the complex and uneven positionalities of all involved, engaged research often involves navigating unpredictable situations that have no preset guidelines on what to do. Therefore, it requires a willingness to navigate the complexities and challenges that arise from the intertwining of personal and professional realms. Each collaboration, whether between researchers, participants, or institutional bodies, carries an inherent interdependency that shapes both the journey and outcomes of research. Yet, there is an often-overlooked aspect of research processes that may profoundly impact knowledge production—namely, the role of conflict. Although the impact of conflict—through discord, emotional struggles, or burnout—is less often discussed in academic writing, conflict is also a part of research, and it can significantly influence the ways in which knowledge is both created and constrained.

For this reason, in this complex landscape of interdependency, intimacy, asymmetry, and emotion, our fieldwork experiences underscore the need for a non-idealized thinking-approach to care. While caring research relationships can indeed be rewarding, a romanticized view may overlook the potential for conflict, resentment, and shifting power dynamics. It can create unrealistic expectations and overlook care's inherent complexities (Tronto, 2010). We have thus came to view boundaries *as* care, because boundaries not only demonstrate concern for others, but also for oneself, a community, and research itself. This ongoing process involves establishing, maintaining, expressing, and resetting boundaries. The fluid nature of boundaries, relational autonomy and the complexities around vulnerability may explain why

boundaries of care in engaged research are difficult to establish and maintain in time, or at the right time. By distinguishing complexities and challenges of care, we hope it allows (aspiring) engaged scholars to reflect on their own oftentimes challenging research contexts. It may help set realistic expectations for caring research relations, mitigating the risk of harm by overstepping one's or others' emotional, physical, and/or social boundaries, as well as ensuring that research is conducted ethically, sustainably, and with care for all those involved. When boundaries are not expressed, are too loose, or are transgressed, the ability to offer and receive care is compromised, and the impact resonates through the entire research process. Conversely, when respected, boundaries allow researchers to cultivate relationships founded on trust and reciprocity that can sustain discomfort, (temporary) disengagement, rupture and repair.

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Chapter 6
Engaged Research and Reflexive Methodologies: (Auto)Ethnographic Narratives of Forced Migrants in Cape Town, South Africa

Mustapha Kazadi and Leah Koskimaki

6.1 Introduction

> It was 6 pm. I recall it was a Saturday in September 2000. The train from Johannesburg to Cape Town entered the platform in slow motion. It stopped, and I quickly jumped off and passed through a small gate, holding my train ticket. My first impression was the infrastructure, buildings, and public phones. I was dressed in three trousers, two T-shirts, and an overshirt to avoid carrying a bag as a traveler, and in all my pockets were small items such as toothpaste, facecloth, toothbrush, and a small Vaseline. I noticed the queue was taking too long at the public phones; I panicked, as it was getting to be night, and where was I going to sleep? I also panicked that I might be arrested by the police before I introduced myself at Home Affairs. I noticed people rushing home, and some were standing talking to one another. I decided to leave the queue. I walked approximately 100 meters and observed a group of people shouting at each other in Lingala, Swahili, and mix of French. I stopped and greeted them, but only one responded.
>
> I introduced myself and told them that I am also a Congolese from Lubumbashi, but here I am lost. The man was interested to know what was going on with me. I reached deeply in my pocket, handing him a small piece of paper on which was written two cell phone numbers and an address for my colleague's cousin. The gentleman loudly read, "Philippi Township." I kept that piece of paper safe, like my passport and visa. This gentleman was a Good Samaritan—in the Bible verse, a person who saved lives. Indeed, the gentleman saved my life on that evening. He asked me, "Where is your traveling bag?" I was not shy in answering that I did not have a traveling bag.
>
> Two months later, I landed my first job as a "trolley boy" through fellow Congolese community networks. I worked every day, 12 hours per day. It is certain that my network by then was limited only to fellow Congolese who lived in the Cape Flats. After six years of struggle in Cape Town, I enrolled at the University. (Kazadi)

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This memory by the first author, Kazadi, is the starting point of many long years of working to build a new life and eventually pursue higher education in South Africa. Kazadi's journey to South Africa is not very different than that of many Congolese refugees in Cape Town who, since the 1990s, have fled the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) due to wars and economic instability and have ended up working in informal jobs and navigating precarity in the city in search of livelihoods and a sense of belonging. However, his experience is also somewhat unique because he has been able to pursue a PhD, conducting research on forced migrant issues within the Congolese refugee community in South Africa. Congolese are one of the prominent refugee communities in South Africa (Rugunanan & Smit, 2011; Vuninga, 2021). Like many forced migrants in South Africa, they have and continue to struggle with obtaining permits and formal employment (Nyamnjoh et al., 2021; Rugunanan & Smit, 2011), often relying on their own community migrant networks to get by (Owen, 2015).

This chapter arises from Kazadi's experiences of arriving in South Africa as an asylum seeker and grappling with his own story as he conducted ethnographic research and collected narratives from his fellow Congolese refugees for his PhD. The chapter reflects on the challenges and practices of conducting ethnographic research on refugee precarity from a refugee researcher perspective and with a focus on the negotiation of insider and outsider perspectives, the shared emotional memory of the forced migrant experience, and the navigation of dangerous spaces in the urban neighborhoods where the research took place.

Our discussion in this chapter is also situated within the meaning and continual rethinking of engaged scholarship. As defined by this book's editors (Ghorashi et al.), engaged scholarship refers to "transformative and critical forms of academic work" that can "enable more inclusive practices in society and academia." Building on this, we describe the processes of learning, employing, reshaping, and re-contextualizing methodological strands in ethnographic research with an urban refugee community. Conducting deeper "community engagement" in research requires a longer process and is sometimes less considered in university "research rankings," which "are frequently measured by peer-reviewed publications rather than other metrics such as one's contribution to society" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 6). However, reflexively responding to the needs, experiences, and memories of refugee participants in shaping the research allows for a more transformative process through efforts "to create spaces which are safe for mutual exchange and honest dialogue" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 3). At the same time, a refugee researcher may face many challenges, including grappling with one's own emotional memories and sense of belonging. This chapter thus explores the reflexivity of a refugee researcher in a complex and challenging urban refugee setting and argues that a particular understanding of refugee agency can be located in the writing of shared memories and knowledge exchange.

6.2 Congolese (Forced) Migrants in Urban South Africa

After the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa opened up to increased migration flows, and in 1996, the newly democratic South African government acceded to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. However, despite these commitments in the post-apartheid era, research has highlighted South Africa's restrictive and bureaucratic migration governance (Kavuro, 2022; Khan & Lee, 2018; Khan et al., 2021; Moyo & Zanker, 2020). After arriving, asylum seekers apply for a temporary permit at a Refugee Reception Office. This permit must be continually renewed until a refugee permit is granted, but many applications are eventually rejected (Amit & Kriger, 2014). Many of those who are unable to renew their permits on time or to obtain formal refugee status become illegalized and struggle with getting formal unemployment due to discrimination and the temporary status of their permits (Rugunanan & Smit, 2011). In South Africa, refugees are not placed in camps; instead, they often live in urban centers, where xenophobia against migrants often takes the form of violent assault and murder, robbery, arson, harassment, discrimination, and scapegoating (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Misago, 2017).

Congolese migrants have been arriving in Cape Town since the 1980s, with forced migration increasing in the 1990s due to wars and instability in the DRC and Great Lakes region. A number of Congolese in South Africa were once victims of the 1990s conflicts in the DRC, and many sought refuge in the 2000s due to the war and the economic turmoil there (Owen, 2015). Research with this community in South Africa has documented their precarity and struggles in getting documentation and accessing jobs and housing (Nyamnjoh et al., 2021; Rugunanan & Smit, 2011). Thus, many Congolese "rely on their ingenuity and their social networks to survive in South Africa" (Owen, 2015, p. 216).

Despite experiencing forms of precarity, exclusion, and marginalization, Congolese refugees in South Africa find ways to survive and participate in society and politics and have created spaces of mobilization, organization, and activism to counter this situation (Mpeiwa, 2018). Congolese diasporic group activities often support various Congolese political parties (Mpeiwa, 2018). Congolese also work as active societal actors through establishing NGOs, leading community building activities, and initiating cultural associations (Masuku & Rama, 2020; Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018) and through social networking (Amisi, 2010; Makanda, 2021; Maringira & Vuninga, 2022; Nyamnjoh et al., 2021; Owen, 2015).

There is, however, diversity in political preferences and "ethnoregional identities" in the Congolese diaspora, which can result in "intra-Congolese rivalry." Garbin and Godin (2013) argued that many of these diasporic Congolese political voices in various global contexts have been dominated by older generations of men, with a sidelining of younger and women's voices. In the South African context, Inaka (2016) refers to conflicts between "opposition Congolese from the east, who are Swahili speakers and mostly pro-Kabila supporters, (pejoratively termed *collabos*), and Congolese from the west, who generally speak Kikongo, Lingala and Tshiluba,

also known as *combattants*, and are generally in the anti-Kabila camp" (Inaka, 2016, p. 5–6). Vuninga (2021, p. 4) further draws from Owen (2015) to describe how these "antagonistic political identities" play out in the Congolese community in South Africa by reemerging in migration bureaucracy. In this context, eastern and western Congolese are perceived differently in the context of labeling as "economic migrants" or asylum seekers (Owen, 2015, p. 40, as cited in Vuninga, 2021, p. 5). Hence, mainly those hailing from the war/conflict region of the DRC are more often offered asylum (Vuninga, 2021).

Kazadi's ethnographic research therefore had to navigate this complex space. His initial intention was to focus on the precarious circumstances and community activities of many of the Congolese forced migrants, alongside participant observations of various actors and of associational life in this space of mobilization, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, his identity in the context of these political histories and ethnic divisions led to further reflection on how to navigate his own sense of belonging while conducting research.

6.3 Methodological Approach

As stated in the Introduction, this chapter presents narratives from Kazadi's research with Congolese refugees in Cape Town alongside autoethnographic vignettes from his own experience. Kazadi is a PhD student and researcher who came to Cape Town, South Africa, as a forced migrant from the DRC. His narratives and reflections on his research experience in this chapter are accompanied by methodological and theoretical reflections made together with Koskimaki, an anthropologist in South Africa advising Kazadi's PhD research. The primary motivation to write this chapter developed through a dialogical research process between the two authors that took place as Kazadi was building his knowledge about anthropological approaches and exploring ways to think through his research methodologically and ethically as he conducted it within his own community. His research was shaped by his concern that despite many years living in Cape Town, many Congolese refugees face social, political, and financial exclusion and "othering" because of their refugee status. During his research, Kazadi also faced challenges and unexpected experiences in trying to connect with some members of the community, which opened new ways of thinking about these topics in his research.

Kazadi's research employed ethnographic methods, qualitative interviews, online chats, and social media engagement. Because his research began during the COVID-19 pandemic and was therefore subject to the restrictions on movement and physical interaction imposed by the South African government, Kazadi first engaged with his participants in online focus groups and "asynchronous interviews." After face-to-face research was allowed, it was still necessary to be cautious about travel during the ongoing pandemic risk. Given that and his own familiarity with the space, the research setting often focused on Kazadi's own neighborhood, along an area named Voortrekker Road. This area is a long, busy corridor from the suburbs into the

city center. It consists of small shops and apartments and crosses through low- and middle-class neighborhoods where many Congolese and other migrants live. While many former township and informal settlement areas in Cape Town are considered dangerous spaces to walk in due to the risk of crime, Voortrekker Road is more suburban with migrant shops and more pedestrians. Kazadi found he could more safely and easily meet with people in their homes or chat with Congolese working or meeting at small businesses or small shops in this area. During a 24-month period, he interviewed 25 Congolese forced migrants and interacted with many more, some in precarious positions, such as tailors or delivery drivers as well as pastors, community organizers, and supporters of various Congolese political parties and agendas. Though he aimed to interview women about their experiences, his age and gender as a more senior-generation Congolese man meant it was easier to access male spaces. In the end, he was only able to interview three women and thus decided to focus on refugee men's experiences for the study. He also attended community planning meetings about Congolese and refugee community concerns and attended a protest against international foreign policy toward the DRC. Interviews were conducted in French, Lingala, and English, with a few done in Swahili.

6.4 (Auto)Ethnography and Reflexivity in Refugee Research

Anthropological literature and the reflexive turn in migration studies emphasize a greater need to focus on self-awareness, legitimacy, and power relations in research and to reflect on the categories used for migrants and migration processes (Dahinden et al., 2021). The same goes for refugee studies, in which there is generally "an inherent power imbalance between researchers and refugee populations" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 3). This power relation may lead to refugees giving socially acceptable responses because of their vulnerable position and hope of receiving some kind of assistance (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). In addition, more privileged, mobile researchers would not experience borders in the same way as the refugee participants (Khosravi, 2008). Researchers therefore need to examine the power dynamics in their studies and thus their "epistemological assumptions, their situatedness with respect to the research" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 3).

While the literature in the previous paragraph offers researchers valuable lessons about power relations, it does not include the complexities related to the opportunities and challenges involved when the researcher is a refugee themselves. In this sense, the refugee researcher shares some precarious situations with the participants, which provides a unique insider position to the refugee context. Khosravi (2020, p. 292) has reflected on this concept:

> I have heard this often when asking people about their journeys across borders without papers, or about their waiting for asylum that might last for years, or about the general condition of

> undocumentedness and deportability ... What can we really know about a migrant's emotions, political subjectivity, migratory experiences? Or do we, as many migrants have told me, have to "experience it" ourselves in order to "understand it"?

To locate these experiences, Khosravi (2020, p. 293) writes, research can involve the interweaving of "experiences, storytelling, and traveling." Autoethnography can help connect these experiences, to "reach those parts of the migration experience that are hard to reach through interviews, those critical moments of border crossings or the emotional aspects, such as fear, grief, and longing" (Khosravi, 2020, p. 294). Using autoethnography, a researcher can share personal experiences to describe certain practices, highlight specific experiences, and combine experiential and academic knowledge (Leitch, 2018). An interesting example is provided by Maringira (2014, p. 37), who studied deserted soldiers' life experiences in connection to his own emotional experiences as a deserted soldier from Zimbabwe living in South Africa.

In this chapter, Kazadi also engages in autoethnography and embraces his insider/outsider position in producing knowledge about his research. As a refugee researcher, Kazadi could understand and even imagine the details in participants' narratives. Then, alongside these, he could write about his own experiences, past and present, to help him connect to his participants. Tewolde (2023) reviews autoethnographic work by migrants who use hindsight reflections on identity and integration, arguing that while autoethnography can rely on the researcher's memory, it can, importantly, also be based on "real time" experiences. Kazadi uses both approaches to write his memories and his experiences navigating his everyday life and the research spaces.

Autoethnography intersects with another important aspect of refugee research, that of documenting refugee voices and what Ghorashi (2021, p. 59) refers to as a "revival of refugees' agency through sharing narratives." This is especially important in the context of what Godin and Doná (2016) and Cabot (2016) refer to as the depoliticization of "refugee voices." By this, they are criticizing the way that advocacy groups, despite their well-meaning intentions, represent refugees as victims, "thus contributing to the silencing of refugees as active and critical subjects" (Cabot, 2016, p. 648). Despite well-meaning work on foregrounding refugees' stories, there is a risk of depoliticizing their historical and social contexts, homogenizing refugee groups, and overemphasizing traumatic stories (Godin & Doná, 2016) or of focusing on what Tuck (2009) refers to as "damage-centred" research that presents communities as deprived. Instead, forced migrant voices can be foregrounded by centering their narratives in a way that "victimhood and agency are not mutually exclusive categories" but are intertwined (Kihato, 2007, p. 104).

6.5 Insider or Outsider?

Employing ethnographic methods as a forced migrant with other forced migrants provides an opportunity to understand refugee politics in Cape Town from an insider's position. As someone interested in political issues in the DRC, Kazadi aimed to

explore how refugees' participation in politics and associations connects to the way Congolese work to manage precarity in urban life. This led him to understand reflexivity as being not only about his awareness of his past experiences as a migrant but also about how he accessed participants and forged and maintained relationships in and outside the field (Ghorashi, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2006; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). However, this position is complex and not always constant. In this section, we describe some of the complexities of insider research.

When conducting research in his own community, Kazadi also had to navigate the languages, political differences, and regional and ethnic identities of his participants. Indeed, despite refugee researchers having insider knowledge and familiarity in terms of language and context, they still have to deal with issues of accountability, intersectionality, and power relationships in (forced) migrant research (Ademolu, 2023; Taha, 2019). Intersectionality in refugee research helps to unpack the discursive labels and essentialized identities in refugee contexts while challenging different forms of oppression (Taha, 2019). It also shapes the insider and outsider positionalities of refugee researchers.

Tewolde (2021, p. 1033), an Eritrean refugee who conducted a study among his community in South Africa, draws on Carling et al. (2014) to reflect on how a shared ethnicity "does not automatically" make a researcher an insider, because "insider or outsider positionality is determined by how co-ethnic researchers are perceived by research participants during encounters in the research field." He argues that although he was a refugee with the same ethnicity/nationality as his participants, he was often still seen as an outsider because of his researcher positionality. Similarly, Hamdan's (2009) research with Arab women discusses the power relations that emerge in researching one's "own people" and the kinds of accountability she had to navigate. During Ademolu's (2023, p. 14) research among fellow Nigerian migrants in the UK, his accent and education often positioned him as an outsider: He writes about his "subconscious compensatory behaviour of shifting back and forth along the continuum of [his] insider-outsiderness, to counteract moments of 'difference' and alienation from the studied communities."

One challenge we faced in navigating insider positionality was that we knew some refugees might feel apprehensive about telling their life stories to Kazadi, someone they might meet again in the future and who they think might keep "record" of their narratives. Kazadi perceived that this was because of participants' sociocultural and personal contexts: they want to maintain their dignity in the social context and the privacy of their stories that may be personal. As Kazadi was a known person in the community, they may have felt reluctant to share stories that might affect their position or image in the community. When Kazadi observed this happening during his research, he encouraged those who were not comfortable to stop sharing sensitive stories that could lead to trauma or humiliation.

Conducting a study with refugees and asylum seekers who have been affected financially and mentally is a challenge for any researcher. Following university research ethics protocols, before commencing with an interview, Kazadi provided research information sheets that included an NGO in the city offering counseling

or support to less privileged migrants and refugees. He found that refugee participants chose to focus their conversation on their experiences of precarity given their lack of resources and support. At times, he felt caught between being a counselor and a researcher. As a researcher, Kazadi felt he needed to keep some distance between himself and the participant, even though he empathized. Some refugees were surprised to discover that trauma centers exist in the city. The boundary between insider and distant researcher was hard to maintain and became blurred in these spaces.

However, because Kazadi had also experienced similar challenges to those of his participants, such as delays in obtaining documentation as well as unemployment, uncertainty, and everyday immobility in the city, he could understand their problems. We share some of the knowledge that comes from being an insider researcher in the remaining sections.

6.6 Navigating Danger as an Underprivileged Migrant Researcher

Due to the spatial inequality in Cape Town that is the legacy of apartheid, it is difficult or unsafe to walk alone in some neighborhoods, which limited where Kazadi felt he could safely conduct research. Many Congolese can only afford to reside in more dangerous communities where accessing accommodations is cheaper and easier than in safer suburbs.

While Kazadi had received some research funding, he could not stretch it to cover expensive travel in the city. In Cape Town, there is no direct public transportation link from Kazadi's neighborhood to the nearby shopping center; one needs to change multiple taxi vans and buses to reach the destination, and the transport fare is high for those who are under-resourced.

Hence, he struggled to reach some of his participants via public transport minivans. One day, he was approached by eight young men who threatened him and robbed him of all his belongings, including his outer clothing. Another time in the city, after a research meeting, he was chased by a man on the street.

> One day, I took public transport to Cape Town for an interview, and on this route, drivers always ask passengers questions before starting the engine. This driver spoke the local language, isiXhosa, asking: "Does anyone on the bus need to go on the main road?" The main road is an alternative route and is a long way to the central business district. Because of my poor skills in the local language, I always paid careful attention and tried to interpret passengers' body language when they communicated with the drivers. Unfortunately, on this particular day, no one responded. The driver refused to go on the main road, and he quickly asked me if he could drop me off on the freeway. It was a challenging place to be dropped off and, although it was within walking distance, it felt unsafe, and I felt vulnerable as a foreigner. (Kazadi)

This experience was one of many that helped Kazadi relate to his participants. One of his research participants explained that sometimes he avoids speaking English in public transport to avoid being noticed: "It makes you lose a sense of belonging."

Anthropological writing on research in "dangerous places" has elaborated on ways to maintain safety in such contexts (Sluka, 2012). Some recommendations to researchers are, for example, to connect deeply with participants in order to stay more safely embedded in their communities, to conduct slower, careful research, and to find ways to plan and navigate challenges and risks (Sluka, 2012). Marks and Abdelhalim (2020, p. 307) elaborate that often "full or partial 'insider' identity does not assure immediate acceptance" in some research contexts but can instead lead to risk "as the authors fear being exposed as not native enough or as partisan." Often researchers have had to "exit" the field site for safety reasons (Marks & Abdelhalim, 2020). Such dangers are more difficult to navigate and escape from when the researcher does not have many resources themselves and when they live in these dangerous places and are part of the community within these places. In his research, Kazadi did not have the ability to exit the field site, as the field site was his home and his own neighborhood and community spaces.

As an insider refugee researcher, Kazadi had an intimate understanding of what danger means for refugees living in Cape Town because he was continually navigating these urban spaces, which were also his home. Being a resident of the same spaces as his participants allowed him an insider understanding of their concerns regarding xenophobia, crime, and housing in the city. However, it also meant that he could not separate himself from the research site, unlike outsider researchers who can "enter a field site" and then leave when they wish to return to their own life elsewhere.

6.6.1 Reflexivity and Reactions: "Reintroducing" Oneself in the Community as a PhD Student

> Before conducting fieldwork, I gathered the names and cellphone numbers of potential participants in the community. In my diary, I came across a familiar name of a woman I knew 21 years ago. She was also familiar to my wife, even though we lived in different communities. One day I decided to contact her through WhatsApp SMS and reintroduced myself as a Swahili-speaking Congolese student researching Congolese migrant issues in Cape Town. In the messages, I emphasized issues of ethics and confidentiality and assumed that she would be open to seeing a Congolese refugee conducting research within our community. On the contrary, she was unhappy with my request and responded angrily: "Why do you want to expose my privacy to everyone ... And do not think that you are the only one who is well-educated in the Congolese community .... You have to know that some of us were educated long ago in Congo." She also replied, "Write your own life experiences and stories because you have been in South Africa for years, why are you involved in people's lives?"
>
> It took some time for me to step back, reflect on my assumptions, and rethink my positionality amongst my community. It would be unfair to hide my emotions, to hide that on the day I received the messages from her, I cried and felt minimized. I had thought myself an insider and realized that I was also an outsider in multiple ways, including gender, ethnicity, and my

> perceived and real access to the academic spaces that, 21 years ago, I was far away from. (Kazadi)

The woman's rejection of Kazadi's request for an interview instigated thinking on his insider and outsider positionality as well as on his challenges with navigating gender dynamics in conducting research within the community. While we can only speculate on her reasons for refusing to participate, we considered the many possible layers to her response. One reason for her reaction could be a feeling of insecurity that her story might be a revealed in the community or that the researchers might share some information with others known to them both. She may have felt that Kazadi was positioning himself as an educated person in comparison to her, despite her having studied in the DRC, and she may have viewed him as privileged compared to those who were in such hardship. At that time, the woman lived a precarious life in Cape Town and could not afford to access further education. Finally, gender differences may have influenced her reaction. As Garbin and Godin (2013) described, some Congolese women felt marginalized in its diasporic politics. Tewolde (2021) also offers an example from Kusow (2003), who conducted a study among fellow Somalians; although he shared nationality and language, his gender prevented him from freely interacting with Somali women. Kazadi also did not have access to many resources for remuneration, to offer any material contribution to her in exchange for the interview and time. She may have wondered why she should share her experiences when Kazadi had his own to write about.

At the same time, the woman may not have perceived Kazadi's position in the same way that he did. She did not realize the challenges he experienced as a refugee PhD student, that he often felt vulnerable in academic contexts and that his own unpredictable financial situation had negatively impacted his work. As Inaka (2022), a Congolese academic in South Africa, has similarly described, many (forced) migrants face challenges at the university, including the need to write and analyze in a language (English) that is not their first language, the stress and expectations of PhD timelines, and the mental impact of comparisons to peers.

6.7 Shared Politics and Fragmented Memory

This section unpacks how an insider's position in connecting the refugee researcher's memories with different refugees' narratives of the past can reveal the complexity of "personal ties, political allegiances, religious identities and practices, linguistic and cultural features and broader memories in their new settlement country" (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013, p. 684). How might (shared) memories be reconsidered in the context of "insider/outsider" refugee research to be part of engaged scholarship? What are the complexities involved in co-producing narratives within one's own community?

We reflect on refugees' journeys across borders as a collective memory, which creates space for care and the sharing of emotions between researcher and participants. We recall Ghorashi's (2005, p. 374) emotional yet therapeutic experience of conducting research and experiencing shared memories with fellow Iranian refugee women in exile. She writes about her own challenges adjusting to the Netherlands and the United States and how the narratives of other Iranian women helped her "rethink the notions of identity, home and belonging." In reflecting on the meaning and memory of home, she concludes that memories "change over the course of time, remain part of one's life" and help create "feelings of belonging" (Ghorashi, 2005, p. 374). Because of Ghorashi's (2007, p. 118) "shared past" and her awareness of a "history of suffering" with her research participants, she could recognize the need to give more time and detail to each participant's life story and to pay attention to "moments of silence." Below, we offer two examples of shared memories and their impact on the research experience.

During a research visit to the home of "Mr. K" in the Parow neighborhood, both he and Kazadi discovered that they were from the same region in the DRC. When Mr. K began to describe his experience there and why he came to South Africa, they discovered that they shared the same awareness of conflict in the 1990s, when a regional leader called for certain groups to leave the region immediately.

> I think at that time I was still young ... I recall we traveled by train in bad conditions. Another thing I can remember is that the train was overcrowded up to the roof. My father explained to me that we spent almost four weeks along the road before we reached [another province]. In the crowd, my father had to carry me on his shoulders so that I could breathe properly. (Mr. K)

> Mr. K's memories prompted me to remember those past events from when I was living in the DRC. During our conversation, I was not able to create distance, as he talked to me like a brother figure, and I could sympathize with his emotions. He was open and shared a lot of information, which I never expected. I recall when Mr. K paused emotionally for a minute, and I could observe tears in his eyes, and this made me emotional as well. During our conversation, I could also remember other events: how displaced families entered public spaces, such as train stations and school buildings, without food and water. In our conversation, I could also remember the most shocking stories in the city, how displaced people were throwing dead bodies out of a moving train because of the bad smell. (Kazadi)

Mr. K said: "Life conditions had deteriorated, especially for those who had big families, and many people died because of a lack of treatment. Then, when I graduated from high school, I decided to leave."

> Hearing his story, I could not help but locate similar feelings. I found that my memory of my past was still fresh. Certain narratives told to me by my research participants triggered emotions and experiences that I had locked away. As such, I could understand and relate to their memories in my research. (Kazadi)

By sharing these connections, we add further nuance to the discussion (in the (Auto)Ethnography and Reflexivity in Refugee Research section) about refugee voices to discuss how they are often doubted and not always believed. Critical reflexivity in refugee studies, as we mentioned previously, requires one to be cognizant of a power dynamic and of whether refugees are sharing stories in order to influence

whether or how much aid they receive or out of a sense of vulnerability (Bjørkhaug, 2017; Erdal & Oeppen, 2018; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). "Outsider" researchers or officials may question the truth of narratives of memories, thereby removing the agency of those sharing their experiences. However, refugee researchers, although still seen as an outsider in many ways in their own communities, may also understand the nuances of this victimhood and may be able to connect to painful stories of precarity without needing to question their veracity. This relates to Tuck's (2009) argument about how marginalized communities are portrayed as empty and "damaged" in research without foregrounding the structural issues that have created their marginalization and without honoring community voices and desires. Such memories are also able to connect to "exilic memory" (shared traumatic conditions of the journey out of one's home) (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013, p. 687), through which diasporic communities of forced migrants can connect. Refugee researchers' insider/outsider position can therefore provide necessary contextualized knowledge in considering refugees as victims of violence without ignoring or dramatizing their agency.

Memories can also be "diasporic" (Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013) and help to build a collective identity outside of one's home country. Kazadi collected and related to multiple stories from his participants about shared experiences of the precarity of refugee life. He asked "Mr. M" about how he found his way after arriving. Mr. M. described how he struggled in trying to find accommodation:

> I arrived in Cape Town 23 years ago ... For me it was difficult; first I had the problem of the language barrier, I could not read and write English properly. I struggled when in the moment to look for accommodation in newspapers ... and guess what? Most residential houses in Cape Town are managed and rented by private property rental companies. To access accommodation information, I needed to read newspapers and other advertisements on billboards in shopping malls. I tried to look for interpreters, but unfortunately, they were rejecting the call and the request because of my accent .... I gave up and since then I was forced to go and rent an informal house in the township, even though it was unfinished and dangerous. But, in the township, I experienced another form of discrimination—how? I was paying higher prices compared to local citizens ... but it was still more reasonable compared to the agency. (Mr. M)

> Mr. M's story prompted me to remember my arrival memories, when I felt stranded at Cape Town train station. When I showed the man my slip of paper, he quickly briefed me that "Philippi township" could be dangerous for me to travel in alone at night as a newcomer. He assisted me by letting me spend the night at his flat in Cape Town's central business district. Indeed, when I arrived in Philippi the following day, the Congolese migrants in the community explained they were struggling because of unemployment and lack of possible housing in Cape Town. I could recall all the struggling, and how, for two months, I had slept in cold conditions because of the nature of the dilapidated iron house. (Kazadi)

Kazadi also shared memories with his participants of navigating the city with "torn papers." By this we refer to the asylum seeker permits and the later refugee permits given by Home Affairs that allow a person to stay in South Africa. These are carried around and used over and over until they get worn out. Many participants discussed the challenges of getting the required papers or getting jobs with the refugee papers. For example, one participant recalled how, in his early years of trying to find a job,

he was often "reprimanded by employers to apply for green identity [permanent residence] at the Department of Home Affairs." He recalled how he was rejected for many temporary and permanent positions. Another participant shared how he was called for a work interview at a shop in Bellville: "Before I was interviewed, the panel asked me to show them a proof of identification. I gently opened my paper [refugee] permit. They told me, 'Go and look for [a South African] ID book, then we will employ you.'"

> Hearing these stories, I recalled my struggles when they touched on the challenges of traveling daily with a refugee permit in their pockets, looking for jobs. I recalled how my permit got torn before renewing it at Home Affairs. I recalled how, when presenting it in public institutions such as banks and tax return offices, officials struggled to read the information in the document because of its poor quality. I recalled how sometimes I used a plastic cover to protect it from the water during the rainy season. I recalled when one of my participants who previously lived in Johannesburg before settling in Cape Town was taken to the police station for further investigation because of unclear information on the document. (Kazadi)

As Khosravi (2008, p. 331) writes, the shame of dealing with "illegality" is an experience of "being exposed to the disapproving gaze of others." *Indeed, past memories recall humiliation in our contemporary moment.* During Kazadi's interactions with participants, he could understand their circumstances. He could ask questions and take a moment when needed. And when he became aware of his emotions during these interactions, he also felt the need to control his feelings about these shared past experiences. One way of connecting to the participants' stories and the shared memories and to process his emotions was to write his autoethnography alongside their narratives. This allowed for reflection and connection and for the researcher reflexivity to develop and emerge in the writing.

In this final example, we bring together these discussions on insider/outsider positionality and shared memory to the realm of political affiliation. Politics is a contentious area for refugees, who may have come from different backgrounds, have had different experiences in the homeland, or have been affected by war or conflicts in different ways. Although we have anonymized the political affiliations and ethnicities of both Kazadi and some of the participants, we offer an example of how political connections influenced the insider research.

Kazadi could navigate this space as an "insider" because some Congolese leaders within the community seemed curious to hear about Kazadi's research as a PhD student. Because he attended various meetings regarding homeland politics, and heard the concerns about corruption, they felt he understood the various issues and concerns.

Early in his research, Kazadi met with "Mr. C.," who, like many participants, thought he knew about Kazadi's political affiliation or beliefs. In this setting, Mr. C. said:

> I think, Mr. Mustapha, you are also aware about our noble cause! ... I joined the movement, namely [a political party], here in Cape Town long ago just to advance our people and political consciousness. Can you remember we organized many events and protests in Cape Town center because we had noticed that our politicians were looting our country's resources and investing abroad? ... We are suffering here.

In the above quote, Kazadi was seen as an educated insider who might have political awareness of the situation. Indeed, as described earlier, he conducted participant observations at various meetings of the political party Mr. C. mentioned. The reflexivity of this memory, the different experiences of it, the emotions behind it, and the acknowledgment of the past, could help Kazadi connect to the research space while also being aware of his role in writing about it.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has been a reflection on the intersecting experiences of a refugee researcher conducting research with and about fellow refugees from the DRC living in South Africa. While most Congolese in Cape Town arrived as forced migrants, they come from various regional or ethnic backgrounds, have diverse experiences of conflict, and align with different political affiliations. For Kazadi, conducting research with his own refugee community led to an unexpected grappling with insider/outsider positions in that community—which constitutes a range of ethnic and regional identities, language preferences, genders, and class positions. In elaborating these challenges and research experiences, Kazadi turned to autoethnographic and autobiographical writing, sharing painful stories of when he arrived in South Africa, to show how these connect to other refugees' stories.

Navigating his own community also required him to "reintroduce" himself as a PhD researcher. At times, this allowed for deeper conversations and memories to be shared, where fellow Congolese saw him as an educated member of the community who could write about their challenges or issues from the past. In some cases, they assumed he understood their political cause or affiliation. And he often felt his research and studies gave him a stronger voice to contribute more to community meetings and gatherings.

In other cases, such as that of the woman who rejected his interview request, he had to consider his positionality, the differences in perceptions on gender and privilege, and his access to networks, resources, and higher education. Such experiences created complex insights and emotions and different kinds of limitations, such as when the co-perceived power differences became visible in how people responded and how they did not want to engage in the research. As the woman replied in her SMS response to an interview request—she had also been educated in the DRC—but perhaps, unlike Kazadi, she could not proceed in her studies in Cape Town. Despite Kazadi's acceptance into university, however, challenges with academic language, bureaucracy, financial needs, and exclusion all affected his academic journey.

As we reflected in the introduction, research on the representation of refugee voices has been problematized (Cabot, 2016; Garbin & Godin, 2013; Ghorashi, 2007). However, by using autoethnography alongside narratives and political experiences, Kazadi aimed to connect and link these experiences while reflecting on his own positionality within these spaces. Research with other refugees required awareness of language preferences, ethnic divisions, precariousness, and histories. We

referred to Kazadi's personal experiences with precarity and concerns with xenophobia in Cape Town, which he connected to what other refugees and migrants had experienced.

The editors of this edited volume (Ghorashi et al.) advocate for "non-hierarchical reciprocal caring relationships" in research. In line with this, Kazadi worked to connect his memory and experiential knowledge amongst many participants. He felt he had to provide a space for them to share their painful memories while also navigating his ethical role as a researcher, not a trained counselor. Thus, even when the reflexivity was painful, the individual and collective memories compelled him, as a refugee researcher, to try to offer a trusting space for his participants to share their emotions. However, the need for distance, ethical boundaries, and avoiding traumatizing participants was also a concern. Kazadi faced challenges in navigating all these issues while managing his own emotions and memories in facing the inescapable precarity of the research site. Autoethnographic writing was a way for Kazadi to write and connect all of these spaces. Sharing and putting his own memories into words helped him to understand and navigate his own positionality in both the research space and the community space.

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Part II
Embodied Healing at the Nexus of Academic-Community Engagement

Chapter 7
Undocumented Youth-Led Healing and Transformation in Turbulent Times

Leisy J. Abrego and Tara Fiorito

7.1 Introduction

> My undocumented identity made my experience in college really bad. Keeping it to myself. I didn't let anyone else come into my life or have that personal connection with me. So, I didn't really have too many friends. I didn't want that interaction because it's so uncomfortable, you know, how do you tell somebody that you're undocumented, that you can be deported? And there's like the stigma of being undocumented.
>
> [...]
>
> Being involved in the movement, a lot of it is empowerment. It's about developing your community, community building, healing through people within the same struggle, understanding what it really means to be undocumented. And we could only get that with the people who are within the immigration movement. Being around the people that are going through the same struggles shows that there is a positive future out there, and that we're all in there together and it's building these relationships based on our struggles and being able to talk to someone who is going through the same struggles.—Raj, undocumented grad student, personal interview, 2012

Undocumented immigrant students in the United States must navigate a complex immigration regime to access education and pursue a career. The United States has not passed mass immigrant regularization policies since 1986, leaving 11 million unauthorized migrants with limited options to legalize their status. Nationally, migrants who arrived as children are legally permitted to attend public school in K-12 (primary school). States, however, can pass laws to enhance or hinder their access to university. In the state of California where we conducted research, since 2001, Assembly Bill 540 allows many undocumented students who reside in the state to pay in-state tuition (much less expensive than international student rates) to attend state colleges

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and universities (Abrego, 2008). Between 2012–2017, a national cohort of undocumented youth also qualified for the first time for limited protections from deportation and a renewable work permit through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. These are just some of the federal laws, state policies, and changing programs that shape undocumented youth's lives.

As in other parts of the world, US immigration enforcement can also produce affective experiences of fear, stigma, and isolation. The criminalization of immigrants through policy changes and public discourse creates a context in which undocumented immigrants' lives and families may be uprooted by raids, ethnic profiling, detention, deportation, and family separation at almost any moment, anywhere within US borders (Abrego et al., 2017). Anti-immigrant policies and border security enforcement mushroomed during the 1990s, with Operation Gatekeeper in 1993, the restricting of welfare with the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, and the expanding and expediting of deportations with the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996. The criminalization and heightened policing of undocumented immigrants expanded further during the 2000s, with the installment of the Secure Communities program in 2009, resulting in highly racialized ethnic profiling practices and record numbers of deportations under the Obama and Trump administrations (Asad, 2020). To make matters worse, normalized political discourse and mainstream media representations continue to depict undocumented immigrants as "illegal aliens," "occupiers," and "criminals."

The undocumented youth who participated in the studies detailed in this chapter all grew up during this era. They learned to fear authorities and to not divulge information about their legal status to friends, teachers, or others outside their family. And despite the normalized hostile policies and practices of the US citizenship regime, they developed a national and vibrant immigrant youth movement that gained some notable wins, including especially the signing of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive action in 2012 (Nicholls, 2013). These political wins, alongside Raj's quote at the opening of the chapter that speaks of healing and community building, suggest a collective ability to move beyond the fear and the stigma that are normal human reactions to "legal violence" (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Conceptualizing the experiences of fear, shame, and isolation as the embodied effects of legal violence, we consider how our engaged and humbled approach to scholarship allowed us to capture undocumented immigrant youth activists' moments of collective healing.

"Illegality" is not an inherently human condition or identity; rather, it is produced by immigration laws and policies that are historically specific, decisively racialized, and geopolitically informed (De Genova, 2002). Furthermore, the notion and experience of "illegality" is constantly reproduced through stigmatizing public discourse and practices. The everyday effects of legal violence, however, are real and far-reaching (Fiorito, 2019; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Torres et al., 2018; Valdivia, 2020). In this piece, we bring attention to the embodied effects of legal violence as real and harmful, then we move away from focusing solely on the "damage" of the undocumented experience (Tuck, 2009), to center and elevate the full humanity,

dignity, and leadership of undocumented youth in their collective practices of care, healing, and transformation.

At the beginning of the movement, undocumented youth focused especially on removing the stigma of "illegality" to open a pathway to citizenship. In the public domain, they collectively aligned themselves with hegemonic neoliberal notions of deservingness (Negrón-Gonzales et al., 2015). Specifically, they stressed their contribution to the economy, their innocence as youth, and their "Americanness" (Nicholls, 2013). Years into the movement, their external focus shifted toward fighting for the entire undocumented community while simultaneously working more intimately through practices of making kin, community care, and the building of critical conscientiousness and politicization (Freire, 1970).

Drawing on the narratives of undocumented youth gathered through community-engaged (participatory) research over 16 and 7 years, respectively, this chapter analyzes the affective and cognitive transformation processes in which undocumented youth collectively reconstituted their subjectivities. We witnessed them turn their shame into collective pride, and move their sense of isolation into kinship and belonging. The chapter is grounded in undocumented youths' experiential knowledge and their analysis of the transformative and healing effects of their movement participation. Following their lead, we present undocumented youth-led practices of healing as inspiring examples of transformation. We underscore the power of these practices within neoliberal (gendered and racialized) processes of precarization and legal violence that seek to divide undocumented immigrants. That is, we look beyond undocumented youth's individualized and hegemonic public performance in the United States as "good neoliberal subjects" (Pallares, 2014), to focus, instead, on their counterhegemonic collective practices of community building and healing.

7.2 Subjectivities and Identities in the Context of Legal Violence

As critical illegality studies scholars, we understand illegality as a historically specific, socially, politically, and materially produced condition that deliberately produces precarity and deportability (De Genova, 2002) through extended periods of embodied vulnerability and existential uncertainty. We employ the analytical concept of "legal violence" to capture the harmful material and affective consequences of the law in the daily lives of undocumented youth and their families (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Violence is made possible and acceptable through the uncontested, normalized structural and symbolic power of the law. The legal violence framework explains how experiences of immigrant exploitation, detention, deportation, family separation, shame, exclusion, and mental and physical health issues are justified in the minds of the general public because immigrants did not follow "the law" (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012, p. 1387).

The legal violence and discursive and material power of the citizenship regime create a continuously present anxiety and "hyper awareness of the law" (Menjívar, 2011) among undocumented immigrants who must worry about the possibility of being deported on any given day. That fear, shame, exclusion, and exploitation that result from the law and its enforcement can manifest themselves in immigrants' "durably embodied undocumented subjectivities" (Fiorito, 2021). They come to live and stick in the minds and bodies of undocumented youth in prolonged ways (Valdivia, 2020), at times shaping even their sense of worth and dignity. Other social axes, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability also have the potential to further compound the harmful effects of the law (Maldonado Domínguez, 2020; Ramirez, 2020; Sati, 2020; Silvestre, 2020; Zimmerman et al., 2023).

Importantly, immigrants also embody agency and dignity. By focusing on the leadership and transformative communal capacities of undocumented youth, and taking seriously their experiential knowledge and self-analysis, we not only aim to practice epistemic justice, but we also follow indigenous scholar Eve Tuck's (2009) call to move from a "damage-centered" to a "desire-based" research approach. This constitutes an epistemological and depathologizing shift geared toward understanding the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. [...] This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). Our intimate and engaged involvement in the undocumented youth movement has made possible an analysis of the relational and communal practices of undocumented youth that captures these practices as youth-led examples of collective healing and transformation even during hostile and turbulent times.

7.3 Methodology and Data

We are community-engaged scholars who aim to accompany social movements and study participants through our engaged research (Abrego, 2024; Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2019). Guided by an ethic of care and epistemic justice, we use interpretative qualitative methods to work with humility to document and support what became the vibrant social movement of undocumented youth. Not wanting to erase our own full humanity, even (and perhaps especially) when we are conducting research, our engagement is simultaneously emotional, theoretical, *and* practical. We feel strongly that engaging on an emotional and human level enriches the work. By holding ourselves accountable most notably to the very people who grant us permission to learn from them, we commit to knowledge creation that feels most accurate to their realities, thereby adhering to principles of epistemic justice. This accountability translates on the one hand (epistemically) into knowledge co-creation, prioritizing and valuing the experiential knowledge, interpretations, and analysis of undocumented youth who spoke of healing, family/kinship, love, care, and community in relation to their movement participation. On the other hand, this accountability translates (practically) into both of us finding our own ways of responding to the needs

and desires of the community. Abrego has coached and supported undocumented immigrants, promoting the work of undocumented scholars in academic outlets, as well as advocated for asylum seekers through editorial and expert witness work. She shows up consistently to listen, learn, mentor, present, and provide feedback when undocumented students in and outside of her home campus request it. Fiorito became an active movement member: organizing and participating in civil disobedience actions and sit-ins, facilitating meetings, performing in theatre-of-oppressed skits at events and protests, volunteering at movement events, acting as a peacekeeper at protests, hosting parties and retreats at her house, and codirecting a documentary film about the challenges of being undocumented and the strengths of the movement. Moreover, inspired by youth activism in the United States, Fiorito took the lessons learned in Southern California back home to the Netherlands where she played a key role in convening undocumented youth. Following the US-based youth's examples, she organized youth-centered and youth-led gatherings for different relatively isolated undocumented communities to get to know each other, build lasting relationships, further critical consciousness, and share experiences and stories with each other through creative workshops, talking circles (explained in greater detail in the Community Care section), the sharing of delicious meals, and engaging in other practices of community care. She centered humanity, healing, relationality, and creativity and has successfully advocated for some undocumented youth in the Netherlands to access higher education.

These practices of engaged scholarship that allowed us to share as researchers and as human beings permitted us to learn not only what was happening with changing laws and expanding political mobilizations, but also to observe how participants were living these changes in emotional and embodied ways. By purposely rejecting positivist approaches to research, our own humanity shone through in these long-term, caring community-engaged research methods. We were able to get to know participants well, as full human beings and become witnesses of and accomplices to collective processes of transformation. In that context, we came to understand that, in fact, political subjectivities and strategies are closely related to and shaped by affective realities. As we detail in this piece, the richness of community-engaged scholarship revealed to us that affective subjectivities also inform political organizing and vice versa.

For this chapter, we specifically draw on separate qualitative studies in different moments, joining our data in support of our claims. Fiorito conducted research in the greater Los Angeles area in extended periods between 2011 and 2018. She conducted 450 hours of ethnographic research with undocumented youth in over 90 (formal and informal) events attended. These events included many home dinners, movement events, protests, meetings, theatre rehearsals, birthdays, weddings, Christmas and New Year's celebrations, and therapeutic "self-care and healing" events and retreats. She conducted 37 interviews with undocumented and DACAmented youth from Latin America and Asia. Abrego has worked with undocumented high school and college students since 2001 and for this piece, is drawing on interviews conducted in multiple studies between 2001 through 2017 in the Greater Los Angeles area. Besides formal interviews, she participated in social events where she got to know

students and some of their families. In the early research phase, she helped some of them apply to college and served as a chaperone for an overnight trip to the state capitol. All participants in Abrego's studies are Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, or Mexican. Together, we discussed the patterns we had witnessed, co-created categories of experiences, mined our data in search of examples of these experiences, and then worked closely to find representative excerpts, and to develop analysis for this piece.

7.4 Steppingstones of Affective and Cognitive Healing

In our analysis, we identify three steppingstones (or forms and practices) of affective and cognitive healing: (1) kinship, (2) community care, and (3) transformation. The first steppingstone shows the importance of relationality and affective connections as a form of youth-led healing. By coming together like kin in "safe spaces" (Hill Collins, 2000), such as organizing groups and (campus) support groups, undocumented youth can find each other, connect, and form friendships and kinship with directly impacted people in similar circumstances. Their shared intimate understanding of what it feels like to be undocumented allows them to experience the freedom to be open about their undocumented status, to just be themselves without having to demonstrate their deservingness as "good neoliberal subjects," and to be "seen" by others in their full humanity and intersectional identities.

The second steppingstone gears around the transformative potential of community care. Community care practices include talking and healing circles, therapeutic self-care, and healing retreats. These activities are meant to sustain the group's well-being by caring for and strengthening their bodies and spirits while simultaneously fueling the group's political power of engaging in collective action and political mobilization together. The third steppingstone highlights how transformation and healing can come from going against hegemonic othering ("blaming the victim") discourses by locating the source of oppression in external political and social structures. By participating in critically engaged academic spaces and university programs such as Immigration Studies or Chicana/Chicano Studies and learning and drawing from such critical academic theories and scholars within their talking circles, undocumented youth were able to go through collective processes of conscientization (Freire, 1970). And by recognizing and naming oppressive and discriminatory structures, such as the immigration system, undocumented youth reframe and recast stigmatizing discourses, shifting the blame from themselves and their families to structural factors outside themselves. This process empowers undocumented youth collectively by emotionally repairing their sense of self (Taylor, 1996) and cognitively equipping them to engage in and strategize around contemporary debates on these issues.

7.5 In the Face of Legal Violence and Stigma

There is a particular experience of having grown up in the United States without legal permission to reside there. Many undocumented youth left their home countries at a young age and grew up attending US public schools. In that context, it can be particularly jarring for them to reach young adulthood and learn that they are ineligible for opportunities that require legal residency or citizenship (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). In our work, we found that they tended to feel deeply stigmatized and lonely at those moments when they first encountered the material and social realities associated with being undocumented. In 2001, shortly after figuring out that she did not qualify for financial aid for college, the typically optimistic and energetic 16-year-old Elizabeth clammed up when she talked about what it felt like to be undocumented. With hands on her stomach, as if trying to calm her own physical discomfort, she said:

> Well, I feel ashamed. I debated so many times whether to tell my counselor. Because you're just scared to tell somebody because you don't know what they're going to think. And you're just so scared of that reaction. Because you do feel inferior to somebody because you don't have the same rights as they do.

Undocumented student, Arturo expressed similar sentiments about what his undocumented status meant:

> Not being able to tell specific people, because of the fear and shame, you know of people finding out that I am undocumented. And then the fear of deportation. Right, so even that fact: not being able to talk to friends that we grew up with. Not being able to defend yourself in terms of being attacked, or hearing people talking about the whole immigration issue, and you know using all these negative words: "illegal aliens, they should go back, they are stupid" and all that negative crazy talk. Not being able to defend ourselves, because if we say anything they are gonna say: "Why do you care? Are you illegal?"

Like Elizabeth and Arturo, we found that most undocumented youth were filled with shame and fear about their undocumented status. The emotions were strong enough that they manifested in physical ways, as stomach aches and pressure in different parts of their body. This was most evident to us when they spoke about how they had internalized the social stigma emanating from "negative crazy talk," or associated racist and xenophobic normalized discourse. Understandably, the legal violence of policies that blocked them from access to legal work and social services fueled their insecurities, leaving them feeling stuck and unmotivated to pursue their goals. They often felt they had to avoid not only figures of authority, but also new friends who may humiliate them for their status at any opportunity. This felt lonely and made it difficult to trust people or to develop social networks of support. Indeed, it was a first hurdle they had to overcome on their journey to developing their social movement.

7.5.1 Kinship

Having accompanied what ultimately became the growing and vibrant undocumented youth movement over several years, we witnessed some transformations and possibilities for healing that developed in response to legal violence. We came to see that the first powerful antidote to such loneliness, fear, and shame is making and experiencing kinship (feeling connected to and part of an intimate family, with others who share core parts of your identity and/or experience). While many in the movement had experienced allyship and broader community ties with educators and school staff who were very helpful, kinship represented stronger affective ties. Here we refer to kinship as a transformative and constructed relationship of interdependence (which is ontological, affective, and political) between those we feel intimately connected to, dependent upon, and responsible for because of shared experiences; it is about creating mutually supportive relationships with those (humans and non-humans) we deeply care about, love, and feel responsible for (Birdsong, 2020; Haraway, 2016). We found that it is precisely such a self-constructed resistance to the hyper individualism of neoliberal conceptions of subjecthood that protected undocumented youth from loneliness and shame.

Such was the case of Indira. To distract herself from the doom she felt about her status, she spent several years extremely immersed in school and work. Often overwhelmed by her schedule, she felt a clear break in her psyche when she met other undocumented students who had been building a community support group on her campus. She recalled the day she met several of them, "Then there were these people just hanging out and they're undocumented but they're just happy going out to dinner. It was just very different; it was a safer place for me to start kind of coming back into the world." Her words reveal a kind of abrupt realization that undocumented people can also be "just happy" doing something as human as "going out to dinner." Recognizing that others in her shared status could exist in the world outside of the non-stop work and busyness broke the spell that Indira devised for her self-protection by reminding her that she could find safety in ways that were less lonely. By joining the group of undocumented students, she found a "safer place" that enticed her to consider how she could exist in the world in a different, more fully human way.

Similarly, after joining her undocumented student group, Selma learned about what undocumented status meant and that it did not have to determine all of her life experiences and choices. Selma recalled,

> It really saved me. It was really the first family I found at university. It has given me so much (laughs). It has provided me with support on every possible level. Scholarships, and mental support, emotional support, just being able to laugh about being undocumented.

Experiencing kinship with other undocumented students gave Selma material resources such as financial support which is often at the heart of students' needs. However, Selma also stresses the mental and emotional support that made the group akin to "family." That she found a group of people to share laughter with is important given the stress created by legal violence, but it is an especially noteworthy gift that she specifically laughed "about being undocumented" with this group. Being able to

joke and laugh about a status that weighed so heavily in multiple areas of their lives permitted them to distance themselves from what often feels like a totalizing experience of structural exclusion. Laughter of recognition in community makes possible a different relationship to the status of being undocumented; it creates space to notice that it does not have full control over every single aspect of their humanity. Finally, laughing collectively helps to build community and deepen ties when people break the tension associated with injustice to see each other's shared human experiences with a lightness that rejects the weight of legal violence for that moment.

In the early years of organizing in the first decade of the 2000s, undocumented students had allies and supporters on college campuses and other educational spaces. The Leticia A. Network in California, for example, was made up of engaged scholars, teachers, and college administrators to support undocumented students before they had access to in-state tuition or financial aid (Seif, 2004). Those supporters surely helped students access some resources and in many cases complete their schooling, but the most meaningful emotional support came from the kinship ties that students built among themselves. As Sol describes:

> I think it is that initial step of just being able to be surrounded by other undocumented people and be like, you're undocumented, I'm undocumented, that's kinda cool. You know, you're not alone. I think that's the biggest barrier that we have to overcome sometimes, is recognizing that you're not alone, because that's really what I thought when I first found out. Because when your counselor is telling you, you know, you can't do this and society is telling you this and you see yourself in the media represented as something, you just feel really alone. So [the undocumented student support group] was that rock for me that I just used to make leaps and bounds.

Being "surrounded by other undocumented people" means that they deeply understood each other without needing to explain. Specifically, they shared the experience of being targets of legal violence, and of feeling shame from negative normalized discourses and from having school counselors discourage them from seeking opportunities. The depth of those experiences made it possible to instantly connect with people who shared those lived experiences and build meaningful ties together by being reminders to one another that they are not alone, recognizing their interdependence and providing mutual support to one another ("being that rock"). It was in that kind of space that Sol and others found kinship, and it was from that space that they thrived individually and collectively in ways that included healing while building a social movement.

7.5.2 Community Care

Here we conceptualize community care as a practice of tending to one's humanity in collective actions that are meant to sustain the group's well-being. While care is a basic human need, it takes on a uniquely deep meaning for undocumented youth who face the painful consequences of legal violence. As Raj emphasizes in the opening quote of this chapter, coming to rely on each other through the movement

is about "community building, *healing* through people within the same struggle... and that we're all in there together and it's building these relationships based on our struggles and being able to talk to someone who is going through the same struggles." By holding space for each other and engaging in purposefully organized therapeutic self-care and healing practices and retreats, together they affirmed their full humanity and reminded them they were deserving of care, individually and collectively. As they got to know one another in these support groups, the need for such affirmations became more evident, especially after local and national political defeats. Student groups and other undocumented youth-led organizations more purposefully centered acts of community care and healing in collective spaces.

