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Seeking Refuge in South Africa: Navigating Power, Healing, and Co-Creation in Body-Mapping Processes

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Abstract

This article refines the participatory body-mapping process drawing insights from a preparatory workshop in South Africa, the country of origin of the method. Widely used in trauma-informed research, body-mapping as an art-based method enables participants to express embodied experiences through non-verbal storytelling. Responding to critiques of its cultural appropriation by the Global North, we engaged with scholars working with marginalised populations and/or in challenging research contexts to reflect on this participatory methodology. This article details their insights on how to conduct body-mapping research as a contextually grounded tool and sensitive to marginalised populations. The article reconstitutes body-mapping as a relational and dynamic method where bodies, spaces, and emotions interact to co-create knowledge. This process reshapes power dynamics between researchers and participants, transforming body-mapping into a collective space for healing and resistance. Rooted in the South African context, the research honours the method's origins while actively exploring ethical ways to expand its potential for future use in forced migration research.

Keywords

arts-based research; asylum-seeking young girls; body mapping; co-creation; migration; participatory art-based research; power dynamics

1. Introduction

Arts-based research (ABR) is a transformative approach in the social sciences, utilising diverse art forms such as poetry, narratives, music, performance, dance, and visual arts to produce, analyse, and disseminate

knowledge (Leavy, 2017). Among these, visual arts-based methods—particularly photography and drawing—have gained prominence in fields like health, psychology, and recently policy (Lenette, 2019; Orchard, 2017). This rise reflects an epistemological shift that values embodied expression and sensory experience, challenging positivist frameworks by emphasising subjective, emotional, and embodied forms of knowledge (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; de Jager et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017). Moreover, credible visual evidence uniquely captures the material and visible dimensions of social issues, making it invaluable for understanding silent or marginalised experiences within their specific physical and cultural contexts (Lenette, 2019). Furthermore, by centering participants' own cultural narratives, visual arts-based methods prevent the imposition of external interpretations, allowing individuals to share their lived experiences authentically. Especially effective with children and adolescents, these methods transcend language barriers and create inclusive, expressive environments (de Jager et al., 2016).

Rooted in participatory feminist and postcolonial thought, body-mapping is one such art-based method that materializes bodies that are usually relegated to the margins of society. Being silenced does not only apply to women but also to other social groups, such as migrants (de Jager et al., 2016). Through life-size drawings enhanced with colours, symbols, and images, body-mapping allows marginalised populations to document and share experiences that may be hidden by the dominant narratives (Gastaldo et al., 2012; Naidu, 2018). As an asset-based, decolonizing approach, body-mapping combines visual arts, therapeutic practice, and community development to empower participants to reclaim their narratives, shifting focus from perceived deficits to inherent strengths (Jama et al., 2024). This aligns with feminist scholarship, which asserts that research is inherently political and advocates for participant agency and the co-creation of knowledge, actively challenging androcentric biases of objective and researcher-led traditional methodologies (Praag, 2021). By blurring the line between researcher and participant, body-mapping democratizes the research process, creating a space for shared decision-making on data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Praag, 2021).

With its focus on visual and embodied expression, body-mapping resists the limitations of text-based methodologies, making the body a central site of meaning-making. By facilitating personal storytelling as activism, it empowers participants—especially those often stigmatized—to redefine themselves outside dominant, oppressive narratives, thereby advancing social justice and emancipatory goals (Orchard, 2017). Grounded in feminist ideals of transparency and reflexivity, body-mapping not only helps participants reclaim their narratives as co-producers but also fosters critical awareness of social issues impacting their lives, promoting a sense of agency and activism that transcends research setting. Orchard (2017) argues that despite its transformative potential, body-mapping can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuate Eurocentrism if applied without cultural sensitivity and a deep contextual learning, often leading to emotional distress for participants. This critique highlights the importance of ensuring that body-mapping is adapted thoughtfully to meet the unique needs and social realities of different populations (Boydell, 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Addressing these limitations calls for a reflexive approach that prioritizes local expertise, ensuring that the methodology is emotionally safe and contextually grounded.

In response to Orchard's critique, this article focuses on a workshop conducted in South Africa, the country of origin of the body-mapping tool, with field experts experienced in working with refugees, asylum seekers, and other vulnerable populations. Guided by Nunn's (2022) recommendation to integrate professional and experiential expertise before conducting research with marginalised populations, the workshop aimed to refine body-mapping practices to enhance emotional safety by learning from the lived realities and

cultural dynamics of the Global South. By collaborating with South African experts, we sought to address Orchard's concerns around cultural appropriation while aligning with Smith's (2021) call for decolonizing methodologies by respecting and engaging *with* the knowledge systems of the communities where these methods were developed.

Santos's (2015) concept of "abyssal thinking" offers a further deeper critique of Eurocentric thought in academic research. According to Santos, Western academia often operates along an "abyssal line," dividing "legitimate" knowledge from that deemed invisible or irrelevant (Santos, 2015, p. 118). While Orchard's critique emphasises the need for careful implementation to avoid appropriation, aligning with Santos' (2018) thought, we contend that the Western "protective" stance of overseeing and safeguarding non-Western methodologies often perpetuates the very Eurocentric dominance it seeks to critique. Rather than positioning Eurocentric ethical frameworks as safeguards of non-Western methods, Santos (2018) advocates for grounding research practices in epistemologies of the Global South, fostering genuine intercultural dialogue. As Santos (2015, p. 134) argues: "The rise of the appropriation/violence ordering inside the regulation/emancipation ordering can only be tackled if we situate our epistemological perspective on the social experience of the other side of the line." The South African workshop exemplifies this commitment by centering Global South expertise in shaping a participatory, inclusive body-mapping methodology that traverses power dynamics.

Insights from this preparatory workshop were foundational in shaping our primary research on the experiences of asylum-seeking young girls (from the Global South) with the asylum policy of the UK—an often-overlooked group facing intersecting challenges related to gender, age, and race (Lenette, 2021). The workshop was meant to explore how body-mapping process could be made emotionally safe for marginalised populations, addressing power dynamics and fostering an environment where participants' bodies could speak with relational resistance (Barad, 2007). This article thus highlights how our South African workshop informs a de-centered, participatory body-mapping methodology, underscoring the importance of continuous participant feedback and collaborative design. Such an approach not only bridges the gap between theory and practice but also aligns with broader goals of emancipatory and transformative research, fostering a more inclusive and contextually grounded research process that goes beyond Eurocentric thought with intercultural knowledge exchange.

