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Forced Migrant Counter Cultural (Co)Productions

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Abstract

This article investigates the dynamics of knowledge co-creation through the lens of documentary filmmaking with forced migrants in South Africa. Drawing on empirical research done in South Africa in 2022, both narration and the documentary film became potent modes of knowledge co-production, illuminating how cultural productions contribute to shaping our understanding of forced migration and its associated challenges. Emphasising the prevalence of anti-migrant rhetoric in South Africa and the prevalence of violence meted out against (forced) African migrant workers, this article identifies parallels with global discourses surrounding migrancy, where false nationalisms vilify migrants as scapegoats for societal issues. Central to the overarching claim of the article is the integration of border theory as an epistemological framework. We centralise the "bodily border" as the ultimate marker of differentiation where violence is enacted through the frameworks of "recognising strangers" and can be as severe as death. We unpack the makings and framework of the nationalist discourse in South Africa that targets (forced) African migrants—one rooted in citizenship without content, lacerated Pan-Africanism through colonial borders, and bodily borders, among others. We then examine the documentary film as a cultural text, a structured narrative that blends factual storytelling with artistic representation, highlighting its role in co-producing migrant knowledges. Therefore, the documentary film functions not only as a visual and narrative counterpoint to dominant anti-immigration discourse but also as a co-constructed medium for exploring and articulating the complex notions of home experienced by African (forced) migrants in South Africa. Consequently, the article argues that integrating border theory into the process of knowledge co-creation not only deepens our understanding of forced migration but also acts as a catalyst for reshaping societal narratives, fostering a more cohesive and integrated vision of Africa.

Keywords

borders; co-creation; documentary film; forced migrants; Pan-Africanism; South Africa

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1. “Go Back to Your Home/Country”: An Introduction

The numerous times the phrase “go back to your home/country” has been directed to us—nomadic subjects and forced migrant communities that this article foregrounds—is uncountable. Sometimes it takes the form of a question, upon learning about our supposed non-formal citizenship in the dynamics of being or living in “a foreign country.” It has surfaced in conversations with acquaintances or even random strangers on a bus. We the authors are both nomadic subjects. We were both born in Uganda but currently live in the Northern hemisphere—Europe and the US. But we have also lived in other parts of the world. P. K. Mbasalaki (the first author) has studied, worked, and lived in South Africa, a country she considers one of her many homes, a contrast to the phrase we open with, as well as the overwhelming anti-migration discourse in South Africa. Brah (2005, p. 193) asserts this paradox powerfully: “It is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home.” “Go back to your home/country” was also a familiar phrase to the forced African migrant group in South Africa who took part in a short documentary film made by P. K. Mbasalaki, and what this article focuses on. The film is titled *Kudingwa Kumusha: On Being Un/Homed*. Indeed, the prevailing anti-immigration sentiments, especially targeted towards African (forced) migrants, tend to have the narrative “they must go back home to their countries” or “go back home/to your country.” A recent example of this happened with Chidimma Adetshina, a Miss South African contestant (in 2024) born in South Africa to foreign (non-South African) parents. The nation was gripped by a debate over her nationality, many weighing in on social media, including government officials such as the newly appointed Minister of Home Affairs: “On behalf of South Africans, we don’t recognise her and that name! She better start packing and go home,” raged one commenter on X (Kupemba, 2024). Because of this, Chidimma eventually withdrew from the competition citing feeling unsafe. This brief discussion is meant to highlight how the statement “go back to your home/country” plays out not only in everyday encounters but also within the national anti-migration discourse in South Africa.

“Go back to your home/country” conjures up the idea of home as “fixed” in all its various aspects such as meaning, feeling, expression, kinship, and so on, and therefore unchanging and only tied perhaps to one’s country of “origin.” There are indeed certain aspects of home that could be considered “fixed” in a way, such as in the African context or Uganda in particular, an “ancestral” home, with a burial site for the extended family or clan. In our mother tongue, it is referred to as *ekiigya*. And within these frameworks, both authors usually state that their ancestral home is Uganda but have many places they call home. This was also the case for some of the forced migrants that participated in the documentary film.

Home, both as a sociological notion, takes on different forms in terms of place(s), space(s), feeling(s), practices, or an active state of being in the world: “Home is variously described as conflated with or related to house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying. Many authors also consider notions of being-at-home, creating or making home and the ideal home” (Mallett, 2004, p. 65). In other words, home can symbolise or take on various meanings, including nationhood. It is important to note that home is a co-created space through relationality to both humans and non-human animals as well as things. Additionally, there are attributes that render “home” as a source of safety or terror, and sometimes a place of both (Farahani, 2015), or as a space that can be inclusive or exclusionary, or one that requires forms of negotiation where inclusions and exclusions exist. For migrant communities, this negotiation of inclusions and exclusions is constant in both contexts of “origin” and host countries entangled within the narrative of “leaving home” and “being at home” or perhaps an in-between space—limbo. This in-between space also takes on various forms—in terms of failure to get asylum

or legal citizenship, as well as various forms of alienation and non-belonging. Some of these amalgamate from legal processes and structural dimensions that are echoed in "go back home/to your country." The rise in anti-immigration rhetoric can be considered, especially on a political level, a "happy meal" if you like for nationalist discourse or false nationalism (as this article will show, rooted within modernity and colonial borders that exclude historical tribal relations and connections across the African continent) that is ever endlessly giving and eaten up. This means that the increase in anti-immigration rhetoric, particularly in the political sphere, serves as a convenient and continuously gratifying tool for nationalist discourse or pseudo-nationalism (in this case, nationalist exclusion targeted towards African migrants but not white migrants as we point out later on), which is perpetually consumed and reinforced.