Maria, who had been active with the social movement through a difficult political defeat, discussed what it meant to shift their collective spaces to purposefully center collective care and healing practices, such as talking circles (in which groups gather in a circle to take turns sharing, unburdening, and providing encouragement to one another), coaching sessions, transformative justice work, and other therapeutic techniques. She said that besides discussing the material challenges and legal understandings of their situation, they also expanded the goals of their time together, "We also have our identity circle that we just created. So we, more intentionally discuss the emotional side of being undocumented. So whether that's depression, or being really confused about what you're gonna do once you graduate, it can be anything." Aware of the various ways that the law defined their lives, together, they understood that their wellness had to also move beyond only the direct effects of the law, to include "the emotional side of being undocumented." In that space of collective care, they were able and willing to recognize that the weight of legal violence can sometimes lead to depression and that it was important to use their talking circles to give each other space to name that. Their time together allowed them to voice these fears, and to support each other in the process. Jose, another undocumented youth and community organizer reiterated:

> We are purposefully creating facilitated communication circles, where it's supposed to be a safe space. So you have moderators that set the guidelines and ask what are people's needs in the space. So like, sometimes people need space and time to reflect These are healing circles, where you just get together and people talk about what they are going through and people acknowledge what is going on and it's about sharing and healing through speech and togetherness.

Community care was thus sometimes provided by holding space for each other, allowing each other to talk about their feelings and struggles, as Maria and Jose described. But community care also meant providing emotional and physical comfort and support by sharing hugs, massages, and wholesome food, and collectively generating hope for the future through political mobilization and critical consciousness building (see more below).

In another example, Maja described what it meant for undocumented youth to purposely center their humanity and their relationships, rather than formalities, as part of the work they did together in community:

> I remember in the beginning when I joined [the activist organization], and especially for the disobedience actions, every single meeting was either at my or somebody else's house. I would refuse for us to meet in an office. And I would always make food. People would come and we would eat first and we would check-in first and then we would work. And that always feels right. It goes beyond just working together, it is really building family and understanding why. That is not just like a hippie concept of like: "we are all one and peace and love." But no, we are and we have to be, because, we are so right now separated from each other and more and more we are put against each other that we have to recognize the beauty within us. Because that is that one thing they cannot take away from us, it is our own spirits and our own hope. They can put me in jail and they did, but they can't take away who I am.

This approach to "building family and understanding why" was necessary to care for each other and to make the political work meaningful and possible. It humanized them to themselves and to each other in powerful ways. They cooked for one another and checked in about their lives in nourishing and holistic ways, thereby foregrounding their humanity before getting to the political work that they would do together. Such collective care effectively pushes back on the dehumanization and separation resulting from legal violence and neoliberal expectations of subjecthood, which together not only cause actual separation through detention and deportation, but also create divisions and competition by recognizing some immigrants as deserving while criminalizing and demonizing others (Abrego & Negrón-Gonzales, 2020; Negrón-Gonzales et al., 2015). Collective care, on the contrary, allows them to build power collectively and away from the state-centered logic of the law. Being able to connect to their spirit and their hope, not as good neoliberal subjects who are merely successful financial contributors to society, but as people with "beauty within" them, deepened their well-being and their ability to work together for a more just future.

We also want to draw attention to what Maja names as an act of refusal. "I would refuse for us to meet in an office." Here, an office may stand in for all that is traditionally valued under the framework of neoliberal rules of work and good subjecthood. Importantly, demanding physical distance from formal or official spaces as a regular practice of getting to know one another and performing community care allowed them to practice the co-creation of their own social rules.

Tactics and practices of community care thus opened up discursive and affective spaces that helped undocumented youth blossom spiritually and politically. As Paulo described it, "Those were the most beautiful days of my life. The organizing work that transformed me, happened there. It was beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. That's where I learned to be undocumented and unafraid. It was through sharing my story without feeling guilt or shame." Indeed, by recognizing their interdependence and caring for each other (emotionally, physically, spiritually, materially) like family/kin, relationship ties within the undocumented community thickened, permitting them to feel brave and spacious enough as a collective to engage in meaningful political organizing.

7.5.3 Transformation

Being in frequent contact and meaningful communication with one another in inclusive and inspiring environments such as critical academic and activist spaces allowed undocumented youth to expand their political consciousness and transform their analysis of their community's conditions. Sol, who went from being a shy undocumented college student to learning to state publicly that she was undocumented and able to demand change, described the process as "organic empowerment" that happened from organizing with other undocumented students:

> I was able to see these beautiful people, who are undocumented, be so much more than the average definition would believe. And being able to see that first hand, allowed me to prove that definition wrong, right? As much as I could. And so because of that, because of that, just organic empowerment, I gave my first speech [in college] where I said I was undocumented... And that's when I fell in love with it. That's when I kinda saw like, public speaking isn't that bad and sharing your story is really cool. And people are like cheering and like you know screaming for me. Like that's really cool (laughs). I feel their love you know. And so that was my first exposure to the love that can come from activism, both to people and from people. And so that was like the first time I came out like in a big march kinda setting.

The "average definition" of what it meant to be undocumented would typically be formulated through mainstream media, political discourse, or the limited perspectives of educational staff, which were heavily informed by legal violence and portrayed them negatively and exclusively as one-dimensional figures in society. But even when those portrayals were lodged in them, it was kinship, community care, and critical consciousness that disrupted those ideas and allowed them to witness their complex humanity and the social-structural conditioning of their community. In Sol's case, those "beautiful people" who proved to be "so much more" than the negative stereotypes helped her feel the love that can come from activism and reframe her understanding of self, community, and society.

Such transformative processes of conscientization and politicization that many undocumented youth experienced were also fueled by undocumented youths' access to higher education and participation in critically engaged academic spaces and university programs, such as Immigration Studies, Labor Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Central American Studies. As Norma described:

> So yeah, university was like for me a transformation point, because it was where I really embraced being undocumented. And really seeing education as a tool to understand your place in the world and your role in it. That is like revolutionary. For me, university was that understanding, right. Having the theory and having discovered all the theorists and all these books that I had never read before and then somehow connecting it to my experience and having others connected too, it's not just about us, it's about this bigger thing.

Enrique similarly was inspired by engaged scholars and drew on his academic teachings to inform the conversations and the goals of his activist group. As he described:

> My experience of self has changed. I know that there are a lot of intersectionalities and things that coincide with each other. Like me taking Chicano/Chicana studies classes, learning to

> develop my own identity and then applying those things that I learned in class to like being in the movement.

Having recognized their full humanity and kinship through shared spaces of community care, people like Norma and Enrique, could now bring their critical knowledge on larger sociohistorical political-economic structures to connect with one another on a more macro-structural level as they worked to expand each other's political understanding of their collective situation. It was in those talking circles that they helped each other make sense of the structural contexts that produced their conditions as undocumented immigrants, and as racialized and otherwise marginalized people. The political transformations and processes of conscientization thus typically expanded to consider macro-level factors that determined their own life conditions. This included an awareness of US foreign policies and the ways US interventions had destabilized their countries of origin and their families' life chances. At the micro-level, through conversations rooted in community care, participants also described how they transformed their understanding of what social justice encompasses. Juan, for example, was able to connect the macro structural conditions to the micro interpersonal consequences in their lives as undocumented and marginalized members of US society.

> And so, yeah, what I've seen is that those same traumas that we have experienced since growing up are translated, internally, not only into violence, but are translated into how we deal with violence. So as children we experience trauma and that impacts how we relate to each other as adults.... So I work with community organizers to provide tools for human development and self-reflection so they can begin diving deep into recognizing their own traumas, their own triggers and how that impacts their relationships with one another. So through coaching, through therapy, through providing tools to engage in non-violent conflict resolution. And so my goal is to work with people individually, organizations, particularly grassroots organizations to then, eventually, have them sit down together and reflect and build trust among each other. And then collectively, build a community accountability process, so if an individual causes violence, that we can collectively hold them accountable, that is not through the police, that is not through criminalizing, that is not through getting rid of them. But in order to get there, we first have to work on ourselves. Because the idea is that they are going to dive deeply into their traumas to be able to see where all of this pain is really coming from.

This transformative justice framework became more common after many of the undocumented youth activists, who over the years became the professional community organizers that Juan speaks of, had shared spaces of community care with each other and were looking for spaces of healing away from state-based notions of self. They began with awareness only of their individual condition, and as this awareness expanded, as they moved collectively with care to learn from one another about their humanity alongside their legal condition, their vision of what needed change in the world also expanded. In this case, Juan went from being an activist solely around issues of immigration to understanding the broader need for healing traumas in all social justice spaces. He moved to dedicate his work to healing traumas and building caring communities separate from state influence in various spaces.

Repeatedly, the need to heal and engage with healing practices became a central thread in the collective work of our study participants as they moved from being

college students to college graduates. They joined or built groups and grassroots organizations and aimed to reproduce kinship and community care practices in contexts with new peers and other community members. Once they had connected and co-theorized structures of oppression that determined their life chances, they expanded their vision of social justice and aimed for a more holistic approach to support one another. As Sam explained:

> This understanding that our healing is connected to social justice because the reasons why we are undergoing depression, whether it's chronic pain, all of those have to do with systems of power. Of whether you're able to have access to food, access to parks, access to health care. All of those things that are denied to our community contribute to all of the illnesses and pain that exist within our community and so when we heal ourselves it's not just a matter of personal health. It's a matter of social change because we're able to understand how our individual self is connected to a larger whole and the community.

Sam eloquently articulates a vision of social justice that ties the individual—even at the level of embodied health and emotional wellness—with the meso level of the community and the macro structures that produce inequality and delimit entire communities' life chances. From depression and chronic pain that people experience as individuals, to access to parks and to health care for entire communities, social inequality produces injustice simultaneously at multiple scales. In that context, to fight for broader social changes also requires us to consider the need to fight for everything that is necessary to sustain physical and mental health for individuals—including, especially for undocumented folks.

Like Juan and Sam, many participants in our studies traversed a journey of healing and conscientization (Freire, 1970) that helped them to not only combat shame and fear imposed on them through legal violence, but also to experience transformation through the development of kinship, community care practices, and finally a fuller understanding of social structures and social justice. This awareness and deep comprehension grounded them in a different framework through which to experience their condition as undocumented immigrants. It reframed how they understood themselves, each other, and the society they wanted to help improve.

7.6 Conclusion

Legal violence continues. Though some have been able to attain a stable legal status, many of the undocumented immigrants we worked with have not collectively had an opportunity to regularize their status and in some ways have seen their hard-fought political wins recede. They have not, however, lost hope or stopped fighting for social justice.

Accompanying undocumented youth activists during these transformative years—in which their affective and political subjectivities were reconstituted individually and collectively—was powerfully healing and transformative for us, as well. As engaged researchers who lean into our own emotional experiences as a central aspect of our scholarship, we learned in embodied ways about the need for kinship and community

care for transformation. The participants in our studies who gave us permission to be present with them and to learn from them taught us to also center humanity and refuse traditional expectations in those instances when they did not serve social justice. Following their example, we have come to recognize that hopelessness is never an option in the face of legal and other forms of systemic violence. Even when healing and conscientization do not immediately lead to political changes and even when times remain turbulent for many years, the ability to build kinship and practice community care grounds people in ways that benefit us all.

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Chapter 8
Through Art We Co-create Care: Insights from a Rhizomatic Queer Community

Fabian Holle, Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, and Sajad Salmanpour

It is Monday the 25th of September 2023. Today is the first LIMBO workshop after a break of nearly six months. We are sitting around the table in anticipation of what is to come. It is the first time Lana and Rochita facilitate the workshop. It is one of few times we meet on Monday instead of the usual Sunday afternoon. Sajad is in the other room preparing soup. We decide to slowly start. Rochita suggests to do a round and instead of introducing ourselves, share something that made us happy this week. Everyone gives it a try although we see some questioning faces. Some expressed that they can't think of anything happy because of a difficult day or week. Fabian, having taken a step back during a challenging period, expressed gratitude for the new team that had formed. The room resonated with stories of personal struggles, with one participant sharing the emotional impact of LIMBO's break on her life. She can't hold back her tears. Fabian then also tears up. She takes a moment to compose herself. The soup is ready. We eat and Fabian addresses the question of how to make queer flexible caring spaces like LIMBO sustainable: "Hopefully, now after a time of healing and reflecting, LIMBO is organized in such a way that the workshops can continue, regardless of what happens." Tears flowed freely, vulnerability was embraced and understood. The group acknowledged the importance of sustainability, recognizing that the burden couldn't rest solely on few individuals. Fabian highlighted the need for a collective effort. Lana encouraged emotional openness, emphasizing that tears were as welcome as any other emotions.

We move upstairs and Lana starts with three prompts around care: (1) Care for me is, (2) How I show care, and (3) How I want to be cared for. Everyone writes their reflections on small notes and sticks them to the wall. Like this, we collectively develop and establish the concept of care. We acknowledge that both members and facilitators need care. All group

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members offer their perspectives, emphasizing aspects like feeling seen and listened to, providing emotional support, and creating space for others.

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we unpack community care with and for uprooted LGBTQIA+ individuals facing challenges of exclusion and non-belonging in the Netherlands. Specifically, we draw insights from experiences of LGBTQIA+ forced migrants (hereafter referred to as queer refugees[1]), that are part of the collaborative and creative research project LIMBO. LIMBO, referring to liminality or in-betweenness, is a workshop series in which queer refugees are invited to share stories and reflections via a range of artistic practices, such as writing, drawing, and sculpting. We chose the name LIMBO to acknowledge the challenges of those experiencing liminality while at the same time (re)claiming it as having potential for creativity and critical reflexivity (Turner, 1969; Said, 1994). Much like how the term "queer" was originally a slur, and then reclaimed by the LGBTQIA+ community as a pride reclamation, highlighting its potential for unsettling normativity (Jeshion, 2020).

Fabian Holle, the first author of this chapter, initiated LIMBO in close collaboration with queer refugee community members and the art institution Framer Framed based on previous academic community engagement.[2] LIMBO is part of their[3] PhD research examining the opportunities and challenges of engaged scholarship with queer refugees. Fabian coordinates the project and co-authors Lana Jelenjev, Rochita Loenen-Ruiz, and Sajad Salmanpour facilitate the workshops. We, as authors of this chapter, facilitators and organizers of the LIMBO workshops, are entangled with the group as partial insider-outsiders (Karimi, 2020). We each contribute in different capacities and from different backgrounds. We will share personal narratives throughout, to create a better understanding of the collaboration and how our specific knowledges and views became entangled and mutually influenced. Over the course of this long-term project,[4] which is ongoing and, as we write this in September 2024, has included 40 workshop days and 13 (semi-)public events in two-and-a-half

[1] "Queer" or "refugees" are contested labels and need to be used with care and in accordance to what participants themselves prefer. Many LIMBO members use the term queer to describe themselves while referring to the political meaning of challenging imposed societal norms (Jagose, 1996). Some do not use "queer" to refer to themselves or others identifying as LGBTQIA+, but rather terms as lesbian or gay. Here, we use "queer" as both umbrella term and activist position. The term "refugee" often carries negative and essentialist connotations. By highlighting positive aspects of displaced positionalities as noted by Malkki (1992), we aim to counter such essentialism.

[2] Before LIMBO, there were two other co-creative projects initiated by Fabian Holle: Art for Change and Trans-Clash. Insights from both collaborations led to the co-creation of LIMBO.

[3] Fabian uses they/them pronouns.

[4] LIMBO started in January 2022 and is ongoing. The first eight weeks were organized and funded as part of the NWO VICI project Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, led by Prof. Halleh Ghorashi. After deciding to continue, we received funding from the Amsterdam Fund for "Cultuurparticipatie" [translates to participation in culture] for two years for the overarching project Through Art We Care, which LIMBO and one other project are part of. The title of this chapter is

years, LIMBO has provided a unique opportunity to observe and experience its impact on individual members and the collective.

LIMBO members are diverse in terms of religion, age (ranging between 19 and 51 years old), gender identity, sexuality, educational, professional, cultural and national background (Ugandan, Nigerian, Congolese, Iranian, Syrian, and Lebanese to name a few). The majority that actively engages within the workshops are in the asylum procedure. Many members travel for hours from asylum centers in, for instance, Heerlen or Dronten to reach Amsterdam, all while managing numerous responsibilities and oftentimes grappling with mental health. Pinpointing the number of LIMBO members is challenging, but at the time of writing in September 2024, the WhatsApp group has 61 members, with some having already left this medium and others no longer active. At this moment, 79 queer refugees have participated in at least one, oftentimes multiple, workshops.[5] Some members come back after months of not participating. Others have only participated or volunteered at semi-public LIMBO events, while few others have engaged without having a refugee background, such as friends, allies, creative professionals, or (student) researchers, usually LGBTQIA+ and often with a migration experience.

Before Lana and Rochita joined the team, the workshops were facilitated by different (queer, refugee) artists practicing different media. Twenty-four artists and organizers have co-facilitated at least one LIMBO workshop, with almost all of them being LGBTQIA+ and all having a migration background. Although this constantly switching up generated lots of energy because of newness in facilitators, ideas, perspectives, and styles, we decided to focus on creating more stability and consistency by sticking with recurring facilitators. It was simply too much to continuously find, instruct, and host new workshop facilitators. Over time, we collectively developed certain practices and ways of facilitation, which had to be shared beforehand so that workshops could be prepared accordingly. Such practices include holding space for a range of stories and emotions while allowing it to be uncomfortable at times (Cairo, 2021; Plett, 2020), creating intentions for the day, moments of moving and dancing, games, check-ins and -outs, sharing reflections on creative assignments, and starting each session with preparing and eating soup and snacks (see also Holle et al., 2024).

Yet despite this richness of perspectives, the group was structurally lacking the capacity to address mental health issues within the community until Lana and Rochita joined. We worked and collaborated on creating a caring support network, but in an extended period of accumulated stress, the burden of caring-about, caring-for, and caring-with lay too much on Fabian. This eventually led Fabian to develop psychosomatic symptoms of burnout. Therefore, they had to stop working for a period to reflect and heal. Unfortunately, this meant that the LIMBO workshops

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derived from this project's title. We received another year of funding for the period June 2024 until June 2025 from ILGA-Europe, which is an initiative supported by the European Union.

[5] Update September 2025: At the time of final edits, LIMBO had organized 49 workshops and 16 (semi-)public events, with over 100 different workshop participants attending at least one session (often multiple).

were also paused for six months. The network of care was not (yet) strong enough to support and continue without Fabian present. Sajad and other LIMBO members stayed connected with the group via WhatsApp and suggested different queer events to go to instead of the workshops. Even though the period of forced distance was challenging, it brought clarity on how to make LIMBO sustainable. That is when and why Lana and Rochita joined the team, focusing on developing practices of care collectively.

8.2 From Deficit to Desire

Through creative workshops, members engage in a co-creative process of knowledge-making through story creation. This narrative approach, rooted in critical theory in praxis (O'Neill, 2008), is a type of research methodology that addresses and unsettles research that start from a "deficit-approach" in refugee studies (Ghorashi, 2023; Malkki, 1992). In such research, images of refugees as lacking and in need of help (e.g., to improve language skills, networking, volunteering, Dutch norms and values, etc.) are being reproduced because the starting point is that refugees lack certain skills (or liberal western values) for "proper" integration/assimilation. Such a deficit-approach can be detrimental because it strengthens and reproduces already dominant images of refugees as "victims in need of saving," reinforcing a dichotomy of the "other" as inferior because they need help, and the "us" as superior because "we" (supposedly know how to) help. Hence, a deficit-approach focuses on *parts* that are lacking and need improvement instead of focusing on one's *full* humanity which includes all of one's experiences, skills, and challenges.

In health science, such a fullness perspective is called a salutogenic approach, a term coined by medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1996), which is in contrast to a pathogenic approach focusing on parts causing disease. Lana endorses this salutogenic perspective, focusing on fullness and wholeness in addressing trauma. "At its core, salutogenesis looks at health as a continuum, where the goal is not merely the absence of disease but the presence of vibrant health and well-being" (Jelenjev, 2024a).

By focusing on art practices co-developed with, by, and for the community we aim to counter a deficit- into a desire-based approach. "[D]esire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). For us, a desire-based approach departs from consent as an ongoing practice. This means that ways of engagement are optional and based on feeling good, preferably enthusiastic, about it (see also Holle et al., 2024). Therefore, we aim to create a non-compulsory and adaptable space in which members are excited about engaging. We do so by tailoring to both individual and collective desires, aiming to mutually benefit everyone involved (Kajner, 2013). Instead of studies focusing on what refugees need in order to integrate, we acknowledge everyone's full humanity by foregrounding the narratives, experiences, and aspirations of queer uprooted individuals on their own terms. We

start by thinking together about content and form of knowledge co-creation and stay reflexive on power dynamics while sharing responsibility in co-creation, co-facilitation, co-organizing, and sometimes co-curation. In doing so, the knowledge co-produced departs from individual and collective skills and creativity instead of deficiencies. Without brushing over the many challenges queer refugees face, we believe that "[d]esire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities" (Tuck, 2009, p. 417). We shared moments of grief and despair due to loss of loved ones. Few participants shared losing their mother during the perilous journey over sea, while fleeing danger and violence in their countries of origin. Other times, we share joy and laughter, through silly dancing, jokes, or relatable reflections on certain topics.

Authored by facilitators of the LIMBO project, this chapter highlights a desire-based narrative approach, which we observe and experience as healing. We perceive LIMBO as a rhizomatic queer community, that mitigates the persistent challenges this community faces within a neoliberal context fueling individualization, hostility, and carelessness. First, we briefly zoom out to the societal context to explain why many queer refugees struggle with belonging in the Dutch context. Then, we will highlight one workshop as an example of how we co-create care within our narrative approach. We then follow with stories' healing potential, to then conceptualize LIMBO as a rhizomatic queer community.

8.3 Context of Carelessness

Neoliberalism's pervasive influence, as articulated in *The Care Manifesto* (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), relegates care practices that are not profit-oriented to the periphery. Market-mediated and commoditized forms of care and well-being take precedence, while communal care and broader forms of social solidarity are marginalized (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). The ideal citizen in this paradigm is resilient and autonomous, cultivating a culture of self-sufficiency, self-care, and promoting a mentality of caring for "one's own" at the expense of solidarity amongst differences (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Safety and protection of "one's own" are prioritized, and practices of surveillance and policing increase as opposed to forms of solidarity and investing in social provisions (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Hence, communal care and solidarity are undermined by a careless context of profit-driven imperatives, individualism, and protection of "one's own."

Furthermore, the neoliberal emphasis on individual autonomy and care encompasses both self-care and wellness (Baker, 2022; LeClerc, 2022) as well as caring for one's own. In her book *Doppelganger*, Klein (2023), unpacks the alliance between wellness and self-care cultures and far-right populism, showing how practices often framed as liberatory or apolitical can slide into conspiratorial and exclusionary ideologies. She highlights how discourses of bodily autonomy and purity can be weaponized to reinforce exclusionary politics and cultivate suspicion toward public institutions. This dynamic was particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic,

when parts of the wellness and self-care milieu aligned with anti-vaccination movements, rejecting vaccination as a matter of individual choice and refusing solidarity with communities most at risk, such as the elderly, immunocompromised, and other vulnerable groups. Such emphases on self-reliance and caring only for one's own can enable far-right populism, in which uncaring communities emerge and groups pit "one's own" against "the other," forming identities rooted in exclusion and animosity. In such environments, hostility toward marginalized groups, such as immigrants or LGBTQIA+ communities, gains traction (Chatzidakis et al., 2020).

The Netherlands is a good example. Its current political climate is marked by the previous electoral success of the PVV, which translates to Party for Freedom, an extreme right-wing populist party led by Geert Wilders. The PVV advocates for a vision of freedom that is distinctly exclusive. Freedom for Wilders is tethered to a particular demographic: the primarily white, working-class native Dutch citizens. His rhetoric delineates a distinction between "ordinary" Dutch people and those perceived as outsiders, particularly targeting Muslim communities and advocating policies that echo Islamophobia (Betz, 2021). Besides Wilders' claim that Islam is a dangerous and extreme ideology as opposed to a religion or spiritual practice, he also criticizes what he calls "gender madness," framing queer and trans activism as harmful gender ideology. Unsurprisingly, discrimination rises in such hostile environment:

> Last year, the police and anti-discrimination agencies received an increasing number of reports of discrimination, particularly concerning antisemitism and discrimination against Muslims. There was also a rise in reports from transgender individuals. This marks the fourth consecutive year of increasing reports. (NOS, 2024, translated from Dutch)

This reflects what LIMBO members share. In different stages of life, in or outside the asylum procedure, they mention hardly ever feeling safe to be oneself in the Netherlands. Which is paradoxical because besides fleeing from war or local conflict, being safe to be queer is oftentimes the reason to seek refuge elsewhere. Exclusion in the Dutch context can be subtle or blatant, which is why many queer refugees feel unsafe or unwelcome in work or study environments, clubbing, or asylum centers. Subtle forms of exclusion include dominant discourses portraying refugees as victims or incompatible with so-called Dutch national culture (Mepschen et al., 2010). In terms of blatant violence, LIMBO members regularly share stories of queer and transgender refugees being harassed or attacked in asylum centers or in the night economy. Most keep their head down to avoid (negative) attention or harassment. Those who choose to dress and act extravagantly risk confrontation in the public domain.

Additionally, LIMBO members mention that it is hard to stay hopeful in what feels like a never-ending cycle of global violence, ranging from light worry to feelings of desperation and powerlessness about families' and (former) communities' safety and well-being due to continuous and ongoing conflict in other parts of the world. For instance, the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the Iranian Women, Life, Freedom movement, and earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. Some have lost loved ones and are not able to be with family in times of grief and mourning. They express that there

is hardly ever an extended period of peace and quiet to focus on healing, mourning, or recovery due to the ongoing worry and pain. Considering these ongoing and oftentimes accumulating challenges, LIMBO becomes a vital moment of communal care and healing.

These moments of communal care have also positively impacted co-author Sajad. Sajad obtained a Master's degree in Sociology from the University of Tehran, Iran. Currently, he works as a research assistant in the project, bridging queer refugee communities and academia. Sajad's journey as a refugee from Iran is marked by challenges and resilience, serving as an exemplar of the complexities faced by queer refugees in navigating both personal and cultural landscapes. Sharing personal stories with peers, particularly within the queer community and among refugees, became a source of inspiration. He realized the power of collective sharing and listening to others' stories as a means of finding inspiration and strength. Through these exchanges, Sajad gained insights into the shared challenges of their community and recognizes the importance of solidarity. He has committed himself to giving back to their community by using his own experiences to inspire and support others facing similar difficulties. Moreover, LIMBO inspired him professionally to co-found a separate queer organization focusing on transitioning to the labor market. His multifaceted identity is shaped by contrasting cultural backgrounds, family dynamics, and academic pursuits. Sajad navigates the intricacies of self-discovery, migration, academic challenges, and personal loss, enriching our understanding of the complexities inherent in identity, resilience, and process of transformation.

8.4 Care

When we authors share our personal stories about care, community, and transformation, we recognize the risk of romanticizing these concepts. The word "care" itself often carries idealized or sentimental associations. Therefore, it's important to critically explore and unpack the question: What do we mean by "care"? Care refers to a wide array of concepts and actions. It encompasses notions of nurturing, attentiveness, safeguarding, maintenance, empathy, mindfulness, caution, precision, accountability, affection, and even desire (e.g., "Care for some tea?"). Whether we're discussing caring for someone or something, being careful in our actions, or simply expressing concern, "care" touches upon a multitude of sentiments and responsibilities. In *The Care Manifesto*, care is explained as

> a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life. Above all, to put care centre stage means recognizing and embracing our interdependencies. (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 5)

Embracing interdependencies, in the sense of establishing mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and caring relationships has been and remains a central tenet of our research collaboration. In *Matters of Care* (de la Bellacasa, 2017), Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa unpacks care in a variety of research contexts. She critically (re)considers works of

Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway and refers to the following similar definition of care by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fischer:

> [Care] includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair "our world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, as cited in de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 198)

Even though de la Bellacasa acknowledges the generic nature of this definition, she probes further into its different elements, expanding beyond the traditional understanding of care as merely care work to encompass a broader range of agencies and actions. de la Bellacasa emphasizes that care is more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and practical agencies with tangible and material consequences. This conception of care highlights life's interconnectedness and interdependency, recognizing the intrinsic bonds that tie individuals and communities together emphasizing collective well-being over mere individual autonomy and resilience.

For us, these definitions are excellent starting points because they align with our salutogenic, more holistic perception of healing. Lana and Rochita, both originally from the Philippines, explain care through the Filipino concept of "kapwa." Kapwa reflects interconnectedness, shared identity, and communal support across diverse backgrounds and experiences (De Guia, 2005, 2013; Jelenjev, 2024b).

> The core of Filipino personhood is kapwa. This notion of a "shared Self" extends the I to include the Other. It bridges the deepest individual recess of a person with anyone outside him or herself, even total strangers. (De Guia, 2005, p. 28)

In contrast to neoliberal highly individualized societies fueling a general aversion to embracing dependency (de la Bellacasa, 2017), for kapwa-inspired individuals, community care is second nature. Kapwa inspires a relational, people-centered orientation, committed to community care through everyday actions, from volunteering to sharing resources, skills, and knowledge (De Guia, 2013). In LIMBO, we engage with such forms of relationality and community care in relying on each other for emotional, psychological, and sometimes practical support.

> Mutual support, underpinned by Kapwa, manifests in various forms of bayanihan, or communal unity and cooperation. From physical acts of helping neighbors move their house to pooling resources for a community project, Kapwa is the driving force behind these collective efforts. It also finds expression in emotional and psychological support, where the joys and sorrows of one are felt by all. This sense of shared responsibility and mutual care is a testament to the power of Kapwa in fostering resilient communities that thrive on empathy, understanding, and a profound connection to one another. (Jelenjev, 2024b)

The vignette at the beginning of this chapter describes a workshop that specifically centered on care. In this session, we collectively described care as a multifaceted concept that involves feeling seen, listened to, and understood. The group emphasized the importance of sensing each other's feelings and needs, supporting one another, and paying attention to what someone may be going through (Fig. 8.1). Feeling safe and valued, where one's existence matters to someone else, was highlighted as an essential aspect of care. Participants noted that care includes making space for

others, listening, and acknowledging their needs. The group stressed the importance of being there for each other, whether through helping, offering a smile, or providing a hug. Effective care, in the group's view, involves understanding, clear communication, and mutual respect. Many emphasized the importance of truly being present, whether by checking in about how someone is feeling or by actively listening without judgment. Some participants shared that they express care by reaching out through calls or conversations, offering advice when appropriate, and being available to help when needed. Others mentioned showing love and support by being present in the moment, making time for others, and engaging in fun activities together. They noted the value of being sensitive to the emotions of themselves and others and respecting others' thoughts and ideas. Being respected, particularly in terms of boundaries and personal space, was highlighted as crucial. Others noted the importance of feeling at home and receiving comforting gestures like offering soup or spending time together. Sensitivity to emotions and the environment was valued, with participants appreciating when others carefully sense their needs and check in with them. Overall, being listened to, understood, and loved, especially during difficult times, was a recurring theme.

8.5 Healing Through Stories

After thinking collectively about care, the workshop transitioned into a creative session led by Rochita. Rochita facilitates LIMBO workshops as an artist with a focus on creative writing. Her journey is a tapestry of self-discovery and navigating societal norms as a queer individual growing up in a conservative environment in Banaue, Ifugao, the Philippines. Through her experience of uprootment, perpetual feelings of being in limbo, dealing with different languages and related challenges of fitting in, she learned the responsibilities that come with being a writer for underrepresented voices. One pivotal moment is receiving the Octavia Butler scholarship, a significant breakthrough for a Filipino writer entering predominantly white spaces. Rochita mostly writes Science Fiction and advocates for the equal value of imaginative storytelling, irrespective of cultural roots or personal pain. She engages with decolonization practices in this field, underscoring the ongoing struggle against stereotypes, defying expectations tied to cultural backgrounds, while emphasizing the universal value of diverse stories that transcend cultural or personal boundaries. Her engagement with the queer migrant community become platforms for exploring and expressing queer narratives, to explore concepts not openly addressed in the Philippines, outside of the toxicity of exclusionary attitudes.

Through clay, LIMBO members crafted their visions of alternative universes (see Fig. 8.2). Each piece represented an artifact from a unique world, such as "tunnel of hope"; a Pokémon-inspired creation; a pizza table by someone who simply wants to eat pizza while going through chemo therapy treatment; a time clock device which heals all wounds; a growing forest of fruits and plants that would always harvest anything; a family of little shape-shifting aliens that can transform into humans; a

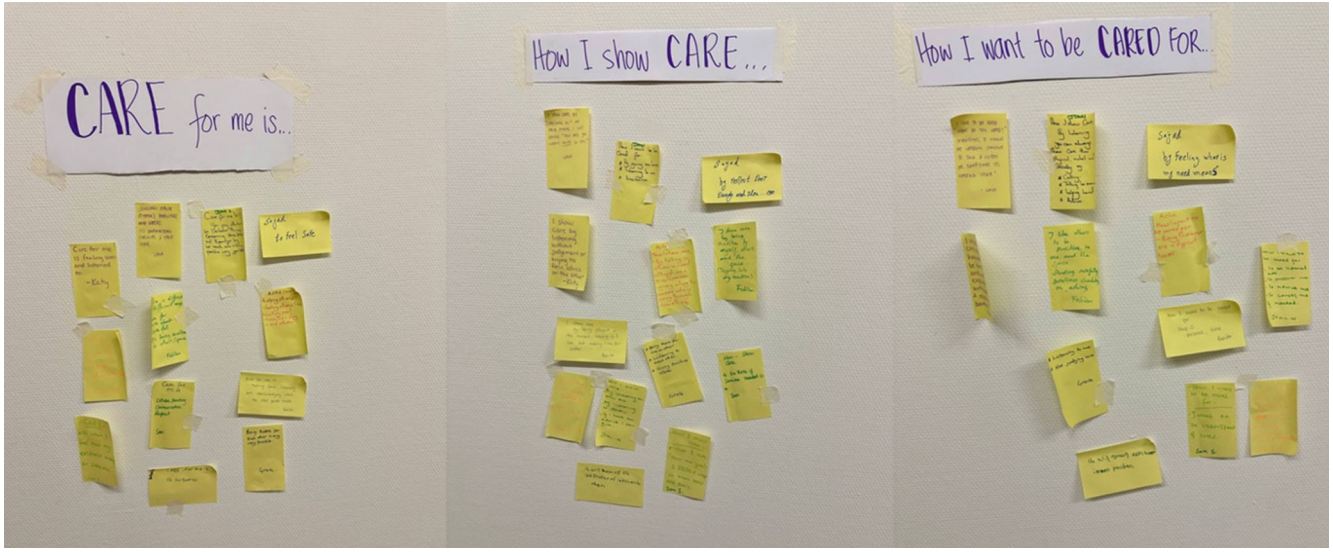

Fig. 8.1 All contributions in Lana's three prompts around care (All photos in this chapter were taken by Sajad Salmanpour on September 25, 2023)

Fig. 8.2 Clay creations

shape-shifting artifact on a planet that is constantly transforming; rings symbolizing connection; two separately made cradles of healing; a magical heart that by touching it, one's broken or heavy heart would be healed; and an ancient Persian artifact of a gender-neutral person with wings. Side note, the maker of the latter confessed they peed behind the actual one located in a deserted spot in Iran, sparking a burst of laughter.

The objects and accompanying stories are about love, healing, and connection. After a short break, the final part of the workshop focused on collectively displaying the creations on a large paper. Rochita encouraged to add colors and text, turning the individual pieces into a collective artwork.

In our check-out, we briefly shared how we felt. Nearly everyone shared leaving happier and more hopeful. There was a sense of connection through shared vulnerability, and a collective commitment to building a caring community. The workshop was marked by tears, laughter, and imaginative clay creations, shared experiences, and support for one another. While each workshop centers on different creative practices, we've chosen to highlight this one as an example of our desire-based salutogenic approach. Over the following sessions, it became evident that our commitment to listening to and starting from the community's desires from the project's outset helped build a foundation of trust. This trust was essential in reconnecting the group after the hiatus.

Dina Georgis (2013) emphasizes the role of stories in shaping collective histories, identities, and political imaginaries in her book *The Better Story, Queer Affects from the Middle East*. She suggests that stories are emotional resources that help us navigate trauma, loss, and difficulty. By examining stories psychoanalytically or metonymically, we see they are not merely accounts of events but also symbolic

elaborations of human experiences, offering narrative coherence and understanding. In essence, every story is invented to enable us to continue living, representing our strategies for coping with suffering and difficulty (Georgis, 2013).

Healing, for us, is not about brokenness but more a natural progression in life. Its synonymous with transformation and growth, and we believe the workshops facilitate these processes both individually and collectively. In LIMBO, members explore their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Through creative processes, they may uncover hidden emotions, gain insight into their struggles, and find catharsis in creative expression (O'Neill, 2008; Holle et al., 2024). Members imagine alternative realities and construct narratives that offer solace and hope. Art practices can be tools for navigating pain and difficulty, leading to deeper self-understanding. Creative activities like writing, drawing, or shaping clay can cultivate a sense of agency and meaningful symbols of hope. For instance, the clay sculptures (Fig. 8.2) represent members' emotional responses to their experiences, such as the pizza table symbolizing a desire for comfort and normalcy during the challenging process of chemotherapy, while the magical heart represents the universal longing for healing and wholeness.

In line with Georgis (2013), we believe stories shape our perceptions of ourselves and the world. Sharing stories and experiences also contributes to a collective narrative of solidarity. Creating and supporting one another cultivates strong bonding enhancing a healing process. Members build empathy and understanding. They can lean on one another for encouragement and inspiration, recognizing that healing is not solitary but a collective endeavor. This aligns with adrienne maree brown reflecting on her experience with "Generative Somatics" and the way

> it feels into how, in a collective or group, patterns of pain can indicate the mass, or intergenerational, trauma people are surviving. And how each of us has the power to help each other feel more, heal, and move toward our longings for liberation and justice together. (brown, 2019, p. 275)

Indeed, healing for us is connected to social and historical contexts. By sharing stories, we acknowledge the interconnectedness of personal and collective narratives and reflect on systemic injustices and a desire for social change. The workshops provide opportunities to explore and address social issues such as trauma, marginalization, and illness, contributing to a collective narrative of transformation and hope. Storytelling, whether through clay or otherwise, is central to all workshops. It becomes a method for social inquiry, contributing to a shared understanding of personal challenges in relation to the societal context. Even though the workshops were not designed for healing, it emerges through creative expression, emotional exploration, and community care.

Lana, a self-proclaimed community alchemist, guides and facilitates positive transformation in the context of groups or businesses. Lana argues for a reconnection to the innate salutogenic understanding of healing, drawing inspiration from ancestral practices. Drawing from Dr. Shawn Ginwright's (2018) healing-centered engagement approach, Lana came to understand that we are more than our adversities and trauma. She co-founded the Neurodiversity foundation and works with the

concept of "settled bodies," emphasizing the interconnectedness of individuals in a regulated state and their potential to radiate positivity and healing to others. She writes among many things on nervous system regulation and the possibilities of relearning social responses. As a decolonization activist, Lana acknowledges the impact of colonized histories on personal narratives. She shares a narrative of uprootment and being perceived as the "black sheep" in familial relationships, largely due to her activism and life choices. After leaving the Philippines, Lana has resided in the Netherlands for over 15 years, encountering challenges in forging a sense of home and belonging. Lana resonates with the concept of re-rooting or rather rerouting (Ghorashi, 2014). Her connections are rooted in people rather than a specific place, aligning with a more interconnected and flexible approach to identity. This fluid, networked understanding of identity echoes the concept of a queer rhizomatic community, where connections grow in multiple, non-linear directions, challenging traditional, fixed notions of belonging and selfhood.

8.6 Queer Rhizomatic Community

> The Latin root of the word "extravagant" means "to wander outside or beyond." It is a good word for mycelium, which ceaselessly wanders outside and beyond its limits, none of which are pre-set, as they are in most animal bodies. Mycelium is a body without a body plan. (Sheldrake, 2021, p. 55)

Many LIMBO members have no, or a very limited, caring or supportive network outside of LIMBO, because they were forced to leave their families and communities behind in their countries of origin. In many instances, their own families and former communities are the reasons for seeking refuge elsewhere, making a sense of belonging crucial for those who have been ostracized from their families and communities of origin. Many members regard LIMBO as more than a community, they refer to it as family, a source of profound support and belonging in a country where they are marginalized and excluded.

The LIMBO community can be understood as rhizomatic because it embraces fluidity and flexibility, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The term "rhizomatic" refers to a mode of growth or organization characterized by multiple, interconnected nodes rather than a centralized structure. In this case, it suggests that the bonds within LIMBO are fluid and interconnected, resembling the spread of mycelium, the underground network of fungi. In LIMBO, the rhizomatic model applies to (1) the fluctuating composition of the group, (2) knowledge co-creation, and (3) co-creating communal care.

8.6.1 Rhizomatic Group Composition

The non-obligatory character leads to a constantly changing composition of the group. Workshop attendance fluctuates, with some attending sporadically and others more consistently, ranging from as few as three to as many as twenty-two members each time. Although navigating this level of (un)commitment presents challenges, we argue that a flexible queer space is important because even those who aren't actively engaging in LIMBO's activities feel a sense of belonging to the group, thanks to its non-obligatory, yet always welcoming character.

8.6.2 Rhizomatically Co-creating Knowledge

In the rhizomatic model knowledge construction takes on a decentralized and community-centric approach (Cormier, 2008). Knowledge produced in the process informs and shapes practices within LIMBO, creating a dynamic exchange where mutual learning is at the core of the collective journey. The community itself becomes the curriculum, cultivating real-time negotiation and construction of knowledge in an entangled web of relations. This enables a non-hierarchical, and reciprocal way of co-creation, which in turn contributes to a sense of connection, ownership, and agency (Cormier, 2008).

We observed that ownership and agency in the community-centric approach activates members in thinking about content and form within the workshops. The knowledge produced is not merely about members' experiences in the Dutch context, former contexts or migration, it also entails knowledge about content and form of the workshop itself. Some ask for better time-management because it is chaotic or messy at times, others ask for salsa-dancing breaks, and one person began to sing for the group during a check-out in which we did a round of sharing how we feel. There are many other examples, but the point is that such active engagement is encouraged and—sometimes literally—applauded by the group, inspiring others to reflect about what they like to say, do, or see happen.

Therefore, we facilitators, avoid overly controlling and instead try to hold space for everyone's input (Plett, 2020). That is why it can feel chaotic at times. For us, there is not one way or form that is correct or higher, all forms of knowledge are salient, necessary, and equally valuable. It is more about nourishing the relations between knowledges. de la Bellacasa (2017) explains that

> knowledge is situated [which] means that knowing and thinking are unconceivable without the multitude of relations that make possible the worlds we think with [...]. Relations of knowing and thinking require care and affect how we care. (p. 69)

This chapter is part of Fabian's PhD dissertation and LIMBO emerged from their PhD research. Co-authoring texts like this one is another facet of our effort to think together with care, because "[w]riting-with is a practical technology that reveals

itself as both descriptive (it inscribes) and speculative (it connects). It builds relation and community, that is: possibility" (de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 77). Fabian's research draws from their experience of prior engagement with a Rotterdam-based queer community dedicated to organizing safer clubbing spaces for queer, trans, and non-binary people. These experiences profoundly influenced Fabian's perspectives on inclusivity, (gender) fluidity, levels of privilege, and the significance of safer caring environments. Raised in different (foster) families after losing their mother at a young age, Fabian grappled personally with feelings of being othered and the challenges of belonging and conforming to societal norms due to familial uprootment and queerness. As a teenager, Fabian's foster father metaphorically likened them to a transplanted tree, struggling to establish firm roots in a new environment, symbolizing a quest for stability amidst the complexities of identity, trauma, and societal expectations. This image resonated for a long time, even though they never really felt rooted in one place ever since. Nowadays, for a large part due to conversations with LIMBO members about mushrooms and mycelial networks, Fabian resonates with the philosophy of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), representing a more fluid form of rootedness, connection, and belonging. Which is an example of how knowledge is co-created and mutually influenced. It also signifies that there are no "pure" distinctions or clear boundaries between different types of knowledges.

8.6.3 Rhizomatic Care

Imagine reciprocal caring relations as an entangled network of grassroots, resembling the strong supporting structure beneath cows preventing them from sinking into typical Dutch wet soil (Kaulingfreks, 2021). A network of interdependencies emerges that is strong enough to support the heaviness of, in this example, cows. Ideally, care is co-created and emerges as a network, supporting one another in moments of heaviness. Heaviness shifts because cows move, making it sometimes heavier here, other times heavier there. Moreover, the network of grassroots itself is changing and growing, meaning that one cannot expect the support to be constant and/or equally divided and carried. In practice this means that for LIMBO to be sustainable, it should be a space where all are cared for and being cared about. As facilitators, we deal with several personal challenges ourselves.

For Rochita, healing in the context of LIMBO is also a personal journey. After facilitating a workshop in the very beginning of the project, she was diagnosed with cancer. The journey of healing and treatment is ongoing, but after one-and-a-half years, she has returned because of LIMBO's sense of care and connectedness. For Lana, cultivating deep friendships and building a sense of community continues to be important, particularly in the face of microaggressions and her battle with breast cancer, underscoring the vital role of a supportive community during moments of crisis. Fabian recovered from burnout as mentioned before. They continue trying to balance academic obligations with building and maintaining close relations with the community. Similar to the other authors, Sajad also grew up feeling like the "black

sheep" within traditional family structures. He faced exclusion for his appearance and struggled to fit into the Iranian LGBTQIA+ community due to beauty standards of skinny and toned bodies in the LGBTQIA+ community and beyond. Sajad struggled academically in Iran as a Sociology student researching LGBTQIA+ issues. When Sajad decided to leave Iran, he embarked on a perilous journey to seek asylum in the Netherlands. He describes this journey as stripping him of identity, making him feel like "nothing" as he travels through various airports. Upon seeking asylum in the Netherlands in 2019, he experienced a significant transformation, both physically and emotionally. Sajad experienced the ongoing limbo of the asylum process and the struggle with isolation and non-belonging.

Hence, both participants and facilitators require care, even though it is not evenly distributed, because it fluctuates and evolves. The reason why we, as workshop facilitators, actively engage in the workshops, is to become integral members of the group, creating non-hierarchical reciprocal relationships based on trust, care, and the collaborative construction of knowledge. For instance, when we collectively established caring principles, we contributed like everyone else. The exchange of diverse perspectives around care—whether experiential, professional, or academic—encompasses a rhizomatic structure, contrasting with hierarchical and one-directional paternalistic care. Paternalistic care typically entails one party possessing greater authority and knowledge about how to care for others perceived as more dependent or vulnerable (Mackenzie, 2014). We avoid this by valuing contributions equally as opposed to promoting a singular "correct" approach to care.

In short, LIMBO represents a rhizomatic queer community that forms fluid connections based on shared challenges and mutual support, much like mushrooms that emerge in different places and times, yet remain interconnected. It is a collaborative and continuously transforming learning experience promoting fluidity, where members and facilitators are shaped by a plethora of relations, actions, conversations, surroundings, ideas, and shared experiences. A network of support and solidarity for those facing displacement and marginalization, which many experience as healing.

8.7 Conclusion

Within this chapter, we interweaved a vignette, literature on care, community, and healing, and authors' narratives to illustrate how a desire-based narrative research approach can facilitate healing on both personal and group levels. Through our writing, we echoed our narrative methodology of knowledge co-creation, intertwining stories from LIMBO members and facilitators with academic insights, highlighting LIMBO as a project of shared storytelling and collective reflection through which diverse forms of knowledge (experiential, academic, professional, creative, and artistic) intertwine rhizomatically.

We challenge deficit-oriented refugee studies by adopting a desire-based approach that embraces everyone's full humanity (Tuck, 2009). This method foregrounds

participants' narratives, experiences, and aspirations, prioritizing their input in the co-creation of workshop content and form. As a result, a sense of ownership and agency is cultivated among LIMBO members. By focusing on the richness of individual experiences rather than perceived deficiencies, participants tap into their creativity and agency.

LIMBO became a vital space for its members, exploring communal care and positive transformation. This is crucial because queer refugees face multiple forms of exclusion in the Dutch context, characterized by neoliberalism and the rise of right-wing populism. Neoliberalism prioritizes individualism at the expense of social solidarity, while right-wing populism enables hostile environments, making supportive, non-paternalistic caring communities all the more essential (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). In doing so, LIMBO offers a counter-narrative to neoliberalism's extreme individualism.

We aimed to make concrete the methods employed, such as utilizing art practices and reflections to co-create knowledge on care. We acknowledge the complexities involved in creating and maintaining a supportive network, including the risk of burden unintentionally falling on few individuals. It is vital to fluidly adapt to the situation and embrace change in collectively making the collaboration mutually supportive. We argue for acknowledging our interdependencies and reflecting together to navigate those non-hierarchically. Unlike paternalistic care, LIMBO prioritizes reciprocity, valuing diverse perspectives and contributions equally. Workshop sessions often revolve around discussions and activities centered on care, empathy, and emotional support, emphasizing the importance of listening and creating space for vulnerability. By collectively sharing creations and reflections, we believe the experience to be both informative and transformative. Particularly due to staying reflexive on hierarchical power dynamics and caring about mutuality and relationality.

Without intentionally designing a project with the purpose of healing, we believe that our approach emerged as healing, particularly due to decentralization and reciprocity (Cormier, 2008). We consider healing from a salutogenic perspective of fullness and wholeness (Antonovsky, 1996). To paraphrase Fisher and Tronto (1990), we embrace vulnerability and recognize the importance of all kinds of knowledge, including emotion, to sustain our network. Individual stories, art, and reflections were enriched through dialogue and engagement, enabling collectivity and relationality. By engaging in diverse artistic expressions, LIMBO members navigate social issues such as trauma and marginalization. Some found personal healing and together we envision personal and social change and contribute to a collective narrative of hope.

Members express a strong emotional attachment to LIMBO, describing it as a caring family. Reflecting on such relationality, we drew inspiration from the Filipino concept of "kapwa" and Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of the rhizome (De Guia, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Kapwa inspires a relational, people-centered way that is dedicated to community building through everyday actions (De Guia, 2005). Rhizomatically co-creating art, knowledge, and care within a diversity of encounters contributes to the community's vibrancy and sustainability. LIMBO embraces a non-linear, ever-expanding environment where ideas, practices, and support are

co-created, informing and transforming both individuals and the group. Our diverse backgrounds and perspectives enrich this process, mitigating feelings of isolation and exclusion, enabling a sense of belonging.

By elucidating the healing potential that emerged in LIMBO and advocating for a desire-based narrative approach and rhizomatically co-creating knowledge and care, we hope to inspire scholars and community organizers to adopt similar methodologies. Moving away from expert-centered models toward reciprocal approaches can facilitate a sense of belonging and agency among participants, leading to transformative experiences for all involved.

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Lana Jelenjev (she/her) is a community alchemist and healing-centred facilitator working at the intersection of learning and community. She supports organizations in designing purpose-driven, healing-centred, and transformational communities. As a senior learning design strategist, Lana works with organizations committed to systems thinking, designing for change, and creating learning experiences grounded in practice and integration. Her work focuses on imagining and shaping new systems, and she promotes healing as a transformative pathway for societal change. She draws on decolonization, healing histories, and the cultivation of safer and brave spaces, grounded in *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa* (Filipino concepts of shared humanity and relationality). Lana explains: "The communities I am part of are my places of refuge. As a Filipina in diaspora, I learned how to find 'my people,' nourish relationships, and be a space of refuge for others. What started as an inner exploration became a core practice."

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz (she/her) is a creative artist working with writing, storytelling, and activism. Born and raised in the Philippines, she lives in the Netherlands. She founded the online Munabol Writing Sessions for BIPOC youngsters and has led workshops for the Other Futures Festival and Fiber. Her practice is influenced by adrienne maree brown, Édouard Glissant's work on relationality, Rolando Vázquez, and decolonial thinkers. Rochita works with collaborative and collective story-making across tools and media. She attended the Clarion West Writers Workshop in Seattle (2009), receiving the Octavia Butler Scholarship that year, and the Milford Bursary for non-white writers (2018). Her speculative work has appeared in online and print publications. In 2021, she released the chapbooks *Colonial Dreaming* and *A Small Assemblage* (Alternate Munabol Productions). More recently, she has begun writing in Dutch; her first Dutch short story appears in the anthology *De Komeet—speculatieve verhalen*, and was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Comet" (1920).

Sajad Salmanpour (he/him) has a background in sociology and a passion for qualitative research focusing on refugees, immigrants, LGBTQ+ rights, empowerment, inclusivity, and diversity. He worked as a junior researcher at VU Amsterdam, contributing to the LIMBO project, and as project coordinator for the Refugee Academy and the VICI project *Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change*. In 2014, he began a research master's in Sociology in Tehran, Iran, which he completed in 2016. His thesis examined social and cultural change in Iran through a semiotic approach to the films of Bahram Beizaie, drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. As a newcomer in the Netherlands, he quickly connected with various organizations, embracing opportunities to understand Dutch society through meaningful interactions. His goal is to combine knowledge and empathy to contribute to impactful research and support positive change in the lives of others.

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Chapter 9
"I Want to Share This Story in What Feels as My Home": Disrupting the Single Story on Refugee Home-Making in the Netherlands Through a Community Storytelling Project

Timo Korstenbroek

> No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story. (Arendt, 1968, p. 22)
>
> Whoever makes up the story makes up the world, [...]. So always try to welcome people into the home of your story. That's my suggestion. (Smith, 2016)

9.1 Introduction

When I was young, around six years old perhaps, my grandparents lived across the street from a temporary shelter for what I was told were *asylum seekers*: people, often with different, darker skin tones than mine, from outside *our country*, the Netherlands. I did not know where they were from exactly. I did not know why they were in the Netherlands. In fact, I did not know much about these asylum seekers at all other than what my grandfather, a white, lower-middle-class, native-Dutch man, had hurried to tell me after a man staying at the shelter had approached me while I was playing outside in front of my grandparents' house. I do not remember my grandfather's exact words, but I remember the message they carried: Be careful around "those people"; they are not "like us"; they are dangerous, behave erratically, do unpredictable things. As I grew older, the stories I heard about asylum seekers (or refugees, as I learned they were also often called) were perhaps more nuanced,

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less xenophobic; yet still, the Other was always at a distance, articulated as *not from here* and *not like us*, an anomaly to either pity or fear, uplift or manage.

I thus grew up with a *single story* of forced migration and refugeeness and, by extension, a *single story* of home-making and belonging within "our" national home. In using the term *single story*, I am indebted to the work of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who warns us about what she labels *the danger of a single story* (Adichie, 2009). Single stories are one-dimensional and incomplete. They perpetuate a singular image of (a) people, their constant rehearsal carefully yet carelessly etching dehumanizing stereotypes into our individual and collective imaginations.

The single story from my childhood is in many ways epitomic for, even synonymous with, the dominant single story informing collective Dutch imaginations about the (non-white) refugee Other and their place in Dutch society. That is to say, the Dutch discursive climate mandates that refugees make a new home in an environment that painstakingly emphasizes that this is not *their* home. Refugee newcomers are viewed as either helpless or violent and are often forced into narrow institutional pathways requiring them to first civically integrate into Dutch society before even thinking about participating in public life (Blankvoort et al., 2021; Ghorashi, 2021; Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010). Meanwhile, radical right-wing standpoints are increasingly normalized within public and political discourses rampant with polarizing standpoints and vehemently exclusive toward refugees (and any form of cultural deviance for that matter) (Baban & Rygiel, 2017; Korstenbroek, 2024). Hence, in this context, refugee stories become stories of impossibilities, stories trapped within discursive walls that complicate the creation of a personal sense of feeling-at-home in the new host country as well as public participation in that country's democratic life.