This article is structured to first discuss the significance of body-mapping in embodied research, followed by elaboration on critique of body-mapping. It then outlines the methodological approach, including the authors' positionality and the biographies of the participating experts. The subsequent section presents the findings from the South African workshop, detailing how expert input was utilised to refine the body-mapping methodology. Finally, the article concludes by integrating the workshop outcomes with broader theoretical and ethical insights, emphasising the critical role of contextually informed, participatory research practices in addressing the complexities of trauma experienced by marginalised groups.

2. Body-Mapping: Transcending Binaries, Weaving Innovation, and Guarding Ethical Threads

Body-mapping serves as both compass and canvas, capturing unspoken trauma while navigating intersections of innovation and ethics. By transcending binaries—mind and body, personal and social—it

engages participants as co-creators of knowledge, weaving personal stories with broader cultural contexts. The following sections explore body-mapping as a relational tool that empowers and challenges, balancing innovation with honoring its roots and safeguarding ethical practice.

2.1. Tracing the Unspoken: Body-Mapping in Embodied Research

Embodied inquiry holds a pivotal role in social science, emphasising the ontological and epistemological centrality of the body in human experience. As Thanem and Knights (2019, p. 26) stress, "we cannot exist and act without our bodies, and we cannot imagine how we might do research without them." Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) assertion that "we do not have bodies, we are our bodies" underscores that bodies are not mere vessels; they are fundamental to how we perceive, interpret, and navigate the world. Traditional methodologies often reinforce a dualistic hierarchy, positioning the body as subordinate to the rational mind (Foucault & Deleuze, 1980). This approach leads to research conducted *about* the body rather than *with* it, thereby stripping the body of its agency (Thanem & Knights, 2019). Such disembodied approaches obscure the body's active role in shaping, resisting, and subverting dominant narratives. Embracing embodied inquiry thus restores the body's potential for agentic resistance, allowing it to serve as both the site and source of knowledge in research. Body-mapping, as an embodied methodology, directly addresses this gap.

Challenging Cartesian dualism in Western epistemology, body-mapping adopts a feminist participatory "mindbody" approach, treating mind and body as unified and socio-culturally influenced (Klein & Milner, 2019). Positioned as both a site and source of knowledge, body-mapping allows participants to visually explore layers of silent trauma, a critical advantage in forced migration research where verbal articulation may retraumatize participants (Murray et al., 2023). Unlike other visual arts-based methods such as photovoice or photography—which demand training, thoughtful camera use, and an emphasis on technically "successful" snapshots—body-mapping removes these cognitive and technical burdens. Participants engage directly with their bodies as canvases, allowing them to explore their narratives at their own pace, thereby fostering a more natural and personal engagement with embodied memory and expression (Murray et al., 2023).

Body-mapping enables participants to explore their lived histories, subjective meanings, and socio-cultural contexts directly on their bodies, constructing a holistic self-narrative that weaves together physical, emotional, and social dimensions (Orchard, 2017). Many participants in trauma research report an increased awareness of the richness of their life stories, resulting in a "thickening" of narratives that foster self-worth, power, and agency (de Jager et al., 2016). This reclamation of agency among survivors underscores body-mapping's alignment with an asset-based approach, where individuals draw strength from their histories rather than viewing them as deficits (Jama et al., 2024).

Unlike other visual methods, body-mapping brings to light the fluid, socially and historically inscribed nature of the body. It recognises that bodies—and their perceptions—are not fixed but are continually reshaped by shifting physical, social, and historical contexts. Rather than capturing isolated, neutral "snapshots," body-mapping allows for a layered exploration of these dynamic influences, offering a richer, contextually embedded perspective (de Jager et al., 2016). Furthermore, through data triangulation across visual, verbal, and symbolic dimensions, body-mapping supports rich, multi-layered interpretations rarely achievable in

traditional arts-based methods (Klein & Milner, 2019). This depth and flexibility make body-mapping not only a rich data source but also a therapeutic tool that supports healing, agency, and resilience.

Recognising that bodies are socially and historically material-discursive, our approach to body-mapping further aligns with feminist new materialist thought to emphasise how identities and experiences are dynamically shaped through both material and symbolic processes (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2013). Barad's concept of intra-action, which suggests that entities do not pre-exist in relation to their relationships but emerge through them, aligns with our body-mapping's approach of capturing identities as dynamically shaped within socio-cultural, physical, and historical contexts. This perspective honors the intersectional and situated knowledge of participants, particularly marginalised groups such as women of colour, allowing them to express their identities and experiences in ways that continuously resist homogenizing or universalizing narratives (Mohanty, 1988). By inviting participants to actively engage with the material-discursive aspects of their identities on their own bodies, body-mapping respects each participant's embodied knowledge, affirming socio-cultural and historical dimensions embedded within their identity (de Jager et al., 2016).

Integrating these methodological advantages with theoretical foundations of embodiment, it becomes evident that body-mapping offers a robust framework for exploring and understanding the embodied experiences of trauma survivors. However, as Gramsci (2020) and Adorno (2001) caution, cultural practices—including arts-based methods—are not entirely apolitical. Positioned within broader socio-political structures, body-mapping, while valuable in generating both ontological and epistemological insights, risks appropriation or exploitation if not applied with cultural sensitivity and integrity.

2.2. Body-Mapping Application Paradox: "Innovation" Over "Integrity and Collaboration"?

The popularity of body-mapping has grown significantly since its early use by MacCormack and Draper in 1987 in Jamaica, exploring female sexuality (de Jager et al., 2016). Later developed in South Africa as a participatory tool to reduce stigma around HIV/AIDS, body-mapping is celebrated for revealing hidden, embodied experiences and bridging cultural divides (Vacchelli, 2018). However, Orchard (2017) cautions that its "integrity" is frequently compromised when Global North researchers prioritize "innovation" over the method's participatory and contextual foundations. Specifically, Orchard identifies three core areas where integrity is compromised: (a) a lack of grounding in body-mapping's South African context, (b) the disregard for therapeutic practices essential for participant safety, and (c) inadequate preparation for managing the emotional intensity of body-mapping workshops.

Firstly, the lack of grounding in the method's South African origins reveals a deeper issue of cultural insensitivity. Many studies, including D'souza et al. (2021) on Jamaica with children, Collings et al. (2022) with mothers experiencing child custody loss, and Barnes et al. (2024) on children's experiences of racism, adopt body-mapping without acknowledging its origins in South Africa. By neglecting the method's cultural roots, these studies exemplify a form of Eurocentrism that appropriates the visual elements of body-mapping reinforcing the North–South power divide (de Jager et al., 2016). The second critical concern is the neglect of therapeutic practices, which are fundamental to the method's integrity. Solomon's (2007) facilitator guide, developed over months of reflective workshops, includes structured support elements like periodic check-ins and reflective breaks to manage intense emotions body-mapping can evoke. Yet, as Orchard (2017) observes, repeated misuse of these practices led Solomon to remove her guide from public

access after witnessing facilitators neglect therapeutic elements essential to participant well-being. In one documented instance, facilitators abandoned participants mid-workshop, leading to significant emotional distress (Orchard, 2017).