These nationalist discourses are vast and thriving in all corners and parts of the world, South Africa and the US alike. These nationalist discourses have been going on for a while in South Africa but seem to have intensified in the last few years. In fact, South Africa saw a reconfiguration of the Trumpist "America First" narrative in the form of the "South African's First" rhetoric the nationalist Operation Dudula bases its vigilante operation on. Operation Dudula was established in 2021 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dudula is an isiZulu word that loosely translates into "force out" or "knock down"—expressing the common purpose of this organisation—to force out African migrants in South Africa. Operation Dudula is a splinter group from a faction in the Put South Africans First Movement. The Put South Africans First Movement draws its sentiments from Trump's "Americans First" rhetoric, which Trump launched with his inaugural presidential speech (SAHO, n.d.). This operation mostly targets African (forced) migrants in South Africa who are scapegoated as taking jobs and bringing crime/drugs to South Africa. A recent BBC documentary looked into this operation and followed their work, which was nationally organised and whose activities are executed in a very methodical manner (BBC News, 2023). Even though the organisation's work is deemed illegitimate—basically, the organisation has no legal mandate to carry out such work—they claim they work within the confines of the law when they raid companies, individuals, or organisations in search of undocumented workers or migrants. The fact that the organisation and operation are nationally organised brings to the fore several unanswered questions: How can a non-legitimate organisation openly operate nationally and "get away with it" in the eyes of the law? Who funds their operations? Just like in the US and elsewhere in the world, this is also the case for South Africa where right-wing organisations have become crusaders around vilifying migration and migrant communities. Forced African migrants bear the brunt of these rhetorics and violence.

With heightened nationalism, borders are at the center of these discourses, sentiments, rhetoric, and violent exclusions, all based on a fixed idea of home as a country—one single country—reserved for those within the confines of white privilege. For instance, in South Africa, these pseudo-nationalist exclusionary sentiments and violence are not targeted towards Dutch, British (both former colonisers), or German migrants but rather African migrants—such as the forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo under discussion in this article. African migrants in South Africa especially bear the brunt of this nationalist violence, with death being the price paid by some, particularly Zimbabweans. In a recent gruesome incident, under Operation Dudula in early April 2022, a Zimbabwean man was burned to death after he failed to provide his passport during a night raid of Operation Dudula in Diepskloof, Alexander township in Johannesburg (Gilili, 2022). A passport, a signifier of borders or border control, is entangled with the politics of the nation-state, determining who belongs and who doesn't. His body paid the ultimate price, through "bodily border" tactics. Meanwhile, in the US, nationalist sentiments are not targeted toward European migrants but rather South Americans and other

migrants of color. White privilege conjures up a borderless existence and experience, while people of color are subjected to bodily border tactics as (forced) migrants.

Against this backdrop, what unfolds when the voices of forced African migrants are centered in a documentary film as part of a collaborative process on migrant knowledge co-creation with researchers who, as global nomads and border-crossing subjects themselves, share the experience of fluid identities and shifting boundaries? The process of co-production took place in August of 2022 with a group of forced African migrants in Cape Town, mostly from Zimbabwe. Mobilised through the P. K. Mbasalaki's networks, many of whom she knew through her previous work, the documentary film engaged with a "talking heads" format through direct interviews conducted by Mbasalaki. Prompted by the national discourse of "go back home to your own country," the notion of home was centralised and interrogated in its various dimensions and contradictions, including community, kinship, and belonging. By collaborating with forced African migrants in the knowledge-generation process, the documentary ensures that their voices, perspectives, and lived experiences are authentically represented, and that scholarship about migrants is deeply informed by their firsthand accounts and insights. This participatory approach empowers the interviewees, giving them agency in narrating their own stories rather than being passive subjects of an external narrative. This direct representation challenges stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated by xenophobic discourses, providing a platform for migrants to assert their identities and experiences. Paulo Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue in creating a democratic and just society, asserting, "dialogue cannot exist without humility" (Freire, 2005, p. 68). This humility is essential in co-produced documentaries, where the filmmakers listen to and amplify the voices of the marginalized.

