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Dispatch

A Creative Storytelling Project with Women Migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa

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This dispatch is about an arts-based storytelling project that was undertaken in collaboration with a small group of women from across the African continent now living in Johannesburg, South Africa. The project, entitled, *Mwangaza Mama* (a name chosen by the women in the group) was motivated by a politically-driven desire to open up an intellectual and practical space for women to speak for themselves from multiple and varied standpoints. Over the course of two years, a core group of seven women (plus the two of us) met on a fortnightly basis to share stories of love, loss, and hardship while each of us worked on our individual textile stories. The project culminated in the production of three collective quilts, featuring everyone's textile stories, and each participant wrote one to two narrative stories about a topic or experience that they wanted to share with public audiences. These visual and narrative artefacts, layered in symbols and metaphors, offer insights into the complex lives of women migrants, and the challenges and concerns identified by the participants. The women's words and visuals also present what Chinua Achebe (2013) would call a "balance of stories," meaning that *their* self-representations move beyond (and complicate) stereotypes of vulnerability that dominate representations by others *about* women who cross international borders.

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Introduction

Until recently, little attention was paid to women's experiences of migration (Hiralal & Jinnah, 2018). This exclusion from scholarly literature has been attributed to a male bias in research (Piper, 2008; Posel, 2001), and to the fact that much of the literature has tended to focus on male migration, in particular the contributions of male migrants to capitalist production (Chimbidzikai, 2018).

Over the past decade, feminist scholars across the globe have sought to provide new approaches and theoretical frameworks that challenge traditional theories portraying migrants solely through conventional economistic models (e.g., Kiwanuka, 2018; Palmary, Burman, Chantler & Kiguwa, 2010). Feminists have, for example, highlighted, the ways gender intersects with race, class, and identity to illuminate the vastness of women's experiences in the migration process, including how even women "left behind" are active agents of social change (Hiralal, 2018). While there is no doubt that this growing body of work has made a pivotal contribution to challenging the androcentric bias inherent in research there is also a concern that much of what is circulating still slips into victim/hero, visible/invisible binaries that do not adequately engage with the complexity of migrant women's lives (Kihato, 2013; Oliveira, 2018b;Walker & Vearey 2019).

In South Africa, for example, questions continue to be raised in academic literature and popular discourse about the impact women's migration has on families left behind (Collinson, 2006), their involvement in transactional sex (Giorgio et al., 2016) and sex work (SALRC, 2017), their risks of sexual violence (Mbiyozo, 2019), of becoming victims of trafficking (IOM, 2012), and of contracting HIV (SANAC, 2011). This preoccupation with migrant women's vulnerability is, however, not exclusive to research; the media and development aid discourses also disembody women's complex experiences and agency in their frequent use of the migrant woman as a signifier of distress (Palmary, 2016). Whether in fiction, aid campaigns, or academic writing, migrant women are often depicted as inexperienced, culturally child-like individuals in need of rescue or saving (Oliveira, 2018a; Schuler, 2016). Rarely do we hear the stories of migrant women in their own words and on their own terms.

Although it is important to acknowledge the extreme circumstances that many women face during their journeys across borders, the vulnerabilities that many are exposed to in their new host countries, and the steps that can be taken to reduce their vulnerabilities, we also believe that migrant women need be included in discussions pertaining to their lives and wellbeing (Walker & Oliveira, 2015). Listening to the needs and concerns of women who migrate is important because interventions that focus on agency instead of victimhood allow for a "shared search for meaning, the social recognition and validation of distress, and common effort towards overcoming adversity and reinstating normalcy" (Boyden, 2003, p. 20), all of which are essential to

validating and integrating experience with practice. A research approach that positions migrant women as experts of their own lives can shed light on the social, economic, and political constraints within which women's agency plays out (Kihato, 2007). As Glynis Clacherty (2019) explained during her arts-based research with unaccompanied migrants in South Africa, working in collaboration opens up "a space for activism on their and our part" (p. 2).

In this dispatch,[1] we present a study that was motivated by a politically-driven desire to listen to the multiplicity of migrant women's voices to create what Chinua Achebe (2013) calls "a balance of stories" in relation to war-affected women who cross international borders in search of refuge and a better life. For Achebe, a balance of stories is "…where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts" (Achebe, 2013, p. 2). Our desire to support social justice by shifting the centre from which knowledge is traditionally generated and disseminated coheres ontologically and methodologically with the principles of both feminist and participatory research traditions (Oliveira, 2018a). Although each embodies a distinct set of underlying values, both assert that the exclusion of under-represented population groups in research perpetuates power imbalances (Reid, 2004).This study, then, combined feminist critiques of androcentrism with participatory research's emphasis on inclusion.

Arts-Based Research: A Participatory Approach to Knowledge Making

Rather than indicating a particular set of methods, participatory research (PR) refers to a way of doing research as the result of a collaborative process (Berngold & Thomas, 2012). It is a bottom up approach that seeks to disrupt power hierarchies by increasing participants' agency in the research process (Tuck & Guishard, 2012). Priority is placed on the needs and concerns of participants (Milne, 2016) and there is an attempt to produce knowledge that is relevant for the communities in which research takes place (Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007). Advocates of PR also tend to believe that those who are most "systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and fracture points in unjust social arrangements" (Fine, 2008, p. 215).