Finally, Orchard (2017) emphasises that proper preparation and contextual understanding are essential for body-mapping workshops, given the intense emotions they can evoke. She recounts an instance where a researcher, captivated by body-mapping's exotic appeal, applied the method with little knowledge of its origins or engagement with participants. This lack of contextual awareness reduces body-mapping from a therapeutic, collaborative practice to an aesthetic tool, reinforcing power dynamics by imposing a top-down approach that disregards participants' lived experiences. Such selective use of body-mapping's visual appeal, without acknowledging its origins, leaves its creators feeling "everywhere being seen but never being heard" (Ziff & Rao, 1997, p. 88). This disregard not only jeopardizes participant safety but also violates the ethical responsibility to "know as much as possible about the lives of the people they work with" (Orchard, 2017, p. 7), transforming body-mapping from a tool of empowerment into a visually appealing yet ethically compromised practice.

In our South African workshop, we directly address these ethical concerns by engaging in what Santos (2015) terms a "ecology of knowledges"—an approach that values diverse epistemologies equally and challenges the tendency to treat non-Western knowledge as secondary or peripheral. Through this intercultural exchange, South African experts contributed culturally specific insights that advocated for body-mapping's therapeutic and participatory foundations, reinforcing the method's original social justice objectives. As Thanem and Knights (2019) argue, ethical embodied scholarship requires ongoing learning and relational engagement, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through meaningful interactions (Barad, 2007; Braidotti & Bignall, 2018; Santos, 2015). By "becoming-with" South African experts in this co-creative process, our workshop countered Eurocentric tendencies of appropriation, illustrating how body-mapping could be applied in a culturally sensitive, empowering manner. This collaborative approach demonstrates the importance of addressing power dynamics in research, ensuring that body-mapping fosters relational resistance and participant empowerment rather than reinforcing hierarchical structures.

3. Approach

Our preparatory body-mapping workshop formed part of a larger participatory workshop series held in 2022 at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Sponsored by the Flemish Interuniversity Council for North–South knowledge exchange, this week-long series was aimed at deepening the understanding and application of participatory research methods in challenging contexts. The overarching objectives of the series were threefold: (a) to develop approaches for working respectfully with individuals facing complex life circumstances, (b) provide insights for conducting fieldwork in volatile or high-risk environments, and (c) equip researchers to positionally situate themselves, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. These objectives have been further elaborated in our booklet *Doing Fieldwork in Challenging Circumstances: Summoning Participatory Methods* (Hannes et al., 2023).

Our one-day participatory body-mapping workshop, held in the birthplace of the method served as a pilot for our ongoing research on the experiences of asylum-seeking young girls from the Global South as they navigate restrictive asylum policies. Situated in South Africa, this workshop sought to address the critique that body-mapping has often been culturally misapplied by Global North scholars, inadvertently reinforcing

power dynamics rather than dismantling them (Orchard, 2017). By cultivating a relational and embodied space, we aimed to realign body-mapping with its participatory roots, exploring its potential to foster collaborative and culturally sensitive research practices.

Invitations for our participatory workshop were extended to researchers experienced in various arts-based methodologies, including digital storytelling, collaborative writing, body-mapping, narrative inquiry, and photovoice. Ten researchers participated, each with extensive experience in working with vulnerable populations, bringing valuable insights into adapting arts-based methods for marginalised settings. Conducting this workshop in South Africa allowed us to foster a relational space for intercultural exchange, where we could listen *to* and learn *from* those on the "other side of the line," as Santos (2015) suggests. This approach aligns with co-creative methodologies that emphasise integrating theoretical insights with lived experiences in research design (Davis et al., 2022; Nunn, 2022), reinforcing body-mapping's participatory roots and affirming its potential as a culturally responsive tool.

Our research team brings substantial experience with marginalised communities globally, including trauma-affected groups facing violence, displacement, and socio-economic challenges. We have collectively engaged with diverse populations, such as young people in urban slums, survivors of gender-based violence, refugees, HIV+ communities, and indigenous groups in South Africa. Key contributors include research psychologists and epidemiologists from South Africa, who focus on relational ontologies in community-based research, working extensively with HIV+ populations and children; a social geographer with expertise in sense of place; a community-based child psychologist specializing in decolonial, African-centered approaches to childhood trauma and violence; and a social/cultural anthropologist utilising participatory arts-based methods in low-income communities in sub-Saharan Africa. These team members, though primarily placed in South Africa, have actively engaged in cross-cultural knowledge exchanges between Global North and South, bringing nuanced insights that strengthen our commitment to culturally responsive, participatory practices. Central to our work is a commitment to fostering community engagement, social connectedness, and spaces that ensure the emotional and psychological safety of participants.

Positionality is central to co-creative and participatory research, as it shapes how knowledge is produced and shared (Bilgen et al., 2021). Our positionality, as three women researchers—two from the Global South—has greatly influenced our approach. With direct and indirect experiences of migration, we brought nuanced perspectives on marginalisation, migration, and asylum to this workshop. The lead author, hailing from Pakistan, has worked extensively with Afghan refugees in slum communities. The third author, born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa, offers unique "South African expertise," shaped by her personal history of migration where her father was a male asylum-seeking boy who fled civil war in Africa. She was born in Johannesburg and spent 18 years there in education until her first year of medical school in 1999. Despite being currently positioned in the Global North, she sometimes resists the functionality and instrumentality of academic publications, reflecting the tension between her South African roots and her academic positioning. The second author, based in Belgium, has been actively involved with international student communities navigating the complexities of migration, marginalisation, and refugeehood. Although these shared experiences provide a sense of solidarity, we recognise, as Nash (2019) argues, that solidarity is not equivalent to "sisterhood." Instead, it is a dynamic coalition that acknowledges differences, allowing for a more intersectional and collaborative approach to research. This understanding of solidarity was critical in

our engagement with field experts from both Global North and South, enabling us to navigate the varying experiences and perspectives we encountered.

Despite these connections to migration and displacement, we remained mindful of our outsider status in certain ways. Indigenous research methodologies, as Smith (2021) emphasises, challenge simplistic notions of insider/outsider roles, acknowledging that even those who belong to a community must remain reflexive about their position. We acknowledge that while we shared experiences of migration, we did not share the specific experiences of forced migration, which faces systemic barriers such as legal limbo, statelessness, and restricted movements. Moreover, although we have strong connections in the Global South, and like the scholars from South Africa we have extensively worked with participatory research approaches, our positions within Global North institutions as "geographies of knowledge production" (Carozzi & Horner, 2023, p. 46) afford us a privilege we recognise and are aware of.