For me, it was only later in life, as I was gradually confronted with other stories about forced migration—stories from the perspectives of migrants and refugees themselves, emanating from literature, film, and, indispensably, personal encounters—that I could truly start imagining different, richer stories. My personal example therefore shows the importance of creating a "balance of stories" as a counterweight to the danger a single story poses (Adichie, 2009). In line with feminist theories, I argue this starts with appreciating the situatedness of both knowledge and imagination—asserting that the ways in which people experience and understand the world as it is, and imagine how it could be, is invariably connected to their specific different positionings (Andrews, 2014; Medina, 2013; Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002). Knowing others, knowing where they come from, is essential for knowing and questioning our own identities and positionalities and, from there, starting to imagine the world differently. To do this, we need stories that feed what Molly Andrews (2014) calls our *narrative imagination*, a concept that reminds us that the stories we hear and tell help us shape and change our imaginations of the world, on both an individual and a collective level.

In this chapter, I build on these ideas by discussing the results of an engaged community storytelling project in which I worked alongside participants from *De Voorkamer*, a community initiative for refugees in Utrecht (the Netherlands), in crafting and sharing their personal stories during storytelling workshops. Within

these stories, the narrators reminisce about moments when they felt at home in their new environment, often contrasting these with moments when they did not. Participants shared their stories with each other during a presentation evening at De Voorkamer and then recorded them as videos. These were published online[1] and viewed and discussed "publicly" during workshops with Dutch civil society organizers and municipality officials in order to carry the narrative power of the stories beyond the walls of the storytellers' community.

The objective of this chapter then is to show the power of storytelling as an engaged methodology that is based on care and reciprocity and that carries the potential (1) to strengthen feelings of home, (2) to garner deep(er) and rich(er) understandings of participants' situated experiences in relation to their home-making practices, and (3) to rupture the Dutch single story on forced migration and civic integration, thereby bringing into view new narrative horizons showing us (more) common worlds within reach (see Andrews, 2014).

9.1.1 On Single Stories: Hegemony, Epistemic Injustice, and Kaleidoscopic Imaginations of Home

What is it about stories? Essentially, our social world is comprised of them: the stories we share with friends and family in our daily lives; the stories we learn about individual others and through which we come to know them as distinct human beings; the stories we come to know about collective Others and through which we then imagine and arrange our social structures and hierarchies. Stories—our ability to communicate and share them—make us uniquely human in Arendt's (1958/2018) sense of embodying the human condition of plurality, which implies both our equality and distinctiveness as human beings: If we were not distinct, we would not need to communicate, yet if we were not somehow equal, communication would be futile, for we would not be able to make ourselves understandable to another person.

Yet, as alluded to earlier (albeit implicitly), one cannot think or talk about single stories without first accounting for the pervasive influence of power. Power, Adichie (2009) remarks, "is the ability not just to tell a story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person." Thus, it is indeed true in a way, as the epigraph states, that "whoever makes up the story makes up the world" (Smith, 2016, p. 119). Given this, I propose two complementary concepts, taken from different philosophical traditions, that will provide further guidance in theoretically conceptualizing the dimension of power within stories.

First, single stories, as a way of talking about (and consequently hierarchically ordering) the world, can be understood as *hegemonic discourses* (see Mouffe, 1999; Young, 2001), a concept combining the neo-Marxist notion of hegemony with post-modernist thoughts on discursively diffused power (see Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

[1] The videos can be accessed via the Learning Crossroads website (Learning Crossroads, 2022) or the Refugee Academy YouTube channel.

Hegemony, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), concerns the creation of an order that requires the articulation of something—or someone(s)—excluded: a "We" invoking a "Them." Moreover, hegemonic discourses arise whenever certain discursive orders become reified as the natural order of things, thereby creating social imageries unreflective of the exclusionary hierarchies underlying the discourse and thus making a situation in which "most of the people in the society think about their social relations in these terms, whatever their location in the structural inequalities" (Young, 2001, p. 52).

Second, the fact that certain stories can become hegemonic, crowding out other stories in offering regularly accepted forms of knowledge, constitutes forms of what has been labeled *epistemic injustice* (see Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). Such injustice occurs whenever certain kinds of knowledge, related to particularly situated social experiences and imaginations, are dismissed as irrelevant or marginalized as viable sources of knowledge. Without resistance to epistemic injustices, those "epistemically privileged" can continue to view the Other through the lens of the single story, thereby undermining the potential diversity and thus equality of democratic life (Medina, 2013).

Now, how do these concepts of epistemic injustice and hegemony manifest themselves within the issue and context discussed in this chapter? And what is the role of storytelling in resisting against this? Let me start by answering the first question.

Although the Dutch have historically basked in the glory of their *thin identity*, cherishing their self-image as a liberal, enlightened, progressive, and welcoming people and nation, critical scholars have unpacked and dismantled this image in recent decades. Their research shows how *thick* and exclusionary notions of Dutchness are hegemonic and effective in creating boundaries between "us" and "them" (see Ghorashi, 2003, 2010; Van Reekum, 2012). Quite ironically, these thick notions often explicitly reinvoke the liberal and "enlightened" national self-identity as a way of demarcating the self from "the rising tide of Islamic and immigrant barbary coming ever closer" (Wekker, 2016, p. 108).

Within the Dutch hegemonic discourse on immigration, this further manifests itself in the construction of an immigrant Other considered a deviant in cultural, racial, and territorial senses. This "racist-culturalist bias" is effectuated through the differentiation between citizens unconditionally belonging, who are seen as "from here," and those having to prove they belong, who are presumed to be "from elsewhere" and thus have to "integrate" (Schinkel, 2018). Moreover, in this schism, there are different cultural and racial markers discursively ascribed to both categories, which hierarchically discern who belongs to society and who needs to prove their belonging. That is, the label "from elsewhere," and thus in need of "integration," is often exclusively reserved for non-white migrants who are seen as lacking behind the altogether "modern" western cultural norms that are strongly linked to a normatively white European culture curated through histories delineated by colonialism (Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019; Essed & Trienekens, 2008; Ghorashi, 2021; Schinkel, 2018; Wekker, 2016).

All this means that to make a home in Dutch society, newcomers—exclusively those non-white and non-western ones conceived as "from elsewhere"—are burdened

with the Sisyphean task of trying to become *as if* "from here": They must learn the language, follow "civic integration courses," take exams about Dutch cultural "norms and values," and participate in the job market (Blankvoort et al., 2021). Underlying all this, I thus argue, is a tacit assumption of home and belonging as being static. Home, it is perceived, can only be *elsewhere*: one's country of origin where one's culture lies (Malkki, 1995). This "sedentary bias" within public and political discourse thus articulates the home exclusively as a territorially-linked concept (Ghorashi, 2017a), rendering it impossible to truly make a new home outside one's original place of rootedness. Of course, migrants are expected to adjust to their new host country—to learn and follow the rules of their new home while unlearning and unfollowing those of their past home. They might even be able to obtain formal citizenship. Yet they will always remain "from elsewhere"; their true home assumed to be a different country, with different cultural norms; their loyalty given to foreign soil.

Clearly, this culturalist and sedimentary bias toward concepts of home and belonging within hegemonic Dutch migration discourses wholly ignores the experiences and practices of migrants actually having to make new homes themselves, thereby fueling epistemic injustices in the process of home-making. Yet, attunement to migrant experiences unveils home-making practices that are dynamic and relational rather than static and territorial (see Ahmed, 2000; Ghorashi, 2017a, b). Following Medina (2013, p. 3), I thus urge that *epistemic resistance* is needed to promote *epistemic justice*, which requires people "to undermine and change oppressive normative structures and the complacent cognitive-affective functioning that sustains those structures," instead making space for richer forms of knowledge that are able to offer more kaleidoscopic perspectives on refugee experiences and imaginations of home and home-making.

9.2 Disrupting Single Stories? Between Home-Making and World-Making

If stories shape and reshape our narrative imaginations—both individual and collective—what then is the effect of doing so? In other words, what exactly is the power of feeding narrative imaginations through storytelling? To answer this, I now turn to discerning what I label the home-making and world-making qualities of stories and storytelling.

What is meant by speaking of home-making in relation to storytelling? Sara Ahmed (2000) offers a notion of home that goes beyond the mere territorial physical space one inhabits (or perhaps ceases to inhabit after moving "away") (see also Ghorashi, 2017a, b; Malkki, 1995). Being-at-home, she suggests, is above all a matter of affect: It is about how one *feels* about belonging in a space. Migration, then, involves a rupture between one's home as "place of origin," where one used to feel at home, and the new home one presently lives in and experiences on a daily basis. This implies that the question of home is not only spatial but temporal:

"'the past' becomes associated with a home that is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 91). Storytelling is a way of making a space for this home-of-the-past in the locality of the present, of trying to *feel at home* in new physical spaces that are unfamiliar, and sometimes even hostile, to the migrant body. The telling and sharing of stories helps people "to relocate: they give a shape, a contour, a skin to the past itself" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 91). And through this, communities can be formed "which 'make a place' in the act of reaching out to the 'out-of-place-ness' of other migrant bodies" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 94).

In this sense, the narrative richness contained within (migrant) stories—and the memories these stories carry—shows how such communities are produced, while the act of storytelling itself simultaneously (re-)produces them (Ahmed, 2000). This act of telling, retelling, and connecting stories within certain spaces (either discursive or physical, or both) thus strengthens feelings of being-at-home and belonging to a space, especially among those estranged or marginalized. Here, the power of storytelling is *directed internally,* toward the community. That is, stories are valued for their ability to create safe spaces. Within such safe spaces, home can be both a *haven*, offering (physical and mental) safety, security, shelter, and intimacy, and a *heaven*, offering a "place where one can collectively be, express and realize oneself; where one feels publicly free and independent. Home here embodies shared histories; a material and/or symbolic place with one's own people and activities" (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 38).

When home becomes heaven, it becomes a *safe space* in line with Patricia Hill Collins's (in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001) notion in which such spaces are appreciated for their ability to nurture *cultures of resistance* and the development of a positive self-identity against dominant ideologies. In principle, this notion of resistance is akin to what I mean with *disrupting the single story*: the ability to form (counter-)publics through the collective sharing of stories, allowing for the formation of collective identities and alternative narratives outside, and against, the dominant gazes and expressions of power (see also Cairo, 2021).

Moreover, while the above notion of safe spaces is largely focused internally—that is, toward the development of positive self-identities within marginalized communities—it also has effects beyond the walls of these communities in that such safe spaces "help individuals to 'be,' develop and express themselves collectively, and to connect with others" (Duyvendak, 2011, p. 39). Thus, in line with Medina (2013), I argue that the creation of new narratives that occurs within safe spaces and acts as resistance against dominant discourses and epistemic injustices forms the very basis for fostering and imagining more inclusive and diverse democratic cultures.

Following this, we can thus discern even more publicly directed qualities of storytelling. That is, beyond offering opportunities for *making homes* into havens or heavens*,* storytelling also offers a potential for engaging with difference within wider (national) public spheres of debate through collective processes of *world-making*, which entails that we "hold in common a world we create in common, in part by the processes through which we imagine it" (Calhoun, 2002, p. 163). Within this notion of world-making, storytelling thus contains a more *externally directed* power as a vehicle to articulate and create commonality across difference.

In line with Hannah Arendt, storytelling-as-world-making means that by entering into communication, exposing oneself, sharing personal stories, and interweaving these into an already existing "web of human relationships," the newcomer, with their unique life story, "affect[s] uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact" (Arendt, 1958/2018, p. 184). For Arendt, this moment of narrative disclosure is where individuals step into the light of the public sphere in order to engage in the process of *making a common world together*. Thus, as Andrews (2014) likewise showed, these personal stories can be powerful conductors for collectively imagining and, crucially, *re-imagining* the democratic nation and its boundaries (Arendt, 1987, 1958/2018).

Thus, with Arendt, the public (i.e., world-making) qualities of storytelling become apparent. However, what seems largely missing here is a consideration of the power relations between these interwoven stories. That is, although different stories exist in interconnection, these stories are hardly ever equally related to each other, as histories demarcated by colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and so forth have propelled forward a dominant story "that has risen to the top out of a wealth of stories" (Cairo, 2021, p. 71). Within this dominant (hegemonic) story, the stories of Others are often ignored, silenced, or flattened into a single story. When speaking of storytelling and world-making, the task at hand is thus not as simple as creating a space wherein different stories can be shared to then create a common world. After all, "inclusion [is] not just about difference, but about the inherent inequalities embedded in that difference and the mechanisms that maintain the system" (Cairo, 2021, p. 78).

World-making through storytelling requires reflection on inherent power imbalances, as well as an attempt to reconfigure the hegemonic mechanisms maintaining the system. It is therefore important that stories are embedded within their social context, conveying the situatedness of a narrative in relation to the (pre-)existing structural inequalities (Young, 2000). Then, as "storytelling is often the only vehicle for understanding the particular experiences of those in particular social situations" (Young, 2000, p. 73), stories can become a way of upsetting dominant stories, hegemonic discourses, and epistemic injustices. Storytelling-as-worldmaking is thus mainly about "reimagining our communities in new narratives that move beyond the idea of homogeneous national identities and cultures" (Sievers, 2024, p. 13). Hence, to make space for stories—both in the literal and the symbolical sense—means to make space for difference through creative and fluid acts of agency that challenge and re-imagine the boundaries of our common world(s).

This follows Medina's (2013) plea to create lines of *epistemic interaction*, which "calls for the development of communicative and reactive habits that operationalize our responsiveness to diverse and multiple others" (Medina, 2013, p. 9). The storytelling project discussed in this chapter took some steps toward answering this plea by publishing participants' stories in video form and subsequently presenting and discussing them in public meetings in order to spur reflection and re-imagination. Doing so constituted a second step of disruption. While the first step involves resisting dominant narratives in safe spaces within a particular community, in this second step,

the stories move—traveling outside the community to potentially confront and challenge others impacted and influenced by single stories and the appurtenant epistemic injustices.

However, my aim here is not to assess the impact these stories have after being disseminated publicly (i.e., to engage in some kind of audience research). Rather, by presenting and discussing participants' stories about their home-making practices, I first intend to highlight the home-making qualities of storytelling by showing how home is both made and discovered within the participants' stories. I then intend to take the stories outside the confines of the more *internally focused* realm of the "storytelling community" by positioning the discursive disruption taking place within these stories as a mirror image against hegemonic discursive constructions (and appurtenant dominant stories) of home in the Dutch national context. In the process, I intend to answer the following questions: What alternative narratives are presented? How does this contribute to epistemic resistance and the promotion of epistemic justice? And, finally, in what ways could this potentially lead to a re-imagination of our common world(s) once these stories travel outside their communities?

9.3 Methodology: On Storytelling as an Engaged Research Practice

This project was part of the *Learning Crossroads for Refugee Inclusion* research project, which focused on the role of civil society initiatives for refugees in the Netherlands. For this project, eight participants affiliated with the community initiative De Voorkamer[2] took part in various storytelling workshops under the guidance of artistic storytelling professionals. In their finalized stories, participants engaged with the notion of what being-at-home in the Netherlands means for them. The stories recalled moments in which they felt "at home," particularly in relation to their involvement with De Voorkamer. Participants crafted their stories during the workshops, then presented them to each other (and to friends and family) during an evening at De Voorkamer. Upon witnessing the power of the stories, many wanted to "do more with them." Seven stories were therefore told on film, with help from an experienced film-maker, either by the original narrators (who received additional coaching to prepare for their on-screen debuts) or by experienced storytellers as actors. With the story authors' consent, these were subsequently published online (see Learning Crossroads, 2022). One participant preferred not to film or publish their story. Afterwards, the stories were shown and discussed during workshop sessions with municipality officials and civil society organizers working in refugee reception.

[2] *De Voorkamer* is a community meeting place established in Utrecht that organizes all types of events for people from different cultural backgrounds within the neighborhood. It aims to promote inclusion and diversity by focusing on the talents and interests of community members, among which are many with migrant backgrounds and native-Dutch locals.

The story narrators have different origins and backgrounds. Though one was born in the Netherlands, most had recently arrived: four from Syria, one from Yemen, one from Eritrea, and one from Iran. Each narrator came into contact with De Voorkamer in their own way. Some were looking for something different in their lives, a tipping point, a breath of fresh air, an escape from certain patterns. Others wanted a place where their memories could come back to life in connection with other people. During the sharing of stories, the laughter of recognition was common, as were the amazement and emotion listeners' expressed about the sometimes unexpected aspects in others' stories.

The importance of sharing these stories became apparent right from the first workshop, when the storytellers—as a first practice in the art of storytelling—recalled moments when they had *not* felt at home in the Netherlands. Stories of marginalization, loneliness, and feelings of invisibility prevailed. The stories about moments when the narrators finally felt at home should therefore be appreciated within the Dutch context (as outlined in the section On Single Stories), in which restrictive discursive climates and narrow institutional pathways obfuscate the trajectory toward agency and the imagining of a new home.

This makes clear the purpose of the engaged methodological approach informing this project: The telling of stories is a means of challenging, even transforming, the normalized oppressive relational structures that narrow newcomers' agency in processes of home-making and world-making. Such an approach echoes Mills' (1959) *sociological imagination*, which encourages social scientists to employ epistemologies based on connecting people's everyday personal experiences with larger sociohistoric realities in order to create insights into the most urgent public issues spurring inequalities. The use of narrative through storytelling is seen as an important conductor to forge these connections between private troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959; see also Ghorashi, 2021; Rast, 2022). Hence, "in this view, the academic and intellectual task of social scientists will be to engage with the narratives of (...) exclusion by connecting them to historical and societal contexts (Ghorashi, 2021, p. 54).

Additionally, for a truly transformative engaged scholarship, it is vital to also critically assess the unequal power relations inherent in the academic production of knowledge itself, asking questions such as: Whose and what experiences and knowledge are excluded here? And how should we go about challenging and transforming these forms of epistemic injustice? (Kajner, 2013; Rast, 2022). In this project, the promotion of epistemic justice is embedded in both the theoretical premises (see Medina, 2013) and the methodological design. Concerning the latter, the open, creative, artistic form of storytelling employed is the vehicle through which refugees' home-making experiences can be privileged as a source of knowledge, thereby carrying the potential to challenge mainstream academic epistemologies and ontologies (Holle et al., 2021; Kajner, 2013; Lenette, 2019; Rast, 2022; Sievers, 2024).

While privileging refugees' knowledges, I was just as much a part of the relationships, mutual care, empathy, and knowledge constellations that sprung up during this project. In this sense, it matters that I am a white, native-Dutch man, raised within

a single story, for whom questions of home have never been particularly personally poignant. It also matters that I am speaking from an academic system of knowledge production in which white people regularly "position themselves as academic 'knowers' to produce knowledge about a problem 'out there'" (Essanhaji & van Reekum, 2022, p. 894). Hence, my aim was to co-create knowledge together during the process of this project. As Kajner (2013, p. 14) contends, "collaborative knowledge production is a power sharing activity that positions all parties as knowledge holders and creators, an approach to knowledge that includes creating a relationship of equality between scholars and communities."

I therefore approached the personal stories as the starting point for knowledge creation, without having a clear initial research direction or question (other than that the stories were about moments at which participants felt "at home"). I also participated in the first workshop, sharing (part of) my story about moments when I felt (or did not feel) at home, thereby disclosing my own positionalities and engaging in the community. In addition, during the workshops, I further elaborated on the research "agenda" of the *Learning Crossroads* project, explaining my interest in gauging the value of initiatives such as De Voorkamer to see how they can provide counterweights against more restrictive home-making policies. The participants and I then discussed what they wanted to do with their stories and to what extent they wanted to present their stories outside of their community. Following these conversations, the decision to film and publish (most of) the stories was made. I thus worked to create relations predicated on the notion of *thinking-with* (de la Bellacasa, 2012), meaning to incorporate a multiplicity of knowledges in the process of thinking, creating a polyvocal process of knowledge production by stacking layer upon layer to create thicker knowledges.

9.4 The Stories

Let me now turn to discussing the actual meat and bones of this project: the stories themselves. What do the storytellers have to say? In what ways do their narratives disrupt the single story on home-making as often perpetuated in the Netherlands? In the stories, narrators recall specific moments when they feel-at-home within the "blue room," as many call De Voorkamer. Colors, smells, and shapes produce a narrative in which pieces of a (sometimes recent but unattainable) past mingle with the present, thereby showing the affective dimension of being-at-home as an embodied sentiment (Ahmed, 2000). Now, let us carefully listen, staying as close as possible to the voices—and the knowledge these convey—of the storytellers themselves. In the following sections, I present (parts of) Salma's, Zina's, Mohamad's, and Ghedam's stories and discern three general pillars of home-making woven within the fabrics of their stories that tease our narrative imagination(s), helping us, the audience of these stories, move beyond our single stories. Though these are individual stories, the common threads discussed can also be found in the other stories created and shared within this project.

9.4.1 Salma: Finding Home Through Time and Space

> It was the 25th of February 2017, and it was really, really cold. I can remember that some shops were still having some red Valentines balloons and hearts, of course. It was exactly two weeks after Ammar's birthday. Four days since I signed the contract of my beautiful new home. One year and a half after I left my beloved homeland. Four months since Ammar has been behind bars. And most importantly, it was around that time that I realized that my being in the Netherlands was real, final, and decisive.

Storytellers are travelers. They navigate themselves and their listeners through the jungles of time and space (see Andrews, 2014). Right from the beginning of her story, Salma takes us from the here and now to the there and then, and back again. In just a few sentences, we are traveling from the Netherlands to Syria, from the present, to the past, to the future—a future that is, from now on, as Salma realizes, staged in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is the place of her "beautiful new home" yet also the place far away from her "beloved homeland." These sentences already reveal a dynamic and multidimensional notion of the home—existing both here and there. Yet, in the following lines of her story, Salma also shows the insecurities that arise when home is no longer self-evident. What if you were forced to leave your "beloved homeland"? What if you had to make a home in a new place? Salma tells about her past as an activist in Syria, and about Ammar, her dear friend who was imprisoned there, while she was in the Netherlands. She asks herself: "Where am I? Who am I? Where are my friends? What am I doing here? And what is Ammar doing now?"

How does one deal with such existential questions? Inspired by a conversation in which her father asked her to contribute to helping Ammar and growing from the activist roots of her past, Salma acts. "This simple call for ten euros brought back the history I left behind, the demonstrations I joined, all the political prisoners I stood for. And now, Ammar. My old, lovely friend." With a million thoughts running through her head, Salma was determined she "wanted to do something":

> I decided that I would create an event (...). My brother agreed to join me with his music and memories of Ammar. (...) The next question was: where? Of course: De Voorkamer! It's a new place It's cozy, small, blue, Ah! Ammar loves blue! But then: who is going to help me? Who better than this new girl that I just met, that is now one of my best friends by the way.

In this part of the story, Salma connects her past to the present. She finds a space within her new reality in which memories of Ammar can be shared and heard. And vice versa, the material qualities of the space itself, the blueness of De Voorkamer, evoke echoes linking the space back to her memories of Ammar. This shows how feelings of home are aroused by the entanglement of both the symbolic (a space in which memories find a place) and the material qualities (the color, somehow linked to these memories) of a place (see Duyvendak, 2011). She also finds a space in which new relationships can blossom. Thus, Salma shows how new homes can be made within spaces in which questions such as "who am I?" and "what am I doing here?" can find answers by giving the past a place and (new) meaning in relation to others within the new context.

Throughout her story, Salma (re-)invokes a notion of home that cuts through both temporal and spatial dimensions, illuminating the different places where home *can* be made and found. Her story therefore challenges the hegemonically supposed fixity of territorial and temporal dimensions of "home"—that is, that home lies elsewhere and that elsewhere is now one's past, disconnected from the present (see Ahmed, 2000). In the final sentences of her story, Salma shares the exact moment in which she experienced a profound sense of being-at-home in the Netherlands: the moment at which she sang a song for Ammar during the fundraising event at De Voorkamer:

> Then came the time for the last song, the song that Ammar really loved (...), I was singing alone, without the music, and that was a magical moment. I felt so connected to everyone in the room, and to the place, which was not only a small cozy and blue place, but has become a place and a home for many of my tiny dreams.

Here, the meaning of home finally coalesces into something mobile and fluid, holding a simultaneous relation to the memories, people, and culture of the past in Salma's country of origin, the present in her new community, and her future dreams in this new country. Hence, Salma's story unveils an affective notion of home-making in which home is developed and experienced as an interior sense of being (Ahmed, 2000), not by erasing the *past* connected to one's country of origin—as Dutch integration discourse would seemingly have it (Blankvoort et al., 2021)—but by giving it a place and a meaning in relation to others within the *present* context. This sense of home is not confined to any fixed location but experienced in places and communities where one's story can be shared and heard. And through this, it becomes possible to imagine a *future* home in a new environment (see Ghorashi, 2017b; Malkki, 1995).

9.4.2 Zina: Finding Home in Safe Spaces

> My story started two years ago: summer 2019, when I moved to Utrecht in summer time. And you can imagine how summer was in Utrecht. People are enjoying the lovely weather: the sun, with their family, with their friends. Yea ... Playing with water, lying on the grass. But not me. I was totally passing in a very difficult period in my life. No family, no friends, just me. Not even anyone to just say hi to me.
>
> So I used to spend my time sitting nearby the canal reading, and reading, and reading. Nothing more. And watching people of course.
>
> Until I met two ladies. They asked me kindly if I would like to join them for an activity which is held every Wednesday. So I said: "OK, why not? Let's try!" And I did. And I was shocked. Because the workshop and the gathering was about embroidery and sowing. And I have no idea how to hold a needle even. So, it was like a challenge for me. But the ladies there were so awfully nice. They taught me how to start my small project, to cut a piece of cloth, and they told me then to just imagine and draw whatever you want and start the embroidery. And I think of drawing a tulip—and it was a very nice tulip.
>
> I started the embroidery; I spent one week and it was really perfect. So I tried to make it more and more beautiful. I decide to fix the borders and the corners. And instead of using a scissor—which is logical, to use a scissor—but I used a candle light to fix it. And I burn

> it! And it was the worst tulip I ever did—one of the worst things I have ever done. So, I was really feeling bad about this. (...)
>
> Later on, I was invited to De Voorkamer to bring my final product: the tulip. The burned tulip. (...) The first thing I noticed when I enter *to* De Voorkamer is the smell. I smell Arabic coffee with cardamom, with lovely music of one of my favorite singers: Fairuz. And I met three ladies who were welcoming guests with a very nice warm smile. (...) I introduced myself to the ladies there and I bring my product. They were shocked of course, because it was mostly burned. But they told me: "Zina, don't worry, we are going to fix it." So they cut it in a specific way and they basically apply it to the tablecloth.
>
> From that time I knew De Voorkamer and I knew some people from there. And since that time I start building my network, my friendships with these people; we are still in touch. And I feel ... home.

Such is Zina's story, a story that I decided could only be told in whole, without the scholar interjecting. Like Salma's story, Zina's story is also a journey, albeit a somewhat different one. In the beginning, we find Zina lonely and isolated, a body disconnected from the place and its people (see Ahmed, 2000). Yet, after an encounter with "two ladies," she slowly starts connecting with both people and places until finally she *feels at home.*

Zina's journey shows the importance of creating *safe spaces*—"warm spaces" as another narrator called them—as a condition for feeling-at-home. Such spaces offer small sanctuaries, havens, of friendship and recognition that help newcomers settle into their new life in a new country (see Duyvendak, 2011; Korstenbroek & Ponzoni, 2025; Ponzoni et al., 2020). Moreover, they also make it possible to tell stories and develop identities without the pervasive presence of hegemonic discourses hovering around (Ghorashi, 2017b; Janssens & Steyaert, 2001).

In Zina's story, the embroidered tulip can be read as a metaphor for this process. Creating the tulip is Zina's first step toward expressing herself within her new environment. Yet, when she accidentally burns it, she immediately feels bad and worries about what others will think about her burned tulip. Within the safety of the space (De Voorkamer), however, she is reassured: "Zina, don't worry, we are going to fix it." There is a space for her expression here (quite literally, the tulip ends up attached to the tablecloth). Through this small gesture and through the relations to the multiple others surrounding her in the safety and warmth of this space, Zina is ultimately able to feel her way into a new home.

9.4.3 Mohamad and Ghedam: Finding Home in Unconventional Spaces

The feeling of being-at-home is also aroused when spaces move from being (completely) safe to becoming more unconventional (see Korstenbroek & Ponzoni, 2025). By this, I mean that they challenge preconceived expectations set by hegemonic norms and make possible a reversal or shifting of positions—in and out of (supposedly) fixed roles and relationships. In both Ghedam's and Mohamad's stories,

we find a narrative about how these unconventional spaces are experienced in making a home. For Ghedam, his world at the beginning of his story is set within the asylum seeker center (AZC) in Utrecht, until someone suddenly knocks on the door of his room there.

> In early 2017, I moved to Utrecht, (...) to the AZC. After two weeks, Pim [founder of De Voorkamer] came to the AZC to recruit for De Voorkamer activities. He found out through connections that I lived there (...). Pim came to my house, to my room actually, and told me everything about De Voorkamer (...), so I was immediately super excited about it.

After a visit to De Voorkamer, Ghedam quickly realized he would come back more often "because it was certainly better than sitting in the AZC." Over the following months, Ghedam gradually got involved in the many activities organized by and within De Voorkamer's community, culminating in his story's climax, which took place at an open festival at De Voorkamer. When the workshop leader for an Eritrean dance workshop—a workshop Ghedam planned to participate in—failed to show up, Ghedam quickly decided to take action: "I felt like I was the one who could give the workshop. I felt that responsibility. So, I did it. It went really well! Even though I'm really bad at Eritrean dancing."

Ghedam's story illustrates how various roles and relationships emerge and evolve when a space is, somewhat paradoxically, sufficiently safe to allow for unconventionality—such as the upsetting of hierarchical dichotomies between *guest* and *host* (see Baban & Rygiel, 2017)—to unfold. Though Ghedam is initially a guest at De Voorkamer, invited to visit, his role within and relationship with De Voorkamer changes over time until, eventually, he feels the responsibility to take ownership of the space by hosting the dance workshop. The last sentences of his story are illustrative of this change: Ghedam evokes an intimate image of someone relaxing in the comfort of his home and in his new role as a host.

> I had finished my workshop, but the people, the audience, and the musicians weren't done, they just kept going. I just went to the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the staff, and went to have a beer and enjoy the cozy atmosphere.

Similarly, the final part of Mohamad's story, in which he visits De Voorkamer for the first time after learning about it from a Syrian compatriot he happened to meet at the train station, illustrates how such a subversion of expectations (expectations that had by then also taken root within Mohamad himself) can contribute to the feeling of being at home:

> I came in, and I saw here like, really crowded, mixed cultures; like mostly from Syria and people from here, and I had the image that I would hear people from Syria that learn Dutch or something, but actually it was not that. The other way around it was: People from Syria teaching Dutch people Arabic! Ha ha ha! It was also confusing. It was like: Huh? This is the first time I see this here in Holland. Normally, if I go somewhere they are like, "Do you speak Dutch? I will try to teach you Dutch." But the other way around is not, like, really common in my life. So it was super interesting.
>
> And then I thought, like, it's a really nice place to just come in, because this is my first experience to actually let people also try and speak Arabic, because it's not an easy language, I find. So it was for me: to let people feel what I feel when I try to learn Dutch [laughter and

> response from the audience: "The suffering!"]. Yeah, exactly, the suffering! (...) And after four or five months, exactly here [at De Voorkamer], at the moment we took the picture and we put it in the WhatsApp group, I thought, like, yeah, I actually belong to this group and I belong to this area. So, yeah, it was amazing!

Mohamad's narrative shows how an unexpected disruption and reversal of fixed patterns can provoke feelings of ease and safety precisely because it—the sudden rupture with "the expected"—demonstrates that things can be different, that the emphasis does not only have to be on how he, Mohamad, should apparently talk and behave in the Netherlands but that a space also exists for *his* experiences, knowledge, and background. This reversal of seemingly fixed positions opens up space for new, more reciprocal, less hierarchical relationships in which Mohamad is no longer essentialized as "just" a refugee, as a stranger in a new country who needs to learn the language, and "Dutch people" are not the standard "experts" helping him to learn. Instead, it nurtures the ability for a process of decentering: a moving away from the dominant center (in which single stories reside) to create room for a multiplicity of experiences, perspectives, knowledges, and indeed, stories (Ghorashi, 2014, 2017a; Janssens & Steyaert, 2001).

9.5 Discussion and Conclusion: Home-Making and the Disruption of Single Stories

The stories shared in this project unveil an intimate connection between home-making and storytelling. As one participant said, "To share stories, we need a home, a warm space. I want to share this story in a place that feels as my home." Telling stories is thus predicated on feeling-at-home. Yet, conversely, Ahmed (2000) shows that for migrants, the making of homes is often intimately tied up with the telling of stories. As I illustrated in this chapter, homes are constructed and (re-)discovered within narrative journeys in which place and time intertwine and in which both safe and unconventional spaces are located and appraised. Moreover, the very act of re-telling these home-making stories within the community reproduces and strengthens the community bonds and the feeling of being-at-home. Hence, home-making and community building involve an endless loop of storytelling in which each story builds on the next to create thicker notions of home, with each layer fortifying its foundations, and thus the safety to share new stories.

Now, finally, it is time for me to make (more) explicit what has so far remained largely implicit. How do these stories of and on home-making relate to one of this chapter's central arguments: that is, how do they disrupt single stories? And how does this then promote epistemic resistance and epistemic justice? By disruption, I refer to stories' ability to create ruptures with the expected, to create narrative counterweights against hegemonic discourses to tease our taken-for-granted imaginations.

In Salma's story, this disruption was found in the way that home was narrated as multi-temporal and multi-spatial, thereby disrupting stories of home and belonging

as static and territorial. Such stories are starkly embedded in hegemonic Dutch public discourse in which demarcations between those *from here* and those *from elsewhere* are deeply imbued (see Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019). Zina's story disrupts hegemonic discourses in which being-at-home in the Netherlands is largely formulated in terms of *integration* (Blankvoort et al., 2021; Schinkel, 2018)—wherein, to make a home, migrants must learn the Dutch language, find a job, and adhere to so-called cultural norms. However, her story shows how becoming part of the new society—the making of a new home—first requires warmth, comfort, and friendship. This outlines the importance of home as both haven and heaven (Duyvendak, 2011) and of creating safe spaces outside hegemonic structures (Hill Collins as cited in Janssens & Steyaert, 2001). Lastly, Ghedam's and Mohamad's stories disrupt the single story by showing how the making of (new) homes is made easier when fixed roles and patterns, such as between host and guest, teacher and student, which are dominant in Dutch integration discourse, can be upended.

The participants' stories therefore unveil practices and knowledges of home-making that are often overlooked, a habit that contributes to forms of epistemic injustice (Medina, 2013). The very act of telling these stories, of creating a space in which it is possible to share them and have them listened to by others, is thus a first step in epistemic resistance because it contributes to an *undermining* of "oppressive normative structures" (Medina, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, by filming the stories, publishing them online as videos, and showing these during online workshops with professionals working in refugee reception, we took this resistance—and the notion of disruption—one step further. That is, these actions were aimed not just at *undermining* oppressive structures but at *changing* them, at moving the stories' disruptive qualities outside the community and into the public realm to foster the process of world-making.

The extent to which these stories actually affected (the single stories of) those who came into contact with them is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, working from theory, I assert they can be powerful conductors in re-imagining the makeup of our common worlds (see Arendt, 2018). Storytelling, both as an artistic social practice and as an engaged research methodology, is a way of making alternative perspectives intelligible. There is a depth and richness in narratives and stories that make it possible to more clearly "see another person"—to deeply understand the position they reason from (Hochschild, 2017; Young, 2000), thereby feeding our narrative imaginations and potentially increasing epistemic diversity within the constitution of our public domains. As Andrews (2014, p. 8) stated, "The stories and images we encounter (...)—which are, by definition, forever changing—help to shape our individual and collective imaginations."

Though stories might thus be powerful conductors in challenging exclusion within increasingly polarizing political contexts, Andrews (2014, p. 87) cautions that they should be wielded with care, noting that "although stories might be able to provide particular insight into difficult experiences, their telling depends upon the existence of a willing, listening audience. Knowledge which is 'too threatening or too different from the listener's experience' is suspect." This points to the importance for future research to further engage with the (different) audiences "receiving" stories.

This also points to another, rather fundamental, challenge for world-making through storytelling: Who is actually willing to listen, and more importantly, who is not? How should the inherent power imbalances between different stories be dealt with? How can spaces be created for migrant stories to go beyond being shared to actually challenging existing power inequalities without being dismissed as "too threatening" by the dominant story? After all, "unless we not only acknowledge but also change the way how we do stories in these spaces, nothing will really change and the space shaped by dominant stories will prevail" (Cairo, 2021, p. 24). Effectuating such change is extremely difficult. In the workshop in which we showed these stories to professionals, we tried to effectuate change by positioning the stories in relation to current hegemonic discourses and practices and by pointing out and discussing the valuable alternative knowledges about home-making the stories contained.

Yet, although the professionals participating in this meeting were open to receiving the stories and our critical perspective, it was not necessarily a comfortable situation for the storytelling participants. One participant who was present at the meeting and whose story was shown and discussed told me later that, even though we had discussed sharing her story prior the workshop, she had felt uncomfortable with this public viewing and scrutinizing of *her* story. For her, her story was a deeply personal one containing many dimensions. Thus, it was estranging to witness it being "diminished" to a sociological anecdote about the Other while the dominant story seemed to remain largely unscathed. This example shows the complexities that come with carrying such stories into the wider (dominant) public sphere and the extra care that one must take to actually address the ways in which we relate across differences within these spaces (see Cairo, 2021).

This incident confronted me with my own blind spots, for I had not considered that storytellers might feel this way. I had thus fallen into the pitfall Tania Kajner (2013, p. 15) warned about when stating that "reciprocity implies a way of being together that includes an emphasis on a shared journey, rather than just the creation and accumulation of knowledge." I had forgotten to share the journey. And by not giving sufficient attention to this relational reciprocity, "engagement can lead to knowledge that seems to be co-created, but in reality is a relationship of exploitation and oppression." Luckily, the participant and I could discuss this on a friendly basis. However, this incident taught me valuable methodological lessons for conducting engaged research, while it also further solidified my insights on an empirical-theoretical level.

That is, it suggests that the power of storytelling as both home-making and world-making resides best in *spaces in-between public and private*. Such spaces need to be closed enough for people to feel safe in even starting to share their personal stories and to begin the process of making homes outside the influence of hegemonic structures. Yet (at times) they must also be open enough for stories to reach a (wider) public's eyes and ears, thus enabling epistemic resistance to potentially *change* (and not only undermine) dominant discursive structures. This boundary between *just safe enough* and *just open enough* is a thin one. As the above example showed, as engaged researchers, we need to be extra careful with the spaces we move in and the relationships we engage in. If we do so, we can work toward new narrative horizons

promoting epistemic justice for those we care for in both our immediate research environments and the wider societal contexts we concern ourselves with.

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Chapter 10
A Taste of Humbleness: Food Practices and Co-creation with LGBTQI+ Forced Migrants in Johannesburg

Miriam Adelina Ocadiz Arriaga, Thomars Shamuyarira, and Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki

Keywords Care · Food · LGBTQI+ forced migrants · Co-creation

10.1 Introduction

It all started with food, steak and ravioli to be specific. We, Thomars and Miriam (Mimi), were having dinner at a restaurant in Maboneng, Johannesburg, in March 2022, trying to get to know each other. That dinner was our first face-to-face encounter, after having one Zoom meeting arranged by a contact in common. As we ate, we discussed our different positionalities and our shared desire to support the lived realities of forced migrants in South Africa. Thomars is founder and director of The Fruit Basket (TFB), a Johannesburg-based organization that supports the needs and concerns of forcibly displaced LGBTQI+ people (an acronym we will explain later). TFB's activities include legal counseling, skill development training, and judicial support in cases of deportation and harassment. It also offers an emergency shelter and works as a referral system to guide its beneficiaries to other relevant organizations. TFB's work is a response to Thomars's lived experience as a transman

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and forced migrant from Zimbabwe who has faced persecution and discrimination. Mimi at that time was a Mexican PhD candidate in the Netherlands working on the Engaged Scholarship Narratives of Change[1] project, which addressed how academia can contribute to social and epistemic justice for forced migrants. Aiming to decolonize her own research, Mimi strives to challenge power imbalances in academic research. The third author, Phoebe, has worked in South Africa for over 15 years, focusing on the intersections of critical race, gender, sexuality, and migration. She worked online as Mimi's co-promoter and assisted as a collaborative researcher and guide. Our collaboration, bound through food, led us to unpack hunger beyond a physical need for nutrients. Instead, we regard hunger as a pedagogy (Freire, 1987; Hoosain Khan, 2014) with the potential to teach us about LGBTQI+ forced migrants' cravings for a well-being that includes basic needs such as housing and healthcare as much as a sense of belonging and connectedness (Matchett & Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2020; Zielke, 2021).

In this chapter, we use the term LGBTQI+ to name the TFB community—a group of forced migrants with non-normative sexual and gender identities. We are aware that this acronym was first coined in a western context and thus may not encompass the diversity of non-heteronormative lived experiences in (South) Africa. As Matebeni and Msibi (2015) argue, non-normative sexualities and gender diversities in Africa "go beyond asking who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, pan-sexual, queer" to instead listen and recognize "[t]he ways in which people name themselves and their relationships, such as *kuchu* in Uganda or Kenya, or *supi* in Ghana, [that] extend beyond identity categorization" (p. 4). However, and most importantly, we use the LGBTQI+ acronym because the TFB community prefers it as a group self-identifying terminology. Noting the importance of self-identification within the broader dynamics of the politics of representation, TFB uses this terminology to position the organization within an international struggle against the oppression of every person who does not follow a heteronormative, patriarchal status quo (Wilkinson & Kirey, 2014).

In the beginning, we sought to build a trustworthy and reciprocal partnership that questioned academia's role in collaborating with LGBTQI+ forced migrants. Thomars's input as a community leader was fundamental; he recognized the importance of research and scholarship in advancing social justice and promoting equality. However, he also highlighted that many scholars have approached him to gather information without returning results meaningful to his community, a common critique of South African academia, which is located within a colonial history. In response, Mimi explained her desire to work with TFB by jointly finding alternative ways that challenge top-down research approaches. This culminated in ongoing discussions about the different positionalities and how Mimi could support TFB's work. Their collaboration began with Mimi volunteering at TFB two days a week from March till May 2022. She helped facilitate workshops on documentation and managed TFB's

[1] Engaged Scholarship Narratives of Change is a project that aims to better understand how scholarship can have a more critical and transformative role in the lived realities of forced migrant communities in South Africa, the Netherlands, and the USA.

database. In addition, the Gay and Lesbian Archive (GALA) based at the University of Witwatersrand, a partner and ally of TFB that often provides it administrative and financial support, offered office space for both Mimi and Thomars.

As we spent more time together, our friendship flourished alongside our work. For instance, after a long day preparing for TFB workshops, we would often go out to grab some comfort food, allowing time and space to get to know each other's stories about family, friends, and dreams about the future. However, a collision of positionally based power was always entangled in our friendship. For instance, Thomars rightfully noted that because Mimi is a foreigner—she was likely to be read as white because she was studying at a western university—and thus could possibly be perceived to have more authority by the community within and around TFB. An example of this occurred at an academic event at a historically white university: Mimi was welcomed openly and was asked for her feedback on researchers' projects, whereas Thomars was mostly ignored throughout the entire event. Such moments left Thomars feeling challenged, ignored, and disrespected by scholars just because he does not hold an academic degree. Their behavior showed the hierarchy that often values academic credentials more than embodied and other forms of knowledge. Such situations led to tensions within our collaboration, and our friendship, placing a higher emotional burden on Thomars due to the pressure to constantly prove himself. Meanwhile, Mimi had to be reflexive and negotiate when to step back to acknowledge Thomars's leadership and when to step in to offer feedback and support. These power imbalances often forced us to have difficult conversations such as how Thomars is in a more precarious situation that requires more than just academic support but also financial, legal, and psychological assistance, which Mimi could not always help with. Our experiences exemplified how the social axes of race, class, gender, and nationality continue to complicate relationships between forced migrants and scholars despite their best intentions. For us, the bottom line was a hunger for justice, with an emphasis on working toward a meaningful collaboration.

Guided by decolonial praxis and frameworks, we knew it was important to not only acknowledge our positionality and major differences but also take specific actions to unsettle power. We therefore worked within the framework of being cognizant of LGBTQI+ forced migrants' needs, bringing in Mimi's previous experience on food practices with forced migrant women in Gqeberha (Ocadiz Arriaga, 2023). To engage with TFB's focus on community well-being, while destabilizing modes of data collection that tend to play within the potent binary of researcher/researched, we developed the Chakalaka Sessions, a project in which recipes from different African countries[2] were used to nourish the bodies of LGBTQI+ forced migrants while engaging in conversations. The Chakalaka Sessions were aimed at "doing" research together while elevating moments of enjoyment.

In this chapter, we weave enjoyment in and through food practices using a theoretical framework on the pedagogies of craving and the methodologies of nourishment to explore the hunger for physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. First, we locate

[2] Nigeria, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Africa, as well as two recipes from Mexico.

this within Paulo Freire's (1987) work on pedagogies of the oppressed, focusing on LGBTQI+ forced migrants in South Africa (Hoosain Khan, 2014). We elaborate on how we approached this group's bodily experiences of hunger and cravings through methodologies of nourishment informed by decolonial, Afro-feminist scholarship. Then, we analyze pedagogies of craving and methodologies of nourishment through two case studies that reflect the challenges, limitations, and major contributions of the Chakalaka Sessions.

10.2 Food Practices and Well-being

At the beginning of the collaboration, Thomars and Mimi joked about one of their favorite South African relishes: Chakalaka, a catchy name for a heartwarming relish. This South African dish is made with baked beans, grated carrots, finely chopped peppers (usually green and red), onions, garlic, curry powder, and sometimes small pieces of green chili and pickles. It is a delightful, nutritious, and affordable vegan meal. Chakalaka was developed in Johannesburg townships in the nineteenth century, when migrant mine workers from neighboring countries mixed canned beans from the British with curry from the Indian diaspora, as well as spices and vegetables accessible to migrant workers (ImmaculateBites., 2014; Rawson., 2017). Chakalaka has been a meal that supports working class (South) Africans on the move, and thus it is an emblematic meal for one of TFB's key goals, namely, supporting a sense of well-being among LGBTQI+ forced migrants.

We approach the concept of well-being as an overall sense of "happiness, life satisfaction and positive state of consciousness such as feelings of self-worth" (Matchett & Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2020, p. 76). From this angle, well-being goes beyond fundamental access to material needs, such as housing or healthcare, to include people's experiences of happiness, contentment, and enjoyment in their lives, as we will demonstrate in this case study. A personal sense of well-being is a response to a concrete context that results from socioeconomic and structural circumstances, which determine who has access to achieving and sustaining well-being. In other words, well-being is not (only) a personal quest but a complex process entrenched in the (often unequal) distribution of power and resources (Zielke, 2021). This is particularly relevant for LGBTQI+ forced migrants, as their well-being is affected by homophobia, transphobia, racism, classism, and other forms of structural oppression that systematically diminish the living conditions of LGBTQI+ people worldwide (Garcia et al., 2020). The well-being of LGBTQI+ forced migrants in South Africa is disrupted by blatant and invisible forms of discrimination, violence, and oppression due to histories of colonialism and apartheid (Dill et al., 2016; Hoosain Khan, 2014).

TFB aims to address and mitigate these forms of oppression by offering short- and long-term relief such as shelter, skill development, and legal counseling to LGBTQI+ forced migrants. Due to the nature of this work, emotional and psychological supports are needed to engage with well-being. These were especially important during our project due to the increasing sense of isolation and disconnection that LGBTQI+

forced migrants experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Africa, LGBTQI+ forced migrants were excluded from governmental interventions for food, healthcare, and housing, while they also experienced rising anti-migration, homophobic, and transphobic aggression and violence. This combination along with the isolation resulted in inhumane conditions and decreasing levels of both physical and mental well-being (Mukumbang et al., 2020). The Chakalaka Sessions were therefore meant to offer support to the TFB community's well-being. The sessions were designed in line with the kinds of activities TFB does. The project enabled a co-creation process through three brunch sessions in which LGTBQI+ forced migrant community members were able to cook and eat together. Co-creation enabled facilitating informal spaces in which TFB beneficiaries came together and shared their lived experiences, such as stories of how oppressive structures operate, with the idea of (re)centering their hunger for well-being. Knowing that a limited number of sessions would not change any structural aspects in LGBTQI+ forced migrants' conditions, we hoped for moments of meaningful engagement through food that would contribute to TFB's work in addressing the pain and disconnection caused by those structural forms of oppression, which were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At its core, this project spoke back to a tradition of social and epistemic activism in (South) Africa that acknowledges that every person, including members of marginalized communities, are experts of their own lives and thus should be acknowledged as active agents of knowledge (see Hoosain Khan, 2014; Oliveira, 2016). Such approaches recognize that knowledge is not something (only) produced in academic spaces where marginalized communities are seen as subjects of study. Instead, an engaged approach to knowledge considers how recognizing, respecting, and dialoguing with the knowledges of marginalized communities enables processes of reflection through which people enhance their capacities to understand and challenge power structures. This, in turn, has deep repercussions for social change because knowledge "can potentially enable learners to act 'in' the world in order to transform or reshape structural and social processes that serve to exclude the poor and the working class" (Sinwell, 2022, p. 8). Hoosain Khan (2014) refers to LGBTQI+ activism in South Africa, which took up Paulo Freire's work (Freire, 1987), to demonstrate that engaging with communities' knowledge is a form of education that can enable political praxis that has the potential to contribute to social justice. The following section describes the relation between Freire's work and the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ forced migrants, focusing on the hunger and craving for social and epistemic justice.

10.3 On Hunger and Cravings

For Brazilian philosopher and activist Paulo Freire (1987), education, which he regarded as a process of knowledge co-creation, is about engaging with people's daily experiences and their understanding of human existence and then (re)shaping

their lives toward social justice. Freire argued that those who experience oppression do not lack knowledge; indeed, the oppressed have the capacities to deconstruct and transform unjust power structures because their understanding of oppression emerges from their own lived realities. He argues for a pedagogy in which those oppressed reflect on the sources, structures, and consequences of their own injustice and oppression. Pedagogy thus becomes a process of conscientization, the development of critical awareness (Freire, 1987), which transforms education into a liberatory practice. In using food practices, we situate pedagogies of the oppressed, as a political praxis, in the lessons that emerge from the very real sensations of hunger and craving in the everyday lives of LGBTQI+ forced migrants.

Thomars argues that for him and his community, hunger implies much more than a physical need for nutrients. Instead, hunger is grounded in everyday struggles for a dignified life in which he is seen (and feels) like a human being instead of (only) a member of a marginalized community. He describes how his life as one of the many LGBTQI+ forced migrants in South Africa, is constantly threatened by homophobia, transphobia, and anti-migrant sentiments, which leads him and other LGBTQI+ forced migrants to be seen (and feel as if they are seen) as a problem and burden to society. Thomars describes this situation as a sort of double-edged position. Because he lacks proper documentation to stay in South Africa, he is denied access to services such as education and employment, and he often struggles to afford basic services such as the food needed to resist oppression. In addition, everyday hardship is paired with a constant state of fear of deportation and violence that reinforces a sense of disempowerment. However, that very position of hardship is what feeds his fire to fight for the freedom and justice that comes from his hunger for a dignified, fulfilled life that is worth living, for both himself and his community. Both types of hunger motivated the Chakalaka Sessions as an initiative that engaged with the LGBTQI+ community's experiences to create a space in which individuals could not only find nourishment for their physical and immediate needs but also address their cravings for justice, belonging, and recognition as human beings with dignity and worth. While we locate hunger, for both food and social justice, as a result of oppression, we also consider craving as a visceral desire to thrive and flourish.

To do so, we first consider Lélia (Gonzalez, 1984, 2019, 2020) work in relation to the pedagogies of the oppressed. Gonzalez, a black Brazilian activist and scholar, unsettled white feminism in the 1980s countering it with the experiences of black Afro-Brazilian women, who simultaneously experienced racism and sexism. Similarly to Freire, Gonzalez called for a praxis of political education (Gonzalez, 2019); however, she used conscientization as a way to challenge the notion of "racial democracy"—a term used to describe Brazilian society as a melting pot, and thus absent of racism. Admired by fellow black feminists such as Angela Davis, who publicly recognized Gonzalez for developing scholarship that engaged with intersectionality even before Crenshaw "officially" coined that term in the United States (see Boitempo, 2019), Gonzalez took the idea that education can be a tool for transforming injustices and translated it into the Black Education Movement in Brazil, proposing a decolonial education that centers the lived experiences of black working-class women and thus highlighting the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Similarly, African feminisms unsettle power by connecting theory and action so that the voices of the oppressed inform scholarship in order to "subvert the boundaries that alienate and fragment knowledge and the pedagogies that reproduce inequalities instead of transforming them" (Mama, 2017, p. 4). This speaks to the work of Hoosain Khan (2014), who analyses education as a form of resistance for LGBTQI+ communities in Southern Africa. Because this community faces simultaneous, overlapping oppressions regarding their race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and document status, Hoosain Khan (2014) adds a gendered reading of conscientization to the pedagogies of the oppressed. This means that centralizing the voices of LGBTQI+ communities provides space to unsettle normative and oppressive discourses of gender and sexuality.

In the Chakalaka Sessions, we observed how food stimulated bodily capacities to (self-)reflect and address multiple forms of oppression while also allowing a sense of well-being rooted in interconnectedness, community, and enjoyment. That is, in enabling the cooking and sharing of food, the Chakalaka Sessions were about learning from the community's craving for deeper physical, emotional, and spiritual appetites for wholeness, as Thomars stated earlier. We call this approach a *pedagogy of craving*, in which co-creation of communal knowledges and practices is rooted in the qualities of eating, which—"due to its sensual, visceral nature—is a strategic place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power" (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008, p. 462). Inspired by Freire's (1987) notion of conscientization and Gonzalez's (1984, 2019, 2020) call to undo all forms of oppression, we posit that the pedagogy of craving is the process in which recollection, preparation, and sharing of food connects knowledge to practice. This process allowed LGBTQI+ forced migrants to share stories about their lived experiences that, without ignoring hardship, emphasized elements of creativity, resilience, and joy, as we explain below.

10.4 Methodologies of Nourishment

We approach food not only as a pedagogy but as a methodology with decolonial potential. Tamale (2011) unpacks how in colonial contexts, scholarship has been constructed around imbalanced relations between researchers (who are often part of an elite group descended from or connected to colonial settlers) and researched "subjects" (namely, native people of color who have been systematically oppressed). Such can be seen in how the voices of LGBTQI+ communities in Africa are often sidelined because western discourses of gender and sexuality are privileged in academia. This then "ultimately produces the notion of 'the homo-sexual'—a visible, fixed and universal (western) creation, which often becomes a strategic entry-point for homophobic African leaders who disregard such a positioning as 'unAfrican'" (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015, p. 5). Instead, these leaders suggest that "homosexuality" is a modern and western import onto the African continent and is therefore unAfrican. In response, African feminists have called for using decolonial approaches of self-determination as a process in which African (LGBTQI+) communities "'rewrite' and 're-right'"

their position in history, to "tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes" (Smith, 1999, p. 28, quoted in Tamale, 2011, p. 36).