In this article, we aim to bring co-production as a form of co-creation with a group of forced African migrants in South Africa. Prompted by what was going on around Operation Dudula, which had a lot of media attention—both public media, including national media, as well as social media and other avenues—we wanted to co-create a counter-narrative that foregrounds the lives, fears, anxieties, and hopes of forced African migrants. The concept of co-creation was important to us as engaged scholars who work within the frameworks of anti-colonial and Afro-feminist ethics, centring "researching with" rather than on, for, or about. In what follows, we unpack the makings and framework of the nationalist discourse in South Africa that targets African migrants. This discourse is rooted in citizenship without content, lacerated Pan-Africanism through colonial and bodily borders, among other elements. We then reflect on the co-production of the documentary film, not only as a counter-narrative to the overwhelming anti-immigration discourse, but also as co-meaning making about the concept of home.

2. "Encountering Strangers": Bodies and Borders

Central to negotiating the idea of home, the participants' insights into borders and their imposed subjectivities provided crucial examples of how borders complicate the notion of home. By framing their lived experiences through the lens of borders, the participants showed how home is constantly under threat, not just from the exclusionary policies of the state but also from societal attitudes that view them as outsiders. Borders, according to them, were not merely geographical markers but were tied to the social, political, and psychological barriers that migrants have to navigate every day. This understanding of borders—both physical and symbolic—was woven into the documentary, deepening its exploration of how forced migrants experience displacement, exclusion, and the persistent struggle for belonging.

Nationalism and anti-migration discourses are not a new phenomenon in South Africa. These sentiments are part of the daily reality for many migrants, though they become more violent during each public eruption. These eruptions, often targeting African migrants, resemble war, with violence, arson, and death becoming the language through which they are expressed. In his work on borders, K. Kizito (the second author) offers the thesis that borders are documents of violence, reminding us that borders are tangible reminders of colonial legacies and the violent histories that shaped them (Kizito, 2019, 2020, Kizito & Carter, 2022). He argues that borders are the physical and symbolic markers that perpetuate hierarchies of belonging and non-belonging, continuously influencing how individuals and groups are classified, controlled, and marginalized. Kizito's framework is particularly useful in understanding the roots of anti-migrant violence in South Africa. His work emphasizes how national borders inherited from colonialism not only separated people geographically but also reinforced ideological and racial divisions that continue to manifest in contemporary politics. Accordingly, borders transcend geographic boundaries. They permeate daily life through internal mechanisms of control, such as police checks, mobility restrictions, and societal perceptions. Kizito argues that beyond geopolitical borders, border enforcement extends inward to exert violence against migrants, both by state apparatuses and local communities. By framing borders as documents of violence, Kizito reveals that anti-migrant violence in South Africa is not an isolated phenomenon but a continuation of deep structural and historical forces. His work calls for addressing colonial legacies and rethinking borders to foster an inclusive African identity that dismantles rather than reinforces the divisions driving xenophobic violence.

Dating as far back as 1994, many (forced) migrants in South Africa ended up being displaced in these violent processes, seeking refuge in churches or common rescue grounds (SAHO, n.d.). Attackers have frequently charged that foreigners are stealing the fruits of democratisation with putative underlying causes such as class and the postcolonial condition (Klotz, 2016). Prior to democratisation, black South Africans were not only non-citizens but also migrants in their movement from Bantustans into cities for work and had to carry formal documentation—a dompass. Some scholars argue that removal of race as the core feature of citizenship (where during apartheid, race and by extension whiteness served as the primary and only form of citizenship), the post-apartheid era opened the complex question of "who are the people" that democracy should now serve, and without "black" as the primary reference for innumerable demands, "South Africans" became an identity with no obvious content (Chipkin, 2007). The deficiencies of South African citizenship are evident in the inability to access fundamental resources, such as adequate housing and sanitation, particularly for Black South Africans. This is compounded by high levels of unemployment and other systemic failures. These issues are part of the broader economic legacy of apartheid and colonialism, positioning South Africa as one of the most unequal societies globally. The disparity is starkly reflected in the post-apartheid income and wealth gap. For example, the 2020 Oxfam South Africa report indicates that the wealthiest 20% of South Africans control nearly 70% of the nation's resources. Furthermore, the report highlights that the economy remains dominated by a few large corporations, many of which originated during the colonial and apartheid eras and continue to benefit from government support and historical advantages. In other words, the biggest share of income in South Africa is still allotted to the white minority. The fruits of democratisation are minimal and have reached only a small portion of black South Africans, hence fending off African migrants, who are perceived to be encroaching on these modest resources available to black South Africans.