This realisation required us to continually negotiate our positionality within the research process, ensuring that we approached the participants of our research as co-researchers, recognising their agency and expertise in navigating their lived realities. To address this insider-outsider dynamic, we deliberately created what we termed the "third sphere," a conceptual space that allowed for a more fluid exchange of roles and knowledge. As described by Dierckx et al. (2019), this sphere occupies the intermediary space between traditional participant and researcher roles, where expertise is shared rather than owned. In this space, participants and researchers, regardless of their Global North or South affiliations, engaged on equal footing, dissolving rigid distinctions and enabling a genuine knowledge exchange (Hannes et al., 2023). In this third space, South African participants led workshops too where we joined as learners, further dismantling researcher-subject boundaries. This was not only an exploration of positionality but also an evolving site for co-creation and shared power dynamics, challenging hierarchical structures. The third sphere became an experimental ground for disrupting traditional power imbalances, supporting a reflexive, equitable, and relational approach to participatory research.

The mutual expertise in creating body-maps together did not only allow us to learn from the South African scholars to refine the body-mapping process but also revealed how we navigated power dynamics and emotional depths as a collective. Through this collaborative engagement, our bodies became active and relational acts of resistance (de Andrade et al., 2020), speaking to the complexities of vulnerability, empowerment, and solidarity. This shared journey laid the groundwork for the themes that emerged, highlighting how co-creative methodologies allow participants to not only share their experiences but also shape the research process itself.

4. Emerging Insights From the South African Workshop

In this section, we present findings from the South African workshop with field experts, which contributed to refining the body-mapping process in alignment with Orchard's (2017) critique of Eurocentric applications. The workshop centered on addressing Orchard's identified concerns: cultivating ethical practices to ensure participant safety, navigating power dynamics inherent in the research process, and managing the emotional complexities that body-mapping evokes in trauma research. To guide these discussions, an initial version of the facilitator's guide was developed and tested with the experts (Figure 1). This prototype served as a foundational tool for gathering feedback on how body-mapping could be adapted to address the unique

General Introduction before beginning	Introduction to body mapping
Body Tracing	Exercise 1: Body & posture Tracing
	Exercise 2: Draw where you research? (region, area, field, environment)
Personal Slogan and Symbol	Exercise 3a: Draw a personal symbol and assing a slogan to who you presently are as a researcher
	Exercise 3b: Draw a symbol and assing a slogan to who you WERE are as a researcher
Draw you future?	Exercise 3c: Creating personal symbol and slogan of who you 'aspire' to be as a researcher in future
	Exercise 4: Marks on or under the skin which you feel while working in the field with marginalised communities
	Exercise 5: Draw a symbol or a figure that demonstrates your support system during/after the field work

Figure 1. Prototype facilitator's guide.

needs of young girls with lived experiences of forced migration. By creating a physical draft of the guide, researchers were able to effectively communicate and test their concepts, identify challenges, and propose solutions (Dam & Siang, 2021). While the prototype was initially designed for the South African workshop, the feedback provided crucial insights into refining the process—particularly in handling emotional responses and negotiating power dynamics. The following sections explore how these insights informed the methodology, addressing key challenges and potential solutions to create a safe, meaningful, and participatory research environment.

4.1. Navigating the Body-Mapping Process

During the South African workshop, experts collectively identified key insights and challenges in participatory ABR. These findings, which emerged directly from their experiences in the field, offer practical guidance on navigating the complexities of space, time, and artistic expression, helping to foster safe and meaningful engagement in future body-mapping research.

4.1.1. Spaces Holding Memories: Artistic Expression in Vulnerable Communities

Navigating relational space effectively is crucial in participatory research, especially when engaging with vulnerable populations. Relational space refers to dynamic, interactive environments where participants and researchers co-create meaning, shaped by social, emotional, and physical contexts. The workshop highlighted significant challenges posed by conducting research in impoverished, resource-scarce environments. One participant who has extensively worked with HIV+ populations and children vividly described these conditions:

> Small houses…inhabited by multiple people…surrounded by garbage…working with communities who have so little access to resources is an incredibly humbling experience.

These conditions not only highlight the challenging living environments the participants endure but also deeply affect their ability to fully engage in a meaningful and empowering art-making process. In such contexts, relational space becomes even more critical, as it demands heightened sensitivity to the participants' lived realities and the creation of a safe, trusting environment where they feel empowered to express themselves.

Experts at the workshop emphasised the importance of considering both the physical and emotional contexts of research settings. Reflecting on the impact of these settings, one expert with expertise in social geography noted:

> I wonder how the space in which visual art is conducted has an impact on the results of research. For me, being in this room brings back a lot of bitter-sweet memories from my student days.

This underscores the complex role that environments play in shaping research experiences, aligning with scholarly discussions on the necessity of crafting safe spaces that foster meaningful participant engagement. Recent debates in the literature, such as those presented by Praag (2021), highlight how the creation of "safe spaces" in participatory research is essential for enabling genuine co-creation and engagement. Ensuring that research environments are safe, comfortable, and familiar to participants not only supports their emotional well-being but also enhances the validity and depth of their creative expressions. To implement this, field experts recommended forming partnerships with organisations that are already trusted by the participants to help identify locations that minimize potential trauma and maximize accessibility in forced migration research.

4.1.2. Time as a Canvas: Expanding Engagement in Body-mapping Research

During the workshop, the challenge of balancing meaningful engagement in creative processes with the stringent time constraints typical of community-based research projects emerged as a central concern. A visual artist with expertise in various arts-based methods highlighted the contrast between the more flexible timelines in art school and the strict deadlines in community research settings:

> Coming from art school, we used to have a lot less time constraints. In research, the findings just have to be the findings once the time allowed by community organizations is up. I have shown this with an hourglass on my map [see Figure 2] with a knife next to it.

This metaphor not only illustrates the tension between the need for expansive creative exploration but also the restrictive timelines imposed by traditional research frameworks, posing particular challenges for participants in trauma research who require significant time to process their emotions and experiences through art.