To counter western hegemony, African feminists have highlighted historically silenced narratives on gender and sexuality to unsettle homophobic and transphobic discourses in African contexts. Matebeni and Msibi (2015), as noted earlier, argue that these counter discourses foreground knowledge production on historically silenced experiences that do not fit western categorization. Such efforts also build upon a long tradition in black feminism, in Africa and the diaspora, of challenging the research-subject dichotomy by recognizing how knowledge emerges from the interconnections of personal and collective experiences in oppressed communities, including LGBTQI+ forced migrants. We argue that food practices can also enable decolonial methodologies through what we call "methodologies of nourishment." Because food is a fundamental part of everyday experiences, we recognize its centrality in forming relational processes between bodies and power structures, mediating embodied political subjectivities (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008) and offering sensorial and sensual channels to oppressed bodies (Lewis, 2016). Thus, in the case of the Chakalaka Sessions, we see cooking and eating as political acts (see Nyamnjoh, 2018; Ocadiz Arriaga, 2023; Probyn, 2003) that draw (dis)connections between the everyday bodily experiences of LGBTQI+ forced migrants and the power structures that constrain their complex lived realities.

The Chakalaka Sessions approached food practices as a form of decolonial methodology, ensuring that TFB's LGBTQI+ migrant community was involved in each step of the project. We, Thomars and Mimi, started by reaching out to TFB's community, asking who was interested in joining the initiative and gathering input on organizing each brunch. Because the budget was very limited, only three sessions were facilitated, each with five to eight community members. We invited different participants to each session so more people could be part of the project. A mix of participants with different gender identities, sexualities, and nationalities were included in each brunch. We also considered people's availability and preferences to join one session over another. All participants were remunerated financially for their time and travel expenses following TFB guidelines.

For each brunch, we contacted one community member versed in cooking skills,[3] who was paid extra for their expertise. This person offered various dish options and shared them with the other brunch participants via WhatsApp, allowing the group to select the menu together. Thomars and Mimi met the designated cook in Braamfontein on Friday morning to gather the needed ingredients and cooking tools, storing them at GALA, and have lunch together. On Saturday morning, we (the designated cook, Thomars, and Mimi) brought all ingredients and tools to the Holy Trinity Church, located next to GALA. TFB events often took place there, so it was a familiar place for the participants.

Aiming to destabilize hegemonic methodologies in which scholars lead and control research projects, we respected how every community member participated as

[3] Cooks had previously received one year of vocational training provided by TFB to increase their employability.

they felt comfortable. For example, some participants wanted to prepare the meals in the kitchen, helping with peeling, chopping, or frying certain ingredients, while others opted to arrange the table and run any errands needed, such as buying extra drinks. Around noon, we all sat and ate together, aiming to build a space that "encourage[ed] participants to share personal constructions of self and identity, rather than teaching queer people about their identity and their problems based on analysis from elsewhere" (Hoosain Khan, 2014, p. 130). This led to rich conversations, which made food practices a process of storytelling. After each session, Mimi took notes on the stories that had emerged while cooking and eating and later shared and discussed them with Thomars and Phoebe. We thereby analyzed how food practices became a process of communal, co-creative knowledge-making. Below are our findings from the second brunch, in which Mickey and Leona shared their stories and the group discussed gender roles and food practices.

10.5 DJ Mickey in th' Kitchen

At the Chakalaka Sessions, several participants described how few things provided a sense of fulfilment as fufu did. Its earthy taste and fluffy texture make it the perfect comfort food. Accompanying it with a thick egusi soup of balanced flavors (onion, palm oil, crayfish, crushed melon seeds) provides a kaleidoscope of sensations that awakens the whole body. Fufu with egusi was suggested by Mickey, a rapper, cook, tattoo artist, TikToker, and transwoman from Nigeria. Thomars and Mickey had worked together since 2020, when Mickey took TFB's vocational training and acquired a diploma as a cook. Mickey's pre-brunch session took place on Friday, 29 April 2022. Thomars and Mimi met her in Braamfontein, downtown Johannesburg. Mickey was cheerful and took the lead in gathering the necessary ingredients to prepare her dishes, as well as chakalaka, which was a signature dish at every brunch. As she led us to a corner store that specialized in products from Central and West Africa, Mickey's excitement increased because she perceived the store as a "piece" of Nigeria and thus a reminder of "home." She shared childhood memories of her father teaching her how to cook, passing on family culinary secrets, such as making fufu with cassava instead of with plantain or corn. She described how food helped her to build a special bond with her father, as cooking was a way for them to spend quality time together. Also, because fufu with egusi is a staple dish "loved by everyone," as she often said, preparing it in South Africa meant that she could recreate an important expression of her culture and perhaps continue an aspect of family lineage—and kinship—that was highly appreciated by her father.

We consider this connection between food, memories, and kinship as a manifestation of the pedagogies of craving. Mickey's leadership in gathering ingredients and cooking fufu with egusi, centering her culinary knowledges, is, according to Freire (1987) and Gonzalez (2020), a fundamental step in developing conscientization. The food practices involved in (re)creating the dishes allowed Mickey to reflect on her identity as a Nigerian, a transwoman, and a forced migrant. For her, cooking was

more than preparing a healthy and delicious meal; it was a way of learning about her own hunger for connection and belonging. Feminist scholarship has emphasized that food works as a pivotal bridge connecting people's sociohistorical and political context with their personal experiences and life (hi)stories. For forced migrants, this is particularly true, as bodily sensations such as smells, touch, and taste are crucial in supporting people as they approach new environments while remaining attached to how their body feels/thinks back to their place of origin (Longhurst et al., 2009; Ocadiz Arriaga, 2023). This was demonstrated in the way Mickey narrated her memories of cooking and sharing this meal with her family, particularly her father and brothers, and how this made her feel (re)connected, recognized, and respected by her loved ones, especially those back in Nigeria.

This bring us back to the idea of kinship, which we consider as a network of practices and relationships that respond to people's needs and demands throughout life and death, supporting the human need for belonging and interdependency (Morison et al., 2019). While in several societies, kinship is marked through marriage and situated within blood ties (Van Zyl, 2011), for Mickey and other participants, the notion of "queer kinship" (Morison et al., 2019) is much more significant as way of developing relationships of care and belonging that move beyond hetero-patriarchal structures of bonding (Morison et al., 2019; Van Zyl, 2011). This was seen in how Mickey acknowledged her family and ethnic ties in Nigeria while also enacting bonds of care and connectivity with fellow LGBTQI+ members of TFB, who she described as her family in South Africa. This LGBTQI+ community became Mickey's "chosen family," a notion embedded in queer kinship studies (Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2023; Morison et al., 2019; Van Zyl, 2011). Mickey's capacity to prepare fufu with egusi nourished a sense of well-being, without dismissing hardship, enabling an experience of enjoyment, contentment, and interconnectedness, which in return reinforced the already existing sense of queer kinship within TFB's LGBTQI+ forced migrant community. This was particularly important given the alienation and oppression Mickey, and other forced migrant participants, experience.

Here we see food practices overlapping hardship and enjoyment to demonstrate connections between what seems disconnected and, in the process, destabilizing traditional gender norms. Mickey exemplified this by juxtaposing her childhood memories with different elements of her current gender identity as a transwoman. She was proud that it was her father who taught her how to prepare fufu with egusi, showing the importance of male figures in food practices, which are traditionally seen as female tasks. She also considered cooking as a way to perform her complex gender identity. This was seen in how Mickey described herself as a "lady" but dressed as a "tomboy," as she described it, which is often considered non-ladylike. Sporting a Bantu Knots hairstyle and wearing an oversized blue blouse, satin trousers, and golden jewelry, she rapped and played hip hop as she cooked, making cooking a time and space for creativity. Thus, Mickey's approach to food practices playfully linked and mixed elements associated with gender roles, blurring the boundaries of what is supposed to be feminine or masculine to perform her complex gender identity in her own terms. Mickey assembled different elements of her worldview and identities, making cooking an opportunity to be herself, with all her apparent contradictions.

This helped create an informal, energetic ambience that welcomed other LGBTQI+ community members to cook, dance, sing, and share stories.

We see all this as a manifestation of the pedagogies of craving, as Mickey used food practices to unpack her intersecting, complex, and fluid location as a forced migrant transwoman. Hoosain Khan (2014) approaches this process of self-reflection as an education of "dislocation," which is "the act of challenging the status quo of an assemblage of inequality"; "dislocation is about moving against the grain, outside the boundaries of the normativity of a particular location" (p. 127). For instance, Mickey used food practices to reaffirm her gender identity beyond traditional gender roles that fixate food labor as a (cis) female task. From this angle, she brought different elements of her identity, including race, class, gender, and nationality, to show how she challenged the expectations and categories imposed on her. For instance, being Nigerian and following in her father's steps is incompatible with being a stylish, tomboy lady. This process of dislocation was enabled by food's capacities to go beyond recreating what people self-identify with, but cooking and eating are also processes that "refract who we are" (Probyn, 2003, p. 33). Through cooking and eating, Mickey involved hands, mouths, and all the senses to ingest, digest, and share food. She transformed food as much as food transformed her body, allowing an experience of dislocation that led to a pedagogy in which her craving for wholeness, connectivity, and self-worth nourished a critical consciousness of her self beyond categories.

10.6 "Un/Doing" Gender at the Table

Another manifestation of pedagogies of craving took place at the table, where sharing delicious and nutritious food opened a space for participants to engage in conversation. As we enjoyed Mickey's chakalaka and fufu with egusi, Thomars started talking about the relationship between gender roles. We debated whether LGBTQI+ couples stick to traditional power relations in gender roles, with the (self-)identified female partner doing the cooking and the (self-)identified male partner providing other elements, such as money or safety. Coco, a gay man, argued that cooking and eating must be organized according to who is "top" and "bottom" in a "sexual" relationship, which is a dominant discourse in LGBTQI+ sexual encounters. However, for Coco, this discourse also extended beyond the bedroom. For him, the top is the person considered the dominant partner irrespective of their gender identity or sexual preference. Being top is about holding power (at least to a certain degree), while bottoms are seen as a more submissive figure. To exemplify this, Thomars shared a story about one of his ex-partners, a cisgender woman who followed traditional Zimbabwean patterns—cooking whatever he liked, washing his hands before dinner, kneeling to give him food, and eating less than him—even though he asked her not to because it made him uncomfortable. For Thomars's ex-partner, this was a way of showing that she "praised her man," reinforcing the idea that Thomars, as a

transman, was the top in the relationship. While she considered this a sign of love, Thomars perceived it as a sign of an unhealthy unbalance within the relationship.

Coco argued that because tops are already in a position of power, they need to take charge of acts like cooking to show love and care and to meet their partners in a "middle-way." For him, cooking could change power dynamics between tops and bottoms in non-hegemonic, heterosexual couples. A counter-narrative on gender roles was further explained by Zama, a cisgender woman, and her partner, Hope, a transman. They did not agree that one of them must be more dominant than the other, instead preferring to be playful and disrupt categories of tops and bottoms through their food practices. Hope, who self-identifies as the male in the relationship, does the cooking, while both contribute to finances and housekeeping. Hope explained that he enjoys cooking elaborate, tasty dishes, such as *iDombolo* (steamed bread), that he learned to prepare at home in Eastern Cape. As both described details about *iDombolo* (its soft texture, its smooth taste), they used their hands, they salivated and smiled, evoking the sense of enjoyment that food brings in their relationship. Hope was positioned as a male figure who willingly and gladly does the labor around food without questioning his masculinity, which goes against traditional notions of masculinity in certain contexts. Both Hope and Zama highlighted that Hope's cooking abilities strengthened his position as a partner and a lover, as he was able to evoke pleasure.

We see this conversation as a process of knowledge co-creation, in which members of the LGBTQI+ forced migrant community shared personal experiences and their understanding of gender, food, and power, thereby generating pedagogies of craving—a process in which people self-reflect on their own stories. Just as Hoosain Khan (2014) used art to offer a journey in which LGBTQI+ youth learned from each other's stories, the Chakalaka Sessions used food to facilitate new understandings: as participants ate, talked, and enjoyed, they shared their own ideas about relationships between gender and food practices, and new pedagogies of gender emerged. Probyn (2003) argues that the "sensual nature of eating" provides "a privileged optic through which to consider how identities and the relations between sex, gender and power are being renegotiated" (p. 7). The discussion about tops and bottoms illustrates how participants both conformed to traditional gender roles and renegotiated them by challenging notions of cooking as a female-only task. Food practices also allowed participants to perform their gender identities beyond expectations, just as Mickey used cooking to present herself as a "lady tomboy," interweaving feminine and masculine elements. These overlapping stories show that there are multiple narratives within the LGBTQI+ forced migrant community on how to un/do gender.

The discussion about gender also demonstrates the relationship between food and power. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) posit that bodily experiences linked to food are deeply connected to political struggles—"what to eat, where to eat, who gets to eat, and so on—have come to be understood as political questions with implications for diverse struggles of ecological and social justice" (p. 463). In the Chakalaka Sessions, as participants described the roles of tops and bottoms, they used the capacities of food "to generate new, anti-oppressive and humanising relationships" (Lewis, 2016, p. 7). They thereby demonstrated their agency to use their

culinary knowledges to channel power through food's capacity to bring nourishment, enjoyment, and pleasure.

10.7 Leona's Cravings for Food and Sex

The connection between pleasure and food in LGBTQI+ intimate relationships was further addressed by Leona. As we continued enjoying the food and talking about food and sex, Leona stated, "I will only cook good food if the sex is good," causing everyone to burst into laughter. We laughed because Leona talked openly, with sincerity, and without any shame about expressing her hunger for sexual pleasure. Leona's story was not so much about using cooking to control her lovers but about her desire to cook because she was getting good sex. She mentioned that in a relationship, there needs to be balance, which she described as a mutual sense of care, reciprocity, and pleasure. For Leona, good sex is fundamental for a successful relationship, because it addresses cravings for connection, recognition, and (self-) love. She added that if the sex was outstanding, she would cook more delicious and elaborate dishes as a way of increasing the pleasure shared in the relationship.

The power of food to evoke and provoke pleasure brings to mind African feminists' argument that food can be used both to impose power and to draw unexpected forms of resistance. We see resistance in how Leona crafted her romantic relationships by learning from her own hunger for sexual satisfaction, claiming her capacity to renegotiate by sensing and sharing pleasure. Lewis (2016) affirms that there is agency in how a cook provides gastronomic pleasure that supports a sense of connectivity, nourishment, and contentment, highlighting how food enables well-being at various levels.

In the specific case of LGBTQI+ forced migrants, their agency to negotiate pleasure and power disrupts heteronormative food practices. Ehrhardt (2018) points to queer food by engaging with the way non-normative sexualities change the meaning of food and the gender roles around it. In her writing about lesbian Chicanas, Ehrhardt (2018) argues that lesbians use food to represent themselves as "food eater in addition to food preparer. They present [a lesbian Chicana] as a woman with appetites that deserve to be satisfied, even if they do not fit heteronormative patterns, rather than as one who must deny her own hunger so that she may feed others first" (p. 96). Similarly, we argue that Leona's story pushed the boundaries of heteronormative approaches to food by emphasizing how food works as a channel to take ownership of one's pleasure and from that to exercise agency. Leona finalized her story by stating that her use of power was not intended to reinforce categories of tops as the dominant partners and bottoms as the ones cooking. Instead, she preferred more reciprocal and egalitarian relationships, in which neither partner "lags behind." Like Hope and Zama, she saw food as a fundamental element in creating intimate bonds.

In the way Leona links food and pleasure, we note another manifestation of the pedagogies of craving. Her story exemplifies how her appetite for wholeness, love, and sexual contentment led her to reflect on how she could take ownership of her

pleasure and thereby unsettle power. Leona characterized this by challenging the expected submissive feminine role of cooking, making an unashamed call for pleasure through sex and food, which we see as resistance to silences relating to female sexual pleasure. There was something disruptive, fresh, and spicy in Leona's story, as she used humor to contest expectations put upon her and to instead emphasize how she negotiated the relationship between food, sex, and pleasure. Also, by making other participants laugh, Leona—and Mickey—enabled a sense of connectivity, ease, and contentment that promoted well-being. This facilitated a space in which everyone could eat and share their stories, thereby satisfying individual and communal cravings for a deep sense of nourishment.

However, the problem with cravings is that, if nourishment stops, hunger comes back. Participants continued to face multiple forms of oppression, often leading to physical, emotional, and psychological forms of hunger. Although there was a sense of connectivity and enjoyment at each Chakalaka Session, the project was not meant to, nor was it capable of, addressing all the challenges that led to different forms of hunger among the community. Instead, the Chakalaka Sessions were meant to ease the consequences of oppression by providing elements that supported people's well-being. For example, in other TFB activities, Mickey shared painful difficulties she faced with relatives and co-workers who made her feel discriminated against, unaccepted, and unloved, which contrasted the stories of her loving relationship with her father. However, she noted how these complexities do not erase the enjoyment she shared when cooking fufu with egusi. This denotes the layered nature of belonging and (queer) kinship for LGBTQI+ forced migrants and the urge to develop more long-term forms of support. Thus, after the project ended, Thomars developed follow-up activities, with support from Mimi. For instance, in September 2023, TFB facilitated a Solidarity Space that aimed for a safe(r) space in which LGBTQI+ forced migrants could share their lived experiences. This session included a "Queer Quirky Quiz" that allowed the community to play, laugh, and feel more connected. According to Thomars, this event aimed to build upon the Chakalaka Sessions by inviting some brunch participants along with newcomers to further contribute to a sense of enjoyment and connectedness among LGBTQI+ forced migrants. We see this as a critical way to engage with the pedagogies of craving, to keep supporting well-being while also enabling stories to be shared.

10.8 Conclusion

Inspired by the work of black African feminist scholars, we view food practices as a space in which to address power structures. We argued that LGBTQI+ forced migrants' cravings have the potential to teach us about their capacities to evoke and share connectivity, pleasure, and nourishment in order to transgress power imbalances in daily life. We saw how participants took cooking and eating as opportunities to unsettle power, often through caring and sustaining relationships that were important to them. In the way Mickey connected to her father, Hope and Zama expressed

their love, or Leona interacted with her lovers, food worked to offer recognition, respect, and reassurance for themselves and for those they care about most. Food also supported the tensions and contradictions in LGBTQI+ forced migrants' lives. As Mickey demonstrated, it is possible to have different cravings connected to kinship, to adapting to a non-normative gender identity, and to blurring the boundaries around femininity. This illustrates that while LGBTQI+ forced migrants face multiple forms of hunger, they are capable of using their cravings for a dignified life to channel diverse forms of resistance. Our findings show how through gathering ingredients, cooking, and eating, Chakalaka Sessions participants centralized their knowledges and expertise, enabling a more humble, less top-down process of knowledge cultivation. By doing so, they explored their own understanding of being LGBTQI+ forced migrants beyond imposed categories and expectations. Thus, the Chakalaka Sessions engaged with the following question: how "[c]ould something as common as eating contain the seeds of an extraordinary reflection, a visceral reaction to who and what we are becoming?" (Probyn, 2003, p. 14). We observed this engagement with the lived experiences of the TFB community through dislocation of the status quo.

Although the scope and nature of the Chakalaka Sessions was rather small, we present this initiative as a taste of pedagogies of craving that enabled processes of (self-)reflection starting from bodily yearnings for well-being. As we gathered ingredients, cooked, and ate together, we were able to bring nourishment to LGBTQI+ forced migrants' physical, emotional, and spiritual cravings for well-being. This enabled a process of knowledge co-creation, particularly regarding how participants perceived and contested gender, a process that involved knowledge as much as practices, with the body as a central element. We chopped and peeled, ate, tasted, and digested, involving all our beings to learn through doing food practices. We therefore call for further initiatives addressing the hunger of non-normative bodies for well-being and connectivity, making of research a space for unsettling power through care and nourishment.

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Part III
Transforming Institutions Through Epistemic Multiplicity

Chapter 11
Refugee-Led Advocacy: Embedded Knowledges as a Source for Epistemic Multiplicity

Elena Ponzoni, Halleh Ghorashi, Domenica Ghidei, and Mohammed Badran

11.1 Introduction

Puig de la Bellacasa (2012), quoted often in this book, emphasizes the importance of relational thinking, researching, and writing shaped from connectedness and personal relations. She describes research that embraces a multiplicity of knowledges as a form of "thinking with care." As a form of connected thinking and writing, "thinking-with" takes shape from a shared commitment and a shared sense of care in addressing societal troubles. This chapter is the outcome of a trajectory of thinking-with each other, based on long-term collaborations, critical discussions, and dialogical reflections between the four authors. It channels insights emerging from our shared practices and acts as catalyzer for new co-creations, horizontal alliances with others, and imagined futures.

While migration and asylum are high on the political agenda of many EU countries, the perspectives and experiences of refugees are rarely represented in public debates and policymaking that directly affect them (Alio et al., 2020; Badran & Mustafa, 2019; Ponzoni et al., 2020). Knowledges, experiences, and wisdom of displaced people are instead articulated in refugee-led advocacy networks, community research projects, informal exchanges, and community-led conferences.[1] Many bottom-up

[1] See, e.g.: https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/files/files-1/research-in-brief-10_global-governed_web.pdf; https://www.networkforrefugeevoices.org/uploads/1/0/9/9/109923753/gsor_outcomes_and_policy_paper_final.pdf

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actions exist in which displaced people organize for mutual support, community work, or sharing concerns (e.g., Alio et al., 2020; Duale, 2020). Scholars such as Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016) argue that greater attention and recognition needs to be given to the multiple actions through which people with a history of displacement respond to the needs of their communities, actions that should be seen as important and complementary to those of institutions and globally recognized players like UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (see also Purkey, 2016). We focus specifically on the issue of recognizing the knowledge that exists and emerges in these refugee-led networks, through collective actions and shared concerns, as a crucial source of "epistemic multiplicity," referring to practices in which different types of knowledge are considered equally valuable.

Even when refugee-led action is recognized as relevant community work, the original perspectives and views stemming from these networks, projects, and communities rarely make a difference in the formal contexts of policymaking in European states or in informing institutional knowledge systems engrained with creating policy frameworks or support policy. Despite nominal pledges to include refugee perspectives and to speak "with and not about," most systems of policymaking are remote and largely closed off from refugee perspectives (Milner et al., 2022), while research that informs policy is also rarely led and carried out by researchers with lived experience. As reported by the Global Summit of Refugees held in Geneva in 2018, involving 72 refugee representatives from 27 refugee-hosting countries: "Refugee participation is mostly welcomed as a way of implementing the agenda of larger institutions and governments rather than as genuine strategic engagement that enables a response based on what people need and want rather than what goods and services can be supplied" (see also Ortiz et al., 2018). Such collective action, in which multiple experiences converge in shared concerns and become collectively articulated, remain undervalued as sources of knowledge. Thus, refugees' narratives countering limited and inadequate representations of their lives and identities often remain unheard (Ghorashi, 2014).

The marginalization of lived experiences in shaping solutions to societal problems is deeply rooted in institutions with colonial histories. Figueroa Helland and Lindgren (2016) describe this as the "coloniality of power," a system "constituted and underpinned by anthropocentric, androcentric, hetero-patriarchal, Euro/western-centric, modern/colonial and capitalist systems of power" (p. 432). These histories enforce exploitative modes of living and relating and sustain hierarchies of knowledge. The notion of the "coloniality of power," originally developed by Aníbal Quijano and expanded by Maria Lugones and other South American decolonial thinkers, describes the workings of the rationalist legacies upholding specific forms of instrumental rationality that are rooted in colonial histories. These legacies entail privileging the thoughts and actions of people identified as expert, rational, and knowledgeable along hierarchical lines of difference stemming from historically intersecting systems of oppression (colonialism, racism, patriarchy, capitalism). Such hierarchies are expressed in dichotomies like man/woman, white/non-white, human/nature, rational/irrational, and resourceful/passive, thus making it appear natural that solutions for societal issues are designed by unaffected actors perceived as rational

or resourceful. These hierarchies also sustain epistemic injustice, wherein the knowledge of specific groups of people is structurally silenced, omitted, or not recognized as valid or relevant (Anderson, 2012; Medina, 2013).

The coloniality of power permeates national and international institutions. One of the many institutional contexts in which coloniality is visible is the global system of refugee protection, wherein white "expert" voices from the Global North currently still dominate the articulation of problems and solutions, while racialized people with refugee experiences are not, or only very limitedly, involved as knowledgeable subjects.[2] According to Krause (2021), white supremacist legacies in global refugee protection stem from the founding of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which was dominated by powerful Global North nations (excluding many still colonized Global South nations) and produced Eurocentric protection categories based on racist views. In more subtle ways, the coloniality of power pervades national systems of policymaking such as the Dutch one. We will return to this later, when we argue that changing these pervasive systems of exclusion is difficult even for people working in institutions wanting to address them.

In this chapter, we focus on the role of relational alliances between people differently positioned in these systems, starting from the notion of epistemic multiplicity. Such intersubjective engagement and multiple knowledges from contrasting positionalities is essential to stop the reproduction of harmful discourses and policies, particularly those regarding refugees. Specifically, we explore "embedded knowledges" from refugee-led networks as sources of epistemic multiplicity and epistemic resistance. Embedded knowledge is knowledge rooted in personal lived and embodied experiences and mirrored in the experiences of others with similar backgrounds and similar positionalities (Ghorashi, 2023; Ponzoni et al., 2020). Although not necessarily representing unitary experiences of an entire community, this knowledge is more than just individual embodied knowledge but is rooted in collective and relational awareness.

Embracing epistemic multiplicity begins with decolonizing knowledge hierarchies that marginalize experiential knowledge and lead to epistemic injustice. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) claims there is need for "'researching back,' in the same tradition of 'writing back' or 'talking back'" (p. 8). This means questioning who owns, benefits from, and designs research and what its frame is (p. 10). Decolonizing knowledge hierarchies engrained in dominant discourses and policies start with considering the lack of acknowledgement of non-academic voices carrying layered and intersectional experiences, and with reconnecting with the experiential knowledge and imaginations of communities historically excluded from formally shaped dominant narrations. Thus, it is essential to consider refugees' embodied and embedded knowledge (seen as multiple, layered, and intersectional) as indispensable to unsettle taken-for-granted hierarchical constructions of self and other within academia and policy.

[2] See Sana Mustapha's article based on personal experience and informed analysis: *https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2023/03/14/flipping-narrative-roots-refugee-protection-system-are-colonial-and-racist*

We use the Dutch case to explore refugee-led advocacy's role in context and to identify conditions for knowledges and perspectives from within refugee-led networks to become sources of epistemic multiplicity and thus contribute to change in the policymaking system (and connected knowledge-production systems). Here, *refugee-led advocacy* refers to all forms of contributing to policymaking or shaping of public opinion by individuals with a refugee background who are part of refugee communities or (informal) networks.

11.2 Context and Authors' Positioning

This chapter stems from empirical collaborations and reflective dialogues between four authors: Mohammed Badran and Domenica Ghidei have both been active in refugee-led networks and organizations for advocacy and are now working professionally in or with Dutch policy institutions and in research. Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni are scholars working on transformative engaged scholarship and refugee narratives.

Our joint work on this chapter's theme started in 2018, when Mohammed, Halleh, Elena and other researchers from the Refugee Academy collaborated in a conference on refugee perspectives based on community knowledge[3] and continued in 2019, when the Dutch Refugee Council asked Halleh, Mohammed, and Elena to provide research-informed advice for instituting cooperation between policy and refugee-led networks. Domenica was one of the interviewed experts. We interviewed active refugee advocates and policymakers in the Netherlands and discussed the findings in two co-creation meetings with refugee advocates. We also used the findings to develop a masterclass[4] for policymakers based on (co-written) refugee advocates' narratives, which were used to prompt reflection on the pitfalls and possibilities of including their perspectives in policymaking. Then we four worked together in the international project 2incING, which involved advocates, policymakers, and researchers in identifying conditions to create meaningful and impactful roles for refugee-led advocacy in the Netherlands and three south-European countries. These two trajectories (see Fig. 11.1) partly overlapped in time and were connected: insights from the first were used in developing materials for the second, while discussions in the second fed later activities that were part of the first (e.g., a 2022 workshop with advocates).

This chapter conveys the lessons learned in these co-creative projects, researching with differently positioned people (advocates, policymakers, researchers) to analyze/understand the necessary conditions to create meaningful routes for refugee-led advocacy in the Netherlands. We also offer a reflective dialogue that allowed us to look back and share theoretically informed analyses of our observations in these projects.

[3] This was a G100 conference (see footnote 5).

[4] *Masterclass*—a training in which participants are guided in reflecting on theoretical knowledge and empirical examples and in connecting their own work practice and experience to those ideas.

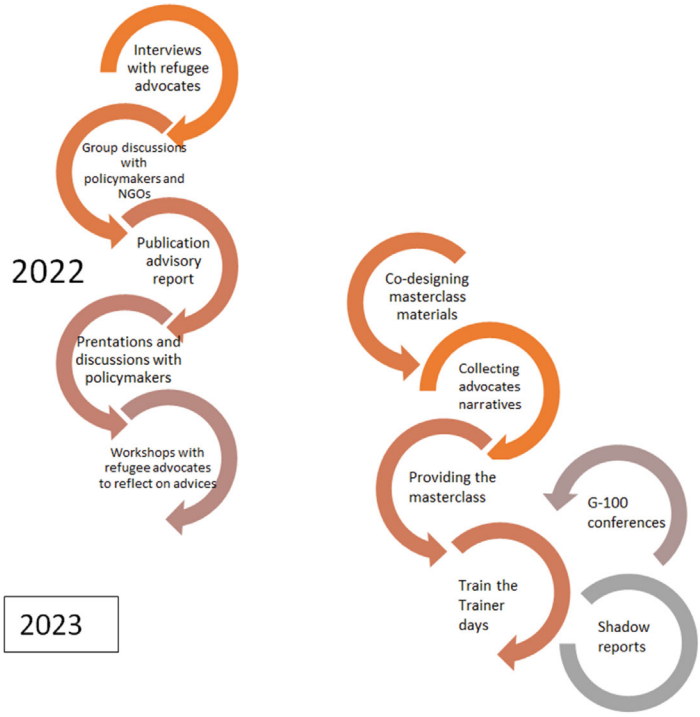

Fig. 11.1 Timeline of the two trajectories on the theme of refugee-led advocacy

Given our years of empirical work and our own migration experiences, we engaged in dialogues upholding the ideal of epistemic multiplicity, juxtaposing our own analysis and personal experiences. We explain our positionings below:

> **Mohammed Badran**—As a dedicated refugee advocate, I have been at the forefront of the refugee-led advocacy movement since the 2016 UN Refugee Migrants Summit, where I had the "opportunity" of being the sole refugee permitted to address the General Assembly. This pivotal moment cemented my commitment to advancing meaningful refugee participation in policy development. Since then, I have tirelessly advocated for including refugee voices in shaping the policies that directly affect our lives and have created practical tools and platforms to facilitate this engagement. Initiatives such as the G-100,[5] the Global Refugee-led Network, and Syrian Volunteers Netherlands, all of which I co-founded, are testaments to my belief in the transformative power of refugee involvement. In my academic and professional roles, I consistently emphasize the necessity of epistemic multiplicity in knowledge production. This approach not only challenges the status quo but also ensures that refugee narratives are integrated into broader societal frameworks, thereby enriching policy-making processes with diverse and authentic perspectives. I am committed to fostering an environment where every voice is heard and valued, paving the way for more equitable and effective refugee policies.

[5] G-100 is a refugee-led initiative and a series of conferences in Europe aimed at ensuring that newcomers' voices are heard in decision-making processes through participatory bottom-up approaches (https://dezwijger.nl/programma/new-voices-for-europe-council)

Domenica Ghidei—In 2017, the expertise lab Refugee Academy began at the VU Amsterdam. This gave long-awaited academic recognition to refugee advocates' many decades of involvement in influencing policy in the Netherlands. Over thirty years earlier, around 1985, together with other refugee advocacy organizations and independent refugee advocates from many different countries, I started a federation to advise local and national government policymakers in designing refugee integration policy in the Netherlands. We, the women of this refugee advocacy organization, also successfully lobbied for (internationally) recognizing gender-based persecution as full-fledged grounds for recognizing refugee women as refugees. As a human rights lawyer working in social science and from a phenomenological approach, I focus on how to bring together multidisciplinary perspectives in a space where the power dynamic is palpable but denied. Working with Halleh, Elena, and Mohammed on 2incING gave me the opportunity to experiment with how to translate refugee advocates' embodied and embedded knowledge and wisdom in influencing policy. My work as an organizational trainer, coach, and adviser on non-discrimination, equity, diversity, and inclusion brought insights on the practical translation of possibilities and challenges in engaging refugee advocates in bureaucratic spaces.

Halleh Ghorashi—Engaging with policymakers, for me, started with my personal experience of coming to the Netherlands as a refugee over 30 years ago. From the outset, I was confused by the refugee reception and integration policies. How could all the effort and money invested in refugee integration be so disconnected from the challenges refugees like myself face. At first, I thought becoming an academic and collecting refugees' narratives about their integration experiences would help provide policymakers the necessary insights to develop tailor-made policies. However, after some years of trying to make societal and policy impacts through refugee narratives, I realized that people with decision-making power needed to have more active engagement with refugees' narratives. Together with Elena, I designed masterclasses that brought different perspectives (of policymakers, refugees, NGO professionals, and academics) together to create impact (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014). This became the foundation of the expertise lab Refugee Academy in 2017 at the VU Amsterdam. I hoped to show the need for multidirectional knowledge production, based in recognizing the value of multiple knowledges, as an important source of the reflection needed to broaden the horizons of the social actors involved. It also became the central question of the Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change project, focused on how to enlarge the transformative capacity of co-creative endeavors between academia and society. This project focused on the importance of experiential and community knowledge and considered the conditions necessary to avoid marginalizing such knowledge.

Elena Ponzoni— In my research and life, I seek to nurture relations that increase my awareness of the subtle workings of power. Refugee Academy has been a pivotal space for this. Different research themes I explore all converge on the importance of pursuing epistemic multiplicity, connecting knowledges rooted in different experiences and positionings. Migrating from Italy to the Netherlands as a student, I have since worked in Dutch academia, navigating the contradictions of pursuing collaborative engagement within the pressure of neoliberal academic structures, while also being academically raised within those structures myself. Being a white scholar in a country and academy imbued with a colonial past and supremacist legacy greatly increases the risk of unconscious complicity with oppressive and exploitative knowledge structures. Avoiding this requires continuous relational and reflective work. Research has been the home where to do this. Collaborative community-based projects and relations with colleagues and partners with other positionalities than my own are the spaces in which I search for paths to contribute to dismantling structures of inequality. The value of embedded knowledge, specifically in refugee-led advocacy, has been a central focus of the Refugee Academy from the start, which makes my work and writing with Mohammed, Domenica, and Halleh particularly important to me.

The mirrored experiences and expectations we encountered while working together in our joint projects form a source of reflection in our dialogue. Our joint empirical work

offered a starting point for looking back on our own experiences as nomadic subjects, contextualizing those in our historically formed understanding, and identifying and theorizing pitfalls and potentialities of refugee-led advocacy in the current Dutch context.[6]

First Trajectory: Writing Advisory Report and Discussions

2019: In-depth interviews with 11 refugee advocates, interviews with five policymakers from three different ministries, and a focus group with an internal advocacy team from the Dutch Refugee Council. Written correspondence with two additional refugee advocates active in previous decades about lessons learned in the past.

2020–2022: After publishing our advisory report, we gave various presentations to policymakers and organized two workshops with active refugee advocates. We shared ideas from the advisory report and collected reflections from both groups.

Second Trajectory: 2incING Project

2022: Co-designed masterclass materials, including a video-lecture with theoretical building stones, co-written personal stories of advocates from different countries, individual and group exercises to reflect on different types of participatory spaces and connected challenges. Masterclass held in four countries; participants' reflections and exchanges collected. In each country, policymaker workshops and G-100 conferences were held. Refugees at conferences looked for collective patterns in their experiences with reception and integration policies. Steering committees of leading figures in refugee advocacy wrote shadow reports for policymakers.

2023: From our experience with the masterclass, we developed Train the Trainer materials and provided a three-day Train the Trainer workshop in Amsterdam. We organized a workshop with advocates on institutional memory and the challenges of refugee-led advocacy and an event for policymakers to discuss the outcomes and importance of the shadow report. The project ended with a conference in Brussels, where advocates and policymakers came together to reflect on the project.

[6] All activities in these projects were centered on co-creative dialogue and reflective exchanges. However, this chapter conveys our own reflections and interpretations and was not discussed with participants, so it is not directly the fruit of co-creation, although the insights we discuss emerged in co-creative processes. We want to acknowledge all participants' contributions to discussions, meetings, the masterclass, Train the Trainer days, and informal conversations.

11.3 Juxtaposing Engagements

Our projects brought together people with refugee experiences wanting to contribute to policy change and actors from institutions. The latter were mostly policymakers or representatives of established Dutch NGOs, who believe that connecting to refugee perspectives is key for developing just, inclusive, and context-sensitive policies, but realize their actual practices rarely uphold this ideal. The 2incING project included both capacity-building activities for institutional actors and a trajectory for refugee advocates. These built on each other, including exchanges and sharing between the two groups. All activities were developed in parallel in four countries (Netherlands, Croatia, Greece, Malta), though this chapter reflects on the Dutch context specifically. The central tool for policymakers was a two-day masterclass "polyvocal policymaking",[7] focused on exchange and cooperation between policymakers and refugee- or migrant-led organizations and individual advocates.

The Dutch masterclass took place in September 2022, with 25 participants, including national and local policymakers, representatives of major NGOs active in refugee protection and participation, refugee advocates who co-produced materials with us, and the four authors. By engaging with theoretical and empirical material, participants reflected on how to connect their work with the lived experiences within refugee and migrant communities and what (visible and invisible) barriers exist to meaningful forms of refugee participation in policymaking. In parallel, the G-100 conference brought together 50 people with refugee backgrounds, including community leaders and people already active in refugee-led advocacy, to identify pitfalls in reception and integration policies. It led to identifying different themes and visions for change and to forming a core group of advocates (Integration Compass committee[8]) who later worked on distilling relevant themes, connecting the different experiences of people in their communities. One outcome was a shadow report that, in January 2024, was presented to and discussed with policymakers and NGOs (some of whom had been masterclass participants).

11.3.1 Theoretical Building Blocks

A common assumption among project participants was that, without connecting with embedded experiential and community knowledges, it is not possible to design policies that positively contribute to the present and future of refugees in the Netherlands.

[7] The four authors designed the masterclass with contributions from refugee advocates and community leaders in the countries in which it was provided.

[8] For the 2incING project, steering committees were formed in each country, consisting of refugee advocates with leading roles in the project. The Dutch steering committee, calling itself Integration Compass, comprised nine people rooted in different refugee communities, who use their existing networks to map experiences with integration policies. In 2023, they wrote a shadow report on how policies influence newcomers' work, education, and mental health.

One starting point was the explicit acknowledgement of the need to connect with lived experiences to develop socially just policies. Anne Phillips (1996) calls this the "politics of presence," which values the physical presence of underrepresented groups over a purely "politics of ideas." Presence is the first step toward inclusive policymaking; the next is to actively create space for the knowledge and wisdom of silenced communities, recognizing them as essential for equitable decisions. For Philips both presence and ideas from historically excluded groups are crucial for addressing social injustice.

Focusing on the value of marginal knowledges and insider/outsider positions for critically reflecting on the status quo and enabling change, our project led us to critically examine conditions for this knowledge to emerge and actually make a difference. Black feminist standpoint theorists such as Hill Collins, 2000 argue that embodied, lived experiences from marginalized positions hold high epistemological value for understanding society. Addressing the exclusion of these perspectives from decision-making and knowledge production requires examining structures that limit refugees' and other silenced communities' access to contexts in which policy ideas are formed. It also requires awareness of implicit and less visible structures and power dynamics that, even when these groups are invited to participate, still limit the impact of their contribution. Young (2002) calls this "internal exclusion": hidden dynamics that define what counts as relevant, informed, what form legitimate contributions should have, thereby neutralizing the impact of historically excluded communities when they do not conform to these implicit rules (Young, 2002).

11.3.2 Participant's Experiences

Many of our projects' participants from refugee communities had previously been involved with advocacy work in different contexts, such as being on advisory boards or being occasionally invited to meetings with policymakers. However, they encountered severe limitations in these roles. Frequently mentioned experiences include being asked to provide knowledge and advice without being told how it would be used, what its impact would be, or what actually happened with one's contribution. This leaves advocates, who often invest considerable personal energy and non-compensated time in these consultations, with the feeling that their efforts are purely part of a tokenistic ticking-the-box strategy. Another example is being invited to contribute to discussions, even in important venues, but realizing that one's role was only that of "putting a human face to someone else's plea." Advocates also reported being consulted very late in the process of creating policy frames (and usually under considerable time pressure). Their contribution was clearly not meant to be "a core ingredient of the pie" but at best functioned as decoration. Common threads were the feeling that their perspectives were discredited as being only "one out of many"

and experiencing a co-option of one's perspective so it becomes part of an already existing dominant perspective and loses its transformative character.[9]

These experiences were mirrored in policymakers' responses. For example, they referred to consulting refugee advocates as an additional step in their work (not an essential one). They also wished refugee-led groups would "unite" in one, coordinated group with one message but showed no interest in providing financial support for such a complex endeavor., This expectation disregards the impossibility of having such a united message given the heterogeneity of refugees and their needs. Schrover (2010) has shown the historical fallacy of governments' expecting migrant advisory boards to represent a whole group with a singular message. This unrealistic expectation sometimes appeared to function as an excuse not to take seriously the contribution of advocates (for example, the claim their perspective is "one out of many"). Also, representatives of Dutch NGOs advocating for refugees in official arenas reported sometimes simply "looking for someone with a refugee background to take along" so they could reinforce the NGO's argument with their personal story. Despite these limitations, policymakers and participants of formal institutions were often invested in searching for ways to connect differently with refugee-led groups. However, they often felt isolated in this search and constrained by the lack of space at the institutional level. What we saw during our activities was that these participants felt the need for reflective networks and coalitions with others sharing this search.

Another theme emerging repeatedly in the sessions was that exchanges with policymakers are generally one-sided. Advocates are asked to share their experiences, provide advice, or react to policy drafts, but, because there is no two-way capacity sharing in these collaborations, the values, power relations, and institutional frames that policymakers have to deal with remain unknown to advocates. Also, advocates often do not receive follow-ups, so whatever (especially more long-term) impacts their engagement may have had often remains invisible to them. This lack of transparency increases their sense of powerlessness.

The barriers limiting refugee advocacy's impact can have serious personal consequences, also on a personal level, as appeared in the stories of (former) refugee advocates who have long been active in the Netherlands. An immense imbalance often exists between what refugee advocates are prepared to give—in energy, time, network, and emotional investment—and the actual space they receive to make a difference. The work and lives of earlier generations of refugee advocates reveal the, sometimes destructive, personal effects of engaging in refugee-led advocacy. Indeed, many who have been active for decades have had to face persistent stress and frustration, leading not only to profound disillusionment but also to health damage (see also Spit et al., 2025). In our conversations, we connected this reality with the repeatedly shared experience (by refugee advocates) of being asked to contribute from a

[9] See for a telling example our report (Ponzoni et al., 2020, p. 23), where we describe how M's concerns about asylum seekers' health, well-being, and social safety were ignored by local authorities until, after an incident, they were used to strengthen the authorities' own narrative about the asylum seeker center's risk to the neighborhood. Only through this co-option was his story considered relevant.

position that is always *external* to the systems that need transformation (policy, institutions, organizations), while *within* these systems, a deeper and substantial belief in the value of insider/outsider knowledges is actually missing. This lack of a deep-felt need for critical transformation creates a perpetual sense of dependency and of being asked to serve (in the sense of "being at the service of") institutions or organizations that reproduce exclusionary mechanisms. This resonates with what Wekker, in her analysis of the colonial cultural archive that permeates Dutch society, calls the trope of the racialized "helper," typically portrayed as subordinate and supportive, grateful and loyal, and non-threatening (Wekker, 2016).

While advocates wish to have more access and more impact in the institutional world, they also reported fearing the risk of becoming co-opted by institutions when actually making stronger connections with institutional actors. Advocates participating in the 2incING project reflected on how, through this project, they had become more conscious of the possibilities, constraints, and vulnerabilities of connections with institutional representatives. An example are the relations advocates made with national policymakers who participated in masterclasses, workshops, and presentations and who profiled themselves as allies. Some advocates found that being vocal and disrupting conversations that were ignoring their knowledge was easier at the start of the project than at the end. For them, creating alliances or collaborations with policymakers brought new levels of cautiousness and even self-censure, dictated by the fear of losing even these limited connections.

11.3.3 The Significance of Relating Experiences

In juxtaposing the experiences and reflections of differently positioned participants, including refugee advocates and institutional or NGO representatives, it became clear that, even though all ostensibly supported the importance of a politics of presence, the possibilities to shape spaces where refugee advocates' experiences could have a meaningful impact appeared very limited. Clearly, these limitations are not always equally visible from all positions. Some institutional representatives, for instance, appeared surprised when hearing refugee advocates' describe the long list of barriers or frustrating experiences endured in their effort to contribute. But, in becoming more aware of these barriers, these institutional participants also seemed to realize that they themselves were caught in structures that made it difficult to combat them. It appeared difficult to avoid tokenism and box-ticking in contexts where connecting with refugee communities' experiences was not a central starting point for developing policy frames but rather a discretionary and additional step in the process (Larruina & Ghorashi, 2020).

Also, although they were the ones most familiar with the institutional frames, institutional participants often expressed a fundamental sense of insecurity and hesitancy regarding not only how to best involve refugee advocates in conversations but also how to consider their contribution altogether. To understand this, we dive into the particularities of the Dutch institutional context forming the historical background

of the above-described efforts, thereby helping to further understand the deep-rooted barriers to acknowledging refugee knowledges and perspectives.

11.4 Dutch Institutional Context

Until the 1990s, migrants' and refugees' representation in the Netherlands relied on formal advisory bodies offering solicited and unsolicited advice to government institutions. These bodies were expected to represent entire communities—an unrealistic, essentialist assumption that undermined refugee-led advocates' credibility (Schrover, 2010). Over time, this system was dismantled. Currently, we see a shift from emphasizing collective representation to an increasing interest in individual stories and personal experiences. This is paired with increasing international attention to refugee participation in global policy (Milner et al., 2022). The UN has repeatedly emphasized meaningful refugee involvement, and new networks of refugee-led organizations supported by European institutions are emerging. In the Dutch context, this resonates with widespread "nothing about us without us" calls (Damen et al., 2022). Yet, translating these intentions into concrete opportunities remains limited.

The drafting of Dutch refugee reception and integration policies follows standardized processes that rarely involve refugee communities. At best, vague aims of "consultation" are included in these processes, often interpreted pragmatically through established relations with actors deemed reliable, considered spokespeople for refugees' perspectives. These are typically NGOs founded by native Dutch professionals rather than refugee-led initiatives. Historically, such organizations were seen as bridging the gap between refugees and policymakers, combining advocacy with service provision. Their long-standing presence and networks make them familiar and trusted. As one policymaker noted during the 2incING project, they offer "a welcome balance between involvement and distance." This preference reflects historical patterns that devalue lived experience as knowledge, privileging distance and detachment as supposedly "neutral" positions.

This way of "speaking for the subaltern" (Spivak, 2023) is rooted in paternalistic and white supremacist paradigms. Feminist and decolonial scholars have long exposed the costs of such practices, including academia's role in epistemic injustice by speaking for marginalized communities and framing them exclusively through pain and loss (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Hartman, 2007). In systems of structural exclusion, privileged voices often advocate for humane treatment by reproducing images of victimhood and powerlessness.

Similar patterns persist in contemporary democracies. In Dutch discourse, refugees are portrayed both as threatening "others" and as victims needing protection (Blankvoort et al., 2021; Ghorashi, 2021). Supportive actors also reproduce victimizing narratives to counter xenophobia. This nexus between protection and victimization forces refugees to trade agency for safety, reducing them to passive subjects (Kirkwood, 2017; Welfens, 2023). Van Walsum (2008) illustrates how gendered assumptions in Dutch migration law exclude women who do not fit the "ideal victim"

mold forcing women to trading intimate and substantial aspects of one's identity for protection. Similarly, queer asylum seekers, to obtain protection, are forced to adapt their story to fit stereotype narratives of extreme isolation and abuse—often denying sources of strength and positive relationships, which comes at a very high emotional (Bekele et al., 2024).

Finally, embodied and situated knowledges have long been marginalized in Dutch academia and policymaking, which are deeply intertwined. Essed and Nimako (2006) show how this entanglement coincided with the exclusion of scholars of color, whose work was dismissed as too normative or insufficiently neutral (Essanhaji, 2023; Ghorashi, 2023). While positionality of white scholars remained invisible under the guise of neutrality, othering mechanisms toward migrants and refugees persisted (see also the chapter titled Supporting or Transforming the Status Quo? in this book).

11.5 Embedded Knowledge

In recent years, emancipatory and social justice-oriented movements have claimed space for marginalized knowledges and highlighted narratives as key to address exclusionary discourses and expose social injustices. This has led to unprecedented attention on narratives' and stories' importance for creating empathic connections and stimulating the imagination of people in decision-making positions. Indeed, many people within institutions, like the policymakers participating in our trajectories, appear keen to latch on to these developments and create space for narratives from the margins in their organizations. Refugee participants in our trajectories are often invited to share their personal experiences in different contexts. However, the value of these personal stories and experiences is often contested because they can be easily instrumentalized or shifted aside as individual anecdotes (Purkey, 2016).

This attitude neglects the relevance of shared problem framing and collective actions within refugee communities. In these exchanges, embodied knowledges rooted in personal experiences become forms of what we call "embedded knowledge" (a central term in both our projects). The Integration Compass committee's Shadow Report,[10] for instance, included compelling individual examples showing contradictions and paradoxes in current policies regarding refugees' access to work, education, and mental healthcare. These were presented as examples of larger patterns of refugee experiences emerging in conversation with others.[11] The knowledge emerging in these narratives, although embodied in the storytellers' lives and not necessarily representing unitary experiences shared by every group member, is more than just individual embodied knowledge. It is knowledge *embedded* in relational awareness, which emerges in interactions with others.

[10] https://vu.nl/nl/onderzoek/shadow-reports-from-refugee-and-migrant-advocates

[11] Similarly, the masterclass used examples of individual stories (written with the story owners) to prompt reflection on exclusionary mechanisms.

As we discussed extensively in workshops with refugee advocates, embedded knowledge requires the ability to "connect the dots" between stories and see relevant patterns for reflecting on the current (policy) situation. In this form of experiential knowledge, particular aspects of one's own story are mirrored in others' experiences and recognized as relevant because they show something important that is publicly ignored. It is particularly their being located at the margins of societal discourses and policy frames that allows people carrying embedded knowledges to recognize these patterns of experiences that are shared with peers but ignored, silenced, or distorted in mainstream spaces (Hill Collins, 2000).

Refugee advocates most active in our trajectories, such as Integration Compass committee members, carry *embedded knowledge*. Domenica's interaction with advocates in the workshops showed how the wisdom of earlier generations is crucial for developing different forms of consciousness. These include *relational consciousness*, which enables seeing broader patterns by mirroring experiences with fellow refugees—networks most policymakers lack. Advocates also develop *practical consciousness* (Giddens, 1979) as their long-term engagement with Dutch society enables some understanding of the practical structures of the host country, while still retaining an outsider perspective linked to their home country. This insider/outsider position (Hill Collins, 1986) fosters originality because structural norms are constantly negotiated (Said, 1993), leading to a form of *reflective consciousness.*

All these forms of consciousness need recognition and support. For example, practical consciousness is hindered by one-sided exchanges with policymakers. More reciprocal dialogue would help advocates understand the constraints of their advisory role and strengthen their ability to reflect on policy structures. When these consciousness types are nurtured, embedded knowledge becomes more than individual experience—it connects to shared patterns of refugee-ness (Malkki, 1992). While these narratives do not represent whole refugee communities, their partial representation remains essential for addressing ongoing challenges.

Recognizing embedded knowledges as valuable sources of institutional engagements, which means upholding epistemic multiplicity, is an indispensable step for creating policies rooted in social justice. However, as argued above, such recognition is far from obvious in the context of Dutch institutions.

11.6 Searching for Pathways in Seemingly Impossible Structures: Two Paradoxes

The end phase of our trajectory brought a series of reflective conversations among us authors and with others in the 2incING project, which were influenced by the period in which they took place. During the Dutch elections of November 2023, the (relatively unexpected) overwhelming support for extremist right-wing parties with racist and xenophobic rhetorics shocked many people working with equality and social justice issues from all kinds of different positionings. Many European and other countries

saw a similar trend. This change and an increased visibility in painful, dehumanizing discourses connected with the war in Palestine cast a dark shadow on our reflections. Our conversations naturally centered on the impossibilities, impasses, and paradoxes we see when working toward epistemic multiplicity in relation to refugee communities, the academy, or policy institutions. Below, we present two paradoxes identified in these reflective conversations and look for the pathways and possibilities between the lines. Though paradoxes indicate contradictions and instability, such disruptive moments can also provide room to see possibilities for change.

11.6.1 First Paradox: Decolonial Intentions, Actions, and Projects Exist within Structures Shaped by the Coloniality of Power

Working within structures and cultures[12] stemming from colonialist frames leaves little space to make a difference because the implicit norms are very strong. Hierarchies of knowledge stemming from historical systems of oppression, such as the marginalization of embodied and situated knowledges of "racialized others," permeate not only modern governmental institutions but also academia and are so pervasive it is hard for people working in these systems to change them. This is paradoxical, as many people become active in policy, civil society, or knowledge institutions in order to contribute to change. However, even for people critical of structural injustices, being part of the institutional system always involves some complicity. Recruitment and training within these systems, as well as their bureaucratic structures, demand the reproduction of modes of being, talking, and acting that sustain (epistemic) exclusions and injustices. For instance, policymakers committed to engaging with refugee perspectives are often not able to give them a serious, impactful role or to challenge the normalized paths for policy design that bypass refugees' embedded knowledges. Despite recent attention on the importance of narratives with emancipatory value, their impact will likely remain limited if they are not matched with a deep-level recognition of the epistemic value of embodied and embedded knowledges.

As explained in the introduction to this chapter, institutions such as the refugee protection system are rooted in hierarchies stemming from coloniality. Dominant images of refugees as passive actors, whose needs are defined by Dutch policymakers and support-providing white organizations, exemplify how the "coloniality of power" still permeates the modern dynamics of reception and integration. It works through the actions of people in positions of power who overlook how their actions make others passive. Wekker's (2016) earlier mentioned idea of a cultural archive is on point here. She argues that Dutch society is permeated by the myth of white innocence—the belief that white Dutch people are inherently ethical, progressive,

[12] See Wekker's notion of "cultural archives" mentioned earlier

and non-racist, which helps maintain a self-image of benevolence and moral superiority, while obscuring the exclusionary power dynamics and the need for deep transformation.

Prasad and Prasad (2003) argue that colonial legacy is a continuation of a colonial practice entailing "the social and cultural construction of a fundamental *ontological* distinction between 'the west' and 'the non-west.'" This distinction was based on an elaborate system of hierarchical binary oppositions (e.g., active/passive, rational/emotional, secular/religious, superior/inferior, scientific/superstitious, civilized/savage, objective/subjective, etc.). One way to deconstruct these binaries is to dismantle their hierarchical relationship. Think about the importance of oral cultures, which become marginalized in the worship of the written word, which is dominant in our institutions. Or consider the importance of emotional involvement and academic engagement in the struggle for justice, which is mostly degraded by the argument of objectivity. One crucial pathway we see toward epistemic multiplicity lies in the reiterated and continual work of ascribing value to the categories that have been disregarded by colonial legacy, thereby bringing back dignity to what has been ignored or even disparaged. Working in repeated reflective projects with people differently positioned in the field might help all involved in becoming more and more conscious of these binaries, thereby paving the way to embracing and cherishing the experiential and community knowledge that has been disregarded for decades.