The specific targeting of African (forced) migrants often gets the rest of the African continent upset with emotive responses. For instance, in 2019, when the Nigerian government and citizens responded to

xenophobia in South Africa by protesting and calling for Nigerians to boycott South African products (supermarkets) and services (such as the MTN mobile network) in Nigeria ("Letter from Africa," 2019). Burna Boy, one of the most visible and internationally recognised African singers, cancelled a concert in South Africa in protest of the country's xenophobia. Burna Boy's song *Another Story* highlights the disillusionment with the state of Africa and the plight of African migrants. His lyrics underscore the irony and tragedy of African migrants: Despite the rich natural resources and potential of the continent, many Africans feel compelled to leave their homes to find basic dignity and survival elsewhere. The song serves as a reminder of the human cost of this migration, as people face dangerous conditions, exploitation, and often hostility in foreign lands. Other responses alluded to the fact that the African continent supported South Africa during apartheid in various ways, including housing or hosting special African National Congress (ANC) programs. For instance, at one point the ANC headquarters were housed in Lusaka, Zambia, during the height of apartheid. Yet with post-apartheid amnesia, these once-strong solidarity ties are forgotten, decimated. Additionally, borders, as a colonial invention, decimated former tribal or ethnic lineages that existed on the African continent. Traces of these remain in iterations such as Bantu languages across the continent. One of the primary obstacles is the persistent adherence to national borders that were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers. These borders have not only divided African nations but also entrenched a sense of nationalism that often supersedes the broader Pan-African identity. Consequently, the notion of a unified Africa remains an elusive dream, complicated further by internal conflicts, economic disparities, and political instability. The legacies of Bantu education and censorship have left many South Africans with limited knowledge of regional pan-African history (Klotz, 2016).

Indeed, xenophobic violence in South Africa highlights a fundamental contradiction in the notion of Pan-Africanism: the tension between national sovereignty and continental unity. While Pan-Africanism advocates for the erasure of artificial colonial borders and the unification of African peoples, the reality is that nation-states remain the primary units of political organisation and identity. National interests often take precedence over continental solidarity, leading to conflicts and divisions that undermine the Pan-African project. Furthermore, the persistence of xenophobia indicates that cultural and ethnic divisions within Africa are not merely relics of colonialism but also products of contemporary socio-economic and political conditions. These divisions challenge the assumption that a shared African identity can easily transcend national and ethnic boundaries. Pan-Africanism as an aspirational ideal remains a powerful vision for the future of Africa, promising unity, solidarity, and collective progress (Ubuntu). However, the reality on the ground, as evidenced by South Africa's xenophobia against African migrants, reveals significant obstacles to achieving this vision. Constrained by the legacy of colonial borders, coupled with contemporary socio-economic and political challenges, the pursuit of a united Africa is a far cry.

A critical interrogation of the relationship between borders and xenophobia in South Africa yields knowledge of a standing contradiction between the ideals of Pan-Africanist thought and the entrenched geopolitical colonial identities that characterise the identity of the nation-state. Originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries among the African diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean who sought to combat colonialism, racial discrimination, and economic exploitation, Pan-Africanism is a political and cultural movement that advocates for the solidarity of African peoples worldwide. The movement's leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Marcus Garvey played pivotal roles in articulating the ideals of Pan-Africanism that emphasised themes of shared heritage, collective identity, and political unity, all of which contradicted the postcolonial African nation-state. Moreover, Klotz also points to the political

manoeuvring that took place at the turn of the last century, in relation to the formation of South Africa as a nation-state, he states that:

> History of evolving borders reveals that the current notion of foreign Africans in South Africa has deep roots in racist citizenship policies, defined by territorial lines which resulted primarily from a complex array of white elites and their political manoeuvres. Starkly stated, Botswana (1966), Lesotho (1966), and Swaziland (1968) as well as Zimbabwe (1923/1980) owe their independence largely to British fears of Afrikaner nationalism. Once these colonies gained formal statehood, their rulers crafted nationalist discourses that reified those borders even while transforming other aspects of the postcolonial state." (Klotz, 2016, pp. 192–193)

In other words, had Britain not feared Afrikaner nationalism and the instigation of apartheid, those three countries—Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe—could have been part of South Africa. Afrikaner policies drove the process of bordering, which is currently being reified in anti-migration rhetoric, politics, and policies in South Africa. Furthermore, the current anti-migration rhetoric could also be a nationalist articulation that draws from continuities in history, similar to that deployed by the National Party, which was responsible for instigating apartheid in South Africa. In other words, a continuity of an Afrikaner nationalist discourse that also excluded black South Africans and other persons of colour. And therefore offering another racialized dimension in the historical spillages or continuities of nationalism in South Africa.

If we take a moment to engage with border scholarship, this offers insight into gatekeepers that delineate the inside from the outside, who belongs and who doesn't, who is a member of the in-group and who is not. Borders are not merely lines on a map but are imbued with powerful symbolic meanings that influence social attitudes and behaviours. Sundstrom and Kim (2014) shed light on "civic ostracism" as a mechanism for maintaining boundaries between normative whiteness and the Other, positioning individuals as insiders legally but outsiders socially. This is something we observe in South Africa, where Africans and migrants of colour are bearing the brunt of nationalisms and xenophobia unlike white migrants from Europe or the US, who are excluded from this narrative. The Othering here is clearly towards migrants of colour. Indeed, Silva (2015) underscores the xenophobic atmosphere fostered by civic ostracism, noting its psychological, political, and existential ramifications, reinforcing the notion of foreigners or immigrants as outsiders within a polity. In this case, the new democracy in South Africa whose citizenship black South African are clinging to as alluded to earlier. In the realm of international relations, scholars such as Balibar and Williams (2002, 2010), Brunet-Jailly (2011), and Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2009) grapple with border-related issues like territorialization, sovereignty, and citizenship. Concurrently, scholars like Ngai (2014) and López-Sala (2015) explore borders through the lens of jurisprudence, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of border dynamics. DeChaine (2015) portrays the border as a multifaceted entity, encompassing symbolic, material, affective, and performative dimensions, underscoring its omnipresent influence. Building on this, Ono (2012) emphasises the dual nature of the border, both literal and figural, elucidating how it extends beyond geographical boundaries to impact bodies and societal constructs. Ono's concept of the "bodily border" underscores how bodies themselves become sites of border enforcement and negotiation. In this particular case with South Africa, it is African bodies or persons of colour who are (forced) migrants.