Leavy (2017) emphasises that the therapeutic potential of arts-based methods critically relies on providing participants ample space to engage deeply and reflectively—a process frequently compromised by conventional research deadlines. Boydell (2020) reinforces this perspective, noting that trauma-informed research settings must offer extensive opportunities for participants to explore their personal histories and complex emotions, which are essential components of the healing process. In response to these identified constraints, experts at the workshop proposed extending the duration of specific creative tasks, such as the

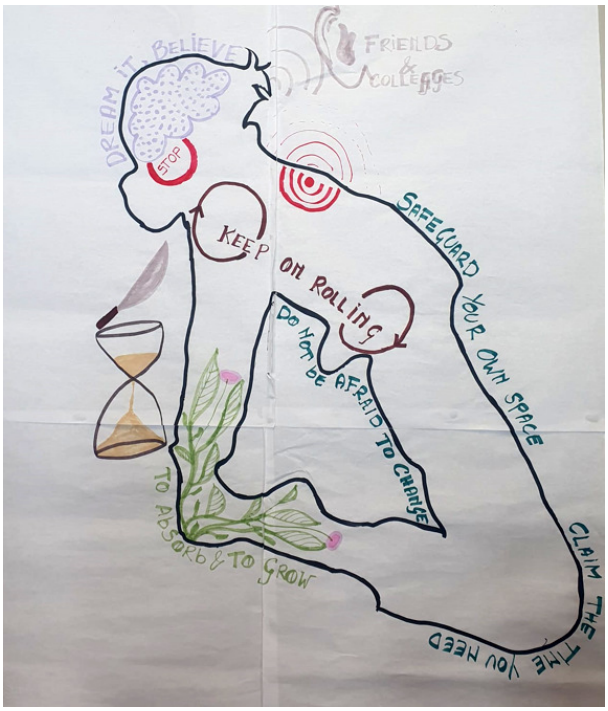

Figure 2. Hour-glass with knife on body-map.

initial outlining phase, to allow participants to revisit and refine their work in multiple sessions. This approach not only accommodates the varying paces at which individuals engage with the material but also underscores the importance of the *process* over the *product*. As one expert with experience in community-based participatory research highlighted:

> In co-creative research, it's more about the *process* than the end *product*.

Prioritizing the quality and depth of the creative process over strict adherence to predefined schedules enables researchers to cultivate a supportive and ethically sound environment, enhancing both the authenticity and therapeutic value of the research outcomes.

4.1.3. Cultivating Voices: Fostering Artistic-Expression in Participatory Research

Another challenge that emerged during the workshop was participants' reluctance to engage in artistic self-expression, a sentiment prevalent among marginalised groups particularly in forced migration research (Lenette, 2019). This hesitation was vividly expressed by a participant:

> I would not call myself an artist; however, I may be convinced to call myself a social artist.

This shift from reluctance to tentative acceptance marks a critical narrative change, reflecting common barriers of self-doubt due to a lack of confidence in expressive skills. Reframing the artistic process as a vehicle for personal and emotional expression rather than a demonstration of technical skill can significantly lower the threshold for engagement. This approach helps participants move beyond their self-doubt and recognise their potential as creators, fostering a deeper connection with the art-making process (Leavy,

2017). Such a supportive environment is essential, as it encourages a transformative experience through art, enabling participants to see and express themselves in new and empowering ways.

To address these initial hesitations, experts at the workshop advocated for a more inclusive and nurturing approach during the early stages of artistic activities specifically in trauma-informed research. The research psychologist and epistemologist from South Africa suggested:

> My experiences of similar work tell me to have informal meetings with them before the body-mapping workshops, [get them to] familiarize [with] you, draw with them…remember it is a relational co-creative process. You are becoming together…the connectedness in you as co-researchers, as humans.

By actively engaging alongside participants, facilitators can shift the focus from "correctness" to "connectedness," fostering a more inclusive and supportive art-making environment. This method not only encourages greater freedom of engagement but also underscores the therapeutic value of the process. Through collaborative interactions, facilitators create a space where art serves as a powerful tool for healing and self-expression, thus enhancing the depth and effectiveness of the participatory research experience. The emphasis on nurturing relationships within research settings enriches the transformative potential of art-based participatory research, making it a profound agent of change and personal growth.

4.2. Navigating Power Dynamics

In participatory research, power dynamics are constantly being negotiated. The South African workshop highlighted how power can be shared through collaborative agency, relational trust, and an openness to co-creation. These reflections challenge traditional hierarchies in research, emphasising that power is not static but fluid, evolving with the interactions between researchers and participants.

4.2.1. Reframing Power: Collaborative Agency in Participatory Research

Western academia, according to several experts, has a tendency to over-vulnerablise participants, especially if they are from the Global South, disabled, or young, and erase their agency and strength (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). This significant bias in Western research sets the stage for a broader discussion on the relational nature of power and agency in research settings. A community-based child psychologist, specialised in decolonial, African-centred approaches underscored this:

> It is problematic to assume, before even being in the field, that some have power and others don't. They come with their lived experiences as we have.

This perspective challenges the conventional view of power as static and unidirectional, emphasising instead its fluid and negotiated nature in the research process. Further enriching this discussion, another expert with expertise in visual arts-based methods highlighted the transformative potential of reciprocal trust in participatory and collaborative research:

> If you gift trust to someone else, they give back power…they give "you" power. I experience this often with my community work.

This reciprocal empowerment is pivotal in redefining traditional researcher-participant dynamics. By valuing participants' contributions and involving them as co-creators, research processes become more equitable, particularly for groups like asylum-seekers who often confront disempowerment by the policy narrative. McIntyre and Neuhaus (2021) support this view, suggesting that such collaborative practices can effectively democratize research, allowing participants to significantly influence the research's direction and assert their agency. The discourse on power dynamics extends to the global context, where Kwon et al. (2018) critique the colonial underpinnings of research conducted by Global North institutions. These institutions tend to impose their frameworks of unidirectional power narrative on marginalised/vulnerable communities, perpetuating a form of academic colonialism. The South African workshop serves as a counterpoint to this trend, emphasising the importance of local expertise and lived experiences in shaping research methodologies that genuinely reflect the needs and realities of "underrepresented" communities. This approach not only challenges the traditional hierarchies of knowledge production but also fosters a research environment where *power* is more evenly distributed and *agency* is actively cultivated, echoing Barad (2007) who contends that agency emerges from the dynamic interplay of relationality.

4.2.2. Renegotiating Power: Cultivating Openness and Reciprocity in Participatory Research

Renegotiating power dynamics in participatory research involves redefining spatial and interpersonal dynamics, essential when engaging with vulnerable and marginalised populations. The South African workshop demonstrated this through its deliberate spatial setup, designed to encourage free movement and interaction. Workshops were equipped with creatively stimulating environments, allowing free movement throughout—tables lined with paper, accessible colourful pens, and markers—fostering a dynamic and participatory atmosphere. This configuration reflects a cultural openness, as one South African psychologist with a focus on relational ontologies in community-based research noted:

> The local South African context and our social norms allow for free movement within and across personal spaces, perhaps not normalized in the Global North.