11.6.2 Second Paradox: Refugee-Led Advocacy Entails Moving Between "Crushing Margins" and "Complying Center"

Staying perpetually at the margins when hoping to make a difference in institutions can end up crushing people, as we saw in the experiences of those with long institutional memories of refugee-led advocacy. Relations with policymakers are often one-sided, lacking two-way capacity sharing. The large imbalance between personal and emotional investment and perceived impact can have profound effects on refugee advocates' lives.

But paradoxically, the experiences of advocates participating in our projects show that distancing oneself from the margins and getting closer to the center of decision-making does not automatically reduce insecurities and tensions. When starting to work more structurally with or even within institutions (e.g., receiving formal assignments from governments or building productive alliances with individual policymakers, like during the 2incING project), advocates face pressures to conform to discursive and institutional norms and expectations. If advocates become part of institutions, moreover, this means they will also carry responsibility and unwanted complicity for inherited forms of harm and structural exclusion that these institutions reproduce (such as forms of institutional racism). Also, advocates in our

projects feared that moving away from the margins and forming tighter connections with formal institutions might affect their perspectives and their connection with embodied knowledges in their community. Moving away from the margins and connecting more with people within the institutional system.

In order to preserve embedded knowledges and to make them impactful, it is therefore essential to continuously re-wave ties between people occupying different positions—in the spectrum between informal community-led work and formal work within institutions, and that chains of trust are created. Such chains require embracing and cultivating the insider-outsider positions of all actors involved (particularly refugee advocates) to even partially push back the dominance of institutional and discursive norms, which undervalue the importance of such insider-outsider positions in the first place. Furthermore, when actors acknowledge their marginalized selves when conforming to the norm, it allows them to see the value of refugee advocates' in-between position and hold space for them in their institutions. These will allow individuals within these chains to support each other in bringing what is marginalized to the center and to consider the limitations and possibilities of their own position in a different light when contributing to transforming exclusionary structures.

Moreover, while our projects envisioned co-creative spaces where refugee advocates and policymakers could jointly shape policy, it is crucial to acknowledge the limits of this ambition. True co-creation would require profound institutional change and shared responsibility—rarely possible for governmental actors. Collaborations thus generally remain within invited spaces, though co-designed interventions can occur, such as sessions for knowledge-sharing and listening in which refugee advocates hold space for divergent voices to emerge and the rules governing engagement and interaction are co-designed and co-owned.

11.7 Regenerative Connections in the Dynamic Relation Between Margin and Center

These paradoxes create the need, and the space, to imagine new pathways for increasing epistemic multiplicity. The path that came back repeatedly in our reflective conversations is that of creating new regenerative connections between different players. First, networks of regenerative connections are needed between refugee advocates' networks and communities. Former refugees who have an institutional memory and a long history of influencing policy are especially important here. Their knowledge of structural barriers and exclusion mechanisms in the Netherlands can help younger generations of refugees gain traction and discover new strategies to better navigate the field of policy-influencing. The added value of intergenerational connections between advocates from younger and older generations is seen clearly in the strong recognition of similar experiences and their need to learn from each other's experiences. In this interconnectedness of stories lies a potential that can bring

about mutual inspiration and knowledge exchange. Also important are ties of intra-group solidarity that allow advocates to see the common struggles between different refugee communities (or other societal groups) that, though somewhat different, are engaged in similar battles for social justice from marginal positions.

Second, it is important to create and maintain connections that create chains of reflective exchanges connecting perspectives outside and inside the system of institutions. Policymakers working with refugee-led advocacy should cherish epistemic multiplicity and value embedded knowledge, which becomes meaningful in the reciprocal, reflective, and respectful relations they build with refugee advocates. Refugee advocates who work with policymakers or other actors at the institutional level are able to maintain their insider/outsider role (and thus embedded knowledge) when they can keep connecting themselves with the perspectives of people who have more marginal positions in their communities. Relating from multiple positions entails the continuous work of dialogue and of awareness of the limits and possibilities connected with each position.

In arguing for the importance of restorative and regenerative connections in relation to embedded knowledge and in-betweenness, we find inspiration in the connection between resistance and vulnerability elaborated by Butler et al. (2016). Countering the neoliberal interpretation of resistance as individual resilience and the paternalistic interpretation of vulnerability as passive, they problematize the opposition between these notions. Vulnerability and resistance must be connected to work toward modes of alliance and political intervention that are based on a deep recognition of the interdependence of differently positioned actors and their embodied knowledges and vulnerabilities. There is a need for networks that recognize vulnerability and that support, nurture, and root individuals' knowledges and actions. These networks of care enable a flow of insights, wisdom, and knowledge to create regenerative and intergenerational efforts.

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Chapter 12
Institutional Solidarity with Forced Migrants at a South African University

Leah Koskimaki and Azania Simthandile Tyhali

12.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the potential for building institutional solidarity with refugees and migrants within academic spaces in the historical, economic, and social landscape of higher education in South Africa. We explore this in the context of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town, where we and our colleagues are building a program for the study of migration and mobilities: the Migration and Mobilities Interdisciplinary Collective in Africa (MMICA). UWC is an important space to explore solidarity with refugees: It is a historically disadvantaged university hosting a large number of black students from low-income backgrounds, as well as forced migrant students from various countries on the continent. UWC also played a role in the struggle against apartheid, as well as in the recent #FeesMustFall student protest movement in 2015, which called for decolonization of the universities and greater access to education for marginalized groups. The university also promotes research that contributes to engagement and knowledge co-production within local communities.

Foregrounding engaged scholarship with and for forced migrants in this space as an extension of UWC's legacy of social transformation, this chapter expands on the concept of "institutional solidarity" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016, 2019) and "transformative engaged scholarship" (Introduction chapter, this volume) to consider how this space has been and can continue to be generated with and for forced migrants. As the chapter will explain, this solidarity requires ongoing work and reflection and should involve refugee participation in supporting both refugee students at the

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university and academic engagement with organizations for forced migrant concerns in the community.

The chapter is organized as follows: First, it offers an overview of the forced migrant context in South Africa, followed by some forced migrant student narratives from UWC. Second, it conceptualizes migrant solidarity, focusing on the challenges and opportunities for generating institutional solidarity for refugees in academic spaces. Third, the chapter then offers an overview of the role of community engagement at UWC historically and in the present. Fourth, it provides an overview of how other universities have engaged in solidarity practices with refugees, leading to a discussion on how institutional solidarity could be enacted further at UWC based on our recommendations, refugee student voices, and literature on engaged refugee research in South Africa.

12.2 Forced Migration Context in South Africa

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, South Africa has been a destination for forced migrants seeking safety and better lives, with many arriving from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, and Zimbabwe (UNHCR, 2025). United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics estimate 250,250 refugees (who received refugee permits) and asylum seekers (who have applied for asylum and are awaiting refugee permits) currently live in South Africa (UNHCR, 2025). However, these figures do not account for the undocumented and irregular migrants seeking asylum or for the backlog and delays at the reception offices. South Africa is a signatory on international refugee conventions and protocols, but in practice, asylum seekers face challenges in obtaining refugee status and social inclusion. As soon as an asylum seeker enters the country, they are required to apply for an asylum seeker permit without delay. Section 22 of the Refugee Act grants a temporary asylum seeker permit, which must be renewed every three to six months at the Refugee Reception Office, until refugee status is granted. Some asylum seekers renew their permits for years without gaining refugee status, and many applications are eventually rejected (Amit & Kriger, 2014). Refugee Reception Offices in South Africa are known for their bureaucratic and slow procedures, which often create obstacles to receiving or renewing permits and thus make forced migrants even more vulnerable (Hoag, 2010; Johnson, 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Moyo & Botha, 2022; Moyo & Zanker, 2020; Rugunanan & Smit, 2011). Although asylum seekers are allowed to stay in the country and work or study while waiting for their refugee status, many are not offered work due to their temporary permits and are discriminated against, often ending up illegalized, leading to the loss of jobs and livelihoods (Khan et al., 2021; Moyo & Zanker, 2020). Even after achieving refugee status, refugees still cannot easily access social services and often face xenophobia and discrimination (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010; Kavuro, 2022).

In South Africa, asylum seekers and refugees do not reside in camps; instead, they are supposed to integrate themselves into urban areas. However, inequality and

unemployment in South Africa as a legacy of apartheid has impacted communities and life in townships, where many forced migrants settle due to the relative affordability of these neighborhoods. Xenophobia against migrants is high in these areas, fueled by negative portrayals in the media and via political parties who scapegoat them for social problems and the lack of jobs (Misago, 2017; Moyo & Zanker, 2020). Much of this xenophobia has been referred to as "Afrophobia," (Nyamnjoh, 2016) directed toward Somalian, Congolese, Zimbabwean, and other continental migrants. Xenophobia is experienced by African migrants of all categories—whether they are asylum seekers, refugees, permanent residents, irregularized, or holding work permits.

While we note the importance of the forced migrant category for this chapter and we draw on forced migrant students' narratives regarding their unique challenges, our discussion also acknowledges the blurring of migrant and refugee categories, especially in the South African context. We agree with Erdal and Oeppen (2017, p. 983) who argue that migration scholars need to interrogate the discourses around such categories, "recognise our own roles in creating, influencing and maintaining or disrupting them" and gain insight into migrants' "own interpretations of experiences." In South Africa, there is a "deliberate collapsing of the distinction between refugees and labor migrants by the South African government at a legislative, policy and narrative level" (Moyo & Zanker, 2022, p. 254). By this, Moyo and Zanker (2022) refer to the South African government's legislative documents on migrants and refugees, in which schools and employers often check asylum seekers' Section 22 permits, as if it were a visa, as well as its annex regarding skills categories. They also note the bureaucratization that makes it hard for asylum seekers to get permits and also complicates "regular" pathways to immigration. Finally, they point to the lack of clear statistics on migrant and refugee numbers that creates a "vantage point by political leaders to construct a threat from the migrant other" (Moyo & Zanker, 2022, p. 258).

Furthermore, Zimbabwean migration, which has been described as "crisis driven" (Crush & Tevera, 2010), is treated differently in South Africa. Because of the larger numbers of Zimbabwean migrants crossing into South Africa, as a neighboring country, and in order to "reduce pressure on the asylum and refugee system," (Khan, 2024, p. 5) the South African government created a separate temporary labor scheme for Zimbabweans. This scheme is continually at risk of being terminated, leaving many Zimbabweans with no ability to gain alternative status or permanence (Carciotto, 2018; Khan, 2024) and creating a liminal and uncertain existence (Nyakabawu, 2021). Thus, Moyo & Zanker (2022, p. 257) argue that "certain nationalities, especially Zimbabwean, have basically no chance of gaining refugee status in South Africa, amounting to group-based criteria for exclusion." It is our experience through research and teaching that while some migrants, such as Zimbabweans, do not hold or could not access official asylum or refugee permits, their migration experiences and motivations coincide with the description of a forced migrant as one who flees their country in precarious circumstances. Therefore, we include their experiences in this chapter.

12.3 Challenges of Forced Migrant Students

Barriers to higher education for forced migrants globally include difficulties in navigating administrative restrictions, accessing information, affording fees, accessing scholarships, having missing credentials, and language proficiency and psychosocial health challenges (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Morrice, 2013). Forced migrants in South Africa also experience these issues, and this section explains how they manifest in the local context.

South Africa remains a major destination for student mobility on the African continent (Hiralal, 2015; Tati, 2012). Forced migrants with asylum seeker and refugee permits are allowed to study at the universities as long as their permits remain valid. However, South African universities categorize all foreign students, regardless of their permit category, as international students for administrative purposes. Tati (2012, p. 131) reports that from 1994–2010, international student numbers increased in South African universities; in 2009, UWC's foreign student enrolment was 1357. In response to our request for the number of forced migrant students in 2024, the UWC administration provided only general international student numbers: 1202 international students are enrolled at UWC, with high numbers from Zimbabwe, Namibia, Sudan, Nigeria, Zambia, and the DRC. The recent literature we reviewed (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Hiralal, 2015; Tati, 2012) on international or foreign students' challenges did not explicitly state whether the experiences cited were those of forced migrant groups. However, from our experience conducting research with and teaching migrant students, we found that migrant students of various backgrounds report experiencing similar kinds of precarity and challenges at South African universities, which we explain below. Given these students' financial challenges and experiences of exclusion, Tati (2012, p. 120) argued that there is "little space for foreign students to contribute to the transformation process or to become integral agents of change in the post-apartheid higher education system."

To illustrate how such challenges were experienced at UWC, in this section we share some refugee voices describing their own challenges, based on qualitative empirical data collected by one of the co-authors of this chapter, Tyhali. The experiences of four forced migrant students from the DRC and Rwanda and two students who fled from Zimbabwe due to the economic crisis there emerged in unstructured interviews and focus groups with African migrant students from various backgrounds and nationalities. Some of their concerns include the burden of ensuring the timely renewal of permits; lack of access to scholarships and financial aid, which are given to citizens only; age limits in qualifying for funding; fewer opportunities to socialize and build a sense of belonging; and challenges in accessing affordable and safe accommodation.

Struggles with documentation include renewing asylum seeker permits, obtaining refugee status, and certifying educational qualifications. For example, "Michael" is an asylum seeker student from the DRC in his 40 s and has been renewing his asylum seeker permit every few months for more than 15 years. The pending expiry of his

permit has periodically led to his bank account being closed, delayed his receiving funding, and affected his registration.

Such struggles also affect these students' financial stability; forced migrants express financial challenges as one of their major concerns. Financial challenges impact their ability to pay for not only fees but also transport to campus and needed resources such as computers, phones, and data. Many forced migrant students come to university later in their lives and thus must also support their families and children while studying.

Although South African citizens studying at universities are eligible for various kinds of scholarships, bursaries, and financial assistance aimed at redressing past inequalities perpetuated during apartheid, these are often not accessible for non-citizens. International fees (which apply uniformly to all non-South African nationals, including forced migrant students) are a barrier at many South African universities and pose challenges to finishing one's degree (Raghuram et al., 2020). UWC requires all students to pay registration fees up front, even before they can be awarded their bursaries, and refugee students—who must register as international students—are required to pay the registration fee and entire tuition upon registration. "Mary," from Rwanda, is supporting her two children while studying. She cannot regularly afford data or transport because her small bursary only went into paying her fees. She lamented how asylum seekers were considered the same as international students despite often facing more financial vulnerability. "Tendayi," from Zimbabwe, described this constant cycle of precarity in which students do not have enough financial savings to pay registration fees and tuition, but they need to be registered to access the funding bursaries or commence work study.

Students also struggle to get employment due to their temporary asylum seeker permits being less favored in the job market. "Charles," from the DRC, shared that he struggles with finding employment due to English not being his first language. Although "Michael" had a degree from the DRC when he arrived in Cape Town, he could only get work as a car guard (a very low-paying job requiring him to stand in the shopping center parking lots), which meant he could not easily build an income. "Tafi," from Zimbabwe, shared how, when she arrived, she could not afford campus accommodation and also did not have enough savings to pay a deposit and secure a safe rental near campus. She had therefore ended up sleeping on the floor of another person's room. She mentioned that some of her friends from Zimbabwe also did not have accommodation at the university and could not afford private renting, so they had slept at the residential services office. As she explained, "It was not a nice experience; you know, you are far from home, and you are homeless at a university. Those things affect you, my friend, and you have not begun with academics..." With this, Tafi referred to her own and fellow refugee students' experience of spending a lot of time just trying to register and find a place to stay and becoming exhausted before even being able to start their academic work.

A student's financial instability may also impact their access to opportunities to socialize academically and create a sense of belonging because they must leave campus to work at other jobs or cannot afford to regularly hang out at eateries and other coffee shops. For example, Michael's limited time on campus meant that he did

not have time to attend any associations or social meetings with other students. Tafi explained, "It's hard when you are an immigrant student—you must make friends with local students to be familiar with the university." Many students talked about feeling xenophobia on campus and not being included in opportunities or academic social spaces.

We share these examples as a background to better understand the local context and therefore the potential obstacles to building solidarity and engagement for and with forced migrants at UWC. The forced migrant students in Tyhali's research reported how they found themselves caught between hoping for an improvement in their situation and feeling the need for compliance to maintain their position at the university.

The rest of this chapter reflects on how diverse solidarity practices can be fostered in and from academia. We first conceptualize migrant solidarity and then focus on the lens of the institution—with the university as an institutional body that has a potential role in extending forced refugee solidarity through student support and community engagement.

12.4 Migrant Solidarity

Migrant solidarity in this chapter refers to recent theorizations and explorations of the various arenas in which hospitality and support are extended to migrants and refugees at a local, and often urban, scale (Bauder, 2020) or beyond in city or transnational networks (Bauder, 2021a; Lacroix, 2022), even in opposition to national policies or laws on regularizing (forced) migrants (Bauder, 2020; Darling, 2021; Jørgensen & Schierup, 2021; Kreichauf & Mayer, 2021). Some of these themes emerged during Europe's refugee "crisis" when increased enactments of humanitarian, civic, municipal, and grassroots support arose at the city level for accommodating and welcoming refugees (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Bauder, 2021b). Such spaces of migrant and refugee solidarity can connect people "in diverse places and at various scales, ranging from homes and places of worship, schools and campuses, cities and towns, and transnational networks to converge on common political struggles related to free mobility and access to rights and dignity" (Bauder, 2021a, p. 3215).

A literature review of migrant solidarity practices in South Africa (Koskimaki & Mazani, 2025) finds that because government support for forced migrants is shown to be weak in South Africa, more examples of support occur through civil society and refugee-led organizations (Uwimpuhwe & Ruiters, 2018), within faith-based groups and churches (Hungwe, 2015; Mazani, 2023; Mpofu, 2018; Mukafuku, 2021), and informal solidarity between and within migrant groups (Makanda, 2021; Mbatha & Koskimaki, 2023; Rugunanan, 2022). We refer to these later in the chapter as important community spaces with which universities have and can continue to engage to build academic and community collaborations and bring together new research and transformative praxis for forced migrants.

Agustín and Jørgensen (2016, 2019) outline three conceptual areas of solidarity for migrants: autonomous, civic, or institutional. They describe autonomous solidarity as "horizontal participation" that is "produced in self-organized (mainly urban) spaces," while civic solidarity refers broadly to the inclusion and support for refugees in NGOs and civil society. In this chapter, we borrow their third concept of institutional solidarity, which "represents the formalization in different degrees of solidarity" and "connects the civil society arena with the one of policy-making" in spaces that are welcoming to migrant groups (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 41). The concept of an institution here, they argue, can apply "both to existing institutions" as well as to the potential to build new ones (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 38). Overall, they write that institutions help to create organizational structures through which to communicate and take action. Examples of institutions positively involved in migrant solidarity can be large organizations or smaller community spaces such as libraries.

However, institutions can also potentially undermine solidarity movements. Using a Gramscian analysis, Agustín and Jørgensen (2016, pp. 231–232) also describe the pitfalls of institutional solidarity, giving as an example the EU's commitment to take in refugees. They argue that "the European Commission can absorb the critique made by the grassroots solidarity movement and neutralise the movement by integrating its proposals into the EU migration framework" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016, p. 232). They therefore caution that this form of institutional solidarity can be "contentious" and at times is thus "reduced to a strategic calculation of rights and obligations or, in economic terms, debt and benefits" (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019, p. 28).

We find this conceptual discussion to be a useful frame with which to analyze the potential of the university in South Africa to foster (forced) migrant solidarity because it is connected to the communities around it and because it is an institution currently and historically involved in transformation. Because solidarity movements and practices are "embedded in rather different regional geopolitical situations, national legal regimes, local discourses of migration, and other place-particular circumstances" (Bauder, 2021b, p. 877), we do not aim to generalize them but rather explore our own university as a space for thinking through the potential for engaged scholarship as it is enacted in different scales and realms.

While we do not mean to create a false separation between the university space and the community space, the following two sections describe how institutional solidarity can be enacted for (1) forced migrant students at the university itself and (2) forced migrant concerns in the community through the university's legacy of community engagement. The section focuses on both potentialities and the challenges of the university as an institution that can connect to migrant solidarity.

12.5 Institutional Solidarity within the University

This chapter identifies the university as a potential space for connecting people on common political struggles related to rights and dignity. As Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) argue, "institutions connect with a symbolic dimension consisting in creating

alternative imaginaries." In this sense, we highlight the role the university has in the national and social imaginary to instigate and influence change, which makes it important for countering xenophobic discourses and enacting transformation around forced migrant issues.

However, as Agustín and Jørgensen (2019) caution, the "formalization of solidarity relations" implies a "constant tension between the potential political action of solidarity and its regularization by the institution." Emphasizing the calculation of economic benefits can detract from the free pursuit of knowledge. We relate this to recent discussions on decolonizing the African university. Mbembe (2016), for example, has critiqued how a "system of business principles and statistical accountancy applied to university education." The colonial legacy has shaped African universities into what Mbembe (2016, p. 30) describes as "large systems of authoritative control, standardization, gradation, accountancy, classification, credits and penalties." For universities in Africa to decolonize, as Mbembe has argued, requires "a geographical imagination that extends well beyond the confines of the nation-state," as well as democratizing access. By the latter, he refers to the "possibility to inhabit a space to the extent that one can say, 'This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here.' This is not hospitality. It is not charity" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30). However, universities in South Africa are still struggling to overcome the challenges of colonial legacy, bureaucracy, lack of resources, and national politics, as well as xenophobia (Mgogo & Osunkunle, 2023; Oloruntoba, 2022).

These debates around transformation were re-invigorated in South African universities during the #FeesMustFall movement in 2015 and 2016, in which university students across South Africa, including at UWC, demanded more access to affordable higher education and decolonization of the university structures and curriculum (Barnes et al., 2016; Maringira & Gukurume, 2016). The #FeesMustFall movement decried what Maringira et al. (2022, p. 104) describe as the "institutional culture accentuating white privilege and supremacy... [that] continued to configure racial and structural inequalities in the post-apartheid era." #FeesMustFall gatherings evoked memories of organizing during apartheid; Mzileni (2020, p. 20), for example, describes how the "apartheid government banned mass gatherings of black people in public spaces and, as a result, black people strategically used every social space they could find to actively conscientise one another." He further argues:

> Accordingly, the nonformal organisation of political gatherings during the #FeesMustFall protests by students for purposes of dialogue, teaching, learning, writing, and theorising with one another are all instances of an African political tradition—the intellectual heritage of youth struggles and national resistance for many decades.

#FeesMustFall has been described as a "political and socially racialised movement" (Maringira & Gukurume, 2021, p. 502). However, despite their Pan-African rhetoric, Fallist movements have been critiqued for failing to fully include international students, especially black African students (Kasembeli, 2020; Tagliabue, 2022; Tyhali, 2025). Tagliabue (2022) documents narratives from students at Rhodes University who refrained from joining protests due to fear of acquiring a criminal record, underscoring how deeply political unrest influences students' decisions,

particularly for those coming from migrant backgrounds. Tyhali's master's research (2025) shows how the precarity of migrant students at UWC—their concerns about deportability, documentation, and financial security—affected their ability to participate in #FeesMustFall and other political movements in South Africa. Kasembeli (2020) highlights contradictions within Fallist movements, particularly the exclusion of "black other" students from the broader narrative of the struggle. Despite Pan-African references in movement songs and symbols, there remains a disconnect between the ideology of Pan-Africanism and the reality of xenophobia toward black foreigners in South Africa.

This is where a "transformative engaged scholarship" (Introduction chapter, this volume) can come in to foster and sustain academic institutional solidarity and to connect with a broader political imagination beyond a calculation of benefits. We draw from hooks (1997/1986) who argues that true solidarity requires sustained engagement and active participation in the elimination of oppressive structures. Thus, decolonization of the university should also mean solidarity with others in this decolonial project. We highlight the power relationships in these acts of solidarity, "while acknowledging the complex, fragmented and multifaceted relations between people and groups in different circumstances" (Bauder, 2020, p. 1068). By this, we mean that we are aware of the historical context of apartheid in how black South African students have continued to be marginalized and universities have remained under resourced.

Recent global literature on social inclusion in higher education for forced migrants describes various initiatives. A UNHCR report (Maringira et al., 2022) offers 15 recommendations from a policy perspective; of these, the report highlights the need for institutional support to foster "university networks" and to advocate for resources from government bodies. It also promotes "mentoring programmes" that will help in cultural exchanges, "where local and refugee students can meet." In an example from an Austrian university, Bacher et al. (2019) proposes the development of "integration" programs for refugees, arguing that students need more than language support. Focusing on a Brazilian university, Gediel et al. (2019) describe the importance of language classes, legal services, psychological support, financial aid, and university policy changes regarding the recognition of (forced) migrant students' diplomas. In reviewing refugee student support networks in universities in the United States, Germany, and Australia, Unangst and Crea (2020) stress the importance of refugees' co-participation in building refugee networks and tailoring supports around their lived experiences and backgrounds. Finally, Murphy (2020) describes how, in Ireland, universities can become designated "sanctuary institutions" by establishing "a sustainable culture of welcome" and sharing their knowledge and "good practice with other education institutions, the local community and beyond."

For many of the students in Tyhali's research, the general notion of solidarity implied the ethical obligation to treat all people with dignity and humanity regardless of their country of origin or status. Many expressed that access to more funding opportunities that recognize the forced migrant experience would support their research, integration, and social connection and that more assistance with permits would mitigate their feelings of uncertainty. Their focus on funding and permits reveals that

without these, students remain caught in cycles of precarity and can therefore devote less time and energy to generating engaged and collective spaces.

In the final section of this chapter, we offer some ways in which we can attend to these challenges. However, to further our consideration of dismantling these colonial legacies, we first turn to UWC's history with engaged scholarship and community engagement.

12.6 Institutional Solidarity with Forced Migrant Communities

As outlined earlier, institutional solidarity can also emerge in the way an institution engages with the communities around it—in this case, the university's connections to forced migrants and organizations for forced migrant support. UWC's legacy of community engagement can be seen as a starting point for shaping solidarity with forced migrant and refugee communities. UWC was founded in 1959 and was once a university for working-class "Colored" students during apartheid. It has a long history of student and academic activism and fought against the Extension of Universities Act of 1959, which regulated university access along ethnic and racial lines during apartheid (Lalu, 2012). Over the years, student activism on the UWC campus included campaigns of solidarity, trade union boycotts, support for decolonization movements in Africa, and connection between the university and community struggles regarding housing and other social issues (A. Karriem, personal communication, 2024). A popular aspect of UWC's history is the moment when Jakes Gerwel, the then Rector, opened UWC's doors to black South African students and aligned UWC with a mass democratic movement, calling UWC the "intellectual home of the Left." In the contemporary period, a majority of the university's student body comes from working-class or marginalized backgrounds, lives in townships or arrives from rural areas, and struggles to afford fees and even food, accommodation, and transportation. UWC is considered a "historically disadvantaged institution (HDI)," based on the Higher Education Act of 1997, which aimed at "resolving the inequalities and historical injustices facing the 'black' universities," through additional funding and support (Africa & Mutizwa-Mangiza, 2018, p. 84). However, Africa and Mutizwa-Mangiza (2018, p. 87) express concern with the way the HDI label "feeds into a perpetuation of the colonial structure and dichotomising system where particular institutions continued to be valued." By this, they refer to the way in which white universities established during apartheid still continue to be better resourced and hold higher symbolic capital than historically black universities such as UWC.

Since the 1970s, UWC has advocated for "community action (Lalu, 2012, p. 59) and recently described community engagement "as a form of inclusion, transformation and social justice, with a key focus on oppressed groups," involving legal aid clinics, community projects, and outreach to learners in disadvantaged communities (UWC Office of the DVC-Academic, 2021, p. 5). Many academic staff were

student activists at UWC against apartheid. Our colleague in MMICA, Abdulrazak Karriem, narrated how the UWC history department played a role in asking "how do we reshape history beyond grand authors?" He recounts taking peoples' history classes and going to churches and mosques to speak to community members and write their stories (A. Karriem, personal communication, 2024). Engagement during this time focused on how the community and university connect to issues transforming society. The aim of many UWC academics fighting against apartheid was to answer this question: How do we go from interpreting the world to conscientizing and changing the world? By conscientizing, we refer to Freire's (1993) description of "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1993, p. 35). There was nothing wrong with academic work within the university, but it could not be divorced from grassroots organizations and had to be rooted in community struggles (A. Karriem, personal communication, 2024).

Although "community engagement" continues to be a widespread practice at universities, it can be time consuming and is undervalued by many university systems globally (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021) and in South Africa (Vally, 2023). Many South African universities have not taken up the National Plan for Higher Education's emphasis on community service (UWC Office of the DVC-Academic, 2021 p. 4).

Because of UWC's historical background, community engagement has been an ongoing priority and is currently situated within the "Scholarship of Engagement for Societal Impact" program. This program is spearheaded by the university's former Deputy Vice Chancellor-Academic (DVC-A) Professor Vivienne Lawack and encourages community relationships in areas of research, teaching, and learning. This Scholarship of Engagement (UWC Office of the DVC-Academic, 2021, p. 5) refers to a range of university partnerships in communities, which include the "scholarly community, student community, business/industry/public sector, civil society, and international community." This work intends to be multifaceted, and involves, for example, teaching in low-income neighborhoods, working on research with various NGOs, inviting peer researchers from the community to campus to share their experiences, and courses in which students gain development experience within their own community. Notably, one of the suggestions is that engagement is not treated as "a separate activity from research and teaching... but rather an infused approach by the university" and that it should be "reciprocal" (UWC Office of the DVC-Academic, 2021, p. 4).

Our discussion about UWC's role as an institution is situated within this book's core discussion of addressing academic institutions' possibilities and limitations to create transformative practices that are meaningful for (forced) migrant communities in precarious conditions. Agustín and Jørgensen, (2019, p. 42) argue the following:

> The key to characterizing institutional solidarity (in opposition to institutionalized solidarity) is the capacity of enabling (infra)structures to materialize solidarity and maintain (and foster) the connections with civil society and migrants and refugee organizations.

Given UWC's legacy of engagement and historical activism, we describe both ongoing practices and proposed ideas for materializing institutional solidarity with and for forced migrants.

12.7 Institutional Solidarity: A Collective Way Forward

Considering this background on institutional solidarity within and from the university, we use this final section to identify directions and agendas for the future work of MMICA. As we have described, UWC's history of anti-apartheid activism and its emphasis on community engagement provides an opportunity to build collective transformation. However, this trajectory is limited by counter forces such as its colonial legacy, being under resourced, xenophobia within academia and the city, and the ongoing financial precarity of the student body, both South African and international.

Recently, UWC founded MMICA, a collective that draws together research, teaching, and community engagement related to migration and mobilities. As MMICA shares perspectives on migration and mobilities in and out of Africa, the collective aims to consider knowledge production, decolonization, advocacy, and support for a new generation of academics to broaden the horizons of migration and mobilities research. In the realm of research, MMICA promotes UWC's policy to build equitable partnerships and advocates for reflexive research. In teaching, many colleagues are working on decolonizing the curriculum to be attentive to knowledge production and Global South theories in migration studies work. We refer to MMICA's potential to link these more fully with community engagement as part of UWC's Scholarship for Engagement for Societal Impact. Given UWC's commitment to transformation, it plays an important role in providing spaces for intellectual and theoretical dialogue on themes regarding forced migrants in South Africa and contributes to the conversations happening globally.

Further, at the university, we draw from what Ghorashi and Ponzoni (2014) explore as "collective empowerment" that can bring in diverse voices and change perceptions regarding migrants. They refer to this empowerment as "a collective sense of solidarity to change the negative assumptions regarding refugees" (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014, p. 172). For example, we work to host events, seminars, and initiatives for forced migrant research and concerns across campus and the surrounding community to create a stronger consolidated platform. The student community is therefore part of UWC's Scholarship of Engagement (2021, p. 8), which emphasizes "equity, participation and trust, all of which should be equally relevant whether there is 'engagement' with and between students on or off campus." At UWC, the practice of countering xenophobic discourses (e.g., about migrants taking jobs or causing crime) involves such collective empowerment—coursework, workshops, seminars, and informal student gatherings. We argue that while such activities are ongoing in small ways and in classrooms, they can be more institutionalized at the university.

Our agenda is to foster more interdisciplinary dialogues and to involve refugee-led organizations, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations, informal

networks, and municipal actors in order to foster alliances with and within the community. While many of us in MMICA already work with migrant- and refugee-support NGOs in our events and research, there is an opportunity to build further community engagement, especially including refugee-led organizations (Koskimaki & Mukafuku, 2024). This can be done through engaged research and through forced migrant students' voices in research that engages within the communities, as well as through support for forced migrant research. Overall, we draw from UWC's legacy and Scholarship of Engagement (2021, p. 9), which emphasizes the co-production of knowledge and critiques the frequent way in which a "partnership focuses on its project and/or funding, while excluding participants' expectations and opportunities to come from the project."

Finally, such spaces need to continue to be participatory with (forced) migrants. As Ghorashi and Rast (2018, p. 196) write regarding the context of community spaces in Amsterdam, to shape participatory inclusive spaces "communities need to be able to connect their everyday personal realities with larger social and historically embedded structures." Drawing from this argument, we see UWC's composition of students and academics from historically marginalized backgrounds as one potential arena in which forced migrant solidarity can arise between South African students and refugees on the basis of their shared precarity and aspirations.

12.8 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that forced migrants face many challenges in South Africa due to uncertainty and inability to get needed refugee and residence permits, lack of access to resources, inability to secure permanent employment, and xenophobia. Municipal support for migrants is weak in South Africa; hence, potential spaces of solidarity can be found in community organizations, social networks, and religious and faith-based institutions (Koskimaki & Mazani, 2025). This chapter has focused on the university and academia as a migrant solidarity space in South Africa but one that needs more analysis and reflection due to colonial legacies (Koskimaki et al., 2021), xenophobia, and the challenges of community engagement.

Given this background, we outlined some of our vision in building MMICA, our program for migration and mobilities. MMICA is a platform to emphasize the need to continually "stretch" solidarity and institutional boundaries. This does not mean that forced migrant solidarity can be assumed; it needs continual work to be made explicit, while involving multiple groups. MMICA aims to support institutions in responding to and fostering participatory forced migrant spaces, beyond merely quantifying their benefits for the institution.

One of the main pitfalls of solidarity, according to hooks (1997/1986), is the tendency of privileged individuals or groups to dominate and dictate the terms of solidarity. This is in line with hook's argument that solidarity is "not the same as support" and requires a "community of interests." We therefore look to the different groups with similar interests in migrant solidarity that can come together through an

organizational structure such as the university, which as an institution, is connected to the state, civil society, and local communities. This emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting different perspectives within a movement or struggle. Hooks' (1997/1986) argument is relevant here because it shows us that true solidarity can only come about when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to address them. This is where the potential for the university as a space for institutional solidarity needs to be unpacked. In order to be transformative, institutional solidarity must foster this "community of interests" and not dictate terms or propose empty gestures.

We conclude by referring back to this volume's emphasis on "transformative" engaged scholarship as transformation of institutional and societal relationships, collaborations, and structures with an emphasis on "caring partnerships in creating and sharing various forms of knowledge" (Introduction chapter, Beyond the State of the Art). As the editors of this volume argued, engaged scholarship is "boundary-crossing because it cuts across the missions of teaching, research, and service." By incorporating the perspectives from transformative engaged scholarship into the intersection of research, teaching, and community engagement regarding forced migrant issues, we may ensure a more equitable approach to institutional solidarity with forced migrants in South African university spaces.

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Chapter 13
Co-creating Intergenerational Collaborative Spaces: The Youth Leadership and Resilience Project

K. Maeve Powlick and Evelyn Vlasman

13.1 Introduction

In July of 2023, approximately 70 people gathered in the large gallery space of Framer Framed, on the east side of Amsterdam. To open the event, we watched a slideshow of photos from the previous eight months, showing us making art, laughing, posing on a bridge in Rotterdam, and working on projects. The song in the video was written and sung by one of the participants, Gigi, repeating the words "I cannot imagine us not being here." This event was part of the Youth Leadership and Resilience Project (YL&R), which lasted from November 2022 to July 2023. YL&R was a co-creative, engaged research project with multiple overlapping goals: bringing undocumented youth together to do something fun and creative, learning about experiences of undocumented youth in the Netherlands, and generating enthusiasm for participation in a future co-creative research project, which continued in July 2023. Participants included undocumented and formerly undocumented youth in their teens and early twenties; researchers and activists in their 40 s, 50 s, and 60 s; master's students; community workers; and elders and leaders from undocumented communities. Participants also brought parents, children, and siblings to some meetings.

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Around this time, many undocumented youth participants had either recently enrolled or were contemplating studying in Dutch universities and Universities of Applied Sciences as part of the "Covenant" pilot project.[1] This pilot program was initiated in 2022 by the City of Amsterdam, working together with five local institutions of higher education, to offer undocumented youth the opportunity to pursue higher education in a process similar to the Dreamers campaign in the United States. While the Covenant provided pathways to enroll in higher education, we came to see through YL&R how necessary ongoing institutional transformation is in order to create actually inclusive environments for marginalized youth and set them up for success instead of failure. As a response to this need, a follow up co-creative research group was started with some of the YL&R participants. This project had a central focus on the topic of inclusion in higher education, which was a shared goal of our youth-adult partnership.

As an intensely intergenerational experience, YL&R and the co-creative research group offered an opportunity to better understand intergenerational relationships in group settings. While many participants have connections to higher education—as students, prospective students, or teachers—we intentionally wanted to work outside of these power structures, working with youth in a non-directive way, making space for leadership, reciprocity, and collaborative relationships across generations. This type of relationship can be defined as youth-adult partnerships (YAP), the subject of a large body of interdisciplinary research (Brion-Meisels et al., 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013). With the focus on undocumented youth, a group with little prior research in the Netherlands, YL&R offers an opportunity to learn about building YAP with marginalized and historically excluded groups of people, creating spaces where these relationships can flourish, along with fostering YAP in institutional environments, such as higher education, to better include marginalized youth.

With all this in mind, YL&R was driven by an open-ended research question: What can YL&R teach us about working with undocumented youth in the Netherlands? This paper focuses on three specific questions which emerged from the project: What are the critical building blocks and the role of adults in fostering and nurturing YAPs with undocumented youth? How can we conceptualize spaces where this type of relationship can flourish? And: How can we apply these building blocks to institutional environments such as higher education? To answer these questions, we start by framing the research within three bodies of literature: on YAP, undocumented youth, and the design of youth spaces. We then discuss the methodology, which was grounded in engaged scholarship, co-creativity, and epistemic justice. The Results section includes key themes related to creating YAP within the context of the YL&R project and our experiences applying them to the follow-up, co-creative research project within institutions of higher education. The discussion develops the concept of intergenerational collaborative spaces as a new way of describing the environment we worked together to create, applying this concept to transformations in the institutional environment of higher education.

[1] https://www.amsterdam.nl/zorg-ondersteuning/ondersteuning/vluchtelingen/ongedocumenteerden/pilot-toegang-hoger-onderwijs/

13.2 Key Theoretical Concepts

13.2.1 Youth-Adult Partnerships

YAP is defined as the "practice of: a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, b) in a collective [democratic] fashion, c) over a sustained period of time, d) through shared work, e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization, and/or affirmatively address a community issue" (Zeldin et al., 2013, p. 397). YAP exists among intergenerational groups working together toward a common goal of importance to the people involved. This term puts a name to the type of relationship many community workers seek to create with youth in their programs and contrasts with other intergenerational relationships characterized by hierarchical power dynamics. YAP is seen by many researchers and practitioners as intentionally counter-cultural, challenging prevailing norms of adults leading and youth as passive recipients of services and care (Gil Clary & Rhodes, 2006; Harper & Carver, 1999; Heffernan et al., 2017).

YAP benefits both youth and adults, contributing to youth development and social-justice goals such as social-emotional learning and restorative justice (Brion-Meisels et al., 2020; Ramey et al., 2017a, b; Zeldin et al., 2013). The practice of YAP fosters mutual learning (Brion-Meisels et al., 2020; Zeldin et al., 2013) both about a particular subject matter and self-reflective learning about participants' own identities, how they relate to others, and how to forge collaborations across generations (Ramey et al., 2017a; Zeldin et al., 2013). In addition to practical learning, such as developing facilitation skills, YAP may also create context-specific knowledge, such as developing new concepts and names for specific relationships between youth and adults. For example, Nalani et al. (2021), p. 11, citing Mitra, 2008) discuss how participants in a YAP-oriented summer camp referred to adults at the camp as *zilla*, a made-up word representing a role "qualitatively different—more warm, inviting and oriented toward partnership—from the typical top-down roles of camp staff, counselors and teachers." This invented terminology allowed participants to actively create new roles for youth and adults, challenging previously determined roles.

YAP is often perceived as being difficult to implement, scale up, and sustain due to external factors such as organizational culture, funding, and lack of experience (Nalani et al., 2021). External pressures from schools or funders may also threaten the sustainability of YAP structures (Mitra, 2007, 2009). Nalani et al. (2021) further argue that implementing and sustaining YAP at scale requires organizational learning so that behaviors, norms, rituals, and practices used to foster and sustain YAP can be adopted at different levels of organization. When successfully built and sustained within an organization, YAP has the potential to transform institutions built around intergenerational relationships through this multi-layered learning process. In order to do so, it is key to address norms, traditions, and assumptions within those institutions as well as within the people who work within them.

13.2.2 Experiences of Undocumented Youth

To build YAP with undocumented youth, it is important to understand how undocumented status impacts their experiences of the world and their identities, as cultural differences and differences in social position can complicate YAP (Medina et al., 2020). Undocumented youth undergo a process referred to as "awakening to a nightmare" as they begin transition to adulthood. Instead of a celebration of turning 18, they lose access to education, healthcare, and other social services and experience emotional and practical exclusions unknown to them as children (Guns et al., 2022; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). The extreme shift in life experiences as undocumented youth reach adulthood can be particularly challenging for "1.5-generation" youth, meaning those who migrate at a young age and receive all or most of their education in the host country, or for those born in a country with no residence rights, as is the case for many Dutch undocumented youth.

Although most research on these experiences has been done in the United States, undocumented youth in the Netherlands face a similar situation as they reach adulthood, being blocked from key rites of passage such as obtaining a driver's license, opening a bank account, getting a job, and enrolling in higher education. Although undocumented youth in the Netherlands are able to complete educational programs they begin before their 18th birthday, they are unable to enroll in any new programs after reaching adulthood. Conversations with undocumented youth, activists, and social workers suggests that many youth are tracked away from university programs toward vocational training programs, which they can start at a younger age.

Research in the United States indicates that 1.5-generation youth experience a contrast between strong social and identity ties with their host country alongside harsh experiences of exclusion (Abrego, 2011; Abrego & Lakhani, 2015; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). This is exacerbated during the transition to adulthood, with a transition from relatively safe and inclusive school environments to less inclusive environments (Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Interviews with undocumented youth in the Netherlands indicate that this experience is particularly linked to being judged on their "Dutchness," sometimes expressed through hypercriticism of accent and small language errors.[2] "Dutchness" is a concept referring to idealized norms of tolerance, openness, individuality, and cultural progressiveness (Van Reekum, 2012, 2023). The deservingness of youth wishing to obtain residence permits is often judged in relation to their perceived conformity to "Dutchness," including norms, tastes, mannerisms, and values (Nicholls et al., 2016). This results from increasing nationalism in the Netherlands linked to "culturalizing" citizenship in the form of "Dutchness" (Van Reekum, 2023).

While parents of undocumented youth often experience a great deal of fear related to legal consequences of their status, Abrego (2011) argues 1.5-generation and second-generation youth are more likely to engage in activism and advocacy.

[2] More extensive data on experiences of undocumented youth in the Netherlands will be published in a subsequent paper, specifically regarding the impact of transition into higher education on the mental well-being of undocumented youth.

Abrego explains that 1.5-generation youth in the United States approach "their legal limitations as unfair and, rather than focus on a fear of deportation, experience it as a source of social stigma" (2011, p. 357). This stigma drives youth to activism, in contrast to hiding out of fear.

Likewise in the Netherlands, the Dreamers NL campaign uses film clips of 1.5- and second-generation undocumented youth telling their stories to advocate for access to education and the labor market. Youth involved in this movement have collaborated with other activists, researchers, and societal organizations to push forward projects such as the Covenant agreements in Amsterdam and the Hague to access post-secondary education, petitions for specific asylum and citizenship claims, and protection of the rights of domestic workers.

13.2.3 Making Space for Youth

Undocumented youth face challenges, exclusion, and stigmatization, leading to a need for spaces where they feel comfortable and welcomed. Undocumented youth in the YL&R expressed feeling safest when their undocumented status is accepted and when they don't have to constantly explain themselves or their situation. Van Liempt and Staring (2021) emphasize the importance of "spaces of restoration" for refugees in the Netherlands, highlighting that some locations, even hometowns, can feel unwelcoming and harmful. In contrast, discovering and claiming places where one feels an attachment and belonging can be integral to homemaking in a new country and can facilitate healing (p. 322). "Spaces for restoration" are similar to the concept of safe space, advocated by many different marginalized communities, including the movements for civil rights, black liberation, LGBTQ liberation, and women's liberation from the 1960s and 1970s on (The Roestone Collective, 2014).

Safe spaces are valued as a place to escape oppression such as racism (Darrell et al., 2016; Davis, 1999), misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia (Austin et al., 2020) and gather with others in relative safety. Patricia Hill Collins associates safe spaces with being able to "talk freely" based on shared experiences of oppression, free from outside judgment and pressure to conform (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 100) and emphasizes the importance of relations among black women both within informal environments and families and more formal environments such as the church. Intimate environments are also important in bell Hooks's (1997) concept of the homeplace as safe space.

While, intimate safe spaces, such as the homespace, are created by a relatively small group of people who have strong connections to each other, members of marginalized groups also spend time in institutional environments where they are the minority, and, in the case of undocumented youth, often in an extremely small minority. In educational and other institutional settings, the challenge is to create safe space within the public space, where participants may not all know each other or have shared experiences. Moreover, intersectional identities mean that even members of one marginalized group have differences from each other, with different aspects of

privilege and disadvantage, which often leads to tensions (Irazábal & Huerta, 2016; McConnell et al., 2016). To address this concern, some activists adopt the term "safer space" (Holle & Ammar, 2022). Among educators, there is concern that working to establish a "safe space" can preclude important conversations across difference, which could limit the opportunities for growth and learning and also unintentionally reinforce dominance of the privileged group (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Arao and Clemens offer the concept of "brave space" as an alternative, which has been adopted by many advocates for social justice education. A "brave space" is an environment where people are able to take risks and discuss uncomfortable topics, with "bravery" seen as more important than safety in tackling important issues of social justice (Ali, 2017; Simon et al., 2022). This type of space has recently been recharacterized as "daring spaces," emphasizing "the dynamic and unsteady act of daring, requiring a continuous search for balance, rather than spaces hosting 'brave' people." (Engaged Scholarships Narratives of Change, n.d.). Safe learning environments, where all participants in a group are able to share ideas and be listened to (Anderson, 2021) and where they can take risks without fear of humiliation (Callan, 2020), exhibit characteristics of both safe(r) and brave spaces. Others argue both safe and brave spaces should exist within educational environments, with safe spaces fulfilling a nurturing role outside the classroom and brave spaces within the classroom (Ali, 2017).

Interestingly, the literature on safe and brave spaces for youth mostly adopts an implicit assumption that spaces are created by adults for youth, with only incidental collaboration from youth, such as setting ground rules together. Additionally, the concepts of safe and brave spaces describe desirable qualities of youth spaces—spaces where people can feel safe or be brave or daring—but do not adequately describe the functions of the space or how safety, bravery and daring is translated into learning. Engaged pedagogy, as advocated for by bell hooks and Paulo Freire, offers further insights about creating spaces for transformational learning with youth. Engaged pedagogy is an example of praxis, putting theory into action to create change in the world (Freire & Ramos, 1973; Hooks, 1994). Both Freire and hooks advocate approaches to education that make space for nurturing, collaborative relationships between teachers and students. Rejecting the "banking" model of education, Freire advocated collaborative problem solving between teachers and students both to address real world problems and to avoid reproducing oppression within the classroom (Jones, 2017). Hooks (1994, 2003)) describes teachers and learners as whole beings with bodies and feelings in addition to minds and thoughts. She advocates for authenticity as an integral part of "education as the practice of freedom," where teachers and students interact as equals and as their true selves within learning environments (Hooks, 1994). While educational institutions include larger structures that cannot be changed directly by any individual teacher, the actions of teachers within their own classrooms, schools, and other group environments such as research projects contribute to the culture within such institutions, for better or worse.

13.3 Methodology

13.3.1 Methodological Approach

This project is grounded in an engaged approach to scholarship, seeking a "symbiotic relationship between academic and practical expertise" (Anholt et al., 2021, p. 555). Engaged scholarship questions the distinction between "learning" and "doing," as doing can inform both applied and scientific knowledge (Small & Uttal, 2005). Stemming from a fundamental questioning of the nature of knowledge as objective, co-creative research recognizes that researchers impact outcomes through their own positionality within a complex web of discursive, normalized power (Ghorashi, 2021).

Through engaged co-creative methodologies, we sought to promote epistemic justice (Fricker, 2013) throughout the project. Epistemic injustice can refer to when some people are not only excluded from being "knowers" but are also excluded from important roles, such as those offering critiques or asking probing questions (Hookway, 2010). In the YL&R project, we challenged epistemic injustice through an arts-based approach to knowledge, making space for youth to lead, and creating group norms of valuing all voices. All participants were encouraged to play flexible roles as "knowers," "questioners," "planners," and "critiquers."

13.3.2 Data Sources and Analysis

Because of the guiding methodologies and values discussed above, the project evolved based on the desires, input, and needs of participants. After initial planning meetings, including a kick-off event on 15 November 2022 with 40 participants connected to undocumented communities, the YL&R project included five workshops, one full-day field trip, two planning meetings for the final event, and the event itself on 7 July 2023. Four of the five main creative workshops were led by undocumented or formerly undocumented people, three of whom were also youth. Following this, a co-creative research group was formed, focused on the experiences of undocumented youth in institutional environments of higher education and the labor market. The research group involved monthly sessions held at institutions of higher education along with related social events, one-on-one lunches with in-depth interviews, and exchanges in a WhatsApp group. As a group we also experimented with co-creative methods including two non-traditional focus groups—one where participants wrote their own questions and asked them of each other, and one held during a dinner and including friends of both the undocumented and non-undocumented research group members. All participants were paid for their time in the form of a "makers fee" after the YL&R final event and hourly wages for the co-creative research group.

Altogether, this paper is based on approximately 150 hours of field work, with field notes, artifacts, and recordings from group meetings as the primary data sources.

A survey was completed by 11 participants in the YL&R project, which was also included in the dataset for this paper. Data were analyzed in an iterative manner, including field notes and memo writing immediately after each session. Although analysis was iterative, the primary research approach is inductive in nature. The research questions arose from analysis of early field notes and workshop artifacts. Emerging themes were discussed with other researchers and participants and modified based on discussion and additional review of the data. Prior to publication of this paper, all participants were invited via a large WhatsApp group to review draft versions. All names are mentioned in the results are pseudonyms. Participants were given the option to choose their own pseudonym if desired.

13.4 Results

Below we discuss two themes that emerged from the project in relation to the role of adults in YAPs: Embracing mess and finding the role of Adult Presence. Then, we discuss the process of developing collaboration across generations and other sources of difference. We end with examples of how these themes were applied in the follow-up co-creative research group, where authenticity and space for collaboration were of central importance to generating data on the topics of our co-creative research. We highlight the potential and challenges for transforming institutional spaces through YAP and begin to imagine how to address such challenges.

13.4.1 Embracing the Mess and Finding the Role of "Adult Presence"

In the very first workshop, things did not go according to plan. This workshop was given by Julius, a formerly undocumented migrant and now a service provider and spoken word artist. First, Julius needed to unexpectedly switch languages from Dutch to English because some participants did not speak Dutch. Then, the audio-visual equipment stopped working, meaning Julius could not use the PowerPoint he had prepared. Due to these unexpected challenges, Julius was visibly shaken. When the technology could not be fixed, he deviated from his outline and shared his own story of growing up during a protracted war, moving to the Netherlands, experiencing homelessness as a young person, and eventually finding strength through telling his own story. He also talked about realizing there were parts of his story he could not tell without becoming emotional.

After sharing his story, Julius asked participants to tell each other stories in pairs. During this time, people shared both true and fictional stories with each other. Julius then invited participants to take the mic. Carlos shared the story of how, when his family's car exploded in Brazil, they knew they had nothing left there and decided

to move to the Netherlands. Albert told a fictional story that had been improvised by Dylan, who was not comfortable speaking in English but gave consent for Albert to share. The story was about a young man who stole from others while in the Congo to be able to get to the Netherlands but then arrived and realized it was not the "land of milk and honey" he had been expecting and went back to stealing. When Albert forgot the ending, Dylan finished the story in Dutch, with Albert translating. Amaya, who works with children, shared a story she plans to turn into a children's book. In the story, a boy has wings which get dulled by anxious thoughts. He is supported by a teacher who helps him learn how to clear those thoughts away, making his wings shine again. She shared her story in Dutch, and another participant translated it into English. She said, "I'm a little bit the boy in the story, but I'm also a little bit the teacher." Multiple participants felt empowered to take the mic and share personal, creative, and powerful stories, demonstrating how mutual vulnerability created a sense of trust.

After the workshop, facilitators expressed concern that it did not go as planned and worried about its reception. With all the unexpected changes, several aspects of this workshop could be described as a bit "messy." However, later in the project, several participants listed it as their favorite, both during feedback and in the survey. When asked why, Juan said it was because people were "sharing their own stories."

The positive evaluations of the workshop highlight the importance of **embracing mess** because it fosters chances to engage authentically and vulnerably for all participants. When a polished workshop is delivered with perfectly-timed, structured exercises, it meets one set of goals, but does not create much space for youth participants to add to the experience. "Mess" means there is still the work of creation to be done and makes room for youth to pick up some of that work and power. Participants consistently said taking workshops led by peers and near peers was one of their favorite parts of the project, regardless of moments when it might have felt "messy."

Additional benefits emerged from "embracing the mess" and allowing space to feel around, make mistakes, and experiment. First, Gigi, who led a music workshop that also did not go according to plan, connected with Andrea during the workshop about their mutual joy in making music. They ended up collaborating on a song, which Gigi made into a video that played during the final event of the project. Second, just before the final event, Sofia, a high school student, shared that she and another participant in the project, Camila, were collaborating to plan a series of workshops specifically with Brazilian teens. They planned to follow a similar model to YL&R, including youth-led workshops. Sofia said that seeing youth leading workshops, even when they had never done so before, made her believe "yeah, we can do it!" She and Camila approached Eduardo, a key community leader, and convinced him to fund their idea.