By virtue of being black or African whether migrant or not connotes relationality of sorts—continentally through kinship (historical Bantu lineages) or otherwise. The notion of "bodily border" invokes Ahmed's

(2000) notion of the "encountering stranger." She writes that a stranger is not simply the one whom we have not yet encountered, but one we have already encountered, or already faced. The African (forced) migrant stranger in this case is one who easily "blends in." For instance, P. K. Mbasalaki is constantly told that she could easily pass as South African by "just looks" or physical features. How then is the migrant stranger recognised in the South African case? The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: We recognise somebody as a stranger rather than simply failing to recognise them (Ahmed, 2000). Being all African, the "recognising stranger" (in the South African case) that distinguishes non-South African blacks as outsiders is deployed or manifests through several "bodily" techniques—such as accents. For instance, the Zimbabwean English accent is quite distinct (really just like any other country-based English accent that is quite distinct; e.g., Congo is distinct from Uganda, which is distinct from Nigeria). Another "bodily border" technique deployed is through names: African names north of South Africa are quite distinguishable from South African names; for instance, one can easily tell Zimbabwean English names. Language is also a big maker of differentiation, through the inability to speak any of the main South African languages other than English. Moreover, for those (forced) migrants who manage to learn Zulu or other South African languages, there are markers of differentiation, e.g., certain isiZulu words are very difficult to pronounce for non-native speakers, such as the word "elbow." These "bodily border" markers were also featured in our conversations during the documentary filmmaking. Techniques deployed engaged with the "bodily border" by manoeuvring through various aspects of the body to recognise the African (forced) migrant Other. Such techniques involve ways of reading the bodies of "others" South Africans come to face as mis/recognising the stranger within. Along similar lines, Ahmed further argues that "Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place. Such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of 'this place,' as where 'we' dwell" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 22).

Jones (2016) expands the discourse on borders to include cultural barriers based on factors such as sexual preferences, religion, and nationality, conceptualising the notion of a "social relations border." This multifaceted approach to understanding borders underscores their complex and pervasive nature, extending beyond geographical boundaries to encompass legal, social, and cultural dimensions. Considering these exclusionary regimes, as well as some of the techniques deployed, as engaged scholars we wanted to co-create counter-narratives with forced migrants, mostly from Zimbabwe, to counter the prevailing discourses, which we explore in the next section.

3. Counter Co-Productions: Narratives of Home/Homing and Pan-Africanism

P. K. Mbasalaki was based in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic and witnessed the rise of Operation Dudula, with heightened animosity towards Zimbabwean and Nigerian (forced) migrants. She continued following their development when she moved to the UK, in addition to maintaining communication with Zimbabwean friends who are forced migrants in South Africa and were anxious about being targeted. Some were indeed victims of malicious acts. For instance, one of her friends was "outed" in an NGO she worked with, where a mass email was sent to the whole organisation from a bogus email address stating her documentation status as well as the salary she earned. Constant news streaming of violent attacks spurred off the idea of a documentary film. A co-creation approach was eminent within the framework of engaged scholarship.

Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) to understand a complex problem or phenomenon (Van de Ven, 2018). It has grown over the years in the quest for cutting through the boundaries that separate the university from society. Being conscious of this divide, in a post-colony like South Africa, engaged scholarship has taken various forms. For example, student protests in 2015 called for the decolonisation of the university and demanded a renewed awakening. This has formed the basis of most of the research we partake in. Approached as a form of praxis, engaged scholarship is accordingly understood here as being driven not simply by a desire to interpret and understand the world, but also to change it (Cowley, 2013). The kind of research that calls for meaningful collaborations that aim to destabilise and trouble hegemonies embedded within the academy and non-academic binaries. Nagar and Ali (2003, p. 360) refer to this kind of engaged research as "praxes that focus explicitly and deliberately on":

> (a) conceptualising and implementing collaborative efforts that insist on crossing multiple and difficult borders; (b) the sites, strategies and skills deployed to produce such collaborations; and (c) the specific processes through which such collaborations can find their form, content and meaning.

This becomes even more important in reference to forced migrant communities who face multiple alienations and exclusions as well as various forms of violence. Collaboration here took on the shape of co-creating/co-producing a documentary film, and it meant paying a great deal of attention to issues of safety, compensation of time, and nourishment, as well as offering access to support in relation to trauma. It was a kind of transformative and meaningful collaboration.