This practice of embracing "South-ness" fosters a welcoming space where incoming researchers are seen as partners in mutual learning rather than "the other," reflecting Santos' (2015) concept of "ecologies of knowledge." This approach encourages intercultural exchange that transcends abyssal divides in knowledge hierarchies and epistemologies. Experts further highlighted the importance of viewing consent as a dynamic, ongoing process, essential for maintaining an inclusive atmosphere. As emphasised in the workshop recommendations: "Ensure open free space where ongoing consent is allowed and participants can leave at any time." This underscores the necessity of adapting consent as interactions deepen and evolve. By ensuring workshop spaces remain open and activities consensual, we respected participants' autonomy and changing preferences. This approach, highlighted by Carozzi and Horner (2023), acknowledges the fluidity of participant engagement and the ethical need to maintain consent throughout the research lifecycle.

Addressing the ethics of compensation, the workshop participants actively challenged funding inequities prevalent in marginalisation and forced migration research. An expert emphasised that compensation extends beyond monetary value, reflecting respect and recognition of participants' contributions:

> What is in for them is essential, not as an indebtedness but in their sense of community. We provided food packs to our HIV-surviving participants.

This aligns with Lenette's (2019) perspective that participants, as knowledge holders, must be compensated for their collaborative involvement, directly addressing the power imbalances often inherent in research partnerships. Knowledge holders volunteer their time, their expertise, emotions, and their knowledge; while those hired for the research, or leading the research based in universities are funded for undertaking research.

Throughout the workshop, the unintentional yet meaningful relationships that emerged underscored a deep commitment to "South-ness"—an embodied immersion in shared geographical, cultural, and experiential bond that fosters genuine connections. These relationships, though not formally labelled, were enriched by mutual respect and a collective experience of solidarity and support, challenging the rigid, often colonial, research structures.

4.2.3. Power of Social Connectedness: Beyond Western Epistemic Control

Western academic geographies often practice epistemic control through enforcing "right" ways of knowing and doing research, leading to the erasure of alternative epistemologies—a phenomenon Santos (2018) terms as epistemicide. Despite promises under EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) policies to encourage creative methods like body-mapping, the ethical frameworks that underpin such policies remain entrenched in binaries, which separate the researcher from the participant and uphold a detached, objective research model (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As noted by Manning (2018), this approach not only undermines the relational, embodied nature of creative research but does violence to the very bodies it claims to protect. Detached, observer-centric research continues to be celebrated, while the close relationships fostered through co-creative methods like body-mapping are either dismissed or viewed with suspicion, still tethered to the ethics of positivism.

During a body-mapping workshop, when concerns about power dynamics arose, a community-based visual arts researcher contended:

> While working in the slum community, I formed close friendships. I did not intend it, but it was inevitable. Trust dissolved the power dynamics itself.

This dissolving of boundaries echoed across the workshop as Global North and South participants traced their bodies together, illustrating social connectedness through holding hands in their drawings (Figures 3 and 4). Such relationality defied the Western ethics rigid notions of separation between researcher and researched (Carozzi & Horner, 2023), instead embracing Barad's (2007) notion of entangled relationalities, where humans are deeply interwoven in their social being. Recognising this emergence, another scholar advised:

> Allow 30–45 minutes for participants to form connections [at] the start and meet informally before the activity to build collaborative bonds.

In this way, the field becomes a space of shared knowledge and collaboration, highlighting that the pre-set ethical frameworks cannot resolve the complexities of relational, co-creative research without being immersed in the field itself. Opportunities that emerge in the field need to be celebrated rather than sticking with the risk-averse narrative of Western ways of doing research.

Figure 3. Image holding hands.

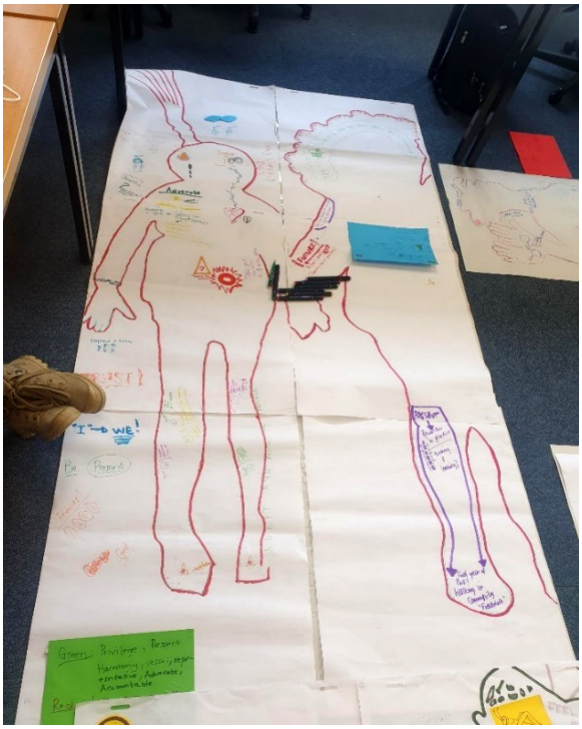

Figure 4. Body-map holding hands.

4.3. Navigating Emotions and Trauma

Navigating emotions and trauma in participatory embodied research requires careful attention to the emotional and psychological complexities participants bring into the process. The insights gathered from the South African workshop illustrate how trauma-sensitive methods can foster emotional expression, bodily autonomy, and collective healing, while maintaining ethical sensitivity throughout.

4.3.1. Exploring Emotional Depths: Trauma, Healing, and Ethical Sensitivity in Embodied Research

When working with vulnerable populations such as forced migrants, psychological and emotional safety are central concerns in arts-based research, which often brings emotions to the surface (Murray et al., 2023). Throughout the South African workshop, both experts and participants acknowledged the emotional toll such work entails, highlighting the critical need for approaches that prioritize emotional well-being. One participant working in social and spatial urban transformation poignantly shared:

> The circumstances in which my participants find themselves leave me feeling heavy and broken-hearted.

This illustrates how researchers themselves can be deeply impacted by the emotional weight carried by the participants. Research in trauma settings requires intentionally designed collaborative spaces where emotions can be processed non-verbally, using therapeutic methods such as body-mapping. Artistic expression, such as body-mapping, offers a meaningful medium for trauma survivors to externalize and process their pain. In the workshop, the same participant placed a symbolic "plaster" with words saying "let it go" on their body-map (Figure 5), representing emotional healing (Boydell, 2020).