Over the course of the project, we naturally gravitated toward a role very similar to what Quakers call "Friendly Responsible Adult Presence" (also called Friendly Adult

Presence or Adult Presence).[3] Adopting the role of Adult Presence implies a semi-structured environment where as little as possible is under the control of adults, and, freed from rigid roles such as teacher and student, adults and youth are encouraged to interact with each other in an egalitarian, authentic manner, building trust and a sense of safety. Adults maintain a presence, however, stepping in and stepping back so that youth are not left on their own to do everything. Rather, youth and adults act in partnership with each other, as is the goal in YAP. In practice during YL&R, this meant offering suggestions when it was necessary but also creating space for youth to try their own ideas and debrief afterwards. Stepping back while remaining friendly, responsible, and present and allowing things to unfold, even when messy, created space for co-creation. Adopting this new role facilitated "embracing the mess" in co-creation—which is often at odds with roles adult organizers play in their professional lives, where professionalism and preparation are highly valued. As described later in the results, this conflict came up when the project moved into a university, where we were fighting against norms, traditions, and assumptions related to the institution of higher education without realizing it.

13.4.2 Collaboration Across Generations and Difference

YL&R brought together a group of undocumented youth along with allies from outside of the undocumented community, creating a diverse group of people. Youth repeatedly stated that they valued being in a group of undocumented youth. One participant gave the following bilingual response to the survey question: Do you have any other remarks, questions, or things you would like to share with us?

> Het project was heel erg leuk, gezellig en vooral inspirerend. Het gaf me een totaal nieuwe perspectief van wat ik al heb. De connecties die ik heb gemaakt met iedereen is iets wat ik ga meenemen voor mijn groei in de toekomst.[4] It became a platform for everyone to be themselves and show each other that regardless of our "undocumented" situation, we're all the same. We're all humans in this society trying to live and lead a normal life. We're nothing different from the majority of people who ARE "documented." Thank you so much once again for organizing this project!!

This participant shared the importance of feeling like others in the group, along with the importance of participants being able to be themselves and building connections with one another. Another said the following:

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[3] Friendly Responsible Adult Presence is not a clearly defined role but rather one constituted through cultural traditions among Quakers. O'Neil (2007) offers a rich description of how this role (in this case, called Friendly Adult Presence) was filled by a Quaker who was killed while on a peacemaking trip in Iraq.

[4] "The project was really very fun, *gezellig*, and above all inspirational. It gave me a totally new perspective about what I already have. The connections I have made with everything is something that I will carry with me for my growth in the future." The Dutch term *gezellig* does not have an English equivalent but implies pleasant time spent comfortably with one or more people.

> I'm happy that this kind of project exists. A space where you meet others all with the understanding of how difficult being undocumented is, is very much appreciated!

This participant highlighted how important understanding is for them—rather than being among people who shared their specific experiences of being undocumented, it was more important that their experience was simply understood. Both of these survey responses highlight the importance of safe(r) spaces for participants, where they could expect shared experiences and/or basic knowledge of their situation, and where they would not have to repeatedly divulge and explain their immigration status. YL&R therefore served functions of safe(r) space, by shielding participants from the stigma of undocumented immigration status.

At the same time, YL&R was a very heterogeneous group, and one where political and legal processes happening outside the group were of great importance. Several Dutch participants have been heavily involved in brokering access for undocumented youth to higher education and other resources, working from positions as social workers, activists, and university faculty. For example, it is part of adult participant Rosa's job to help youth complete student visa applications so they can study through the Covenant, and she worked with several project participants to complete these applications while the project was ongoing. Researcher Emma had many conversations with undocumented participants regarding advocating for themselves with universities, navigating visa processes, and problem-solving when other roadblocks emerged. Dutch organizers in the project have all written letters of support for immigration procedures. These adults played bridging roles, exemplifying engaged scholarship and connecting youth to resources outside their own communities. Although such bridging activities might have happened without the project, as the organizers were already involved with work around the Covenant, they were enhanced through the project, which brought together multiple partners and a group of undocumented youth in the same space. Emma also states she believes some youth may have participated in the project at least partially because they believed it could be instrumental in helping them access resources outside their own communities.

However, requests for help rarely came out during group discussions. Rather, they were often made one-on-one and at the end of conversations. Emma mentioned speaking with Grace, who was considering not completing her student visa application. It took a long conversation before the underlying issue came out, which Emma helped Grace solve. Grace started university in September 2023. Likewise, Henrique mentioned not knowing how to use health insurance and needing information about that, but only at the end of a conversation when we were about to part ways. During the same conversation, Henrique was asked who was supporting him in his first year of university, where he had been struggling with some classes. He said, "No one, I just do it myself." Although his mother is very supportive, she is unable to help him with his studies, and he didn't have anyone else he felt he could ask. Although he had secured entrance into a University of Applied Sciences, he received no support as an undocumented student or as a first-generation student, and it had not occurred to him to ask for any support of this type. Youth in these examples exhibited reluctance to ask for help, only doing so when they felt comfortable.

Asking for help and seeking support from individuals outside of their own families and communities—which requires bravery—was possible in the context of trusting relationships—which are built in safe(r) spaces. Additionally, rather than solely providing safety and/or bravery, the group was also a place where work was done together, in a collaborative manner, and across multiple sources of difference, including immigration status, ethnicity, language proficiency, income levels, and generation.

The safe(r) environment in the project created space for voices of undocumented youth, so those in the position to serve in bridging functions, especially within institutions of higher education, could hear them and advocate for institutional change grounded in the lived experiences of youth. Moreover, creating space for youth voices to be heard, listened to, and taken seriously, is a component of the type of institutional change desired by participants in the project. These discussions, also informed the next stages of the project, including a co-creative research group, which included ten participants.

13.4.3 Creating Intergenerational Collaborative Spaces in Higher Education

Following the YL&R, a group of six undocumented or formerly undocumented participants continued with four non-undocumented participants in a co-creative research group, which met monthly between July and December 2023. Five of the six undocumented or formerly undocumented participants were themselves students, including two who were starting their first year of higher education through the Covenant. Four of the non-undocumented participants were, likewise, teachers and researchers at institutions of higher education. The fourth non-undocumented participant is an activist who has worked for undocumented rights for more than twenty years.

The goal of this project was to learn together through co-creative research about the inclusion of undocumented students in higher education institutions and to build on the intergenerational collaborative space we had created in the YL&R project. From the beginning, however, there was tension created by institutional norms of what counts as research. During an initial planning meeting of the three academic researchers organizing the group, we expressed a desire for more data on undocumented status and the challenges that come with it, as this topic was often not the direct focus of conversation during the YL&R. Falling back on common research methods, we started to write a focus group discussion guide to use during the first meeting. While writing this discussion guide, however, all three of us realized we were doing the exact opposite of what we wanted to do—now that the project had become "real" research rather than an art project, we were suddenly making a concrete plan for the meeting without involving any of the youth participants. We had to take a step back and figure out how to balance the needs of research—to generate rich data about a

specific topic—and the needs of the intergenerational collaborative space—to have adults play the role of Friendly Responsible Adult Presence rather than take the lead, to leave things messy enough to allow room for creativity and new ideas, and to create the type of space where all involved people could feel safe, brave, and daring. We ended up developing a methodology for a participant-led focus group, where we first asked everyone present to write one or two questions they would like to ask the group about what it was like being undocumented. We then took turns asking those questions of each other. The discussion provided rich data exploring not only the experiences of undocumented youth but also what youth wonder about the lives of other undocumented youth, including questions the non-undocumented participants might never have thought to discuss. One youth asked, for example: "Was it worth it to come here [to the Netherlands]?"

The co-creative research group eventually formed sub-groups, including one on mental well-being of undocumented youth. This, the most active of the three sub-groups formed, was facilitated by one junior academic researcher, Daniela, who played an active role in planning one-on-one meetings with the undocumented students in her group and driving the project forward. While taking this active role, however, she was conscious of engaging with the topic and with her co-researchers in what she identified as "on their terms." In practice, this meant youth co-researchers largely directed the approach to the topic of mental well-being, avoiding narratives of pity and victimization and instead highlighting the agency and resilience of young undocumented students overcoming multiple barriers, in line with a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009). Toward the end of the project, this group hosted a second non-traditional focus group, in the form of a group dinner outing with collaboratively-developed questions for discussion. Daniela wrote the following reflection on this event:

> All of us, regardless of legal status, had experienced or were experiencing mental health issues, albeit to different degrees and with varying access to help and support. We were aware of the sensitive nature of the topic but were keen on breaking taboos. The structure of the co-research, combined with the topic, required us to be open, vulnerable, and willing to consider ourselves as active learners rather than just givers, thus facilitating reciprocal knowledge exchange.
>
> The two [undocumented] co-researchers were actively involved in designing a focus group that suited their preferences, emphasizing enjoyment and a relaxed atmosphere for data collection rather than a clinical, formal research setting. The focus group experience provided a significant example of an intergenerational collaborative space. The co-researchers chose a restaurant they liked and found accessible. They and I each invited two other people close to us, forming a group of nine women aged 17 to 32. Everyone was informed about the aim to share experiences related to mental well-being, but the primary tone was a "girls' night out." One co-researcher introduced a game with flashcards, prompting us to share moments when we felt different emotions. This experience underscored the belief that to create a safe environment for sharing personal mental health issues across generations and contexts, we needed to open up and show our emotions.

In a debrief of the focus group, one of the undocumented co-researchers said: "The three of us brought together people with different stories, personalities, backgrounds, and experiences, yet we all saw a bit of ourselves in each other. There were many

moments when we and the guests found our experiences recognizable, and despite the age gap, everyone felt comfortable sharing their thoughts." The approach used in the co-creative research group pushed the boundaries of research methodologies and required continual challenging of hierarchical norms in educational and research settings. However, by staying true to what we learned in the first part of the project -and thereby challenging institutional norms from within—we were able to learn more about the research topic than we would have if using a mainstream approach.

13.5 Discussion and Conclusion: Conceptualizing Intergenerational Collaborative Spaces

The YL&R Project promoted reflection and learning about the experiences of undocumented youth and the role adults can play in supporting them and creating spaces where they can take the lead. Implementing the YL&R project meant creating a space for and with undocumented youth, which also included allies and community members.

Both safety and bravery were important to the space we created. In addition, to achieve the goals of the project, we needed to create an *intergenerational collaborative space.* In this type of space, it is not enough that youth feel safe or brave enough to speak out. It is also important that adults, used to hierarchical roles such as teacher and social workers, are able to feel safe and brave enough to step out of their familiar roles and comfort zones to be able to learn and act together with youth, adopting the role of Adult Presence and learning to embrace the mess to allow space for co-creation.

Intergenerational collaborative spaces could be defined as spaces where YAP can flourish, which are simultaneously constituted through the practice of YAP. Rather than reproducing dominant power dynamics, intergenerational collaborative spaces make room to collaboratively create new roles, using collective agency to work past constraining structures such as teacher-student or social worker-client dynamics. Coming into intergenerational spaces with pre-defined roles can limit collaboration, but collaboratively defining roles that do feel appropriate and constructive—such as the "zillas" at the summer camp referenced earlier— helps adults be on the same page and maintain YAP over time. A loose framework such as "Friendly Responsible Adult Presence" is a middle way between having no role and adopting predefined roles such as "researcher," "teacher," or "social worker." As an Adult Presence, both stepping-in and stepping-back are valuable—collaborative spaces do not mean adults are invisible, out of the way, or unimportant, but rather, they make space for youth to take on different types of roles.

In the role of Adult Presence, adults are also present in the unpredictable and somewhat messy process of learning and creating, following the collaborative and authentic engaged pedagogy advocated by Freire and hooks. Teachers sometimes plan carefully orchestrated messes for children to engage in constructivist learning

but remove themselves from the mess—organizing and assessing from afar, but not engaging in the mess of learning equally with their students. A key challenge for intergenerational collaborative spaces is to allow for things to get messy while maintaining confidence that teachers and students will work through the mess together.

Intergenerational collaborative space should flourish in higher education, and yet creating such spaces felt substantively different than creating classroom learning environments. Too often, higher education is challenging and stressful for marginalized youth rather than inclusive and supportive. Undocumented students, many of whom are also non-traditional aged and first-generation students, experience this stress many-fold, compounded by stresses outside of the classroom. The intergenerational collaborative spaces of the YL&R and co-creative research group not only built trust among participants from different backgrounds but also facilitated real learning and understanding of challenges faced by youth as they interact with institutions of higher education.

Lastly, we learned that moving the project to an institutional environment closer to the university tempted us to stray from the practices we had developed in YL&R, but that maintaining a co-creative approach allowed us to do "real research" and to learn about institutional transformation by transforming the institution from within.

Ultimately, this project was an exercise in experiential learning about transforming spaces for research and knowledge creation. Youth and non-youth participants in the project all learned something about the experiences of marginalized youth, the act of collaborating across difference and generation, and creating intergenerational collaborative spaces to build knowledge. Building intergenerational collaborative spaces, characterized by not only safety and bravery/daring but also by the authenticity and collaboration entailed by engaged pedagogy, offers the potential to work together with marginalized youth to better understand the institutional transformation needed within higher education by experimenting with that very transformation.

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Chapter 14
Creating a Necropolity: Governing Migration in the City of Johannesburg and Possibilities for Transformative Migration Scholarship

Roshan Dadoo and Salim Vally

> I am a partisan, I am alive, and in the conscience of those on my side I feel the pulse of the future city we are building. (Gramsci, 1917)

14.1 Introduction

Johannesburg, synonymous with migration since its provenance in the 1890s gold rush, is the only city in South Africa to have designed and implemented an urban migration policy. It is a striking example of a post-apartheid city in which mobility is a marker of precarity or poverty for citizen and migrant alike. This chapter is partially based on a research project aimed at understanding what the creation and operation of Johannesburg's migration policy reveals about the city government's vision of who to include or exclude from its jurisdictions through governing urban migration.

Critical assessments of municipal policy in Johannesburg have mainly focused on local economic planning and infrastructure issues. Migration scholars tend to focus on people's lives and issues from the perspective of migrants in the city. We instead look at social development policy on migration from the perspective of the quotidian lives of government officials. Our research into the official municipal imaginary reveals how discourses become dominant and congeal into a hegemonic narrative of who belongs and who does not.

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By analyzing official documentation and elected politicians' statements in media articles and by drawing on officials' experiences working in the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) Migration Sub-Unit, we explore the possible municipal imagination of an inclusive urban society. Using a political activist methodology, a form of critically engaged scholarship outlined later, we question the government's assumptions about migration; the ways categories of "forced" and "economic" migrants are blurred; and the ways mobilities are "managed." We propose that in an increasingly hostile environment, both forced and economic migrants in the urban underclass are governed in a *necropolity*, that is, they are dehumanized to fall outside of South Africa's human rights-based legal framework.

Reflecting on our research process through a political activist lens highlighted two co-creative aspects of engaged scholarship. First, academics can enter sites of power and gain access to those working there in ways that marginalized communities cannot. Transformative academic interventions, located within activist movements, can therefore co-create knowledge with and for marginalized communities by exploring social relations—how real people operate—*within* ruling regimes (Frampton et al., 2006). Second, interviewing municipal Migrant Helpdesk officials had the unexpected consequence of providing space for them to reflect on their day-to-day work outside of bureaucratic evaluations. This revealed possibilities for future engagements in which academic interventions could create space and empower government workers to critically consider their work practices in order to better align them with the needs of the communities they serve. Our study revealed that while increasingly exclusivist discourses are becoming hegemonic in institutions, they also contain tensions and contradictions. Officials both uphold and subvert the policy they are implementing, suggesting possibilities for imagining an emancipatory urbanism. For activist scholars, humanizing bureaucracy and understanding fault lines within the system can assist movements in co-creating effective strategies for challenging and disrupting dominant relations.

This chapter will discuss how critically engaged academic interventions and social movement activism could potentially hasten this dialectic by exposing institutions' fault lines, thus revealing where transformative and subversive praxes can emerge, while exerting counter-hegemonic pressure on exclusivist and xenophobic reflexes.

14.2 Exploring the Context

We start by looking at two post-apartheid parliamentary acts regulating migration—the Refugee Act (1998) and the Immigration Act (2002)—unpacking how and why the definitions of "refugee" and "migrant" are blurred in their implementation. We then summaries migration's importance to Johannesburg and outline the city's migration policy.

The system of apartheid segregation aimed to deny black South Africans the rights of citizens in the white republic, forcing them to live in rural "independent" Bantustans and work as migrant laborers in white South Africa. The post-1994 dispensation

sought to define citizenship for all South Africans, black and white. In both policy and imagination, black South Africans were no longer migrants in their own country but enjoyed the full rights of citizenship.

In line with the Bill of Rights enshrined in the post-apartheid 1996 Constitution, the Refugee Act (1998) reflects international good practice and provides protection for refugees. South Africa acceded to both the Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention and the UN Refugee Convention in 1996, without reservations, implementing an urban refugee policy without refugee camps. On arrival at a border, a person must declare they are seeking asylum and then present themselves at a Refugee Reception Centre, where they will receive a Section 22 permit—an asylum seeker visa. A status determination interview will then determine whether they qualify for refugee status. Neither asylum seekers nor refugees receive any kind of support from the state, but they are allowed to move and settle freely within the country and to gain employment.

The system, however, is dysfunctional. People often remain on Section 22 permits for a decade or more, periodically renewing the permit, because their status determination interview has not been scheduled. Refugee Reception Offices around the country have closed, making people travel further, often with dependent children and at their own expense. The remaining offices are overwhelmed and applicants routinely sleep outside the centers. This administrative disorganization encourages malfeasance, allowing syndicates to demand payment for space in a supposedly faster queue. Once inside, officials frequently ask for bribes for services that should be free.[1] Thus, many asylum seekers end up undocumented—without valid Section 22 permits. The determination interviews for refugee status are so flawed that in 2023, 91% of claims were rejected (Maliti, 2023). Consequently, the appeals process is severely backlogged.

In addition, amendments to the Refugee Act in 2017 and 2020 aimed to reduce the number of people seeking asylum by limiting asylum seeker rights, including removing the right to work. As there is no state assistance, this leaves asylum seekers without any means of support.

The Immigration Act details the system for visitors to obtain visas and permits for work, study, and other purposes. However, it makes no provision for "economic migrants" from neighboring countries or further afield to obtain any form of documentation. The derogatory connotation of "migrant" under apartheid, which referred to black South Africans who had no rights to the city, has shifted in national policy and imagination to refer to all poor people from outside South Africa.

Amendments to the Immigration Act (in 2005 and 2014) created additional administrative hurdles to obtaining visas and permits, even for those with jobs and qualifications. Rather than enable a specific permit for cross-border migrants, as envisaged in the Southern African Development Community Protocol on the Freedom of Movement and as East and West African countries have done, the Department of Home

[1] The Archbishop Tutu Trust recently demanded the removal of his name from the Refugee Reception Office in Pretoria due to allegations of corruption and mistreatment of asylum seekers (King, 2024).

Affairs (DHA) views the asylum system as too lenient and most asylum seekers as economic migrants abusing the system, hence the high number of rejected refugee claims. The government's conceptual division between legitimate migrants and "undeserving" ones creates a problematic distinction between forced migrants and asylum seekers. This translates into asylum seekers and "illegal" migrants frequently considered as interchangeable in popular parlance even though asylum seekers are "documented," awaiting decisions on their refugee status, and therefore legally in the country. We therefore use the term "migrant" in this chapter as inclusive of asylum seekers. The notion of migrant in this context is made complex and blurred by history, as explained in the next section, including the notion of internally displaced (forced) migrants.

14.2.1 Johannesburg: Founded on Migration

Johannesburg, the country's economic hub, has always attracted those looking for work and economic opportunities. Established after the discovery of gold (Davenport, 1970), Johannesburg has a particular history and relationship with migration. According to Brodie (2008), the last African kingdom in the former province of Transvaal was finally defeated in 1882, and the land was distributed by the Boer government in Pretoria to white Afrikaner farmers. By 1886, gold had been discovered on some of the farms, and President Kruger issued a proclamation declaring a "public digging" (Rosenthal, 1970, p. 144). The population grew from three hundred prospectors, farmers, and itinerant laborers in 1886 to three thousand the following year (Brodie, 2008, pp. 44, 49). Within a decade, Johannesburg had become "the biggest city in the country... From the beginning, Johannesburg was viewed as a city of 'uitlanders' or foreigners" (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 4).

The Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 meant that "by 1933 the whole of the city of Johannesburg had been proclaimed white" (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 5). Black workers were being forcibly removed to peripheral locations and were considered migrants with no rights to own, rent, or remain in the city once their contract with the mine ended. The apartheid regime continued this policy with the Group Areas Act (1950), destroying the few racially mixed so-called grey areas that remained, such as Sophiatown, and forcibly removing residents to racially classified townships, evocatively described by Bloke Modisane in his Modisane, 1963 book *Blame Me on History*:

> Walking down Good Street and up Gerty Street was like walking through a ghost town of deserted houses and demolished homes, of faded dreams and broken lives, surrounded by rousing memories, some exciting others terrifying... We cherished Sophiatown because it brought together such a great concentration of people, we did not live in it, we were Sophiatown. It was a complex paradox which attracted opposites; the ring of joy, the sound of laughter, was interposed with the growl and the smell of insult; we sang our sad happy songs... (p. 9)

This was further entrenched by the post-1960 phase of forced removals that tried, albeit unevenly, to remove township residents out of the city altogether and into Bantustans, turning "the workforce into a migrant one" (Unterhalter, 1987, p. 92). After 1994, rural South Africans from the impoverished Bantustans moved back to the city as citizens. Increasingly, asylum seekers and economic migrants arrived from neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Mozambique, from other African countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and from countries further afield such as Bangladesh.

14.2.2 Migrant Helpdesk

The Migrant Helpdesk is situated in the Migration Sub-Unit, one of three sub-units (along with Displaced Persons and Children's Services) forming one of the directorates in the CoJ's Department of Health and Social Development. The political principal is the Member of the Mayoral Committee for Health and Social Development. There is a Helpdesk staffed by one regional coordinator in each of Johannesburg's seven regions. A Sub-Unit Head and one administrator are based in the city center regional office. Helpdesks provide information and referrals to international and national newcomers to the city. Their objectives are to:

- Develop a service frontline that provides migrants with relevant information on available services;
- Develop and conduct anti-xenophobia awareness campaigns with City staff as well as local communities;
- Establish and maintain partnerships with migrant organisations to identify concerns and address service gaps; and
- Liaise with and lobby provincial government departments on issues relating to migrants. (CoJ, 2018)

Johannesburg's Migrant Helpdesk and accompanying migration strategy together form a significant policy model that recognizes that migration is a reality for the city, that migrants have constitutional rights to services and protection, and that migration can be beneficial for development. The Helpdesk was established in 2008, as part of a migration policy adopted the previous year, and was aimed at "making Jozi[2] work for migrants, making migrants work for Jozi" (CoJ, 2007). In 2011, a second policy was implemented, the Policy on Integration of Migrants (CoJ, 2011). Unlike the inclusive definition of migrants in the original policy, this policy stipulates that "undocumented migrants are not the primary target of the integration policy in as far as assisting them to undermine the immigration laws of the country." It goes on to say that the risk in giving undocumented migrants assistance "may be an unintentional

[2] *Jozi* is a colloquial name for Johannesburg arising from the common contraction of Johannesburg to "Joburg."

consequence of assisting those that the Department of Home Affairs would have regarded as prohibited or undesirable."

Despite the migration policy intervention, relations between the city and migrants remain fraught and a climate of hostility toward non-nationals exists among South African residents. Tensions easily erupt into violence.[3]

14.3 Methodology

Our project sought to analyze the institutional relations that movements for change encounter. We situated the research in a critically engaged methodology, combined with discourse analysis, using the Helpdesk as a heuristic device to reveal how local government officials understand the changing nature of the city and migrants' place in it.

This choice was based on two observations. First, the literature on African urbanism identifies a need for studies that focus on city-level policy and governance (Parnell & Robinson, 2013, p. 597). Critical assessments of municipal government policy in South Africa, particularly in Johannesburg, have mainly focused on the impact of local *economic* policy such as Integrated Development Plans; on strategic planning, transport, and tackling of spatial apartheid; or on issues of land, housing, and the built environment (Harrison et al., 2014; Murray, 2011). Instead, we explore a municipal *social development* policy. Our research thus adds to studies of migration in Johannesburg but focuses on the city's policy response to migration and inclusion. Second, existing studies of migration in Johannesburg tend to focus on migrants' experiences and not the municipality's perspectives or those of the bureaucrats implementing migration policy (Ludl, 2014; Makhkulu, 2015). We therefore focused partly on government officials' stories and experiences. Specifically, we conducted in-depth interviews with five Helpdesk officials working in different regions of the city and with the elected official responsible for the Migration Unit; we also analyzed policy documents and media reports.

From the positionality of scholar activists engaged in a project aimed at societal change, we adopted George Smith's proposition of political activist ethnography (in Frampton et al., 2006) as a form of critically engaged transformative research. Though our study is not ethnographic, we formulated the project from his understanding that activist researchers are located outside of and yet constantly interact and struggle with ruling regimes. "Mapping of the institutional relations and obstacles that movements are facing identifies the contradictions that exist in ruling relations and illustrates the weak points that can be actively challenged" (Frampton et al., 2006, p. 139). Understanding the practices and ideological imperatives of the "ruling regime" at the local level revealed not only the inconsistencies between Johannesburg's migration policy and its implementation but also the ideological conflicts within those in power.

[3] For instance, in September 2019, xenophobic attacks broke out starting in Kwa-Zulu Natal and spreading to Johannesburg, leaving twelve people murdered (Burke, 2019).

For activists, this helped identify governmental weak points and even potential allies within the system.

We see political activist ethnography as a form of critically engaged scholarship in which the researcher is clearly positioned within activist movements despite the institutional obstructions they confront. It also requires scholars to exercise a reflexive approach in their role in the activist space: All activists from communities are, in the Gramscian sense, also intellectuals in the process of co-creating knowledge from collaborations within and outside the university (Frampton et al., 2006). Politically engaged scholarship makes this epistemological approach more explicit: the scholar is concretely participating in struggles focused on transformation.

Two co-creative spaces opened up through our research process. First, in the spirit of political activist ethnography, the research contributed to migration activist collectives in Johannesburg, furthering their understanding of the social relations within the municipality. Second, allowing officials a space to express their feelings and views about their jobs outside of managerial evaluations, where they have to prove "successes" against various performance metrics, helped activists to more effectively co-create anti-hegemonic narratives, transformative practices, and imaginaries toward an emancipatory urbanism.

14.4 The Liminal City: Mobility as a Marker of Precarity

Black South Africans and migrant workers from neighboring countries were historically excluded from cities, yet they took part in "illegal" urbanizing while also retaining and re-making relationships in rural areas (Murray, 2008, p. 123). Colonial land expropriation and the ensuing migrant labor system have left a legacy of complex multi-local identities for the black working-class population. In the post-apartheid era, everyone has the right to move freely. But the lack of affordable housing, mass unemployment, and job precarity has made movement for the "new poor" or "underclass" (Bauman, 2013) into a paradoxical marker of "un-freedom"—the inability to purchase stability. Without the possibility of fostering a secure urban subjectivity, freedom of movement has not translated into a sense of urban inclusivity for millions of black South African residents.

Ashman (2022) writes that the spatial geographies of apartheid-era racial capitalism remain despite the removal of apartheid laws. "Housing and transport systems, combined with patterns of work (and the lack of work), have left these dynamics largely untransformed since 1994" (p. 35). She points out that poor housing is often on the urban periphery, far from centers of employment and coupled with inefficient and expensive transport networks. The legacy of apartheid spatial geography has thus trapped a new underclass in urban ghettos and ever-growing shack settlements that expand the former apartheid-era townships into liminal zones largely outside the provisions of the state.

Kihato (2013) uses the concept of liminality to describe urban spaces where the boundaries between formal and informal, legal and illegal are blurred. The

phenomenon of white businesses abandoning Johannesburg's city center since the early 1990s has made the central business district (CBD) a preferable ghetto, as it is close to workplaces or potential employment. Former office buildings have become a hub of informal trading and a hive of unsafe, multi-story, overcrowded residential spaces.

Most people moving to South African cities are from other parts of the country, itself a diverse population with different languages, cultural norms, and class backgrounds. Liminal urban zones are also the most viable choice for non-national migrants who must avoid detention or deportation. Next, we discuss how the concept of integration into a stable host community is at odds with reality in these heterogeneous parts of the city and how xenophobia flourishes in poor, crowded, liminal urban neighborhoods.

14.5 Integration and Xenophobia: CoJ Friend or Foe?

This section focuses on how the CoJ conceives of integration—the policy requirement for migrants to adapt to the host society—and its denial of xenophobia. These themes were derived from the interviews and policy documents.

14.5.1 Integration

The way officials use "integration" and "xenophobia" reveals the complexities inherent in discourses about urban areas. Concepts such as integration and xenophobia are intertwined, volatile, and prone to various interpretations. Specific views coalesce through power relationships into discourses that become normalized.

The CoJ's Policy on Integration of Migrants begins by celebrating the city's diversity and cosmopolitanism, but this is immediately followed with a long list of stipulations for migrants, including "learning the language, understanding the sociocultural context of the host society, and respecting and complying with legislative and community frameworks" (CoJ, 2011, p. 8). Meanwhile, local residents are required to "accept the situation and facilitate the process of integration by breaking down barriers" (p. 8). Despite the policy focus on integration, officials we interviewed emphasized Helpdesk program aimed at convincing locals to accept migrants rather than at convincing migrants to integrate.

The policy focus on integration presents local neighborhoods as stable. It skirts the serious fractures within communities and the power relationships that play out in local-level environments, particularly in spaces existing in liminal relationships to the state's authority.

14.5.2 Xenophobia

The South African government refuses to acknowledge xenophobia and instead promotes the narrative that violence against non-nationals is purely criminal rather than based on the victim's nationality. In 2019, after another wave of xenophobic violence, President Ramaphosa said: "The violence was being spread by people with criminal intent, South Africans are not xenophobic. South Africans have always lived side-by-side with people from other nations" (Goba, 2019).

When challenged, government representatives claim that attacks on migrants are not xenophobic, because the attacks target only "illegal" migrants, not all migrants. They are, in effect, condoning attacks on "illegal" migrants, who are understood to be criminals due to their "illegal" status. Given the conflation of undocumented "illegal" migrants and asylum seekers (as elaborated earlier), a confusing discourse has developed in which politicians' denial of xenophobia is itself xenophobic, criminalizing all poor migrants. State representatives claim that they are clamping down on "illegal" migrants because "the communities tell them to." Thus, the state puts the blame for its agencies' actions (such as police raids on migrant shops) on the people.

The uncertainties and implications around the use of the word xenophobia in official discourse and policy documents reflect similar uncertainties and equivocations in our interviews with Helpdesk officials. The migration sub-unit head had previously worked for the DHA. He distinguishes between the Helpdesk's mandate, originally to provide assistance regardless of status, and the national government's direct management and control over daily life:

> When I was with Home Affairs, there you've got a mandate to enforce the law, there's legislation, there's policy, there's all regulations, and sometimes you don't even realize that you tend to be xenophobic because when you think of a migrant you think of documentation, no documentation—deportation, but when you come here, you realize you can deal with whoever, even those who are illegal, you can still interact with them and they can feel free to come to us anytime just to get advice until their issues are sorted.

His response shows the complexity of the discursive choices made in everyday interactions between local officials and the public In the DHA's approach, migrants are turned into objects, legitimized or not, through DHA officials issuing (or not) a piece of paper: thus, for this respondent, migrants became un-free, dehumanized to the point of producing xenophobic sentiments in him. When working at the Helpdesk, however, the respondent seems to "rediscover" that humans are involved. This indicates how day-to-day practices within different governmental offices generate certain discourses.

The Helpdesk's foundational document acknowledges the existence of xenophobia; indeed, one Helpdesk objective is to implement anti-xenophobia campaigns. However, a 2009 strategic policy review proposed replacing "anti-xenophobia" with "inclusiveness, tolerance and diversity" in public awareness materials because the term "carried unnecessary negative connotations."

On the one hand, this change does what it purports to do: it presents a normative, even idealized, vision for the city—one of inclusion, tolerance, community, and diversity. Yet, on the other hand, eliminating the term anti-xenophobia plays into the national government's denialist discourse. The problem of xenophobia is thus hidden, along with all references to countering it or acknowledgements that inclusiveness, tolerance, and diversity do not currently exist but are goals to strive toward. In this way, governmental discourses are manufactured.

Uncovering the roots of governmental discourses has implications beyond specific policy documents or government officials' utterances. van Dijk (2008, p. 300) explains critical discourse analysis as "focus[ing] on the elites and their discursive strategies for the maintenance of inequalities." The use or omission of certain terms defines the population to be governed and the mechanisms by which various categories of people are to be governed and inequality maintained. Following Gramsci, Weatherell (2001) describes how power relations imbue certain discourses with authority, such as in the case of government statements that then get repeated and reproduced through the media and everyday conversation. For instance, media reports of statements made by government ministers and the president regarding the outbreak of xenophobic violence in September 2019 helped to naturalize a widespread belief that all Nigerians are drug dealers (Simone, 2004).

Calls for the police to use force and for increased immigration raids and stronger border controls (particularly from Johannesburg's then mayor, a member of the Democratic Alliance political party) became "common sense" government responses, resulting in a wave of xenophobic attacks (Africa News Agency, 2019). Although ten police officers were charged with bribery, tipping off shopkeepers about planned raids, and selling confiscated goods, the more powerful narrative, driven by senior politicians, depicted the non-national shopkeepers as the criminals. This shows how consent was manufactured to create a hegemonic discourse that enabled the state to increase the use of force and coercion against cross-border migrants.

The migrant shopkeepers mentioned above are mostly undocumented or asylum seekers. They have created ethno-nationalist trading enclaves (Zack & Landau, 2021) in Johannesburg's inner city from which they sell goods in bulk to cross-border traders. These traders are other African migrants who trade and transit without state-issued authorization, purchasing goods for sale in neighboring countries (Zack & Landau, 2021). In 2015, a Gauteng City-Regional Observatory report put this trade at about R4.6 billion a year (Mail & Guardian, 2015), including the amount traders spend on transport, food, and accommodation while in the city, yet this remains outside the municipality's economic considerations. The CoJ's migration policy initially looked at the positive contribution migrant businesses make to the city's economy. However, with the policy shift mentioned in the Migrant Helpdesk section, the dominant discourse changed to demonizing these traders, rendering them, not only as outside of the *polis* and therefore outside of its human rights protections, but also as threats to national security.

The national government's Justice, Crime Prevention, and Security Cluster said in a statement following the 2019 xenophobic violence: "An attack on law enforcement agencies is an attack on the state, and the government views this in the most serious

light. Blatant disregard for our law threatens national security and the sovereignty of our nation" (News24 Wire, 2019). Xenophobic violence does not exist in the minds of the governmental elite, because migrants are seen as illegal and thus as othered to the point of being "life that does not deserve to live" (Agamben, 1998, p. 136). We therefore consider migrants in the city as existing in a necropolity—where they are seen not only as illegal subjects outside the constitutional rule of law but also as "the migrant," a polity-created construct that negates their existence as human subjects, discussed further below.

14.6 Administration and Control: The Making of a Necropolity

Johannesburg governs migration using disciplinary and regulatory techniques ranging from the use and misuse of population statistics to the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some may die (Butler, 2004; Mbembe, 2003). In this vein, respondents discussed issues migrants face when somebody dies. Viewing these issues through the lens "slavery" (Luxemburg, 2013) and not governmentality alone, we argue that governing migration in the city has become a question of administering and controlling "bare life" decisions, creating a necropolity functioning adjacent to the rights-based constitutional order of the state.

The city's migrant policy (CoJ, 2011, p. 19) calls for "a reliable comprehensive database" that includes everyone living in Johannesburg, updated quarterly. Respondent C questioned this policy and the municipal fetish for numbers: "So the city wants to know how many migrants are coming into the city, it's not possible. Even our academic institutions have tried, it's tough." She also illustrated the futility of data collection when it comes to real-life challenges—such as when a baby died and the parents could not afford repatriation or burial. In all migrant death cases, officials have to raise funds from the migrant community for the burial. Here, however, the respondent had to collect funds from her own family and friends, as there was no other option available.

> I had a case two weeks ago of a one-and-a-half-month-old baby who passed on. Both of the parents are foreigners and the baby was born here. And the baby was lying in the morgue for two and a half weeks before the case was brought to us and they didn't have R900 for the burial site, and I stepped in and we had to provide assistance in terms of getting this baby buried. So it's things like this that are quite emotionally draining.

As someone on the ground, dealing with concrete life-and-death issues, Respondent C could not see the point of an information management system when she is unable to "make a difference in their lives," in this case to find a formal channel of assistance for bereaved parents.

Burial was mentioned as a common problem for Helpdesk clients. The question of repatriating mortal remains and the cost of burials feature prominently among the

city's migrant communities. In his ethnographic study of "hijacked" buildings[4] in Johannesburg's city center, Wilhelm-Solomon (2022) describes *chema*—the process of a family collecting money across social networks for a Zimbabwean migrant's repatriation and funeral. He accompanies the brother of the deceased to the city mortuary "where city's dead are documented in death, a bureaucratic necessity for the journey home, even if they went about undocumented in life" (p. 135).

Given such struggles, Respondent C expressed the futility of the government's fixation with enumerating the city's population when there was no desire to fund the necessary services for migrants. Analysis of media coverage can demonstrate how numbers are entangled in power relations within migration discourse in the city and how "numbers do not merely inscribe a pre-existing reality. They constitute it" (Rose, 2004, p. 212). For example, in 2017, the mayor made public statements regarding his campaign to clean up the inner city from crime and grime. He was widely reported as saying that 80% of CBD residents were undocumented foreign nationals. Africa Check found this claim to be false (Khumalo, 2019).

Nevertheless, the media repeated the mayor's claim, and a few days later, after accompanying a police raid of a hijacked building in downtown Johannesburg, the deputy minister of police stated in a TV interview: "How can a city in South Africa be 80% foreign nationals... that is dangerous" (EWN, 2017). He also said that "in Hillbrow and surrounds, South Africans had surrendered their own city to the foreign nationals" and repeated the statistic of 80% three more times in the next 30 seconds. The government did not try to distance itself from his remarks until two years later when the then foreign minister, addressing African ambassadors during the widespread outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2019, said that the deputy minister would "recant" (Fabricius, 2019).

EWN TV's interview with the deputy minister of police was embedded in their online news story with the headline "Do not surrender your land to foreign nationals," another quote, from the deputy minister. The video of the interview was also uploaded on YouTube by EWN (2017) and was easily circulated on social media, spreading his false claims to a wider audience and over a longer time than the immediate news story. This example demonstrates how statistics can be fabricated and misused in harmful ways. Reputable sources were ignored in the popular consciousness, as statistics have power when spoken by the powerful and disseminated through influential media channels, regardless of their validity. Thus, statistics can be used to promulgate false narratives that are widely perceived as reality.

As outlined earlier, the obstacles hindering asylum seekers' ability to obtain and remain documented, plus the absence of permits for so-called economic migrants, means that the very item the government insists upon to know, count, survey, and police migrants—*documentation*—is simultaneously withheld, thereby creating the "illegal" migrant. The logic of the discourse means that it is impossible to live legally if deemed to be an "illegal" being. Everything the illegal subject does is

[4] *Hijacked* refers to buildings abandoned by the legal owner and taken over by criminal syndicates that over-crowd the spaces and collect rent without maintaining the property or providing access to municipal services.

necessarily outside the law. They are therefore a criminal. Moreover, they fall outside the governable population. They cannot be counted; therefore, they cannot be known. They are an existential threat, an enemy within with no human rights and therefore no rights to be human, similar to Luxemburg's slave (Luxemburg, 2013) or Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995/1998). The tragic response then is to dehumanize the illegal subject in the everyday and expel them from the territory through deportation or death.

From the use and misuse of statistics to detention, deportation, and death, we suggest that a coercive dominant discourse is producing a necropolity. The Helpdesk officials understood that their remit was to disseminate information to the public regardless of status, as stated in the city's initial migration policy documentation (CoJ, 2007), yet they end up facing "bare life" decisions (Agamben, 1998; Dean, 2002) in their everyday work. If they acted on the words of politicians such as the Mayor and refused to assist undocumented clients, they would be condemning them to detention and deportation. That means expulsion and sometimes death if they are *refouled* to their countries of origin where they were facing persecution. Sovereign power, exercised by the national government, is thus intertwined with biopower at the municipal level.

The precarity of work and housing affects all poor residents, but for migrants, the added precarity of documentation, or its lack, creates conditions of harm without care or recourse to constitutional rights. Next, we explore the discursive potential of "community" to radically reimagine the city polity. We then review two examples that exemplify governance in the necropolity but also highlight the role of transformative engaged scholarship within a broader counter-hegemonic praxis.

14.7 Conjuring Up Community: Toward Transformative Praxis

Here, we look at discourses that inform inclusion and exclusion in the CoJ and how these both embody and depart from dominant discourses. The conception of a national citizenry is ill-defined at the local level. And the word "community" is used to describe South African citizens but not external migrants. Policy's insistence on integration into local communities plus officials' muddled meaning of "community" indicates a mutually reinforcing discourse that reifies identification with "community" while simultaneously creating categories of exclusion.

In this section, we point to the potential of using a contemporary understanding of pre-colonial ideas of "community" as an inclusive concept transcending nationality. Despite the lack of clarity over what exactly is meant by "community," the vision of integrating "the other" into an imagined ideal community persists in municipal policy documents: "One distinct aim has been to develop a city polity [sic] to facilitate the integration of migrants into Joburg communities" (CoJ, 2011, p. 16).

The notion of qualifying for inclusion but remaining eternally marginalized brings to mind Young's critique of neighborhood community as an ideal to strive toward. Young (2011) argues that communities are constituted not only by those who are excluded but also those included yet never fully belonging as "local community." She cautions about ignoring differences that enable identification only with those with whom one feels a commonality. Her argument points to the fundamental paradox rooted in CoJ's integration policy. That is, its first guiding principle is described as "strengthening the bonds and positive interaction between people based on the cultural heritage of the host society" (CoJ, 2011, p. 17). Yet, defining the "cultural heritage of the host society" is almost impossible given the multiple cultures and heritages that make up Johannesburg.

Rather than critiquing community as an ideal, as Young does, African communitarianism considers the indigenous ontological understanding of "Ubuntu": variously interpreted as "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" or "we are, therefore I am, and since I am, therefore we are." In the former definition, the individual is created by the community. In the latter case, however, Michael Onyebuchi Eze (2008) argues that the individual and community are mutually generative, recognizing that "the other's uniqueness enriches me" and hence the "other" is constituent of the common good of the community (p. 396).

In contrast to Ubuntu, the dominant discourse seems to present community—or citizen—as "I am because you are not." However, we think Eze's (2008) thesis on Ubuntu opens possibilities for transforming the CoJ's integration discourse. Rather than envisioning migrants integrating into the "cultural heritage of the host society," an ideal "community" can be imagined (Anderson, 1991) that draws from indigenous theories: community-building as an ongoing process in which migrant and local are constantly generating and regenerating urban communities, optimizing mutually beneficial outcomes for all denizens.

The combination of the dominant discourse and the move toward more coercive and less consultative mechanisms of governing the city is manufacturing a nativist hegemonic narrative. However, Helpdesk officials' confusion over policy definitions demonstrates that the dominant discourse is far from "natural" or "common sense." National migration legislation reinforces "the dichotomous ideological forms that run through migration typologies—most notably classifications such as forced/economic/trafficked/slave" (Hanieh, 2019). Yet these are blurred at the level of city officials who deal daily with real-life migrants. Their quotidian experiences can subtly subvert policy directives. While not directly challenging the "bare life" decisions they are increasingly being forced to make, officials' humanitarian responses open space for activist academics along with migrants, residents, and social movements to develop a counter-hegemonic project challenging the narrow nationalist discourse congealed in migration policy.

To examine the possibilities for developing a counter-hegemonic narrative, we look at two examples: a fire that gutted a heritage building on Albert Street and a government action against "illegal" miners at Stilfontein mine. Typical of many buildings in the city center, the Albert Street building had been subdivided into tiny spaces without water or electricity. Although the city owned the building, it had

been taken over by a fake landlord who charged R1500 for a small corner. Residents divided such corners further to reduce the individual cost. When a fire broke out, the overcrowding and structural dilapidation caused over 70 deaths—largely foreign migrant workers but also poor South Africans.

In the recent Stilfontein example, ongoing at the time of writing, police, egged on by politicians, blocked exits to "illegal" miners working in a disused, 2-kilometer-deep gold-mine shaft. They stopped food, water, and medication from being lowered down. This government operation, called *Vala Umgodi* ("plug the hole"), started in August 2024 and has now led to the deaths of at least 100 miners. A full-scale government rescue operation was only put in place on 13 January 2025 after community organizations and NGOs launched a court action. Prior to this, the community had been extracting emaciated miners and dead bodies with a makeshift pulley system. Many miners were undocumented migrants from neighboring countries and were arrested and deported upon resurfacing.

Analyzing the Albert Street fire case, particularly the response from politicians, local officials, and the media, shows how a dominant xenophobic discourse can be created "in real time." Minister in the Presidency Khumbudzo Ntshavheni initially said the "majority of those who reside in hijacked buildings are not South African and they are not in this country legally and the government cannot provide housing to illegal immigrants." This was amplified by the Patriotic Alliance, a right-wing populist party, which called for "mass deportations" (Mkentane & Mhlanga, 2023).

In both cases, the government associated criminality with migration to wash its hands of responsibility for the tragedy. Instead, they blamed the victims for being "illegal" migrants. In the case of the fire, they also blamed the Socio Economic Rights Institute, an NGO that has been defending people the CoJ has evicted from inner-city buildings. The city plans to sell the properties cheaply to private developers. Private sector gentrification will ensure that only the wealthy have access to the city. Neoliberal governmental technologies police and criminalize the poor, rendering them an underclass (Bauman, 2013), the "abject other." The Albert Street fire encapsulates contemporary urban necropolitics in local government. The deaths of so many poor and vulnerable people due to the city not taking action against building hijackers, not maintaining the buildings it owns, and not providing services to the residents is spun into a narrative that blames migrants and the residents themselves.

In the Stilfontein case, the minister in the presidency gleefully stated in November 2024 that "we are not sending help to criminals... we will smoke them out... criminals are not to be helped they are to be persecuted" (GovernmentZA, 2024), thereby justifying withholding sending vital supplies to the miners and knowingly allowing them to die of starvation. There was no way for the miners to leave the shaft without assistance. The government's narrative, amplified by the media, was that the miners' illegality in their actions (mining informally) and in their person (undocumented migrants) meant that they should be starved to death—this is necropolity writ large.

In light of our interviews with municipal officials "at the cutting edge," the government's response demonstrates the role engaged academia can play in revealing the contradictions within local government and sharpening those contradictions to create the possibility for counter-hegemonic narratives and praxes.

For example, inner-city residents' groups, anti-xenophobia campaigns, even some suburban residents, and most notably academics countered the government's assumptions regarding the Albert Street fire. Under the auspices of the Marshalltown Fire Justice Campaign, a collection of organizations, including Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia, academics working on and in the city, and migration scholars have been campaigning for justice for the victims of the fire. They challenged the CoJ's inaction against the building hijackers and its use of illegal and violent evictions to empty buildings.

In the Stilfontein case, an ad-hoc support committee of local community members whose loved ones are trapped, NGOs such as Mining Affected Communities United in Action, National Association of Artisanal Miners, and activists and engaged academics who have been evidencing the need to formalize artisanal mining raised funds for water, food, and a simple rope system to send food down and pull up miners, dead and alive, one by one. The NGO Lawyers for Human Rights initiated an urgent court action that finally forced the government to implement a rescue operation.

While there are academics studying various aspects of migration and life in the city that is of value to activists, engaged academics within campaigns challenge institutional constraints by positioning themselves as partisan. They provide information and analysis as well as spaces to bring marginalized city dwellers into the academy, host public events that give a platform to migrants, city dwellers, and policymakers, and provide practical assistance during emergencies. The media is more likely to take professors seriously, so engaged scholars are consciously leveraging their social status to amplify migrant stories and campaigns. Truly transformative scholarship requires reflexivity and sensitivity, boldness in confronting institutional obstacles, and commitment to collaborative and supportive academic practices. In this way, engaged scholars can expand the space to co-create knowledge, envisioning alternative ideas of the city with and by urban residents, both migrants and citizens.

14.8 Conclusion

In contrast to the post-apartheid dispensation and its foundational rights-based constitution, national government is moving away from the protections of the Refugee Act and the language of "migration for development" found in the White Paper on International Migration (2017). Government at national and local levels is revising legislation and policy to cement the discourse of the migrant as an abject non-human outside the polity, punishable with expulsion and risk of death, thereby entrenching a necropolity. Yet the experiences of the Helpdesk officials we interviewed open possibilities for dissenting from the dominant discourse. This is not in itself transformative but simply pushing back. However, in the context of the global rise in exclusionary politics and authoritarian rule, we suggest that just this small dent in the dominant discourse is welcome, even if only to keep open the space for alternative narratives. As Gramsci (1999) explains, dominant discourses gain hegemony in the interests of ruling ideologies. Yet this process is not automatic, and the dialectical contestation

of ideas allows for counter-hegemonic discourses and agency to unsettle dominant narratives.

As noted in both examples above, engaged scholars can play a vital role in co-creating anti-hegemonic narratives with communities and social movements. Academia allows entry into investigating sites of power and interviewing players that are otherwise impossible to access. Political activist research, the methodology we used to explore the CoJ's migration policy from the perspective of the officials whose job it is to implement it, revealed the weak points and contradictions in the city's policy and institutional relations. The interviewees expressed confusion and paradoxes in trying to do their job of providing advice to migrants in an increasingly hostile legislative and social environment. Analyzing the interviews and politicians' public statements in the media reveals the necropolity existing in the margins of urban governance. Our findings add to debates taking place within a migrant rights coalition in Johannesburg that includes migrant community groups, academics working on migration, and urban policy and human rights legal organizations.

This collective is considering how to move away from a narrative based on asserting migrants rights toward a discourse based on struggles common to all city residents. Roy (2019, p. 775) argues for what she calls "abolitionist" cities where activist organizations refuse police and state surveillance of migrants and poor black communities based on US black radical traditions, calling into question both liberal and cosmopolitan traditions of western humanism. Roy's ideas assist with conceptualizing an inclusive counter narrative that draws not only from South African black radical traditions but also makes room for reconsidering the relevance of indigenous non-western conceptions of inclusion. Although the pulse of the future city imagined by Gramsci is faint, engaged and transformative scholarship helps stretch the contradictions in hegemonic anti-migrant discourses, co-creating subversive practices and imaginaries with activist collectives toward an emancipatory urbanism.

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Chapter 15
Transforming Education Through Refugee Teaching

Ma Vang and Yến Lê Espiritu

15.1 Introduction

We write in a time of crises—crises that necessitate a global political education to inform public action against ongoing colonialism, genocide, and wars that continually displace people from all over the world. As we write, Israel's military attacks on Gaza since October 2023 have displaced a staggering 85% of the territory's total population (United Nations, 2024). And yet, education about, with, and for displaced people—refugee education—is most often rooted in a colonial logic that conceptualizes refugees as in need of the knowledge of the new country in order to become self-sufficient and assimilable subjects. The experiences of refugee students along with their parents are fraught with the tensions of navigating the "exclusionary power structures in their schools and communities" and finding ways to "connect their histories and identities to the national narratives" (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2022). Refugee education is also a part of the humanitarian regime that purports to build a better future for refugee children whose lives are deemed to be in need of uplift and transformation (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2022). There is little room in this model for refugees to also transform education (Greene et al., 2023; Snell, 2018). We assert that refugees need learning environments that engage with refugee knowledge, culture, and history and that refugee parents and communities have the expertise to contribute to the overall goal of public education.

In this chapter, we center the experiences of refugee parents and students in California to examine a specific practice of refugee education we call refugee teaching. The framework of refugee teaching names the acts of, not only teaching refugees

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and teaching about refugees, but also teaching *by* refugees. As such, this framework conceptualizes refugee students and their families not as a problem to be solved but as a source of knowledge (Espiritu et al., 2022). As researchers, we engage in the process of building refugee education alongside refugee students, refugee parents, and public-school teachers, many of whom are teachers of color. We conceptualize refugee education as a site where refugees and their allies labor to shift the narratives about them and their communities, transforming public education in the process. In this collective effort to transform education through refugee teaching, our engaged scholarship centers refugee knowledge and involves meaningful and ongoing collaboration with teachers, especially with teachers of color, to co-create transformative political education. We discuss not only the successes of this approach and why it is needed but also the complexities that we encountered and the lessons we learned in the process of collaborating with refugee communities, local schoolteachers, and school administrators.

Concretely, we envision refugee education, with its focus on transformative political education, to be a key contributor to California's requirement that all high school students pass an ethnic studies class to graduate, starting with the class of 2030. The ethnic studies high school graduation requirement in California, the first in the United States, reflects a decade-long effort (2010–2021) by educators, parents, students, and community groups to "provide students the opportunity to learn about the histories, cultures, struggles, and contributions to American society of historically marginalized peoples" (California100, n.d.). As we discuss below, the goals of refugee teaching align with those of ethnic studies; both center community knowledge through culturally sustaining pedagogy. We contend that teaching ethnic studies must necessarily involve teachers from refugee backgrounds and other marginalized communities who can bring their own experiences into the classroom to bridge theory and practice. Our conceptualization of refugee parents and students as knowledge producers and teachers of color as knowledge facilitators thus constitutes a sharp departure from the persistent deficit model in education.

Centering refugee knowledge and perspectives, we organized two refugee teaching conferences that offered teacher professional development workshops to train in-service teachers to develop refugee-centered curricula that better serve newcomer refugee students and that offer more critical and engaging curricula for all students. The analysis in this chapter draws on our experiences with and reflections on two refugee teaching events that we organized. In 2017, with funding from the University of California Office of the President, we hosted the Refugee Teaching Symposium in San Diego, California, where teachers, students, parents, and researchers gathered to share stories and discuss best practices for centering refugee perspectives in the classroom. In 2022, with funding from the Whiting Foundation, we organized the Refugee Teaching Institute (RTI) in Merced, California. The institute was held on the UC Merced campus and involved collaboration between the Critical Refugee Studies Collective (CRSC), UC Merced University Extension, and several local community organizations. Both the symposium and institute offered teachers credit for their participation, which teachers can use toward their continuing education or salary

increase. The primary audiences included kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) teachers but also refugee parents, students, and community members.

Founded in 2016 in California, the CRSC is a group of interdisciplinary scholars who are committed to engaged scholarship that centers refugee lives. We conceptualize the refugee as a subject whose actions and knowledge illuminate complex refugee lifeworlds. Our Collective members not only study refugees, but many are also refugees themselves with long and deep ties to refugee communities in California and beyond. We depart from the legal and humanitarian approaches to refugees and instead assert that refugees are more than the fear and gratitude they are expected to express to receive protection. Ethics of care and attentiveness to community networks and well-being are key to our research practices. We view meaningful engaged scholarship and genuine partnership with community organizations and local teachers as central to our intellectual endeavor, critical intervention, and personal well-being. We contend that transforming education through refugee teaching is not only about changing institutions of learning but also about using refugee knowledge toward dismantling systems that produce violence and displacement (Espiritu et al., 2022).

15.2 Humanitarian Response to Refugee Education

Education is a main pillar in the humanitarian response to the "refugee crisis." Since 2010, education has been one of the global strategic priorities of the UNHCR (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees), giving rise to a widespread endorsement of "education in emergencies" as a universal human right. In 2015, as world leaders gathered at the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, which includes ensuring quality education for all children by 2030, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, pledged the agency's support: "Refugees face two journeys, one leading to hope, the other to despair. It is up to us to help them along the right path" (Grandi, 2020). Grandi's pledge exemplifies both the promise and problem of humanitarian projects: the promise of needed resources, clout, and expertise and the problem of elevating the discursive frame of victimhood—"it is up to us to help them"—over refugees' own knowledge and initiative. As such, the right-to-education framework risks promoting saviorism and reinforcing deficit perspectives on refugees, thereby perpetuating power imbalances in approaches to education in emergencies.