In post-apartheid South Africa, transformation has become an overused concept or term, often without much substance. It features on many agendas, programs, and interventions in South Africa as an empty term of sorts in many instances. Very few interventions take on its radical meaning, use, and interpretation. Drawing on the framework of critical pedagogy, co-producing a film with forced migrants aligns with the principles of transformational praxis as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005). This framework situates the documentary not just as a medium of representation but as an active process of empowerment and social change. By engaging with the subjects as co-creators, the documentary disrupts traditional power dynamics in media production, fostering a more democratic and equitable form of storytelling. Moreover, this approach resonates with the ethical imperative to do justice to the complexities and nuances of migrants' experiences. It acknowledges their expertise and authority over their own narratives, challenging their often reductive and dehumanizing representations in mainstream media. A jointly produced documentary is a form of transformational praxis. Transformational praxis, in this context, refers to the process of advocating social change through critical reflection and action. A co-produced documentary film, created collaboratively between the producer and forced migrants, holds significant potential as a form of transformational praxis because of its potential to effectively counter and challenge xenophobic discourses, policies, and practices in several ways, such as amplifying forced migrants' voices, exposing structural injustices and fostering dialogue and solidarity through co-intentional education. The production process itself served as a site of "co-intentional education" (Freire, 2005, p. 49), fostering dialogue and solidarity between African migrants and the filmmaker. This collaborative effort builds bridges of understanding and cooperation, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

In this regard, the transformative nature of this engaged research lies within the "encounter itself that creates an immediate opportunity to acknowledge and in turn celebrate the work of many research participants, through shared recognition of their commitment to making a difference, or simply their daily struggle to overcome the micro, meso and macro level injustices of our unsustainable systems and institutions" (Franklin, 2021, p. 8)—this is especially central to (forced) African migrants in South Africa who are alienated from belonging and whose public image is painted as "invaders," "criminals," and non-citizens. So, the potential transformative nature of this experience lies also within the boundaries of co-creation, not only from a research point of view but from a political or activist point of view as well, where the documentary film works as an aesthetic grammar for creative activism (Mbasalaki & Matchett, 2020). This is familiar territory, in many ways, to engaged scholars; a kind of activism that is also historically associated with South African universities and research.

Co-creation in this case took on "researching with" and collaborative storytelling, among other methods. The methods and approaches are understood here as co-creative when they stimulate alternative understandings of why and how things are and how they could be (Franklin, 2021)—in this case, bringing to the fore the daily lived experience of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo in South Africa, in the height of dominant narratives such as that of Operation Dudula. Franklin (2021) further adds that "stimulation of alternative understandings needs to be a shared one, experienced (albeit in different ways and to different extents) by multiple persons within a research process, including both the 'researchers' and the 'researched' alike" (p. 2). For us, this alternative stimulation came through the ability of film to capture authentic voices and lived experiences, a powerful tool for democracy in public engagement that can be used to bring to light existing inequities caused by xenophobia, as well as the effects of movements like Operation Dudula have on the lives of African forced migrants in South Africa. This then becomes a case of joint storytelling between the researcher and forced migrants.

Initially, with co-creation in mind, we wanted to create a dialogue between the film *Man on Ground* (Omotoso, 2011), chosen by K. Kizito, and the documentary film *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed* made by P. K. Mbasalaki, but our efforts to find the former were futile. The disappearance of this film is particularly perplexing given the film's official sanctioning and injection of financial support from the South African Government. Our failure to access the film raises significant academic concerns. Firstly, it highlights the precarious nature of cultural products as tools for knowledge creation. Films, as dynamic and impactful media, offer invaluable insights into societal issues like xenophobia, providing a narrative and visual engagement not always possible with written texts. The difficulty in obtaining this film underscores a broader issue within academic research: the reliance on and vulnerability of ephemeral cultural products. Moreover, the film's disappearance prompts a re-evaluation of the mechanisms for preserving and distributing cultural content. It raises questions about the stewardship of media resources, particularly those with educational and societal importance. The inability to access *Man on Ground* also suggests a potential gap in the global academic community's engagement with African cinematic works, potentially limiting the scope and diversity of scholarly discourse on African issues. Ultimately, this bizarre scenario serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for robust archiving and dissemination practices to ensure that significant cultural works remain accessible for future research and education. The academic implications are profound, urging scholars and institutions to advocate for better preservation and distribution systems. Only through such efforts can the co-creation of knowledge continue to benefit from the rich and diverse array of cultural commentaries available worldwide.