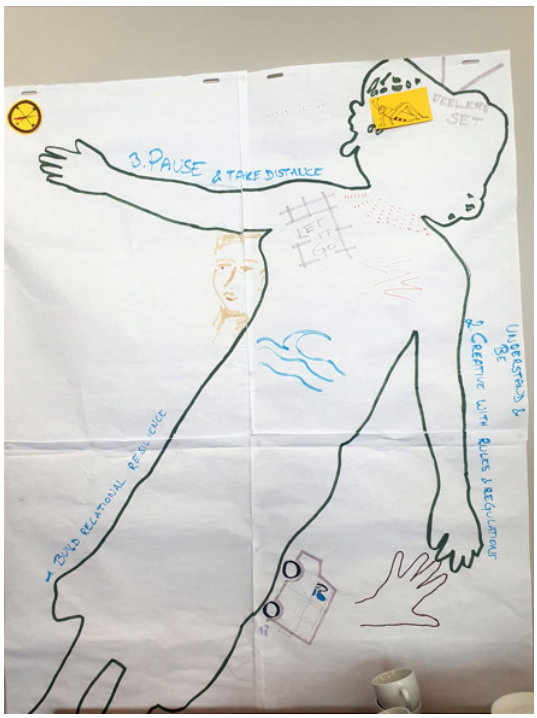

Figure 5. Plaster on Heart with words reading "let it go."

This act illustrates the potential of body-mapping to allow participants to confront and express their trauma in a safe and controlled manner, staying true to its inception rooted in art-based therapy (Gastaldo et al., 2012). However, navigating these emotional complexities requires ongoing ethical sensitivity. Participants may experience conflicting emotions—grappling with both joy and sadness—necessitating flexible research environments that allow for breaks, emotional support, and responsiveness to emotional overload. As a child psychologist working with arts-based methods with children mentioned:

> Holding joy at the same time as sadness is honestly a lot so heavy.

Another participant emphasised the importance of building trust and familiarity, recommending:

> Make sure that the organisational leads or people these young women are familiar with are present in the field while you conduct body-maps. This has been a useful strategy in past research.

These emotionally attuned adjustments are crucial in ensuring emotional safety while maintaining the therapeutic value of the arts-based methodology.

4.3.2. Unveiling Trauma: Navigating Bodily Autonomy in Embodied Research

Gender related issues that may inflict trauma also came to foreground during the South African workshop. One expert expressed apprehension about certain practices during body-mapping:

> Some of the vulnerable gendered populations have been through various ordeals including assault. They may not be comfortable with peers drawing around their body even if they are of similar gender.

This reflection highlights the emotional and psychological risks inherent in activities that involve body tracing, especially for participants who have experienced trauma related to violations of bodily autonomy. Literature on participatory research echoes these concerns, suggesting that for trauma survivors, body-mapping must be approached with extreme sensitivity (Lenette, 2021). Offering participants the choice to draw their own outlines, rather than having others trace around their bodies, can help restore a sense of bodily autonomy, a vital aspect of healing for those who have experienced gender-based violence. By making such adjustments, researchers create a safer, more empowering environment that respects the bodily integrity of participants and avoids retraumatizing them.

A significant concern also arose around the "marks on the body" exercise, which asked participants to draw marks under their skin (Figure 1). While initially designed as a reflective tool for facilitators (Gastaldo et al., 2012), the suggestion to use this question in trauma-sensitive research raised concerns. One expert noted:

> Asking this question from vulnerable [people] who have been through various types of traumas can cause emotional and psychological distress.

This highlights the need for cautious adaptation of such exercises, ensuring that they do not retraumatize participants. The workshop's recommendation to remove this particular exercise demonstrates the care needed when engaging in embodied research, especially with gendered trauma survivors.

4.3.3. Collective Healing: Cultivating Emotional Safety in Participatory Group Settings

Social embodiment research indicates that physical and environmental cues—such as smells, brightness, warmth, connections, and body postures—shape our moral and social judgments, as well as how we engage with others (Lakens, 2014). During the South African workshop, participants reflected on how group settings contributed to their sense of emotional safety. In this workshop, participants observed that their choice of standing together around their body-maps to co-analyse fostered an atmosphere of collective engagement, where input from others helped deepen individual self-reflection. One participant remarked:

> Though the body-maps capture individual embodied meaning, the collective input on my map helped me better display my emotions.

The group co-analysis method, which emerged through participant negotiation, facilitated emotional expression by creating a space where participants could share their experiences and receive validation from peers. This highlights the relational nature of fieldwork, where ethics are not fixed but emerge from specific choices in context (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As Barad (2007) argues, researchers are not radical outsiders to the field; they are entangled in the process alongside participants, who serve as co-researchers in participatory research. This collaborative process helped cultivate trust—both in oneself and others—essential for emotional safety. Another participant, working with visual arts demonstrated how collective input fosters openness. This transformed the body-maps from individual tools into a collective process of healing and empowerment. As one participant put it:

> I am an introvert, but hearing others share their emotional experiences has enabled me to share my own.

Murray et al. (2023) emphasise that the co-analysis of body-maps, though scarcely documented, fosters safety, ownership, and community by allowing participants to connect, affirm, and validate shared experiences. This collaborative process embodies the idea that together we perform and produce research which helps us exploit our potential and constantly become (Boundas, 2006). Through these relational interactions, participants naturally cultivate solidarity, finding solace and strength in shared vulnerabilities. This recognition of common struggles not only deepens engagement but also highlights the therapeutic impact of collective artistic expression in participatory research settings.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Building on Thanem and Knights' (2019) critique of privileging discourse *about* the body over embodied experiences *with* the body, in our preparatory workshop, body-mapping became more than a method imposed on participants; it became a relational process, where both participants and researchers collaboratively created knowledge by taking "refuge" in the tool's country of origin. This engagement allowed for a deeper understanding of how emotions and power relations are continuously renegotiated and reshaped within the research space. Learning from South African experts provided critical insights into navigating marginalised settings with sensitivity and adaptability, positioning us not as detached researchers but as active participants in the co-creation of knowledge (Nunn, 2022). In this way, our body-mapping workshop emerged as an "intra-vention" rather than a mere intervention (Lupton & Leahy, 2021).

Barad's (2007) concept of "intra-action" underscores how bodies, environments, and emotions co-create meaning through mutual entanglement. Building on this, our body-mapping workshop emerged as an "intra-vention," where identities and insights unfolded dynamically within the participatory process rather than being pre-defined. Unlike conventional interventions, intra-vention involved mutual co-constitution, allowing participants' identities to evolve through body-mapping itself—some even identifying as "social artists" during the process. This approach was distinctly material-discursive, as the material aspects of the body, art, and environment interwove with participants' narratives of marginalization, resilience, and support. Embracing temporal fluidity, intra-vention enabled past, present, and future experiences to intra-act, generating a continuously evolving narrative of working with marginalised populations that defied a linear concept of time.