Humanitarian actors and organizations in the Global North perpetuate global inequities as they hold the most power over decision-making in education policy, finance, and programming (Barnett, 2002; Fassin, 2011). Around the globe, power inequities persist in global education spaces as refugees are expected to fit into existing systems designed based on assumptions of an uninterrupted learning continuum. The humanitarian response to the needs for refugee education has primarily been to build makeshift schools in refugee camps or incorporate refugee children into the schools of the first country of asylum (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2022; Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, 2020). While

these educational efforts are necessary, they generally approach refugee students from a deficit perspective, which negates refugees' knowledge and experiences. With this approach, "the problem becomes the refugees, their differences and what they lack, rather than the nation state, the structure of education systems, and what these lack" (Morrice, 2021, p. 865). Adopting this deficit perspective, humanitarian agencies, however unwittingly, approach refugees as passive, powerless, and lacking capacity and knowledge (Harrell-Bond, 1999; Zakharia, 2023). Cast as objects of rescue, refugees are thus denied the right to narrate their own experiences and reproduce their ways of knowing.

Social science research on the integration of refugee students into US schools contributes to this deficit perspective, characterizing refugee students largely as "disadvantaged" victims who lack skills and knowledge upon entering US schools (Baker & North, 1984; Caplan et al., 1989). Schools are then the place where refugees will be repaired and become productive citizens (Caplan et al., 1989; Rodriguez, 2015). As Rodriguez concludes: "The focus on humanitarian aid, resettlement, and the vulnerable and amoral status of refugee-ness in policy and research sets up the conditions for how teachers/schools are able to think about and talk about refugees" (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 118).

Our engaged scholarship practice of co-creating knowledge through a collaborative research approach, which recognizes the "interdependence of theory and practice" and engages multiple societal stakeholders, disrupts the humanitarian narrative that turns refugees into dehistoricized objects of rescue (Ghorashi, 2025), elevating instead stories that refract refugees through the lens of their own humanity. Conceptualizing refugee students and their families as a source of knowledge rather than a problem to be solved, we insist on decolonizing the learning space by acknowledging, engaging, and elevating refugees' own experiences, knowledge, and creativity. In this chapter, we provide two examples of how we flipped the script on refugee education by emphasizing *refugee teaching* rather than *teaching refugees.*

15.3 Storytelling: Refugee Teaching Praxis

Critical refugee studies posits that refugee storytelling, which includes oral stories, art, literature, and other cultural expressions, is the vehicle through which to record and disseminate refugee knowledge about and against the humanitarian refugee regime (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 106). As such, storytelling is a refugee teaching praxis that centers refugee actions and knowledge. As CRSC founding members, we made storytelling our method of collaboration: We share with each other our own seldom-told refugee stories in poetry, literature, art, and folktales from the Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, Palestinian, Cuban, and Somali refugee communities along with Filipinx and African American histories. These stories enable us to center the lifeworlds of refugee and other racialized communities in our teaching, research, and public-facing activities. In all our activities, we create space for refugee stories to be told in multiple forms, to hold those stories as archive and knowledge, in

the now and for the future. Through refugee teaching, which centers storytelling, we collaborated with refugee families and students and with educators to transform pedagogy, curriculum, and knowledge transmission. At the same time, as engaged scholars, we take great care to ensure that our scholarship departs from the "community engagement" model promoted by the neoliberal university, which "promises collaboration but reinforces the divide between the university as the presumed knowledge producers and the 'community' as the presumed object of study and service" (Espiritu et al., 2020).

Refugees tell stories not only of violence but also of resistance and healing (Clark, 2016, p. 56). In this sense, refugee stories and epistemologies anchor refugee loss but also refugee agency, refusing the ways the humanitarian regime frames refugees as victims who must express fear and gratitude in order to receive recognition and rescue. Storytelling is therefore our pedagogy for refugee teaching, which allows for new forms of knowledge, such as the transmission of war memory, to be produced and shared (Maira, 2009; Schlund-Vials, 2012; Whitlock, 2007). We conceptualize storytelling as a relational process of witnessing that is part of "building an intergenerational collective knowledge" (Clark, 2016, p. 56). This conceptualization of storytelling—as a living archive of knowledge formation and a teaching practice—changes the way we see refugees: not as "victims telling their stories of survival but rather as educators, theorists, analysts, and social change agents who overtly demand accountability, responsibility, and responsiveness" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 97). Because refugee stories challenge US-centric pedagogy and curricula, the stories are key to the fashioning of a non-Eurocentric education.

The co-constituted concepts of refugee teaching, refugee storytelling, and refugee publics are rooted in our work with parents, community leaders, teachers, and educational institutions. Professional development for teachers through refugee storytelling allows for the sharing of knowledge in relatable ways and the building of organic connections with teachers. Rather than transmitting information to teachers, refugee teaching invites teachers to engage in dialogue and accountability—to participate as listeners who "are called upon to bear witness" to the experiences of refugees (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 111). In short, we conceptualize pedagogy in refugee teaching as a dynamic, ongoing practice, whereby teachers continue their listening and learning to build capacity for curriculum adjustments in response to students' ongoing needs and changing circumstances.

15.4 Epistemic Shift: Refugee Teaching Symposium in San Diego, California

15.4.1 San Diego and the Making of Refugees

San Diego is the second largest city in California and the eighth largest city in the United States. Shaped by the structural forces of conquest, militarization, migration, and border policing, San Diego is a region where indigenous national and tribal governments, the US–Mexico border zone, defense and military industries and training facilities, and migrants and refugees displaced by US wars interact to produce a dynamic geopolitical location. Dubbed a "military town," the growth of the city and the growth of the navy had become inextricably intertwined since World War I. San Diego leaders had determined that close ties to the military were essential for desirable urban development, and the city's Chamber of Commerce did all it could to lure the navy to town. It was the navy that put San Diego on the national map, that stimulated retail and residential development, and that established San Diego as the "aviation capital of the West" (Espiritu, 2003, p. 99). San Diego is also home to the Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, the major West Coast base of the United States Marine Corps and one of the largest Marine Corps bases in the United States.

San Diego County has long been the hub for refugee resettlement. San Diego's militarized and carceral landscape of military bases, aerospace and defense companies, border checkpoints, detention centers, and the border wall mirrors the growing population of migrants and refugees displaced by US-fueled wars in Southeast Asia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, and other countries who have settled and built vibrant communities in the region. Since 2000, the County has consistently received more refugee arrivals than any other region in the state (Aguilera, 2020). The large presence of refugees in San Diego can be traced back to the presence of the military in San Diego. In the months following the fall of Saigon, Camp Pendleton was the first military installation in the US mainland to provide accommodations for Vietnamese evacuees, housing over 50,000 refugees between April and August 1975. Many of these refugees ended up settling in San Diego, precipitating the establishment of a number of refugee resettlement agencies, which helped make the area, especially the City Heights neighborhood, an eventual hub for the settlement of subsequent waves of refugees. The 1980 Refugee Act also funded permanent State Department programs that funnel refugees into City Heights. In other words, the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s paved the path for Burmese, East African, Iraqi, Syrian, and other refugees arriving in San Diego today (Burks, 2015). By 2017, the year of our teaching symposium, more than 85,000 refugees had made San Diego County their first home (McLaren & Wood, 2017). In the preceding year, more than 3000 refugees resettled in San Diego County, compelling area schools, many already operating with limited resources, to scramble to integrate newcomer students and their families into the school system.

15.4.2 Refugee Teaching Symposium

On November 3–4, 2017, at the request of local teachers and refugee parents and community leaders, the CRSC, led by Founding Member Yến Lê Espiritu, hosted a two-day Refugee Teaching Symposium (https://refugeeteaching.wordpress.com/) in San Diego on refugee education. Planning the two-day conference took months, as our team's engaged scholarship approach requires conferring with a long list of local partners. Teachers' buy-in was key. We met with a number of dedicated teachers who had worked with refugee students in the San Diego Unified School District; partnered with the San Diego Education Association, the second largest education union in California, representing more than 7000 educators; and worked with the UC Extension office to provide professional development credit for teachers who attended the two-day symposium. We held the symposium at the United Women of East Africa Center rather than at our college campus, in part to redirect university funds and other resources to the East African women-led refugee organization. We ensured participation by local refugee students and parents by consulting with community leaders, personally inviting community members, and offering childcare and translation services for attendees, as needed. We paid all our speakers and performers and provided transportation and translation services to all refugee student and parent speakers. We also respected the privacy and safety concerns of our refugee speakers, including honoring their requests to decline solicitation from the local media to cover the symposium.

In our conceptualization of the Refugee Teaching Symposium, we coined the term "refugee teaching"—rather than "teaching refugees"—to prioritize the acts of teaching *by* refugees in collaboration with their families and communities. The symposium posed many of the same questions as other education symposia: How do school administrators, teachers, and counselors best support refugee students and their families? How to build community with and for refugee students? How to integrate refugee students into the school system? But, centering refugee knowledge, subjectivities, and lifeworlds, we added: How to implement strategies for teaching that honor the unique experiences of refugee students? How to design curricula that centers refugee perspectives, refugee agency, and refugees' epistemic knowledge? How to make refugee teaching social and affiliative, producing and reproducing community?

To underscore the theme of refugee teaching, we featured refugee parents and students prominently in the symposium program as speakers. The two-day symposium opened with a refugee parents' panel, featuring four refugee mothers—two from Somalia, one from Congo, and one from Ethiopia—discussing (some through translators) their experiences with and expectations of the school system, as well as their hopes and dreams for their children. Perhaps emboldened by their position as paid speakers on a panel of all refugee mothers, remunerated for their expertise on and knowledge about refugee lives, they forcefully listed, citing specific examples of wrongs, what they wanted from their children's schools, at times appealing directly to the 100+ teachers in the room—with better teacher-parent communication topping

the list. All four panelists also asserted that, irrespective of their English skills or familiarity with the US school system, they were attentive, invested, and capable parents and they wanted to be treated as such.

The second day, all four students on the refugee students' panel emphasized that their perceived lack of English fluency often resulted in being steered away from more advanced courses. One presentation stood out. In front of the packed auditorium, Samuel Sefu, a high school student who came to the United States from Burundi just two years earlier, asked the 150+ strong audience as he strode confidently across the stage: "I want to ask you a question: Do you think English equals intelligence?" Pausing just long enough for effect, Sefu slowly rolled out his answer: "Because I *don't*!" With a tinge of indignation, Sefu told his listeners, many of whom teach in the local schools, that his teachers often fail to recognize his intelligence because of his perceived lack of English fluency (Ghorashi, 2021). Sefu then informed the attentive audience that he and his family speak two languages, official Rundi (Kirundi) and French, and that other Burundians also speak a third language, Swahili, the language of trade. The prior evening, Sefu demonstrated his embodied knowledge by dancing beautifully and joyfully as a key member of the "King of Kings," a dance troupe composed of local high school dancers originally from the Congo and Burundi.

During the students' presentations, the audience of mostly teachers listened with rapt attention, all eyes on the speakers. In the question-and-answer session, several teachers acknowledged the students' critiques and asked for suggestions on how to improve the classroom dynamics. On the other hand, after the parents' panel, in which the parents spoke forcefully about their commitment to their children's education and their desire for more and better communication from teachers, the first question from a teacher was on why refugee parents were not involved in their children's education. This insensitive question, which evidences the inability to "hear" refugee parents, elicited an audible gasp from the audience and angry retorts from one of the parent speakers and from the moderator who reiterated the parents' critique of the lack of communication from teachers about their children.

In a context where refugee students and their families are often represented as a problem for teachers and school districts, Sefu's public refusal to accept the edict "English equals intelligence," along with other student panelists' insistence on access to a quality education and parents' assertion of their rights to language-appropriate information from school administrators and teachers, all constitute examples of *refugee teaching*—that is, teaching done *by* and *for* refugees. Building on the momentum of the Refugee Teaching Symposium, the CRSC applied for and received the 2020–2021 Whiting Public Engagement Fellowship to launch the Refugee Teaching Institute (RTI), a series of public workshops that bring high school teachers together with refugee students and parents, and a broader public, to collaborate on lesson plans that center refugees' histories and worldviews. Led by CRSC Founding Member Ma Vang, the RTI is a public-facing four-workshop series designed for crafting long-term initiatives on refugee teaching in Merced in California's Central Valley.

15.5 Collaborative Storytelling: Refugee Teaching Institute in Merced, California

15.5.1 Refugee and Immigrant History in the Central Valley

Told from the perspective of the largely white agribusiness class, the story of the Central Valley region of California, where Merced is situated, centers the tenant farmers who fled the Dust Bowl in the US states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas in the 1930s to seek land, jobs, and a future in its rich agricultural resources. Contemporary farmers are either descendants of this group, popularly known as the "Oakies," or the small number of Japanese American farmers who returned to their farms after the Japanese American internment between 1942 and 1945. Even public humanities engagement projects featured John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Dorothea Lange's photographs of the Great Depression that highlight farming, white migrant labor, and rural life. As the producer of 25% of the nation's food, the Central Valley is widely recognized for its rich agricultural contributions, as well as its more recent water crisis. These public narratives about the Central Valley and Merced erase the history of ongoing migration into the region and the rich stories told through writers and artists of immigrant and refugee backgrounds. According to the 2020 US census, Merced County's population of 286,461 is 24.8% non-Hispanic White, 62.5% Hispanic, 7.9% Asian, 4% Black, and 2.7% Native American. These statistics reflect the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees—primarily Hmong, Lao, Cambodian, Mien, and Khmu—in the late 1970s and 1980s, Central American migrants since the 1980s, and Syrian and Afghan refugees since the 2010s, all of whom have been represented as a problem for Merced, as a drain on its social services and an overall negative impact on the county. Finally, dubbed the "prison alley," the region houses numerous prisons, including the largest women's prison in the state—an example of the convergence of state violence and militarism.

The RTI's aim is to engage and expand public humanities narratives that represent Central Valley life as primarily rural, white, and agriculturally abundant. The RTI follows the methodology of "critical juxtaposing": bringing together seemingly different and disconnected events, communities, histories, and spaces to illuminate what would otherwise not be visible about war and empire (Espiritu, 2014). The refugee teaching framework makes visible the intersecting histories of conquest, state violence, and forced relocation. Accordingly, the RTI critically juxtaposes the forced displacement of refugees with the dispossession of Indigenous Yokut and Miwok peoples, the relocation of African Americans from the south to the Central Valley during the Jim Crow era, the in-migration of African American military families in the post-WWII context, and the incarceration of poor and largely people of color in the "prison alley." The CRSC's capacious redefinition of "refugee" attends to these overlapping histories as it conceptualizes refugees as human beings who are forcibly displaced as a result of "persecution, conflict, war, conquest, settler/colonialism, militarism, occupation, empire, and environmental and climate-related disasters" (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 72). Refugee teaching as a pedagogical paradigm

allows us to frame the ways that each group experiences the conditions of life in the Central Valley differently but relationally.

While there is a dearth of knowledge about the intersectional history of Merced and the Central Valley, even less is known about the student schooling experiences. School data shows that the Central City School District (pseudonym to anonymize the agency), which educates children in pre-kindergarten through 8th grade, has a student population of 10,973 for the academic year 2022–2023. Of that number, 1932 students are English learners whose primary languages are Spanish (1733), Hmong (116), Arabic (32), Other (31), and Punjabi (14). The Central Union High School District (pseudonym to anonymize the agency), which teaches grades 9–12, enrolled 11,226 students in the same academic year with 1369 English learners. Spanish (1217) leads as the primary language, followed by Hmong (65), Arabic (25), and Other (29). While this data does not record race and ethnicity, it provides an ethnic diversity index that reflects how evenly distributed the students are among the racial/ethnic categories, where a zero index shows the students are the "same ethnicity" and 100 represents even distribution across the index's eight ethnic/racial categories, meaning the most diverse (Educational Data Partnership, 2023a, b). Thus far, 76 has been the highest reported index for any school, meaning that Central City School District (33) and Central Union High School District (30) present a relatively wide range of ethnic and racial diversity (Education Data Partnership, 2024). Given the immigrant and refugee background of the Central Valley and the context of an 18-year ban on bilingual education (1998–2016) in California, school curriculum has not reflected the multilingual and multiple knowledge sources of students' experiences (Williams, 2024). Like refugee students, the knowledge of Indigenous and racialized communities is displaced from the classroom and there are few opportunities for engaging with it outside of the classroom.

15.5.2 The Refugee Teaching Institute During COVID

When the RTI convened for the week-long workshop series for local K-12 teachers at UC Merced on July 26–29, 2022 (https://criticalrefugeestudies.com/teaching/refugee-teaching), we were transitioning through the COVID-19 global pandemic. Vang had begun building partnerships for the RTI upon receiving the Whiting grant in February 2020 and continued this process through the COVID lockdown. Central to our engaged scholarship practice was the development of partnerships that enabled teachers to center refugee and community knowledge in the classroom. Bridging institutions means bringing institutions together to collaborate and serve as sites for refugee teaching. During the two-year hold due to COVID, Vang and members of the CRSC connected with educators and teacher consultants to conceptualize the RTI. Vang partnered with the UC Merced University Extension to create the RTI course. By formalizing the RTI as a course through University Extension, we provided K-12 educators the opportunity to earn college credits toward their continuing education, which contributes to their salary increase. We connected with Central High School

District (pseudonym to anonymize the agency) and worked with two key administrators, the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services and the Director of Interventions, Innovation & Instruction, to identify our shared goals. It was during these conversations that we learned of the district's interest in connecting their teachers' ethnic studies training with a focus on refugees and immigrants in Merced/Central Valley, an objective that we incorporated into our workshops. While the conversations were fruitful, the district rejected our request to subsidize the teachers' registration fees for the RTI, which we ended up absorbing with the grant funding.

The district representative's unwillingness to officially partner with the RTI, along with the COVID disruptions, impacted our planning. Given the lack of active participation from school district administrators, Vang contacted teachers through word of mouth and through the University Extension's Teacher Preparation program and connected with several teachers who were interested in teaching ethnic studies or have already incorporated ethnic studies and critical refugee studies into their classes. Through this process, two teachers were brought onboard as consultants. One consultant had developed and led professional development workshops for teachers in the region and worked with Vang to refine the RTI program and to translate the content into usable classroom materials. The other consultant is a high school teacher who has incorporated an ethnic studies framework into his history curriculum.

Although the COVID pandemic delayed the start date of the RTI, the delay allowed for more engagement and extensive planning with the knowledge producers for refugee teaching: parents, students, community members, and critical refugee studies scholars who come from refugee backgrounds. Vang collaborated with several local community members and the Hmong Education Partnership, a collaboration of teachers and parents committed to enhancing the educational experiences of Hmong American students, to develop workshops for the RTI. She worked with two community organizers: one to develop two panels on the perspectives of refugee parents and students on education in Merced; the other to share his experiences as a parent and an advocate for educational equity and youth empowerment.

While the COVID delay provided us time to build relationships, it also made engaged scholarship difficult because of the lack of in-person interactions. In particular, the pandemic impacted our capacity to build sustained collaborations with teachers. Although we attempted to connect with teachers by visiting their classrooms and creating afterschool listening sessions, distance learning and limited access to school sites constrained our ability to foster these relationships. On the other hand, the teachers who did participate in the RTI were energized for refugee teaching, which they understood to be a practice toward transformative education.

In the end, 19 teachers registered and attended the workshop series, representing a range of grade levels from kindergarten to high school. They also teach a range of subjects including history, social studies, English/Spanish language arts, biology, and chemistry. All but two teachers teach in Merced County, one of whom was transitioning to a job in a nearby county, and the other was looking for a job. About a third of the teachers graduated from UC Merced Extension's Teacher Preparatory Program. Because the RTI was open to the public, faculty, graduate students, and community members also attended. We decided to hold the RTI at the university,

instead of at a community center, in part to have university staff assist with event planning and logistics. We also chose the university location to enable the teachers, parents, and students to be in a space that may not always feel welcoming to them.

Each of the first three days of the workshops focused on a theme. The first day established the importance of centering refugees' experiences, knowledge, and actions, followed by a session on how to teach Central Valley local histories. The second day spotlighted refugee storytelling and media, featuring readings by Cambodian American poet Monica Sok and Vietnamese American poet and literary scholar Mai-Linh Hong. The ensuing workshop invited teachers to practice listening and bearing witness to their students' stories. The theme of storytelling as listening and witnessing continued on the third day, which discussed education, activism, and resilience. The afternoon panels featured local parents sharing their difficulties navigating the school system that criminalized and disfranchised them and their children, and local students recounting traumatizing experiences with teachers who discounted their life experiences. The students' stories elicited defensive responses from a few educators, which evidenced the failure by most teachers to accept refugee storytelling as constituting refugee knowledge and expertise. This dynamic reveals the necessary shift in paradigm to center students' and parents' expertise, and to understand the classroom and curriculum as places where multiple forms of knowledge can exist. The final day (Day 4) opened with a *refugee education* session on the unsettling connections between education and incarceration in the Central Valley; the rest of the sessions were reserved time for workshop participants to brainstorm lesson plan ideas. The teachers finished the day and the institute with concrete topics and materials to create future lesson plans for their classes.

To center refugee knowledge, the RTI foregrounded the layered histories of migration to the Central Valley and navigated partnerships with the local university and school district. And yet, the uneven operations of power among the different stakeholders along with the relationship building and organizing during the COVID-19 global pandemic demonstrate how local stories are also troubling for local institutions. Teachers and students who inhabit a different educational space can reveal the institutionalized power inequities and open the possibility for disrupting them. For us, refugee teaching operates as a framework for storytelling *and* navigating different terrains of power.

15.6 Education for Social Change: Ethnic Studies and Teachers of Color in California

Our work in "refugee teaching" did not occur in isolation but drew inspiration and ideas from the larger movement of ethnic studies and from our partnership with teachers of color in California. Since its inception in the late 1960s, ethnic studies has centered the knowledge of students of color and their families and communities and has viewed education as a collaborative process that leads to social change. In

October 2021, with the passage of Assembly Bill No. 101 that requires all students to complete a course in ethnic studies to graduate, teacher education in California has undergone an ethnic studies education turn (High School Graduation Requirements, 2021). In a study of this shift, Curammeng (2022, p. 42) explains that ethnic studies education for teachers can enact transformative possibilities for both teachers and students. In our refugee teaching initiatives, collaborating with teachers of color has been crucial to connecting refugee knowledge to the histories and experiences of other communities of color.

15.6.1 Ethnic Studies and Refugee Teaching

Ethnic studies education in high school needs to intersect with community knowledge, especially from recently arrived migrants and refugees. However, few teachers are equipped to integrate refugee stories or critical refugee studies theories into their lesson plans. Our RTI offers teacher participants direct interaction with refugee families and students and collaboration between researchers, teachers, and local communities that can translate refugee knowledge into high school curriculum. The RTI follows and amplifies the mandate of the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum to elevate the knowledge and perspectives of racialized, immigrant, refugee, and Indigenous communities.

Since September 2020, when then-President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) for federal agencies and contractors, diversity education has experienced a rabid backlash (O'Kane, 2021). Politicized attacks on ethnic studies in schools have surged across the country, with critics claiming that these initiatives harm white students (Harper, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Sawchuk, 2021). According to the UCLA report *Tracking the Attack on Critical Race Theory*, between January 1, 2021, and December 31, 2022, federal, state, and local government officials introduced 563 anti-CRT measures, many of which aim to outlaw ethnic studies teaching in K-12 schools and in colleges. Nearly half—241—were enacted or adopted (Waxman, 2023; see also Blaskey & Nehamas, 2023; Omokha, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Most recently, in the context of the 2024 Israel-Hamas war that has displaced most of Gaza's residents, detractors have charged that the critiques of Israel in ethnic studies are anti-Semitic and questioned the purpose and pedagogy of ethnic studies (Goldstein, 2024). We contend that refugee teaching is needed to negotiate these contentious debates on teaching and learning about marginalized communities.

15.6.2 Teachers of Color as Education Transformers

We envision refugee teaching as a framework to support and collaborate with teachers of color in California who share the goal of community-centered political education.

In 2020–2021, approximately 20% of all public-school teachers in the United States were teachers of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). According to a 2021 Pew Research report (Schaeffer, 2021), during 2018–2019, the most recent year of available data, the racial/ethnic demographic of public school students show 47% White, 27% Hispanic, 15% Black, and 5% Asian American. The student data also reveal the prevalence of segregated schooling: 79% of white students attended schools where at least half of the student population is also white, 56% for Latinx, and 42% for black students (Schaeffer, 2021). Many teachers of color work in schools with a high number of students of color, yet still navigate a Eurocentric curriculum that denies and erases the cultural and political identities of both teachers and students (Gardner et al., 2020, p. 839). With the growing diversity and complexity of students' lives, it is necessary to offer all teachers, but especially teachers of color, the necessary tools to be critical educators who meet the needs of structurally marginalized students in their classrooms (Reyes et al., 2018).

For teachers of color who teach in a region with a diverse history like Merced/Central Valley, their experiences and those of their refugee students are mostly absent from teacher education programs, the curriculum, and professional development sessions. These teachers often struggle on their own against normative schooling structures and practices that marginalize culturally and linguistically diverse students and that promote deficit thinking and practices (Reyes et al., 2018). One of the teacher participants remarked to Vang that teachers from the region rarely have access to workshops like the RTI that feature scholars and artists of color and community presenters. As such, the RTI model offers critically minded teachers of color in racially diverse cities like Merced the tools to decenter the Eurocentric curriculum and to innovate social justice oriented educational programs that prioritize the experiential knowledge of refugee and other marginalized communities.

Our goal is to continue to partner with interested teachers of color to open up the classroom as a space for social change and transformation. The RTI project offers a model of radical teaching and learning that practices collective support, that theorizes from experience, that engages dialogue and storytelling as pedagogical tools, and that centers the knowledge, desires, and wisdom of marginalized communities. This model matches and amplifies the critical pedagogies already employed by many teachers of color that are informed by their own migration histories, activism, awareness of local community histories, and partnerships with their students' families (Curammeng, 2022, pp. 35–36; Gardner et al., 2020, p. 839). This shift toward culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining (McCarty & Lee, 2014), and justice-oriented pedagogy (Gardner et al., 2020) evidences how stories and storytelling are powerful tools for transformative education. In transforming refugee education, teachers of color are not only the facilitators but the sources of knowledge and bridge builders for students and parents.

15.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we recount two efforts by the Critical Refugee Studies Collective to engage refugee parents and students and interested teachers to develop refugee-centered pedagogy and curricula. We identify K-12 education in the United States as an important site to enact refugee teaching because it is the site where all newcomer refugee students and parents encounter institutional inequality. We conceptualize refugee teaching as the acts of, not only teaching refugees and teaching about refugees, but also teaching *by* refugees. As engaged scholars interested in transforming education, we promoted refugee teaching by assembling a community of interested participants, featuring speakers and performers that center refugee knowledge and experiences, facilitating conversations and action plans amongst critically minded teachers, and connecting local concerns to broader political and scholarly debates on forced migration. At every step, we envisioned refugee education alongside refugee students, their parents, and public-school teachers, elevating refugee knowledge and ideas in developing refugee-centered education. Drawing on the history and resources of the ethnic studies movement and the ongoing political education work practiced by teachers of color, our refugee teaching workshops depart from individualistic, workshop-based professional development practices (Hardy, 2010) by intentionally and meaningfully bringing together refugee parents, students, and community with teachers and refugee scholars to generate a shared vision for teaching and learning in/for the twenty-first century.

Our discussions of the two refugee teaching gatherings in San Diego and in Merced/Central Valley, California, demonstrated three areas of challenge and growth in centering refugees in education. First, enacting refugee-centered pedagogy means bringing institutions together to work toward enhancing students' and parents' experiences and transforming these educational institutions. Our work engaged with the university, the school district, and public humanities organizations. We encountered the school district's lack of support for their teachers to participate in the Refugee Teaching Institute for which we contributed grant funds to cover the educators' registration fees—fees that the university collected to offer credit hours to the participants. Our experience demonstrates the ways refugees have had to navigate institutions, imperfectly, and that institutions often fail to meet not just the refugees' needs but their very own promise of education as social transformation. In addition, refugee teaching created an education space simultaneously within and beyond the classroom for which multiple institutions, including the public humanities organization, can and should participate in education that impacts curricula and communities. Our decision to re-distribute the Whiting Foundation's funds to cover for educators' registration fees, then, operated at the intersections of these institutions. Second, the site-specific gatherings in San Diego and Merced/Central Valley foregrounded the intersecting histories of refugees who arrived in these geographies with the ongoing histories of Indigenous and Black displacement, other forms of Asian and Latinx migration, and

incarceration. Refugee teaching foregrounds these geographies as markers of state-sanctioned violence and sites from which resistance and recognition of shared experiences can occur. Finally, we concluded that centering refugee knowledge necessitates thoughtful engagement with teachers of color, many of whom have the experiential knowledge but not the critical training needed to engage in transformative education. Shifting expertise in refugee teaching is not just about content but also requires reframing teachers' approaches to pedagogy and to students and their parents. Our chapter thus demonstrates how to deploy engaged scholarship strategies to meaningfully partner with educators who teach refugee newcomers and teach about forced migration and refugee lifeworlds to both refugee and non-refugee students.

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Chapter 16
Conclusion: Evolving Journey of a Polyvocal Engaged Scholarship

Halleh Ghorashi

The insights in the chapters of this book are the result of our collaborations related to the comparative research project Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change,[1] in relation to refugee inclusion. In the proposal we wrote for this project in 2017, we presented the story of Sarah (a refugee woman from Eritrea) as a transformative narrative to show the importance of engaged scholarship in the lives of refugees.

> An academic engaged project focused on the inclusion of refugees brought various stakeholders (refugees, policymakers, HR managers, members of NGOs working with refugees) together to debate issues of diversity, power, and inclusion. The most profound example of this project came from Sarah, who had come to the Netherlands as a refugee 10 years prior. When Sarah was asked to tell the group the moment in her life when she felt strongest, her answer was: "I don't think I have such a story." After encouragement from the group to think about which aspects of her narrative she would consider as powerful, she remained silent. "I don't know," she confusedly answered. [...] After several sessions of silence, Sarah ended up telling an astonishing story of herself as a young woman fighting for her freedom and that of other women in an oppressive, male-ruled environment in Eritrea, eventually joining the armed fight for the freedom of her country, leaving her family, social position, and daily certainties behind
>
> How can one account for the fact that such a story can be forgotten? Sarah, who was invigorated by revisiting her activist past, shared that she had only heard negative responses during her stay in the Netherlands. "No, you are not good enough." "No, your language needs to be improved." "No, you do not have the proper papers." Several years of constant repetition of these words caused Sarah to lose her self-confidence and, most importantly, to lose her story. This case helped us to *identify* the normalized sources of exclusion (the structures behind the "no's") and to *discover* the turning point from silence toward a surge of agency. This turning point became visible when she recovered her self-definition as a political activist and a "fighter." This *transformative narrative* served as content for ongoing reflections by

[1] https://engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org

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> the involved stakeholders on the normalized images and practices of refugees in organizations (discourse of lack), in policy (weak groups who need help), and in daily interactions (being either weak or a threat to society). For example, one of the HR managers said that he often gives similar feedback to people whose language is not perfect. He said he had been doing that with the best of intentions, hoping that they would improve their skills. He had never before realized that it could have such a negative impact. One of the policymakers commented that she had also had this image of refugees and migrants as people in need of help and thought that policies focused on this would be a solution. But after hearing Sarah's story, she realized that the policies actually lead to a fixation on imperfections. In this way, the taken for granted images and practices became visible and questioned. (Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014)

As the example of Sarah shows, for those disadvantaged, a lack of resources often leads to limits on negotiating capacity, as well as to a decreased sense of confidence. We argued that making invisible normalized sources of exclusion visible would increase the space for individual agency. Although different notions of agency are used in this book, in that particular project, we defined agency as individuals' "capacity to be reflexive about their situation—their 'discursive consciousness'—and to act upon it to 'make a difference'" (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007, p. 1376). This approach to agency involves micro emancipation instead of early-modern macro-collective forms of emancipation (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007). We thus showed that the type of engaged research we were proposing was one that could contribute to what Wright Mills (1959/2000, p. 6) referred to as "the Sociological Imagination" of all actors involved in the project. By situating the individual story of Sarah within historical and societal Dutch contexts, we could create a narrative that showed the long-term impact of the deficit approach that led to the loss of Sarah's self-confidence and even more importantly to the loss of her strong personal story. The power of this narrative was that it showed how the Dutch system transformed an activist into a "passive refugee." Scholarly engagement with various societal actors including refugees enabled a story of loss to transform into a narrative that would help societal actors reflect on the taken-for-granted deficit approach that paralyzes refugees even when it comes from good intentions.

Internal collaborations within our comparative project, Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, and partnership with our external colleagues helped to develop this line of thinking in different directions: (1) to broaden and deepen the deficit approach's consequences for disadvantaged communities; (2) to argue for decolonizing methodologies that are mutually beneficial for academia and communities; (3) to develop the conditions of community-engaged scholarship to be more transformative in the long term; and (4) to emphasize the importance of ethics of care in relation to epistemic multiplicity, in particular engaging with the imaginative capacity of communities when dealing with structures of inequality that disadvantage them (see also Fiorito, 2024).

16.1 Broadening Our Knowledges on the Impact of the Deficit Approach

In 2009, indigenous scholar Eve Tuck wrote an open letter that "calls on communities, researchers and educators to reconsider the long-term impact of 'damage-centered' research—research that intends to document peoples' pain and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression" (p. 409). In this powerful letter, Tuck critiques research and policy that is fixated on communities' pain or loss in order to "achieve reparation" (p. 413). Tuck argues that this practice is pathologizing because it approaches disadvantaged communities only from the position of their injury and brokenness rather than acknowledging their full subjectivities, strength, agency, humanity, and dignity. Tuck's letter helped us to broaden our understanding of the consequences of the deficit approach and its long-term impact of disadvantaged communities seeing themselves as *broken.* Even more, Tuck argues that such an approach is designed to "document deficit rather than to provide opportunities to redress existing inequalities" (p. 414).

In the specific case of refugees, Liisa Malkki's groundbreaking work from the mid-1990s contextualizes the existing pathologizing of refugees in research and policy. In her critique of what she refers to as the "national order of things," Malkki (1992) discusses the naturalized "sedentarist bias" that positions refugees as anomalies and space invaders. The moral connotations of the legal and discursive sedentary approach results in the paternalizing and pathologizing of displaced people such as refugees. At best, refugees are considered vulnerable and pitiful because they are cut from their broken roots; at worst, they are considered dangerous because of their abnormality. Images of dangerousness, amorality, and lack of personal and social responsibility have gained a stronger presence in public and political discourse in recent years compared to the last decades of the previous century. Gray and Franck (2019) identify several shifts in British media concerning the representation of refugees after 2015. The image of refugees as vulnerable and "at risk" changed to one of refugees "as risk," with a strong underlying gendered and racialized logic (Gray & Franck, 2019, p. 276). A strong manifestation of this image is the representation of refugee men as potential and actual perpetrators in German and Dutch media after the 2015 New Year's Eve sexual attacks on women in several German public spaces (Brenner & Ohlendorf, 2016). In these media reports, a lack of morality and loyalty was clearly connected to "refugeeness" (particularly the racialized othering of refugees and migrants with an Islamic background) in the context of rising nationalism in the west. The reports showed both paternalization (of refugee and migrant women) and pathologizing (of refugee and migrant men) at the same time.

16.1.1 Dehumanization and Dignity Hurt

Pathologizing refugees as people out of place who are an anomaly to the nation-states of their residence, accompanied with patronizing research and policies focusing on repairing their problems, traumas, and damages, not only paralyzes refugees in their development, but also reduces them to a single story of loss and trauma. In her powerful TED talk, Adichie (2009) warns us against the danger of a single story. She argues that reducing people to their single identity of being poor or a victim takes away their humanity and dignity—not necessarily because those stories are not true, but because they are incomplete. Philomena Essed argues that the Black Lives Matters movement has painfully shown "the hierarchies of worthiness in terms of 'way of being' and 'of being human' [and that] some lives are less deserving than others for being seen as (fully) human" (2020, p. 448). Agamben (1998, pp. 168–169) argues that refugees from poor countries are the pure expression of bare life (*homo sacer*) because they "lead a life in a permanent state of exception and [in] detention centres into which they are forced without trial." As the story of Sarah in the introduction showed, a damage-based approach to refugees can take away the memory of their strength, their story of survival, but also the layered complexity of their "way of being." When refugees are constantly approached as people who are lacking, out of place/uprooted, damaged, and traumatized instead of seeing the full complexity of their lives, their identities, and their desires, they are reduced to a single story of "nots" or "never being good enough" (see also Ghorashi, 2021a).

According to Essed, this dehumanization can take different forms. The most explicit form—full exclusion of being considered as part of the human race—is manifested through the animalization of certain groups by comparing them to animals such as monkeys or rats (see also De Jong et al., 2021). Another form is not being considered fully human, which we see in the impact of colonial legacy, through which certain groups are considered "less rational," "less civilized," or "backward" (Essed, 2020, p. 450). But dehumanization can also happen through the simultaneous presence of inclusion and exclusion, meaning that efforts to include can go hand in hand with normalized practices of othering, thereby reinforcing exclusion (Eijberts & Ghorashi, 2016). In the case of refugees, however, it is the patronizing deficit approach toward them as target groups that takes away their humanity, though the intention is often to help the group (or as Tuck would say, repair the damage). Essed proposes more research and policy approaches that treat disadvantaged communities with the dignity that "happens when people are seen, heard, understood, valued and critically supported in their (potential) capabilities and vulnerabilities" (Nussbaum, 2011, in Essed, 2020, p. 453).

As Essed (2020) rightly mentions, it is not easy for disadvantaged groups to address this "dignity hurt," because it is painful and shameful. The normalizing impact of dominant discourses can influence the self-image of disadvantaged communities in negative ways. Marginalized and stigmatized communities can internalize negative external discourses, which can create what Du Bois in 1903 conceptualized as a "double consciousness": a self-consciousness and image of self that is shaped by

both the internal lived experiences of self and society and the damaging and stigmatizing external definition of the marginalized group (black, poor, refugee, etc.). To go against this normalized power, Essed argues that "[f]ocusing on the shared experience of dignity hurt is invaluable as a way of acknowledging as well as transcending multiple and interrelated systems of oppression/domination" (p. 449). In the story of Sarah, we showed how her experience of hearing "No" during her life in the Netherlands was both painful and shameful (her initial silence was a manifestation of that). But it also showed the importance of a co-creative methodology that helped remind her of the worth of her story. And when she shared her story with others (all the participants including other refugees), she broke the dehumanization circle, which also forced societal actors to reflect on the ways they reproduce the dominant deficit approach in their work (even with good intentions). One of the important conditions for engaged projects such as the one in which Sarah shared her story is the ability for refugees to share their dignity hurt and other experiences. Although we did not use this term in that particular project, we invested in the safety of the spaces of interaction with communities to enable sharing stories of pain and loss without reproducing single stories of refugees as broken and lost. The significance of safe spaces has been argued by black feminists to forge alternative narratives and imaginations that counter dominant negative images of black women in the United States (Hill Collins, 2000/1990). But the cases in our study also illuminate the necessity of braveness in these spaces. In these what we later called "daring interspaces," participants dare to be confronted by the experiences of others and are able to reflect on their own positioning and actions through the gaze of others (Ghorashi, 2021b; Ponzoni et al., 2025). This requires bravery and involves becoming vulnerable and exposed (on the notion of "brave spaces," see Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boostrom, 1998). These examples show that, for an engaged scholarship that aims to be transformative, more is needed in terms of framing, methodologies, and inclusion of communities' imaginative capacity. This requires reflexivity on power issues and the positionality of migration/refugee studies scholars throughout the process of doing research together with communities.

16.1.2 The Complexity of Communities

Tuck proposes a "desire-based research framework" that embraces "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (2009, p. 416). This is the only way to de-pathologize and de-patronize the experiences and perspectives of disadvantaged communities as "more than broken." Using a "desire-based" approach in policy and research will bring back the dignity and humanity in the ways that communities with minimum resources survive and contribute to the world. It will facilitate a fuller representation of people who, despite limitations in their lives, are able to provide perspectives on community building and wisdoms to foster "the possibilities of significant change from below" (Stall, 2010, p. 547). "Desire is the song about walking through the storm, a song that recognizes rather than denies that

pain doubtlessly lies ahead" (Tuck, 2009, p. 419). A desire-based approach requires research and policy to create mutually beneficial roles for academics and community participants, with an emphasis on meaningful outcomes for the communities.

In our comparative project, researchers developed various sub-projects called Scholarships for Change, with (co-created) products that were more accessible for non-academic participants and partners in our project. These projects developed from the communities' own ideas and directly responded to participants' needs, wishes, and desires during COVID-19, thereby predominantly focusing on community practices of joy, art, care, food, storytelling, and relationship-building. These Scholarship for Change projects focused on community engagement in art, food, and education through which community practices were highlighted and participants' strengths and abilities were celebrated.[2] The sub-projects, which were inspired by Tuck's desire-based research, centered communities' desires, pleasures, and resilience in the context of structural disparities. What all these sub-projects show is the necessity of embracing the complexities involved in working with communities and engaging with them in a way that acknowledges their strength and creativity in dealing with the aggressive and repressive structures they have to face on a daily basis. Various chapters in this book (Espiritu & Vang; Holle et al.; Ocadiz Arriaga et al.; Powlick & Vlasman; Rast et al.) powerfully show what such engagement requires. These chapters show the importance of reflexivity in both migration studies and engaged scholarship to reimagine co-creative possibilities with communities without romanticizing them or reducing them to solely carriers of loss. Other chapters (Dadoo & Vally; Holle et al.; Kazadi & Koskimaki; Ocadiz Arriaga et al.; Ponzoni et al.) explicitly chose to take the journey of co-authorship with non-academic partners for a volume aimed at academic audiences. In this way, we have tried to create epistemic inclusion in various forms and for various purposes and audiences.

In his book *Native Nostalgia*, Jacob Dlamini (2009) shows that townships in South Africa are dynamic places with strong cultural imaginations that entail much more than the single story of oppression and poverty. He describes his childhood memories in the township he grew up in and describes the richness of life (the music, the colors, the sounds, the smells) despite the harsh presence of apartheid oppression and violence.

> Townships also induce nostalgia because they have always had people with sufficient cultural imagination to show that township life is not all doom and gloom. Listen to the music. Think of the different dance styles with which we grew up. Cast your mind back to the street games we played which heralded the change in seasons [...]. This is not to mention the role that our elders played (not always successfully) in teaching us wrong from right [...]. To be nostalgic is not to wear rose-tinted glasses but to appreciate township life in its complexity. (Dlamini, 2009, p. 109)

Dlamini (2009) argues for remembering the complexity of life in townships as "history against the grain" meaning writing against the way that the townships are presented by governmental policy "as docile recipients of state largesse and service delivery" (p. 110). This also means writing against presenting townships as places of

[2] For more, see https://www.engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/our-cocreations

trauma, a practice that limits the memory of townships within a single story of pain, suffering, and loss. He follows Du Bois's argument that we should not "confuse individuals with the problems they face" (in Dlamini, 2009, p. 111). To acknowledge the complexity of township and the imaginative practices and desires of individuals living there in the context of suppression and violence means "seizing hold of memories of the past without denying the agency of individuals who live in townships" (p. 111). Otherwise, we will approach "townships only as problem areas, zones of lack, that have nothing to give to the constitution of a democratic South Africa" (p. 112). Ocadiz Arriaga and Dyer-Williams (2024) also show the importance of LGBTQI+ (forced) migrant community's sensuous knowledge through food practices that bring out moments of joy and pleasure amidst xenophobia and undocumentation.

In line with Dlamini's broader approach to life in townships beyond the sole focus on violence, oppression, and socioeconomic deprivation, we have argued for a broader approach to the conditions of asylum seekers within the Dutch asylum structure, one that considers their agency and imagination (Ghorashi et al., 2018; Pozzo & Ghorashi, 2022). The non-status condition, long waiting periods, and lack of opportunities for asylum seekers to pursue meaningful activities during their stay in asylum seeker centers (AZCs) have dominated the focus of most studies on the subject. However, by adapting a multilateral approach to exploring life in limbo and asking different types of questions, we were able to see the other side of life in an AZC. In line with Turner's (1994) layered conceptualization of liminality, we argued that living in limbo or being out of place could also provide the advantage of reflection and feed the power of imagination (Ghorashi et al., 2018). This does not mean that we ignored the severity of our respondents' dire life conditions, their lack of resources in an unequal power relation, or the constraints of the structure they were part of. But in line with Tuck and Dlamini, we argued that marginality and agency do not need to exclude each other (Pozzo & Ghorashi, 2022). Stories of asylum seekers living in the centers showed the possibility of transforming an AZC (at least partially) from a "non-place" (Augé, 1995) or "state of exception" (Agamben, 1998)—spaces empty of meaningful social existence—to an "existential space" (Augé, 1995, p. 80)—a space in which existential meanings to life will emerge.

In addition to arguing for a liminal position as a condition that can serve as a "seedbed of cultural creativity" (Garsten, 1999, p. 601), we further addressed a central concept in Turner's liminality model of "communitas" (1969, p. 96). This concept refers to a group experience of (temporary) togetherness, social equality (all being in a liminal position), and solidarity. This sense of connectedness and belonging in AZCs is rarely touched upon in academic work or in social debates because of the sole focus on the devastating conditions in those centers. An exception is a Dutch documentary called *Asielzoeka's*,[3] in which young asylum seekers express their nostalgic feelings of togetherness and belonging during their time with other children at AZCs. Like Dlamini's description of nostalgic stories about the townships, this documentary shows that the existential and legal insecurities of living in AZCs do not need

[3] *Asielzoeka's*—Movies that Matter (https://moviesthatmatter.nl/en/education/film/asielzoekas/), last visited 15 February 2025

to exclude the strong sense of solidarity and imaginative capacity of the ones undergoing such harsh conditions. In line with Tuck's critique of the "damage-centered" approach, Healey (2006) argues that asylum seekers and refugees "need to be treated in a more constructive way, with government policy seeking to allow [them] to achieve their full potential, rather than view them as a "problem issue"' (p. 269). Various chapters of this book (Fiorito & Abrego; Holle et al.; Kazadi & Koskimaki; Korstenbroek; Ocadiz Arriaga et al.; Ponzoni et al.; Powlick & Vlasman; Rast et al., Vang & Espiritu) engage with this by showing the agency and imaginative capacity of refugees and their communities in the context of precarity and violence. In their chapter on youth-led healing, Fiorito and Abrego show the importance of recognizing the community's imagination and strength and their transformative capacity in the context of the legal violence the community endures. In a similar vein, Powlick and Vlasman's chapter explores the potential of young adult partnerships with undocumented youth to allow intergenerational learning through art-based methods, which disrupt preconceived pedagogic roles and allow making space for the young undocumented participants' complex experiences. Different chapters discuss the challenges and complexities of working with communities. Holle and Greene particularly elaborate this theme and warn us that a romanticized view of communities may overlook the potential for conflicts, power imbalances, and unrealistic expectations. They propose boundaries *as* care, by showing that boundaries are not only about protecting communities from researchers and others but also about supporting researchers. This is what engaged scholarship and reflexive migration/refugee studies allow us to see and urge us to recognize and emphasize: care and engagement can take many nuanced shapes, including boundaries as care.

In the book *Ecologies of Engaged Scholarship* (Guajardo et al., 2018), various first-generation scholars show the importance of their communities in how they shape their scholarship in the US context (see also Abrego & Négron-Gonzales, 2020). Guajardo et al. (2018) weave their personal narratives of the past and their work as scholars in the present and show the importance of their "cultural competence," based on the wisdoms of the communities they come from, in approaching education. They refer to the work of various Mexican American scholars in the way they "use the Spanish term *educación* to highlight the difference between being schooled and being respectful and honorable. To be *bién educado* is a significant cultural acknowledgment, even accomplishment," which comes of their embeddedness in their communities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017, p. 10). In addition, they argue that being raised in "borderlands" has nurtured their imagination (see also Anzaldúa, 1987) and taught them to negotiate languages and cultures. Levitt (2009) argues that the multiple identity positions of children of migrants give them the potential to be resilient masters "of several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy in response to the opportunities and challenges they face" (Levitt, 2009, p. 1226). Guajardo and Guajardo (2017) show how, in the community of their childhood, there was interdependence between generations, which taught them that "without dignity and respect, power could be a very violent thing" (p. 13). This is specifically important for the children of migrants, who often become intermediaries and translators

between their parents and their social surrounding, which at times means a shift in power. They argue that:

> [c]ontrary to the prevailing narrative of poverty as a deficit in this country [the United States], we grew up in a space and place of privilege, love, and hope. The economic conditions were difficult, to be sure, but our parents modeled how these social conditions were not determinants to what their children could become. They modeled how hard work and how the need for community were needed to change these conditions. [...] Our training ground for life was defined by these conditions and by learning from our parents, and others [...] how to develop our own agency. (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017, p. 14)

These experiences have guided the ways that these scholars build community in the classrooms, in their communities, and in their research in the United States. In this book, Fiorito and Abrego show the same pattern in their chapter, and Vang and Espiritu also present their experience with "refugee teaching" as a pedagogical paradigm that connects to community wisdom. Their methodology of "teaching not just for but *by* refugees" creates the possibility to juxtapose layered experiences of oppression and resistance, connecting, for instance, the forced displacement of refugees with the dispossession of indigenous communities.

These scholars thus argue for recognizing the power and relational wisdom of communities as "cultural competence," which is often ignored by policymakers and mainstream researchers because of the dominance of the deficit or damage-based approach and the lack of meaningful engagement with communities. This requires that migration/refugee scholars be reflexive about such dominant discourses and practices when engaging with communities. For a meaningful engagement, it is essential to create a safe, gracious, and inviting place for all involved. Indigenous scholars Lipe and Lipe argue for the importance of building *aloha* in relation to the communities scholars engage with. Using Pukui and Elbert's (1986) definition of aloha as "love, affection, compassion, mercy, sympathy, pity, kindness, sentiment, grace and charity" (p. 21, as cited in Lipe & Lipe, 2017, p. 32), Lipe and Lipe argue that aloha is about "reciprocal nourishing and care" between scholars and the communities they engage with. Ocadiz Arriaga and Kisubi Mbasalaki (forthcoming) argue for the importance of two indigenous wisdoms, Ubuntu (currency for justice and equity in African communities) and corazonar (thinking with heart, coming from the Americas), in relation to decolonial love as a fundament for caring engagement to rehumanize academia. This means using a more meaningful approach to dialogue, one that goes beyond the simplistic understanding of it "as a mere technique" to seeing it as "an epistemological relationship" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, in Lipe & Lipe, 2017, p. 35). Engagement in dialogue is then not about the preference of what is told but the importance of "recognizing the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, in Lipe & Lipe, 2017, p. 35). For meaningful engagement, one needs to embrace a broader form of dialogue through decolonizing (art-based) methodologies.

16.2 Decolonizing Methodologies

Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states at the introduction of her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2021) that the word research "is probably one of dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary... [because] it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful" (p. 1). She argues that decolonizing methodologies need to go beyond the critique of colonialism to enable production of alternative forms of knowledge. When researchers do not question their own assumptions and frame of thinking, even those with an emancipatory goal toward oppressed or disadvantaged communities could reproduce damage to their targeted communities. In the Netherlands, our various projects on refugee inclusion have shown that good intentions without clear actions to unsettle normalized biases in institutions or organizations will not lead to actual inclusion of refugees in organizations or societies (Ghorashi, 2021a; Ghorashi & Ponzoni, 2014; Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). Refugees are either tolerated at best or marginalized at worst but seldom included as members who are valued for their contributions. They are expected to become the same (fitting the image of the norm or the norm employee) yet never considered to be same enough, because of fixations on their otherness and their shortcomings (Ponzoni et al., 2017).

Smith (2021) argues that there is need for "'researching back,' in the same tradition of 'writing back' or 'talking back'" (p. 8). This means asking questions: Who owns the research? Who benefits from it? What is the frame of the research? Who designed it? (p. 10). It also means "sharing knowledge" instead of "sharing information," "because the responsibility of researchers and academics is not simply to share surface information (pamphlet knowledge) but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented" (p. 11). Decolonizing methodologies means then to rewrite histories by including the lifeworlds and imaginations of communities that are historically excluded from formally shaped dominant narrations. This requires a different form of engagement with communities' knowledges by acknowledging their importance in the process of knowledge production. Various chapters in this book show specifically how such decolonizing methodologies might look in practice. Rast et al. show the importance but also the challenges of centering the perspectives of refugees and considering them as co-creators of knowledge. Ocadiz Arriaga et al. show the importance of food in creating caring engagement with African refugee (queer) communities in South Africa in order to embrace the pleasure of sharing and caring in a context of extreme precarity. Korstenbroek; Powlick and Vlasman; and Holle et al. show the importance of art-based methodologies like storytelling and performance to revitalize the dignity and multiplicity in (forced) migrants' narratives and to revive the power and challenges of the collectivity as community.

Decolonizing methodologies is also about embracing the insider-outsider perspective of non-dominant scholars to unsettle the hegemonial status quo that has silenced the perspectives of marginalized communities as insignificant.

> The concept of imagination, when employed as a sociological tool, is often reduced to a way of seeing and understanding the world, or a way of understanding how people either construct the world or are constructed by the world. As Toni Morrison argues, however, the imagination can be a way of sharing the world. This means, according to Morrison, struggling to find the language to do this and then struggling to interpret and perform within that shared imagination. (Smith, 2021, p. 41)

In her chapter in this book, Greene engages with narratives from scholars of color in the United States to show the importance of sharing worlds through knowledge co-creation with the communities in which these scholars' insider-outsider perspectives and positionings provide a crucial foundation. This does not mean that we consider community knowledges to be by definition an alternative to dominant discourses, but in line with sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1986), we argue that the marginal position of black women as "outsiders within" has epistemic value in producing specific forms of knowledge. In her view, the marginality of the insider-outsider position creates the necessary distance from the status quo to allow the potential of originality. It is the combination of this distance from the status quo and the intimate knowledge of a specific way of life and history that makes this form of knowledge distinctive for studying societal issues. Black feminist critic bell hooks captures the unique standpoint that the outsider within status can generate. In describing her small-town Kentucky childhood, she notes, "living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out... we understood both" (Hill Collins, 1986, p. S15).

The value of the insider-outsider perspective aligns with what Said (1993) calls the condition of in-betweenness for exiles, which can lead to a feeling of disconnectedness while having a great potential to challenge the status quo. Exiles do not have the privilege of taking their present context for granted. The simultaneous existence of often conflicting past and present contexts creates a condition of *forced reflexivity* (see also Ghorashi, 2018) that is crucial for challenging the normalizing power of the status quo. It is therefore essential to engage with the *embodied knowledge* of disadvantaged communities as "outsiders within" to decolonize the othering foundation of "damage-based" discourses. In their chapter, Ponzoni et al. show the importance of refugee advocates' insider-outsider position in challenging the normalizing power in policymaking. They show how refugee advocates' insider-outsider position generates knowledges that are not only *embodied* in personal lived experiences but also *embedded* in relational awareness, which mirrors one's personal experiences with the experiences of others in one's community. Embedded knowledge is rooted in collective wisdom and allows advocates to distinguish patterns of exclusion and resistance that are relevant for policy. Bringing this knowledge to institutions, however, entails participating within institutional settings rooted in hierarchies stemming from coloniality. Connecting with institutional actors while keeping vital connections with community knowledge poses harsh challenges for advocates and requires the continuous, relentless weaving of "regenerative connections" between people differently positioned within refugee communities (Ponzoni et al., this volume). This is where engaged scholarship and decolonial methodologies for creating collectives can contribute.