Documentary film as a methodology draws on practice-based research in the visual arts through a creative documentary, where creativity becomes the vocabulary or medium through which research is engaged. Indeed, documentary films, through their multi-sensory nature, have been found to be more impactful in portraying reality as well as a means for social persuasion (Nichols, 2010). In recent years, documentary films are increasingly being used in academia for disseminating knowledge. An evolving belief is that documentaries can be valuable in any field of research to illuminate issues of social justice and existing inequities in public education, as well as democratise research (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). The innate nature of documentaries allows the capture of reality and triggers important conversations in society, thus enabling researchers to contribute to knowledge generation in non-traditional forms by including participants' authentic voices in the knowledge generation process. This means that the emphasis on the researcher's interpretation or meaning-making shifts in documentary filmmaking towards that of the viewer's interpretation and the impact of the sensory experience on the viewer (Petrarcha & Hughes, 2014). The central purpose of a documentary film like *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed* is to work as an aesthetic grammar or agitator for change (Mbasalaki & Matchett, 2020) around anti-immigration sentiments, discrimination, and violence, centring the lived experiences of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo. Mbasalaki and Matchett (2020) argue that creative activism does not necessarily evoke the kind of mass rally activism that registers when one thinks of protest action globally but rather incites conversations, discussions, dialogues, debates that stimulate people to consider their role in the situation and how they can actuate it from a point of personal observation to personal action. Indeed, documentary films provide the opportunity for viewers to engage in their own meaning-making—co-meaning-making. The ability of film to capture authentic voices and lived experiences is a powerful tool in a democracy and for public engagement. It can be used to bring to light existing inequalities and, in the case of *Kudzingwa Kumusha: Being Un/Homed*, the experiences of inclusion/exclusion of forced migrants from Zimbabwe and Congo as a counter-narrative to prevailing discourses.

This documentary's storytelling serves as a scholarly intervention into what it means to be a migrant, particularly in relation to the concepts of home and borders. The co-production process itself was a form of collaborative knowledge-making, where the forced migrants, alongside the producer (P. K. Mbasalaki, first author), filmmaker, and crew (sound and lighting), shaped both the filming space and narrative. Filming in Mbasalaki's living space rather than a studio transformed the environment into a co-produced and co-created set, carefully negotiated and choreographed to reflect the intimate and complex nature of the stories being told. Through this process, the participants were not passive subjects but active co-creators, deeply influencing the film's exploration of what home means to them—whether it's a place of comfort, estrangement, or contradiction. Their stories revealed the tensions of feeling at home while simultaneously being surveilled, unwanted, or un-homed, and they illuminated the emotional and physical tolls of anti-immigration violence, such as Operation Dudula. The documentary also delved into the importance of community and kinship for migrants navigating hostile environments. The editing phase continued this collaborative co-production spirit, with drafts shared between the filmmaker, the producer, and a small group of forced migrant participants who provided input and suggestions on the rough cuts. Their involvement extended to the very title of the documentary, *Kuzdingwa Kumusha: On Being Un/Homed*, which they themselves devised. This process illustrates how the documentary not only captures but also co-produces new understandings of home, borders, and migrant identity, making it a profound scholarly contribution to migration studies.

As alluded to earlier, the story told in the film centers on various iterations of home, belonging, community, and kinship. However, these themes are complicated by the presence of borders—both physical and symbolic—as an integral variable in shaping migrant experiences. One of the dominant expressions repeatedly voiced by the participants was: "We are all Africans here." This reflects a sense of bewilderment at the nationalized and ethnicized forms of Othering that African (forced) migrants encounter. This phrase, on the surface, suggests a borderless relationality, perhaps invoking a Pan-African ideal of unity across the continent. Yet, it also brings into sharp focus the harsh reality of how borders function—not just as geopolitical boundaries but as markers of exclusion, surveillance, and control. In this context, borders become both literal and figurative spaces of tension, simultaneously defining and undermining the concept of home for migrants. The phrase "we are all Africans here" takes on a deeper meaning when juxtaposed with the lived experiences of those who, despite a shared continental identity, are alienated through national borders and subjected to border techniques that surveil, restrict, and fragment their lives. The film thus grapples with the contradictions of Pan-African ideals against the backdrop of modern-day border regimes, questioning whether home can truly exist in a space where borders continually dictate who belongs and who is excluded. In doing so, the documentary becomes not only a narrative about home and belonging but also a critical analysis of the borders—both real and imagined—that force migrants to navigate complex and often contradictory identities.

The concept of a shared African identity that transcends national boundaries remains an aspirational ideal. Borders, both physical and symbolic, present persistent challenges that undermine this ideal, revealing that despite its noble aspirations, Pan-Africanism has struggled to translate its ideological principles into tangible political and social realities in South Africa. While Pan-Africanism featured prominently on South Africa's second post-apartheid president Thabo Mbeki's agenda, particularly through his promotion of the "African Renaissance," its impact has been limited. Mbeki defined the African Renaissance as a call for Africans to define who they are, what they stand for, their visions and hopes, how they act, what programs they adopt, and how they relate to one another, encouraging South Africans to embrace an African identity (Landsberg, 2019). This vision stands in contrast to the restrictive function of borders, which continue to fragment African unity. Borders, as legacies of colonialism, serve as mechanisms of exclusion that force migrants into positions of marginalization, surveillance, and alienation. The phrase "we are all Africans here" offers a powerful counterpoint, invoking a sense of collective identity that transcends these artificial divisions, and reflecting the possibility of African reunification. Yet, the enduring presence of these borders complicates such efforts, as they not only delineate physical spaces but also perpetuate socio-political boundaries that deny migrants a sense of belonging and unity. To move closer to the Pan-African ideal, it is essential to address the legacy of these colonial borders that continue to divide the continent. These boundaries, often arbitrary and fictitious, impede the full realization of a connected and transcendent African identity by restricting the movement and rights of African migrants, thereby perpetuating a fragmented vision of what it means to belong on the continent.