This intra-vention not only refined the body-mapping process but also redefined power dynamics. As participants shared insights, the researcher's role shifted from expert to engaged learner, challenging traditional hierarchies. Reflecting on this shift, I realised—as Puar (2020) suggests—that I became a cyborg rather than a goddess, embracing fluid assemblages over fixed identities. This adaptability blurred the boundaries between researcher and participant, showing that bodies, emotions, and power relations are continuously reshaped. Transcending these boundaries exposed a key gap in ABR: Scholars rarely pilot methodologies or engage in peer debriefing to address their own emotional burdens. This preparatory workshop provided such a space, offering collective reflection, healing, and critical learning alongside participants.

Orchard's (2017) critique of body-mapping's cultural appropriation, particularly the lack of grounding in its South African origins, is insightful but reflects a Global North perspective. In contrast, we contend that to situate a method in the Global South is to learn from its *South-ness*. Our workshop sought to centre body-mapping in its "South-ness," aligning with Santos' (2015) post-abyssal thinking, which challenges the Eurocentric "abyssal line" that marginalises non-Western knowledge. Santos calls for "ecologies of knowledge"—a coexistence of scientific, indigenous, and experiential ways of knowing fostering intercultural dialogue. By situating our workshop in South Africa, we embraced *relationality* over Western notions of *detachment*, positioning knowledge as relational and collectively shaped rather than individually owned or objectified (Carozzi & Horner, 2023). As one South African expert eloquently noted, the local context and social norms in South Africa allow for a fluid movement within and across personal spaces—a freedom less emphasised in the Global North. This dynamic, which embraces openness and relationality, aligns with what Nash (2019) describes as the "letting go" of knowledge—rejecting Western academia's fixation on intellectual ownership. This ethos of shared learning became a lived practice in the workshop, symbolized by body maps featuring "holding hands" (Figures 3 and 4), reflecting connection rather than isolation. Furthermore, embracing "South-ness" meant prioritizing *reciprocity* over *extraction* (Santos, 2015); South African experts advocated for fair compensation, ensuring equity between researchers and participants as co-creators of participatory workshops. This "South-ness" also fostered a *dynamic* research environment, emphasising ongoing consent and participant agency, while challenging *static* and *unidirectional* narratives of vulnerability. Through this relational engagement, we created a shared space that not only exchanged knowledge but transformed it through our collective engagement.

Orchard's (2017) critique emphasised the importance of respecting the therapeutic orientation and contextual grounding of body-mapping. Echoing this, experts in our workshop suggested approaching body-mapping as

a *process* rather than a *product*, where rushing would undermine the method's potential to allow participants' bodies to narrate their own embodied stories. This aligns with Murray et al. (2023) argument, who underscore the need for trauma-sensitive approach where participants can process and express complex emotions at their own pace. The workshop also facilitated an exchange with trauma-informed experts, reinforcing Orchard's (2017, p. 7) call to "know as much as possible about the lives of the people they work with." Field visits to marginalised communities deepened our understanding, with experts recommending similar engagement in forced migration research. Their insistence on thoughtful, contextual adaptation was further highlighted in their advice to remove the "marks under the skin" activity, underscoring the importance of aligning methods with participants' unique lived experiences.

In this collaborative effort to address Orchard's critique and refine the body-mapping process, we further foregrounded its social and collective healing potential—an aspect previously unexplored. The workshop revealed how group co-analysis fostered emotional safety, helping participants to collectively navigate stress and complex emotions. This sense of community, celebrated in the South, emerged as a vital aspect, highlighting the relational therapeutic dimensions of body-mapping that had largely gone unacknowledged. Such relational processes allowed us to expand body-mapping's original conception, inviting new pathways for social embodiment and collective meaning-making. As Nash (2019) contends, honoring knowledge means resisting static ownership and embracing dynamic, co-creative potential. In this sense, to honor is to expand rather than hoard—to experiment and push boundaries. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) echo this, suggesting that experimentation is always "in the making." In our workshop's "third sphere," body-mapping was not about reaching a pre-defined outcome but about letting the process unfold through the active, relational dynamics of the field. This act of *making* became an embodied, social experiment where knowledge was co-created in real time. By pushing the boundaries of body-mapping's possibilities, we honored its origins not by keeping it static, but by letting it evolve into a fluid assemblage of emotions, shared experiences, re-negotiated power dynamics, and social connectedness.

While body-mapping enables participants to resist and redefine the "victim" narrative through active engagement, certain limitations warrant consideration. Egalitarian methods like body-mapping can foster mutual inspiration, as demonstrated by the emergence of social artists from our workshop, though they may also inadvertently lead to comparisons. In other settings, some participants might feel intimidated by others' artwork, which could hinder creativity rather than encourage it (Naidu, 2018). Additionally, while we advocate for treating body-mapping as an unfolding process rather than a fixed product, research contexts with stringent objectives might find this approach challenging, potentially rushing a method that thrives on time-intensive relationality.

Despite these limitations, the concept of social embodiment emerged in the field. This aspect of embodiment, however, remains under-researched in existing literature because it defies the traditional Western epistemological frameworks, which often emphasise binary, detached, and fixed orientations. In contrast, social embodiment is relational, multidirectional, and fluid, reflecting the ongoing interactions between bodies, environments, and communities. The reluctance of Western frameworks to embrace this relational potential of body-mapping has limited its exploration, making our work a necessary intra-vention in expanding the understanding of embodied, co-creative research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The original contributions presented in this research are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Karin Hannes specializes in innovative research methods and models to respond to emerging social challenges, focusing on arts-based, place-based, and multisensory designs, and qualitative evidence synthesis as a meta-review technique. She develops, evaluates, and adapts methods for diverse study contexts. Her transdisciplinary team explores urban development, citizen science, art and design, social-behavioral and educational sciences, public health, community-based practice, and global sustainability, crafting inclusive frameworks to study complex phenomena critically. She also inaugurated and chairs the European Network of Qualitative Inquiry.

Marisa de Andrade is co-director of the Binks Hub, co-director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry, and programme director of MScR Health Humanities and Arts at the University of Edinburgh. Marisa uses "traditional" and (post)-qualitative methodologies to situate arts at the helm of strategic decision-making across multiple sectors including health and social care, employability, education, and social justice. Currently, she is project lead on a UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) £2.5 million transdisciplinary grant called REALITIES in Health Disparities: Researching Evidence-Based Alternatives In Living, Imaginative, Traumatised, Integrated, Embodied Systems.