Waldring et al. (2018) also illustrate the importance of the in-between position of second-generation education professionals in the ways they engage with their rich repertoire to bridge the multiple worlds in their increasingly super-diverse Dutch classrooms. Centering communities' embodied knowledges and relational wisdoms magnifies lived local experiences and imaginaries "that challenge the legitimacy of borders as a means of categorizing people" (Uhde, 2021, p. 318). This is what Uhde refers to as "critical cosmopolitan imagination," "a reflexive critique and the normative horizon of ideas about alternative society and actors' claims for justice" (p. 319). This is how we imagine reflexive migration studies should look, going beyond critiquing academia and embracing engagement with knowledges from "the other side of the line" with the aim of connecting communities' aspirations and engaged scholarship together (Vally, 2023).

16.3 From Community Service to Transformative Community-Engaged Scholarship

There is a global call for academics to investigate and invest in contributing solutions to the growing structural inequality, social exclusion, and disconnection. The demand for scholarship with a greater societal impact is rising, along with a growing sense of urgency to communicate academic knowledge to broader communities (Burawoy, 2004; Holland et al., 2010; Motala & Vally, 2015). In the past decades, critically engaged research with a social justice orientation has emerged and has invested in bringing together scholarly investigation and community accountability (Bhattacharyya & Murji, 2013; Motala & Vally, 2015). Critically engaged scholars have been active at the intersection of theory and practice, addressing issues of injustice produced through power differentials (Essed, 2013). These studies plead for academia to be a space of social critique and reflection that contributes to unpacking visible and subtle forms of power and exclusion in order to rethink lasting conditions for inclusion. However, engaged scholarship that aims to be transformative needs to combine a critical lens with contributions to the development of sustainable conditions for epistemic and social justice in which experiential, community, and indigenous knowledges are valued as significant ways of being and knowing in the world.

For knowledge co-creation, there is need for a participatory epistemology which moves away from a hierarchical and one-way flow of knowledge. This means a move away from extractive research that collects information from communities without recognizing their knowledge and expertise. In such studies, communities are positioned as knowledge consumers or "spectators of the research process" instead of as collaborators in knowledge production (Post et al., 2016, p. 10). In contrast, transformative engaged scholarship has social justice at its core (addressing power relations) and interrogates the flow of knowledge by questioning the unidirectional flow from academia to communities. This unidirectional view of knowledge is based

on a hierarchy of values that positions academic knowledge higher than other kinds of knowledge. A "multidirectional flow" is therefore needed, one that recognizes the complex, multifaceted nature of knowledge that moves in different directions (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016, p. 18; see also Ntsele, 2024).

Such a focus on knowledge generation to address societal issues is not new. In 1977, the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the United States considered the broader impact of academic knowledge as a distinct criterion in evaluations, and it added an emphasis on the transformative nature of such impact in 2007 (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2016, p. 18). As already referred to in this book's introduction and the comparative chapter (Fiorito et al.), Boyer's (1996) plea for higher educations' civic mission was crucial in the civic engagement movement's rise in academia. Boyer's reference to the tradition of nineteenth-century US land-grant universities—involved in scholarship that advanced the needs of rural communities—has been quite influential. In 1996, when the American system of higher education suffered a crisis of relevance and legitimacy (Shultz & Kajner, 2013, p. 17), Boyer called for academia to reaffirm its historic commitment to what he referred to as the scholarship of engagement, meaning that "the work of the academy must ultimately be directed towards larger, more humane ends" (Boyer, 1996, p. 17). According to Boyer, what academia needed was not yet another program but "a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life" (1996, p. 20).

For Boyer, engaged scholarship manifests itself on two levels: (1) it connects the rich resources of universities to the most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems of our times, and (2) it creates a special climate in which academia and society communicate in a more durable and creative manner with the objective of enlarging, in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's words, "the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life" (Geertz, cited in Boyer, 1996, p. 20). Boyer's view was a shift from the unidirectional application of academic knowledge to a two-way relationship between academia and communities to solve pressing public issues. Decades of community service programs on US campuses show many universities' efforts to work with Boyer's ideas of advancing societal impact. However, already in 1990, there was an ideological rift between the proponents of civic engagement (early advocates) with transformative ambitions and others who had a more pragmatic approach to such engagement, which was limited to disciplinary learning. And soon, promotors of the social justice approach felt alienated in this debate and service learning lost its transformative angle, instead becoming a more appealing way of disseminating disciplinary knowledge (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, pp. 41–42).

> Apolitical engagement that enabled campuses to maintain the status quo was an idea that could be widely embraced, but in the process, civic engagement risked losing its transformative potential. (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 44)

Beginning in 2000, there was an expansion of efforts to address civic engagement in a more profound manner with the aim of shifting the unidirectional approach toward mutual learning opportunities (students' civic learning outcomes) or rethinking reward systems in academia to acknowledge civic engagement. More attention was also placed on the "mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a

context of partnership and reciprocity" (http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org, cited in Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 50). The mid-2000s saw increasing attention on academic engagement with democratic principles and transformative ambitions for academia and society. The *Democratic Engagement White Paper* (Saltmarsh et al., 2009) argued for the importance of democratic engagement "as inclusive, collaborative and problem-oriented work in which academics share knowledge generating tasks with the public and involve community partners as participants in public problem-solving" (p. 9). It was argued that this could only happen with the transformation of academia itself (Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016, p. 52) and that it could only happen when "traditional notions of scholarly expertise, knowledge as objective and knowledge as decontextualized" were challenged (Kajner, 2013, p. 14). Several chapters in this book (Greene; Fiorito & Abrego; Yen & Vang) describe the conditions needed to reimagine academic engagement by centering community resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience.

In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the 1997 White Paper on education proposed engaged scholarship as one of the means to implement the social justice ambitions of the newly shaped Bill of Rights for Higher Education (Ntsele, 2024). As a result, community engagement has become one of the pillars of academia within universities across the country, including community service, service learning, training, and outreach (Bender, 2008). However, there has been a great lack of conceptual clarity about what such engagement with communities actually means (Bhagwan, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Shawa, 2020). Vally (2023) argues that community-university engagement is multifaceted and multidimensional, covering a great range of activities; however, the literature on such engagement is exclusively from the perspective of universities. This is one of the manifestations of the hierarchical, one-directional relationship in community-university engagement in South Africa, with the focus on outreach from universities to communities. In addition to this limited approach to engaged scholarship, Ntsele (2024) argues that institutional bureaucracies and cultures reproduce these hierarchies even when their ambition is to unsettle them. Johnson (2020), for example, suggests that not everyone sees the value of an engaged form of scholarship, which could lead to a disconnect between the ambitions and the implementations of such ambitions in academia. Motala and Vally (2022) argue that there is still a long way to go for universities to embrace co-creative forms of engaged scholarship, and according to Vally (2023), such co-creative forms of knowledge with communities is still understudied.

Busisiwe Ntsele's (2024) recently defended PhD dissertation is an exception to this. In her dissertation, Ntsele distinguishes between different forms of partnership between universities and communities and further elaborates on co-creative forms of partnership that she engaged in with her research. She defines co-creative partnerships as kinds of partnerships that center mutual learning, equal partnership, and mutual sharing of benefits in the collaboration. She devotes a whole chapter of her dissertation to showing the ways these elements of partnership have evolved in Meraka Village through years of intense collaboration between Mme. Sebabatso, who had a dream for her community, and Anita, an engaged scholar from the University of the Free State. This co-creative endeavor included multiple knowledges (including

indigenous and academic knowledge), which enabled innovation and transformation that was needed for reimagining building structures for communities. Miriam Ocadiz Arriaga (2025) also provides valuable insights on this topic in her dissertation. She differentiates between critical and community-engaged scholarship, noting that there are critical scholars whose engagement with social justice agendas is mainly shown through their critique of national and university policies and others who shape their academic engagement through a more activist form of engaging with communities. For the latter, she refers to the work of African feminists who critically link their theoretical frame with creative forms of knowledge co-creation that were informed by and also contributed to activist agendas for social justice (Mama, 2011; Tamale, 2006). Furthermore, Ocadiz Arriaga and Kisubi Mbasalaki (forthcoming) argue for the importance of indigenous knowledges in the co-creation of research with communities and for caring engaged scholarship. Some chapters in this book show the importance of art-based methodologies to create a reciprocal engagement with refugees (Holle et al.; Korstenbroek). Other chapters argue for the necessary condition of universities' and policymakers' institutional engagement to transform the deep sources of inequality for (forced) migrants in South Africa. Koskimaki and Tyhali, for example, explore the space in a South African university (University of the Western Cape) to engage with forced migrant communities. They emphasize the need to stretch institutional boundaries and to connect this effort to the university's historical legacy of social justice and transformation in the anti-apartheid movement. Dadoo and Vally, with their chapter on engaged scholarship in Johannesburg, reflect on the role of researchers, who are part of activist community networks, in addressing the contradictions of harshly exclusionary and even deadly migrant policies by entering into conversations with policymakers within research settings.

In contrast to the United States and South Africa, Dutch academia has a shorter history of community-university engagement. It is only in recent decades that many universities have developed several forms of community engagement programs using various labels such as Community Service Learning (Scheffelaar et al., 2023; Smets et al., 2020). Snijder et al. (2022) use the term "public engagement" to cover all kinds of interactions between universities and society from communicating research results to large publics to the active involvement of civil society organizations in both research and education. They observe that while individual researchers and lecturers at Dutch universities increasingly engage in these types of activities, there is a lack of structural institutional support. In addition, most such initiatives have a strong focus on student education and learning opportunities through providing "community outreach." Furthermore, there is a lack of studies showing the impact of such community engagement on universities' core activities as well as the transformative long-term impact of such initiatives in society.

Putting this in a historical context, we can observe a disconnect between recent community-engaged initiatives and the history of international solidarity and critical academic engagement with the Global South in the 1970s (e.g., The Third World Center founded by Gerrit Huizer), as referred to in the comparative chapter (Fiorito

et al.). These engaged forms of international solidarity and the critical, justice-oriented approach in academia came under attack because of their ideological foundation. In the 1980s, Dutch academia witnessed a strong shift toward an academic approach with political distance and strict scientific and empiricist methods (Gastelaars, 1985, p. 244). This shift dominated the Dutch social sciences until recent years, leading to the dominance of a detached approach to research and a limited approach to the dissemination of knowledge, with a one-directional focus and disregarding critical (community) engagement as being too involved and thus not scientific enough (Ghorashi, 2024). In their chapter, Rast et al. show the complexities of this context for engaged scholars who have to navigate it when engaging with refugee communities as part of their research production. Others have discussed the exclusionary impact of Dutch academia for students and scholars from the Global South (Hamzah & Aparna, 2024). However, there is increasing acknowledgement for critically engaged scholarship, and we see an increasing number of studies on universities' co-creative engaged research with communities in the Netherlands as well (see, for example, Cairo et al., 2024; Van Houte & Rast, 2024; in addition to Holle et al.; Ponzoni et al.; Rast et al. in this book). Some studies also focus on the specific impact of such initiatives on higher education institutions (Blankvoort et al., 2023; Drop et al., 2024; in addition to Powlick & Vlasman in this book).

16.4 Ethics of Care

Inspired by feminist epistemology, engaged scholarship both in our Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change research project and in what is presented in this book is closely related to the ethics of care. However, considering ongoing discussions on the paternalistic approach to care found even in relationships that are meant to be cognizant about hierarchical notions of care, it is important to discuss how we see care in relation to transformative engaged scholarship. Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) offers a rereading of Haraway's (1997) work, presenting care as a way of thinking and knowing by foregrounding interdependency and curiosity. Acknowledging interdependency in academia means embracing vulnerability instead of positioning oneself as the knowing subject. It also means allowing the possibility of unknowing and the act of openness and curiosity regarding the knowledges that are essential to enable thinking and doing multiplicity. This "thinking with" means standing for sustainable and vital relations and creating conditions for knowledge co-creation that will bring a variety of horizons together. Such an approach to care is neither nostalgic nor romantic but engages with the troubles that interdependency entails and continues "unsettling care," which means "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2010, in de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 204).

Caring, transformative engaged scholarship acknowledges the multiplicity of knowledges that make a difference. This starts with resisting reductionism (or single stories), meaning messing up existing categories that alienate individuals and groups from themselves and each other. Thinking in multiplicity enables thinking thick,

which means engaging with a diversity of knowledges, adding layers of knowledge so that knowing becomes thicker than it initially was (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 201). "This way of thinking-with reveals a commitment to a collective of knowledge-makers," which means valuing "a style of connected thinking and writing that troubles the predictable academic isolation of consecrated authors (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 202). Thus, "thinking-with belongs to, and creates, community by inscribing thought and knowledge in worlds one cares about in order *to make a difference*—a diffraction" (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 205).

However, as Holle and Greene show in their chapter, it is not always easy for engaged scholars to provide care, especially in the context of the growing precarity of communities and scholars. Care can also be interpreted differently by the provider and the receiver, so the intention of care is not enough to create caring scholarship. But most importantly, caring engaged scholars should also be aware of the danger of hierarchical forms of caring and of thinking-for disadvantaged communities by becoming their spokespersons or fetishizing their experiences. Thinking with care means acknowledging the limits of academic knowledge and allowing the vulnerability needed to embrace other forms of knowledge. In line with this, Dalmiya (2016), for example, argues for the importance of relational humility, which is necessary to enable successful caring encounters and to counter epistemic injustice. And Fricker (2007) emphasizes the harm that comes from denying the value of particular groups' epistemic knowledge, a denial often justified by the negative images associated with particular kinds of bodies. Dalmiya (2016, p. 12) also points out that "'neutrality' is at best a mask to make the biases of the privileged invisible." For that reason, care-based epistemology starts from the idea that "there is a certain 'way of being'—a certain character that centrally involves the trait of humility—and this is the source for ensuring the goals of both caring and knowing" (Dalmiya, 2016, p. 18). Care-based epistemology thus goes one step further than standpoint epistemology by stressing the importance of the peripheral location of knowledge that cannot be assessed by the ones in privileged positions. Thus, the major concern of care-based epistemology is to meaningfully engage with knowledges from the margin to enable a "thick way of thinking," including layers of positioned knowledges.

Sandra Harding's "strong objectivity" is an important step toward such engagement because it acknowledges the limits of the dominant view (because all knowledge is positioned in certain locations) and the value of intersubjective reflexivities through located knowledge making their partiality visible. This approach of objectivity through strong reflexivity "challenges members of dominant groups to make themselves 'fit' to engage in collaborative, democratic, community enterprises with marginal peoples (Harding, 2004, p. 135). Dalmiya (2016, p. 19) argues that care-based epistemology is a needed addition to standpoint theories. For this addition to happen, certain conditions are necessary in order to be strongly reflexive: (1) learning to listen attentively to historically marginalized groups, which means (2) critical examination of dominant normalized ideas and practices and (3) critical self-examination to avoid reproducing paternalistic forms of care. Thus, "care-based epistemologies focus on *epistemic/intellectual virtues* that enable strong objectivity along with non-paternalistic caring" (Dalmiya, 2016, p. 20). This means that "caring

as a virtue of character (the disposition of relational humility) must be consciously politicized to embrace historico-material conditions and co-implication of epistemic privilege and oppression" (Dalmiya, 2016, p. 24). And this requires critical engagement with historical locations of privilege and injustice through reflexivity and relational humility (Dalmiya) or "sufficiently receptive sensibility" (Fricker, 2007, p. 96). For relational humility to enable epistemic justice it needs to be "historicized," which "requires a theory of knowledge sensitive to power and wedded to politically engaged methodologies of understanding the world" (Dalmiya, 2016, p. 26). Examples of such caring engaged scholarship are the ways various indigenous scholars have engaged with the knowledge of their ancestors and have shown the importance of a politics of caring (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). These scholars describe that although the conditions of their living were difficult, they were surrounded by caring family and community who taught them how to develop their agency. This experience of "weaving a social fabric within the community" during their childhood guided them to build community in their classrooms and their research (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017, p. 14).

If we agree that polyvocality means the presentation of multiple voices through single authorship, polyphony brings us one step further by claiming shared authorship through the negotiation of multiple voices.

> [P]olyphonic texts arise from "dialogical" rather than "monological" authorship; in dialogical authorship, different logics not only coexist, but also inform and shape one another. (Letiche, 2010, p. 261)

Polyphonic engaged scholarship involves the ways that the production of knowledge is negotiated throughout the process of writing by giving agency to the multiple voices that it constitutes. This means sharing the authority of authorship. Despite the different claims of polyphony in the past such as the "incorporation of multiple authorial voices" (Marcus, 1986, p. 190) or textual dialogues (Clifford, 1986), most of these experiments promoted the voice of the author at the expense of those of others. "Multi-voiced polyphony demands that various voices or perspectives have agency" (Letiche, 2010, p. 262). Giving other voices in the research agency means negotiating textual authority and shifting the boundaries of power in the process of writing.

Many contributions to this book show how co-created endeavors enabled narratives to come together from positions of difference in order to negotiate discursive positioning, constructions of shared meanings, and the production of counternarratives to the dominant discourses of hierarchical categorizations (see also Hill Collins, 2000). Creating this option enables what Johnson and Duberely (2003, p. 1290) refer to as "epistemic reflexivity" through which "social constructions in-use [can be] democratically arrived at rather than as the outcome of power play." This process of co-producing alternative narratives is a form of agency in the face of the dominance of the discourse, which defines our positions without us even realizing it.

16.5 Conclusion: The Complexities of Epistemic Multiplicity

The role of scholars in what Michael Keith (2008) refers to as complicity with the bureaucracy is essential to address. Academics are often asked to serve as experts of knowledge but also to adjust their knowledge to make it accessible to the needs of specific and broader publics. In these conflicting demands, scholars offer services in line with the immediate interests of the communities they engage with, yet they need to balance those services to fit the academic structures that at times could lead to instrumental and short-term investments in communities (Bhattacharyya, 2013, p. 1419). This could bring engaged scholars into conflicting situations, especially when academic impact is conceptualized in a rather instrumental and unidirectional manner (direct and measurable impact from academia to society) while communities demand a more meaningful and durable engagement with academia that is co-creative and mutually beneficial. For that reason, Bhattacharyya (2013) pleads for "times of contemplation away from the noise of immediate instrumental demands [...] and easily digestible lumps of products" (p. 1425). It is necessary to embrace the fact that co-creative knowledge is difficult, at points painful and unsettling; it requires time and space for listening, deep reflection, and healing in the process; yet, it is essential for a kind of engaged scholarship that aims to transform structures of injustice.

This is particularly true in the current political context of budget cuts within academia and the erosion of academic freedom, particularly for academic disciplines that center the needs of marginalized communities and stimulate progressive reform. These real and palpable threats toward academics have become visible in all three contexts of our study. The challenge is then how to make engagement with communities sustainable beyond a particular funded project with limited time and resources. As the chapters in this volume have shown, the combination of critical scholarship and feminist epistemology has historically been essential in all three contexts of our study to rethink academic engagement with disadvantaged communities. Epistemological pleas to acknowledge embodied and experiential knowledges have been furthered by indigenous scholars' critiques of damage-centered approaches to communities and their calls to acknowledge communities' desires and knowledges. Developments of these bodies of work are certainly not limited to the contexts we studied; for example, some chapters in this volume have been inspired by Latin American and African decolonial scholarship (Ocadiz Arriaga & Kisubi Mbasalaki, forthcoming). However, most of the work is based on that of critically engaged scholars from the United States, the African continent, and Europe. Unfortunately, critically engaged scholarship is now severely under attack in the United States and threatened with less funding in other parts of the world. Thus, we hope that this book shows the value of such scholarship, its transformative capacity, and the importance of collective awareness of this academic movement around the world. We are indeed in need of "times of contemplation" as cited in the paragraph above, not only "away from the noise of immediate instrumental demands," but also away from the political and

societal threats to marginalized (forced) migrant communities and critically engaged scholarship.

This requires the inclusion of the affective side in engagements with communities: how fear, failure, disappointment, inspiration, love, and hate are present in the way we do our work as scholars with communities. Sara Ahmed (2004, 2012) has argued for the importance of connecting the emotional to the sociological and to the political. Despite the enduring contributions of critical feminist scholars in the field, "this type of activist thinking and feeling has had a limited impact in university scholarship" (Farrar, 2013, p. 1458). Yet for transformation of structures of injustice in academia and society, there is a need for acceptance of the emotional labor that meaningful engagement requires (see also Holle & Greene and Kazadi & Koskimaki in this book). Burawoy proposes "a dialogic public sociology" that "represents the interests of humanity—interests in keeping at bay both state despotism and market tyranny" (2005, p. 24). This is a heavy burden for many engaged scholars who invest in engaging with communities in a non-hierarchical manner and strive for epistemic multiplicity in their work but who also have to struggle to find space and recognition within academic contexts that do not acknowledge their efforts and impactful work. For transformative engaged scholarship to be sustainable, it is essential to create the collective structures necessary to support the emotional labor of such academics who are fighting different battles. With this edited volume, we hope to provide transnational inspirations and acknowledge the work of those scholars who, through their untiring work, co-produce knowledges and routes for an impactful connection between academia and the societies they are part of.

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Chapter 17
Epilogue: On Being Engaged: Personal Journeys and Complexities in Our Engaged Scholarship

Halleh Ghorashi, Tara Fiorito, Phoebe Kisubi Mbasalaki, and Elena Ponzoni

Doing engaged scholarship is about constant juggling between engagement and detachment, the personal and the structural, the academic and the political, the center and the margin. It is about embracing the complexity of engaging with communities in a meaningful manner and yet having a precarious position within academic contexts. It is about choosing the insider-outsider position and venturing into social engagement to have an influence while preserving the marginality of a scholar to be able to reflect and theorize. This margin where the scholar dwells is not a state of isolation but a precondition for maintaining a relative distance from being overtaken by the power of the dominant discourse or the demands of the neoliberal university. To opt for the margin is to choose to slow down while everyone else around you is running around and to choose to raise questions while others are certain of their answers. In the reflections below, we, the editors of this volume, show the trajectory of our evolving engagement in our academic work. We share the precarities, the joy, the learning, and the dreams in doing the work we are doing.

We also argue for the need for "epistemic responsivity (Medina, 2013, p. 53) in academia, which requires the personal and relational reflective capacity to enable responsible agency and resistance toward normalized structures of thoughtlessness or carelessness. In this way, imagining and enacting difference is possible through

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the shared responsibilities (Young, as cited in Medina, 2013, p. 52) of engaged individuals within meaningful societal spaces. Engaged scholars have an important role to play in these spaces. And this kind of scholarship is urgently needed in the context of current global developments in which anti-migrant utterances and outrageous political actions against vulnerable communities—including their expulsion—has become normalized dominant discourse and practice or celebrated by those with alt-right political leanings. These are indeed troubling times for (forced) migrants, who bear the brunt of being scapegoats in globalized forms of nationalism and exclusions. In our reflections, we grapple with our own positions within engaged scholarship and with such scholarship's demands and limitations as they manifest in their various complexities.

17.1 Halleh's Revolutionary Past and Academic Present

The dream of becoming an engaged scholar started for me in Iran. Then, I was an activist who really liked to read theoretical and philosophical books and think about the interconnectedness of theory and practice. This was possible during the time often referred to as the "spring of freedom," which lasted no more than two years and ended when the extreme suppression started after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. During the spring of freedom, many books (which were previously forbidden) became available in the market and streets were full of people discussing societal issues. One International Women's Day (March 8), I attended a lecture by Homa Nategh, a female professor who was one of the most respected historians in Iran at the time, and she was a feminist activist as well. I was mesmerized while listening to her talking about the importance of academia for envisioning societal change. I thought, this is something I want to be, an engaged scholar. But once I became a refugee in the Netherlands in 1988, that dream seemed like an impossibility. I was looking around me and saw no one with my background as a female refugee who had any position in academia. Even more, I was confronted with images that portrayed refugees as a problem, as people who need help and who have few qualities to offer their new society, as people with shortcomings. In the academic literature, this image is referred to as the deficit approach or discourse of lack. Despite these images, my dream became a reality, but it took several stages.

As a student in cultural anthropology, I saw academics and policymakers providing numbers and percentages about refugees, focusing on negative aspects: language problems, unemployment, trauma, lack of proper education and work experiences, and so on. I thought then, where are the perspectives of refugees themselves in these studies? This lack of refugees' and migrants' narratives in the public space and in academia became a strong incentive for me to do research about the daily experiences of people like myself through narrative research. That was in the 1980s when there was a strong focus on evidence-based research and policy in the Netherlands and the evidence could only be delivered by numbers, not by stories. I realized then that I wanted to do a kind of research that would amplify refugee's life stories and

give space to both their challenges and their strengths. I got the chance to do this when I started my PhD research on the life stories of Iranian women exiles in the Netherlands and the United States. At this time, I was also introduced to Clifford & Marcus's, 1986 book, *Writing Culture*: *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Reading this book resonated with the critical gaze I hoped to develop in my academic work and with the level of reflexivity I envisioned to be necessary for academics to engage with. This book was one of the most influential works questioning the textual authority of researchers. In their work, these experimental anthropologists opted for polyvocality within the textual production of knowledge using a dialogic mode of writing between the researcher and the researched. This shift became known as a "linguistic turn" in anthropology. Despite the great influence of this stream, feminist anthropologists criticized the book and argued that the dense literary text with its postmodern poetic style created a new hierarchy. For example, the achievements of feminist scholars who had been raising questions of positioning and self-reflexivity in relation to gender and power for decades were not included in this experimental trajectory (Mascia-Lees et al., 1989).

This feminist critique was essential to see the limitations of the linguistic turn, and so even greater inspiration during my PhD research came from feminist anthropologists (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Behar, 1996; Behar & Gorden, 1995). In their work, such scholars combined a critical gaze and reflexivity with meaningful engagement with "the narratives from below" and thereby provided stage for marginalized stories and perspectives. I then experimented with this combination in my research, and as I had similar past experiences with the women I interviewed, I chose to present myself not only as a researcher but as one of the women in the study by including my own life story. By claiming multiple positions in the text, I presented a dialogue between my struggles as an ex-activist and a scholar. In addition, by making my position as visible as possible, I tried to present a potential platform for dialogue between my voice and the voices of the participants in my research. However, I did not present a polyphonic writing in which the multiple voices in the research were presented through dialogue and negotiation. This left the notion of multiple authorships unresolved. In the end, I was the one who selected the themes and wrote the pieces about the research. "Multi-voiced polyphony demands that various voices or perspectives have agency" (Letiche, 2010, p. 262). Giving other voices in the research agency means negotiating textual authority and shifting the boundaries of power in the process of writing.

My knowledge and practice of engagement became thicker when I became an endowed professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, a position that emphasizes societal impact as one of its important aspects. After my inaugural lecture in 2006, I was approached by the socially renowned Dutch sociologist Christien Brinkgreve, who suggested that we combine our experiences and design a project that would bring creative writing and biographical methodology together. For me, this was a great chance to further develop the idea of polyphonic writing. The project's aim was to produce writings on narratives from women with various backgrounds about their positioning and sense of belonging and to do so through intensive writing sessions. Choosing this particular form meant creating space for sharing and constructing the

narratives in a relational manner. Yet this methodology also meant giving away, at least partially, control of the project as a researcher and being willing to go with the flow of the process as much as possible. This included many ups and downs in the research process, clashes of expectations (both between the initiators and with the participants), tensions between the willingness and the opportunities to share, and, most of all, intensive time and financial investments. The expected outputs were social visibility (publication of book in Dutch) and academic publications on the position of migrant women in the Netherlands (Ghorashi, 2014, 2016, 2021; Ghorashi & Brinkgreve, 2010). Choosing polyphony for this project was also an epistemological choice. The diversity of voices presented during the project provided the opportunity to co-produce alternative sources of knowledge in relation to the dominant negative discourse on migrants in the Netherlands.

My next step was to think of spaces in which narratives from different societal actors with different backgrounds could be connected. I realized the importance of communities of practice in which different stories and perspectives come together. My colleague Elena Ponzoni and I started projects in which there was space for engagement with the perspectives of refugees/migrants, professionals, and academics. In this narratives approach, we were inspired by Mills's concept of sociological imagination. As early as 1959, Charles Wright Mills (1959/2000) argued for what he called sociological imagination—in other words, developing a "quality of mind" to understand and explain the complexities and challenges in life. Only then would individual citizens be able to place their stories of loss and discomfort in a broader historical context and see their experience more broadly than just as an individual story. According to Mills, without imagination, sociology can produce only information, and this era has more information than it can handle. For sociological imagination, we need stories that show people's experiences in order to be able to grasp the complexity of life and to establish connections.

But then, in 2014, I went to the International Sociological Association's conference in Japan and realized that there is more to be done. Michael Burawoy, the president of the association at that time, said something during his opening lecture that moved me: He said that inequality is the core theme of sociology, but the people who were having an impact in addressing inequality were not sociologists but an economist, Thomas Piketty (with his book about capital), and Pope Francis (who became popular by addressing the poverty in the world). Where are the sociologists in the global scene? he asked. Others have also argued that the most influential ideas in imagining change have come from outside the academy (people such as Steve Biko, Fanon, El-Sadaawi, Audre Lorde). So I asked myself: What kind of engagement is necessary to have an impact in creating transformative inclusive structures in society? Even more, how can we think of structural transformation when the nature of power has become less visible and tangible?

With this new understanding of my work as an academic, I began to shape the comparative research project Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change,[1] which started in 2019 and is the foundation of this book. In this project, we aimed at creating

[1] https://www.engagedscholarshipnarrativesofchange.org/

co-creative spaces in which the academic positioning and perspective is considered to be only one of the perspectives in the equation. The importance of these spaces is not only to give a voice to participants in the research (as it was in my earlier research) but to make them co-owners of the space so that they can co-produce knowledge with us. In this project, inspiration from feminist standpoint theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (1986) has been essential in rethinking the epistemological value of "insider knowledges" (or knowledges from the margin/from below). Hill Collins argues that the intimate knowledge of a specific way of life and history makes this form of knowledge distinctive for studying societal issues. Including insider knowledges facilitates a fuller representation of people who, despite limitations in their lives, can provide perspectives on community building and wisdoms to foster "the possibilities of significant change from below" (Susan Stall, 2010, p. 547). Yet, the most fascinating learning process for me in this project was my introduction to the work of indigenous scholars (such as Tuck, 2009, and Smith, 2021) and their importance in rethinking processes of injustice both in society and in academia. I became aware of my normalization in Eurocentric academic frames and my limitations in engaging with the academic work from the Global South. The ongoing discussions with the project team also made we aware of the importance of engaged scholarship beyond just the critique of societal engagement. For engaged scholarship that aims to be transformative, reciprocal engagement with disadvantaged communities and including their knowledges in the process of research are essential. This requires thinking and doing in multiplicity, which is strongly connected to ethics of care, while acknowledging that the complexities and competing interests are also part of the process. I learned that epistemic multiplicity makes the knowing thicker than it initially was by adding layers of knowledge in the process (de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 201). This project has also taught me that engaged research requires reflection and openness throughout the process to embrace complexities. I hope we have succeeded in showing both the complexity and richness of such caring, transformative engaged scholarship in this book.

17.2 Tara's Juggling of Activism, Academia, and Care

My own journey as an engaged scholar started with a firm belief in ethnography. As a student of sociology and anthropology—more than 15 years ago now—contemporary ethnography, to me, epitomized epistemic justice, although I was not familiar with the concept back then. Ethnography was about long-term personal involvement, proximity, and intimacy; it was about "verstehen," "seeing the world through their eyes," and profoundly understanding the cultural codes, beliefs, values, and practices of marginalized and hard-to-reach communities through "deep hanging out," "full immersion," and "emic research" (Abu-Lughod, 1993). It was something I felt made to be doing. To me, this type of research was about empathy, about building friendships and understanding across difference, and about analyzing how larger sociohistorical political-economic structures shape communities, practices, emotions, and

subjectivities. And vice versa: how people in their everyday lives, despite structures of oppression and exclusion, resist, counter, reshape, and transform such structures through their agency and creativity (Holland & Leander, 2004). While I was familiar with anthropology's (and thus ethnography's) complicity in colonial rule and oppression, the type of ethnography I stood for was about recognizing and understanding the expertise of communities, about *giving voice to* and *seeking justice for*.

During my PhD, which entailed an ethnographic study of a social movement of undocumented youth in Los Angeles, I learned what it meant to be an activist scholar and participatory researcher. This was not necessarily a conscious choice but rather something that happened relationally, organically. From the very beginning of doing my fieldwork in the United States, it was clear to me that I was navigating a highly politicized context: one in which the people I worked with were very outspoken about issues of power and privilege and in which people were wary of exploitative researchers using the lived experiences of undocumented people to build their academic careers without reciprocating in any way. Thus, I was sometimes explicitly, oftentimes implicitly, asked to "give back" to the undocumented community by being engaged and participating in the movement. Because of my genuine desire to do something meaningful, combined with my understanding of ethnography as full immersion and engagement and my belief in the necessity of building trust and rapport, and probably also because of my own political positioning, personality, energy, and age (I was in my twenties, just like most of the (undocumented) activists), I became a full-fledged member of the movement. This meant participating in civil disobedience actions, facilitating meetings, organizing and engaging in sit-ins, learning the talking points of the movement, performing theatre of the oppressed skits at events and protests, volunteering at movement events, acting as a peacekeeper at protests, hosting parties and retreats at my house, and codirecting a documentary film about the challenges of being undocumented and the strengths of the movement, alongside conducting narrative interviews and participant observations and discussing and validating my research findings and papers during and after my fieldwork. Conducting such an ethnography evidently also meant being reflexive about my positionality as a white, female researcher with legal status from Europe doing research with and for undocumented youth of color in the poorest districts of Los Angeles. This self-conscious and relational reflexivity found expression both in my conversations with the community and in my writings about my research.

Next, I became a postdoctoral researcher within the research project Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change, studying the challenges and possibilities of engaged scholarship for the societal inclusion of refugees in South Africa, the United States, and the Netherlands. While I had been familiar with and inspired by critical theory and feminist standpoint epistemology and ethics of care, it was then that I started learning about engaged scholarship in all its different forms and variations: community-engaged research, participatory action research, arts-based research, feminist research, decolonizing research, co-creative research, transformative research. I felt so inspired. I learned about the possibility of working with research participants as co-researchers and co-authors, about co-designing the research (questions, methods, outputs) with communities and putting community needs and wishes

first. And I learned about indigenous research and epistemologies of the Global South, about epistemic justice and epistemic violence (Fiorito, 2024). Within our group discussions, we criticized policy-oriented research that operated with/through the logic of the state, research with a deficit approach that reproduced problematic categories, concepts, and understandings of refugees that did not resonate with their lived experiences and agency. During our meetings, we discussed the epistemological value of insider-researchers and experiential knowledges, themes which also corresponded with larger societal developments and voices calling for the decolonization of society and academia. During a research trip to South Africa, a black, South African, female activist criticized our project for having a predefined research plan, calling it "violent." The incident, combined with our general discussions and the larger academic and societal developments, had a profound impact on me and others within the group. It not only helped reshape the research project of our PhD candidate conducting community-engaged research in South Africa but also led me to fundamentally doubt my position and legitimacy in doing research with marginalized communities that I am not a part of, particularly as a Dutch sociologist working in South Africa, a country in which both colonial oppression and the apartheid regime were products of the Dutch. In fact, the apartheid system was invented by Hendrik Verwoerd, the Dutch/Afrikaner professor of sociology and prime minister who implemented the apartheid regime.

When I became an assistant professor—still connected to the Engaged Scholarship project—I developed and acquired funding for my own (community) engaged co-creative research project aimed at strengthening and studying the societal inclusion of undocumented youth in the Netherlands. The research project was an amalgam of the many different things that I had learned over the years. It was co-created with undocumented youth and societal partners; centered community concerns, knowledges, and wishes; used arts-based methods to explore themes the youth found worthwhile; created safe(r) and creative spaces for undocumented youth to get to know each other, share delicious food, and participate in or get paid for organizing creative workshops (such as storytelling, filmmaking, writing, dance, and music); and contained the possibility for youth to work as paid co-researchers within their own co-created research projects. I had also become a mother of two daughters, both of whom—together with my partner and mom—had participated in outings and events that were part of the (research) project. Through such intimate and personal engagement, I developed genuine friendships with some of the youth and societal partners I worked with. Alongside this community-engaged, caring, co-creative, arts-based research project, I actively sought ways to create institutional change, promote the societal inclusion of undocumented youth, and lobby for access to (higher) education and the labor market. This advocacy work was definitely inspired by the undocumented youth movement in the United States. I became the cofounder of a workgroup that created a covenant/agreement, between the Municipality of Amsterdam and Amsterdam institutions of higher education, that allowed undocumented youth raised in the Netherlands to access higher education. Together with undocumented youth who shared their lived experiences, we actively appeared in public media, met

with the Dutch minister of education, and spoke in Dutch parliament about the issues undocumented children and youth face in the Netherlands.

While I felt extremely proud, purposeful, and humbled to be doing this work and absolutely loved the fact that my engagement actually created concrete societal possibilities for undocumented youth, it also became more and more challenging to combine my personal, professional, and political engagement and ethics of care with my work and duties as an assistant professor and my care duties and personal life as a mom of two children below the age of four (never mind my personal life and care duties as a daughter of two single parents above seventy and my life as a partner, a friend, a human being, etc.). Being genuinely engaged does not restrict itself to office hours. It means receiving text messages and calls for help at all times of the day and week. For many years, my "engaged scholarship," combined with my efforts to be an inspiring and accountable teacher and to obtain a tenured position by publishing in top-rated journals, pushed me to work around 50 hours per week. And I did all that while still breastfeeding and enduring interrupted sleep because my beautiful babies also wanted and needed their mama. Moreover, the decolonization discourse, particularly in activist circles but also within academia, intensified and made me feel that whatever I did was always somewhat "problematic" or never "engaged enough." I wonder(ed) if positivist or policy-oriented sociologists also feel guilty for not giving, doing, achieving enough for the marginalized communities they study.

In a politicized public event about undocumented immigrants in the Netherlands that I had helped organize, a group of scholars who work with undocumented migrants were invited to reflect on the possibilities of engaged scholarship. While it was very clear to me that many of these scholars gave their hearts and souls to assisting and working with undocumented communities and went far beyond the call of duty as researchers, some of the activists who were there used the engaged scholarship critique and the extractivist researcher narrative to shame and pressure these scholars to do more, give more, achieve more. Interestingly, these critiques did not necessarily come from the undocumented migrants themselves but from activists speaking on their behalf. While I could understand—and perhaps even appreciate—the social control and moral obligation mechanisms that were at work in that situation, I also recognized how they had been used on me on several occasions throughout the years.

These reflections spurred my desire to openly discuss and reflect on the complexities and tensions of engaged scholarship. However, this topic is not so popular within politicized and engaged circles, either within academia or society: Who are we to talk about the vulnerabilities and limits of engaged scholars when we should be focusing on transforming the harsh conditions of the marginalized and oppressed communities we work with? How can we balance caring for and seeing to the needs of communities while remaining productive within and accountable to the increasingly neoliberal political-economic structures within academia that expect academic output and promote individualized and competitive publication and acquisition pressures? Moreover, who are we to earn our living and build a career by studying, analyzing, and writing about the experiences of marginalized communities, experiences that we have no direct access to, that we have not lived through ourselves? Should this type of research be reserved for insider-researchers who know and understand what

it is like to be undocumented through their own lived experiences and experiential knowledge?

And then, I read the paper "Against Inclusion: Sex Work Research, Racial Capitalism, and the Knowledge Industrial Complex" by DeCat and Stardust (2021). This is an academic article, written by two sex workers of color, that rightfully critiques mainstream research on sex work conducted by white researchers who produce knowledge about racialized people for white audiences and institutions. The paper proposes a politics of negativity, refusal, and disengagement, suggesting that white researchers should instead study (academic) institutions, thereby proposing new frameworks for engaging and relating. This paper had a profound effect on me.

All of these developments and considerations led me to reconsider my position and abilities as an engaged scholar conducting research with/for/on marginalized communities within a neoliberal academic institution. This spurred me to shift my focus toward trying to transform our institutional structures and influenced my decision to take a new job at the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs, where I could seek societal transformation and encourage social, ecological, and economic innovations and transitions by co-creating and working together with differently positioned societal partners. My engagement now focuses more on inciting processes of transformation and inclusion in local societal issues and decision-making processes. While my professional habitus and identity is still that of an engaged academic—and I will probably return to academia at some point—I am learning a lot in this new role and position, and it has given me some much-needed time and space to reflect. I am happy that a new generation of engaged scholars has continued the undocumented youth project that I started (Powlick & Vlasman) and that I am still in contact with some of the community members and societal partners. And of course, I am honored and humbled to be part of this book on transformative engaged scholarship. Who knows what the future will bring.

17.3 Kisubi Mbasalaki's Hauntings of Engaged Scholarship

Having done my undergraduate education in South Africa, I got "politicized," if you will, very early on matters of inequality and social justice. That spurred my yearning for social justice and subsequently my recognition of the engaged scholarship approach as the only ethical way to "do" research, especially in a context like South Africa. I have been drawn to co-collaborative research, which I carried out for my undergraduate, MA, and PhD degrees and for my subsequent academic research. I am interested in meaningful collaboration that engages with a praxis at the core, one that focuses "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" (Nagar & Ali, 2003, p. 360). In other words, this means a meaningful collaboration and praxis that is not about self-benevolence or feeling good

about oneself but about working toward un-seating or pushing against mainstream and hegemonic structures in their intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. This also means it can sometimes get uncomfortable and unconventional—breaking away from the normative. Therefore, all my work or research has had an activism aspect embedded in it. Many of the issues I engage with come from my own politics of location, such as being a nomad born in Uganda who is a gendered and racialised subject, and so on.

Drifting away from the format of the chronological aspect of "becoming" an engaged scholar, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the complexities of engaged scholarship—what happens to us in the process—it is a *haunting* of sorts. My first reflection is located within relationships formed during work-related research, the kinds of bonds formed during engaged research due to the level of closeness and work-related intimacy involved. These relationships are built while communing together and oftentimes protesting or resisting against "similar" hegemonies. They are built while working within similar causes for social justice, while yearning for social justice as part of a community. This has been the case for a number of research collaborations I have engaged with in working with periphery communities, such as street-based sex workers, some of whom were homeless (and trans) and others who were undocumented migrants, in Cape Town, South Africa. This particular research project involved nearly four years of intense work, theatre processes, and creative activism (see Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2023; Matchett & Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2020). The bonds that developed among us—academics in privileged institutions, NGO colleagues, and street-based sex workers on the margins, resulted from our crossing multiple structural borders to form radical intimacy and kinship (Kisubi Mbasalaki, 2023). I chose to reflect on this here because, though this engaged research ended in 2021 due to funding issues, as happens with many research projects, I am still haunted by it. I am haunted by the fact that I had a roof over my head, could afford to pay my bills (most of the time), and had a meal every day, among many other of "life's comforts" (and still do, on all these markers), while that was not (and still is not) the case for the group of sex workers we worked with. I am haunted by the limits of engaged scholarship, especially because academia is embedded within coloniality and functions or survives within the frameworks of privileging a few (mostly rooted within whiteness, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy), which is why research is the way it is, mostly "about" people or issues and mostly distant from structural shifts and engagement. This is also why engaged research has limits in terms of completely shifting structures—such as un-seating capitalism or inequalities—broadly speaking. But the university and thus research are also a microcosm of society and therefore contain the inequalities that frame society. I dream of an engaged research that totally overhauls the way we do research, unencumbered by limits such as "we can't assist with paperwork for the undocumented participants we work with" or "we can't provide a permanent home for that undocumented trans sex worker." An ideal engaged research would go beyond such normative limits. But this is indeed just a dream within the current confines of coloniality and the neoliberal university. In the meantime, I will embrace and celebrate the small boundaries or margins engaged

scholars work in to push against the normative hegemonies within research, such as those margins presented in this volume.

As a nomadic subject who is racialized as black, I often encounter a difficulty that goes with doing work or research in "the global space," especially when it involves traveling to different countries in the Global North and some parts of the Global South. Albeit, this comes from a position of privilege—the fact that I get to travel for work or research—however, the complex dynamics come with holding a Ugandan passport. People with a Ugandan passport are required to get a visa for all countries in the Global North and some in the Global South. That is a lot of visas. For instance, in the last year, over a short space of time, I had to travel to South Africa, the Netherlands, Brazil, and Canada—all of which demand visas for Ugandan passport holders. And they all present their own drawn-out visa paperwork and process. As just one example, the Netherlands changed its visa application process in 2024—supposedly to curb migration—and this has resulted in fewer visa application appointments that are required as part of the process. Visa appointments are now only opened up at the beginning of each month. For months, I tried and failed to get an appointment for a Dutch Schengen visa, until I finally gave up. In addition to missing out on work-related meetings, there is an emotional labor and exhaustion that goes with these visa processes. They are extremely demanding, laborious, and tedious and are meant to keep people, especially those from the Global South, from traveling into the Global North or the west. Even though the kind of movement in discussion here is meant only for temporary visits and not for migration purposes, we (especially we who carry Global South passports) are seen as a supposed "threat" to the Global North/west, as people who will supposedly come, stay and supposedly never leave and encroach on or abuse the social system. Drawing from an anecdotal story, I was on a train in Germany in early 2024 after visiting my brother and sat next to a German man who was married to a Dominican woman. He currently lives in the Dominican Republic and was just visiting Germany for a short business trip. We got into conversation while we stood on the platform waiting for the train in a small German town: Of course, it was one he initiated by asking "where are you from?" and "what are you doing in Germany?"—a common catalyst for conversations. He was quick to mention that he left Germany several years ago and now lives in the Dominican Republic with his wife, who is Dominican. When I asked if he was visiting Germany with his wife, his response was quite bitter and expressed extreme annoyance at the German government denying his wife a visa on several occasions, citing absurd reasons like "she is a threat because she may not return back to the Dominican Republic and may thus encroach on the German social system." He narrated how he is retired, worked all his life in Germany and paid taxes, yet his wife is seen as a "threat" to the country. This is an all too familiar story for those who go through visa acquisition. I was also once denied a Canadian visa a few years ago because I was perceived as a "threat" who was unlikely to leave Canada. One wonders why that inference was made, as I was based in the Netherlands at the time and had a research position while doing my PhD. I would never even think of going to Canada and not coming back "home." Albeit a temporary home in the Netherlands. Moreover, within the frameworks of mobility and traveling as a racialized subject, I also get profiled a lot and often have to submit

to extra checks when passing through airport security. Elsewhere, my colleague and I (see Kisubi Mbasalaki & Kizito, 2024) theorize the black migrant body as the ultimate border framed within bodily border politics. This adds another dynamic to a nomadic subject doing engaged research on (forced) migration in connection to one's own mobility or lack thereof or as one who is under surveillance. Engaged research, therefore, not only comes from a politics of location but adds an urgency to dismantling systems and working toward some form of (social) justice. Engaged scholarship becomes the only ethical form of doing research as it pertains to me—including the processes that go with it, such as radical empathy and compassion and a commitment to push against hegemonies.

17.4 Elena: Engaged Research Against Arrogance, Isolation, and Fear

We write from a time in which we often feel surrounded by fear, uncertainty, and inhumanity due to harshening political climates, visible and invisible forms of violence, and radical insecurity for countless people. While I am thankful for being part of warm networks of people, many of whom are busy reinforcing and spreading horizontal connections of mutual care, I often think about the final words of the Italian writer Italo Calvino in *Le citta' invisibili* (Invisible Cities; 1972), which my sister reminded me about in a moment of disorientation. Talking about structural forms of harm as "the hell of the living," he writes,

> There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the hell and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second demands constant vigilance and learning: seek and be able to recognize who and what, in the midst of the hell, are not hell, then make them endure, give them space.

With these words in mind, striving toward engaged scholarship for me means continuously embedding oneself in those relations and spaces that enable new forms of seeing and resisting. Relations and spaces that allow us to understand injustice in all its innumerous faces—and to see through injustice toward shared possibilities to counter it—are for me the most important research sites. It is in these sites that research becomes one way of discovering, even in conditions of strong inequality and injustice, all that is "not hell" and giving it space to grow. It offers a way of realizing how, despite the harsh circumstances, connected effort can lead to beauty.

I started my journey understanding engaged research as a personal commitment directed toward societal transformation. Over time, however, I came to see the need for engagement (and my own need for engagement) in a different way, that is, as engaging in the creation, nurturing, and exploring of relations with all those who enable and make doing research possible in the first place: co-researchers, participants, activists from different communities, and people with experiential or professional knowledge in the studied field, as well as colleagues and people in one's

personal sphere that somehow connect to the research. This also includes understanding how the limits of these relations (for instance, when reciprocal understanding is not straightforward or when power differentials block the flow) teach us something about ourselves, our positioning, and the contexts we are part of, as a precondition for working toward any type of collective change. I gradually started seeing my ability and quality as a researcher more in relation to this form of engagement, one that lies in creating mutual connections and connected ways to understand the world as well as in co-creating all kinds of "things": papers, books, art works, websites, stories, lectures, social spaces, inspiring events, or tasty dinners. As a white EU citizen with an unhindered migration path, my gratefulness goes to the people connected to me and working with me, especially those with more complex histories of navigating the margins, who have decided to engage with me and who have helped me imagine paths to work toward societal transformation. One of the things I learned and cherish is that, for me, imagining paths toward societal transformation is a step that always follows, not precedes, these co-creative relations.

In my student years, while doing a master's in organizational anthropology in Amsterdam, I became involved in Halleh's research group as a student assistant. Through my earlier study of philosophy in Italy, and later in the Netherlands, I had had the chance to explore epistemology and reflect on power in social constructions, including academic knowledge. I read the work of inspiring thinkers, but I also experienced an academic environment of elitist and intellectual detachment based on the glorification of individual (generally white-male) intellect. I was impressed by the humility and connectivity of the kind of work that I encountered in Halleh's research group, researching the experiences of migrants and refugees in the Netherlands.

I especially remember the masterclasses in which we worked together with people with refugee backgrounds, HR managers of Dutch organizations, and other researchers to explore forms of exclusion and inequality in the Dutch labor market (for an example from one of these masterclasses, see Sarah's story at the beginning of the Conclusion chapter). We read literature, shared stories and experiences, and created outputs such as theatre scenes or presentations. Creating conditions for connectivity among people so differently positioned was the most difficult part of the work, and we did it through trial and error. For me, the central part of that experience was seeing the importance of connecting experiences "from the margins to the center": that is, to start from experiences that are more marginal. In the case of refugee participants, this meant starting from a place where marginality made it difficult to articulate specific lived experiences in the Dutch context. Personal narratives of exclusion were then linked to, among others, black feminist theories, especially Hill Collins's (1990) work, thereby creating sociological imagination and fostering new consciousness. This encouraged people in positions of power in that context, the HR managers—to reflect on their behavior and the structures they were part of.

At that time, I had been living in the Netherlands only a few years and this experience was very formative, helping me imagine my desired future in this country. It encouraged me to explore participatory methodologies and co-creative research. The place where I had the chance to do that, however, was a different environment. For some years, I worked as a researcher in Dutch government-funded projects

focused on pedagogy, family counseling, and youth work, especially directed at groups considered "at risk," specifically migrant youth or families. This work allowed me to become more familiar with Dutch society and policy frameworks. I got to know, from within, a research environment that can be connected to what Essed and Nimako (2006) call the "Dutch minority research machinery" (see, e.g., Fiorito et al. in this book) and saw what it meant to function as part of this, despite wishing to contribute to social justice.

This experience fueled my need to work more toward questioning academia and structures of knowledge production and making those the primary focus of research. Because I was raised, educated, and normalized in Eurocentric ways of thinking shaped by coloniality, I needed connection with people with different standpoints. Thus, being embedded in networks of critical thinking, like Halleh's research group, to which I remained connected all along, has been very important for me, as has maintaining relations with people differently positioned than me, including collaborations and friendships with strong women and warmhearted fighters for social justice, like Jessica van der Luyt. Slowly learning to see and emotionally relate to experiences of injustice, resistance, emotional labor, and radical hope in the context of normalized forms of oppression became easier thanks to relationships that allowed forms of personal and emotional connection and allyship, as well as through being able to acknowledge my own moments of failure, blindness, and deeply problematic inheritances from a colonial past.

In my work, I tried to translate this by creating small-scale sites of collective reflection and resistance through participatory case research and creative methods with grassroots organizations, advocates, artists, and engaged youth professionals. This entailed sharing power over the research and putting more emphasis on the research process as a site of learning than on the research products.

Refugee Academy, the academic and societal network that we started together with Halleh in 2017, allowed me to work further on this track. This initiative rose from the urgency we and others felt to create connections between different knowledges and between many differently positioned people and initiatives working with or living with experiences of displacement in the Netherlands. The idea here was to invest in more structural impact by inviting people in different hierarchical positions to reflect on existing structures in relation to each other. For several years, we were dedicated to organizing meetings and events, having small-scale conversations, conducting masterclasses, and doing multiple research projects in co-creation with civic initiatives and refugee-led organizations or refugee advocates. This was work in which I tried to embrace a role that was very fluid and not clearly delimited. It brought a large network of new connections and spurred us to theorize different types of reflexivity needed to discover implicit power dynamics within relations, organizations, groups, and collaborations, while also pushing against hegemonies in collaborations with institutions and powerful players.

For my own journey, the most important sources of learning were the collaborations with refugee advocates from different generations, including two of the co-authors of Ponzoni et al. in this book, Mohammed Badran and Domenica Ghidei. We worked with institutions to create more space and care for knowledges and

wisdoms found within refugee communities, both in the Netherlands and in international projects, and mostly encountered limits and impossibilities to making this happen. One of the things that struck me most in this work was the ability of more experienced refugee advocates, who were already aware of these limits, to keep doing their work, despite the draining nature of it. Recently, in our joint work and in collaboration with other refugee advocates such as Yordi Lassoy and Sajad Salamanpour, we have been centering the notion of *radical hope*—the ability to embrace pride and resistance, to create meaning through purposeful action, and to imagine a more just future, while staying rooted in the understanding of ongoing injustices (Mosley et al., 2019).

In the past two years, experiences within Refugee Academy became the basis for creating a new research network called Co-creation Lab for Inclusive Knowledges, which connects different communities and researchers around social justice issues through co-creative work and joint reflection. Central to the work in this lab are many of the notions, questions, and queries that came forward in this book. Leading the lab allows me to connect with many more people, initiatives, and places where transformative engaged scholarship is pursued, which is something I am grateful for. Although there is a concern that spaces such as the Co-creation Lab could also be used by institutions for easy legitimation, as an instrument for palliating deep-rooted epistemic injustices or tempering more fundamental critiques of colonial legacies in academia, it also allows us to have a space to come together, learn from each other, and hopefully contribute to create institutional legitimacy for research that is more caring, collaborative, and based on reciprocity.

At times, I feel the tension between academia's emphasis on individual output, visibility, and success and the collective, relational approach to research that we strive for—one that requires modesty, delay, and sometimes deliberately staying backstage. Neoliberal norms and expectations are often visible, but they can also be subtle, seeping under one's skin. Writing and co-editing this book, together with the enriching relationships that emerged from last year's lab work and all the enduring relations with those who daily support me and understand this type of work, have all contributed to creating a shield against these pressures, reminding me that collective resistance is possible—through allyship, reflective dialogue, co-creative collaboration, friendship, and love.

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