The second phrase that emerged during the filming conversations was: "But this is my home now, where should I go?" Responding to the phrase "go back home," the question challenges the assumption that home is a fixed, singular location, emphasizing instead, the fluid and constructed nature of home as a place where they have built a life, regardless of external pressures to return to a presumed origin. Indeed, many of the forced migrants who participated in the documentary film had been living in South Africa for several years, and various aspects of South Africa had become home or contributed to the feeling of home, such as being able to provide for

family/children financially—this was a great marker, unlike the economic difficulties in Zimbabwe. Being able to send remittances to Zimbabwe and providing for those “back home” brought with it an element of home in South Africa from a financial sense.

Queer and trans forced migrants being able to find refuge in a country that is legally friendly to queer bodies foregrounded another aspect of home. For instance, one participant speaks honestly and candidly about how South Africa offered an opportunity for him to come home into his male body as a transman who transitioned while in South Africa, something that would never have been possible in Zimbabwe. All these point to a co-meaning making of notions of home in South Africa. Yet, even though there were strong emotions and connections of various versions of home in South Africa, there was also an overwhelming feeling of being unwanted there, and therefore they longed for a “home” back in Zimbabwe or Congo where they belonged. Yet again, these contradicting or paradoxical emotions relating to home are in line with Brah’s (2005, p. 193) arguments when she posits that “it is quite possible to feel at home in a place and, yet, the experience of social exclusions may inhibit public proclamations of the place as home.” Indeed, there was an overwhelming expression of the longing for home—Zimbabwe or Congo, especially in relation to anxieties related to the proximity of violence—being violated or having experienced violence in South Africa. The freedom to move without being a target for violence or death brought about nostalgic feelings of missing home.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through this co-production and co-creative research, in terms of knowledge production, it is clear that home is a complex feeling or space that is multi-dimensional and not tied to only one fixed place, space, or country as nationalistic discourses will have one believe. Home is indeed not fixed but malleable and ever-changing regardless of the “fixity” of certain objects such as houses. It is also clear that a combination of factors—for instance, citizenship without content for South Africans, an inherited form of nationalism that is rooted in white supremacy from the apartheid government (National Party), as well as borders rooted in colonialism that have lacerated Pan-Africanism and drive a faux ideal of nationalism targeted towards fellow Africans through various modes of surveillance. The actual enactment of violence is deployed through “bodily border” techniques of the “encountering stranger” and is as severe as death. Perhaps this is an inherited version of bodily border techniques that black South Africans themselves have experienced before, during the apartheid regime built on white supremacy.

This article therefore underscores the vital role of border theory and documentary filmmaking in the co-production of knowledge on forced migration. By integrating border theory, the research illuminates how borders, both physical and symbolic, are deployed as tools of exclusion, particularly against African migrants in South Africa. The concept of the “bodily border” reveals how these borders are inscribed on the bodies of migrants, differentiating them as the Other and subjecting them to violence and exclusion. Documentary filmmaking, as a method of co-production, offers a powerful medium for capturing and conveying the complex lived experiences of forced migrants. This participatory approach not only amplifies the voices of those most affected but also challenges traditional power dynamics in knowledge production. The documentary film serves as an aesthetic grammar that destabilizes the singular notion of home or country, questioning the fixed, nationalist ideas that are often imposed on migrants. By presenting diverse narratives of home, belonging, and identity, the film disrupts the reductive and dehumanizing images of forced African migrants as mere outsiders.

Moreover, the co-production of the documentary film offered a "safe space" not only to air out anxieties for forced African migrants in South Africa but also a space of co-meaning making on various notions of home. In the hope that this, when watched by South Africans, works as an aesthetic grammar that destabilises the single notion of home/country or the (forced) African migrant Other. This documentary film was recently featured in the Khayelitsha Raw Film Festival on 4th August 2024. One of the film participants attended and had powerful things to say about her voice being heard. Especially in the wake of the recent xenophobic/Afrophobic attacks directed towards Miss South Africa contestant Chidimma Adetshina.

Lastly, this article offers a sobering critique of the legacy of colonialism on the ideal of Pan-Africanism. While Pan-Africanism aspires to unite African peoples across artificial colonial borders, the enduring impact of these borders continues to hinder the realization of this ideal. The nationalist and exclusionary discourses that target African migrants in South Africa are stark reminders of how colonial legacies still shape the geopolitical and social landscape. Through the co-production of knowledge and the critical engagement with border theory and film, this article calls for a reimagining of Pan-Africanism—one that transcends colonial borders and embraces a more inclusive and integrated vision of Africa.

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Conflict of Interests

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