One approach to PR is arts-based research: a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across disciplines during all (or some stages) of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and representation (Leavy, 2009). Arts-based research practices draw on visual art, literary writing, music, theatre; representational forms include (but are not limited) to collages, drawings, poems, mapping, film, dance, cinematography, and

[1] Sections of this Dispatch were originally published in the *Mwangaza Mama EBook*: http://www.mahpsa.org/mwangaza-mama-2019/

photography (Lenette, 2019).

Arts-based research and related methodologies, such as image-based research and visual sociology, have developed over the past few decades alongside calls for researchers to engage in critical reflexivity (Mitchell, 2011), to become reflexive activists (Denzin, 2000), and to decolonize knowledge and the process by which we acquire and share it (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Arts-based research approaches offer the potential to allow participants to control the ways they are represented (Kessi, 2018; Langa & Kiguwa, 2016), and the creative artefacts they produce for public audiences can provide new ways of "seeing" population groups that are mostly known through how outsiders perceive and represent them (Kihato, 2010; Schuler & Oliveira, 2018). As Susan Dewey and Tiantian Zheng (2013) explain, collaborative study approaches are a means towards "eliminating, in as much as possible, the patronizing and cruel distinctions between researchers and 'researched'" (p. 4).

Our decision to use an arts-based approach in the project that informs this dispatch was, in some ways, a response to the collective frustrations that we feel about the methods and ethics associated with research seeking to explore and document the lived experiences and needs of migrant groups that are politically, socially, and economically marginalized. Conventional study approaches, such as researcher-driven interviews or surveys, are often inadequate for accessing the intangible aspects of social life, and the range of complex feelings underlying participants' attitudes and experiences (Oliveira, 2016). Not only can the re-telling of life stories validate participants' experiences (Beltrán & Begun, 2014), the process of thinking through making can also offer participants an opportunity to directly and indirectly confront stigma and stereotypes (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2017; Walsh, 2014). When used ethically and responsibly, arts-based research approaches "can facilitate empathetic responses and horizontal channels of learning, both of which are critical to dismantling oppression and advancing social justice" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 537). As Caroline Kihato (2009) explains, an exploration of migrant women's complex lives requires a methodology that not only reveals their subjectivities and "validates how they explain, understand, and represent their situations," but also "foregrounds their words, their self-representations, and signifying practices" (p. 24).

Our ability to tell and listen to stories is a vital part of what makes us human. At their most basic level, stories, whether told in visual, written or oral forms, seek to transmit ideas from one person to another. Stories can help people make sense of the world – life's experiences, dilemmas, hardships – and they can help educate, inspire, and build rapport. Although stories have been told for thousands of years in different styles and formats, and for varying reasons and intentions, there is often a huge amount of power that is given to words. As the second author explains, "The words we have available to us are often inadequate to the task of conveying conflicting identities, the longing for loved ones and places, systematic humiliation, pain,

hopes, and dreams" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 537). Put simply, personal experiences are embodied and can only be partially communicated through written or oral language. "In some ways, it is this 'failure' of language that the arts help bridge" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 537). In all of its various forms and mediums, the arts provide an opportunity for self-reflection, self-expression, and communication between and among creators and audiences (Finley, 2003).

Listening to the Stories of Women Migrants

Mwangaza Mama is the name of the project that informs this paper. It is a creative storytelling project that was undertaken in collaboration with a small group of seven women from across the African continent now living in Johannesburg. All of the women who took part in the project travelled to South Africa as asylum seekers after fleeing their birth countries—Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—as a result of war, persecution, and other forms of extreme human insecurity (Oliveira & Walker, 2019). The project took place from February 2017 to February 2019, and was conducted in collaboration with the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the Sophiatown Community Psychological Services (SCPS), a local non-profit organization that provides various types of assistance to people in the greater Johannesburg area.

Mwangaza Mama also forms part of a larger body of work at the ACMS that is investigating different ways of conceptualizing, undertaking, and disseminating research that explores the lived experiences and needs of marginalized migrant groups through the use of participatory arts-based research approaches (Oliveira & Vearey, 2017a, 2017b). We obtained ethics approval for the study (H16/11/42) from the University of the Witwatersrand Research Ethics Committee (non-medical).

Inspired by previous MoVE[2] (method.visual.explore) work at the ACMS, the main aim of *Mwangaza Mama* was to learn more about migrant women's everyday experiences of Johannesburg by including them in the production of knowledge about the issues that affect them (Oliveira & Walker, 2019). It also builds on our previous experiences of conducting research with diverse populations in South Africa and beyond.

Over the years, each of us has used a wide range of arts-based approaches, alongside other qualitative methods such as ethnography, in our work with marginalized migrant populations (e.g., Oliveira, 2016; Walker & Clacherty, 2014). As feminists, we seek to address oppression inside and outside university spaces, and understand that our identities and subjectivities (albeit

[2] The MoVE (method.visual.explore) project focuses on the development of visual and other involved methodologies to research the lived experiences of migrants in southern Africa. For more information visit: https://www.mahpsa.org/arts-based-research/move/

constantly shifting) are implicated in the research projects that we are involved in. Elsa is an Angola-born, queer woman, now permanent South African resident, who grew up in the USA before moving to Johannesburg in 2010 to undertake postgraduate studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, where she currently works as a researcher after completing a PhD in Migration and Displacement. Since 2010, Elsa has worked with diverse migrant groups in rural and urban areas of South Africa. She has coordinated and facilitated arts-based research projects in partnership with civil society organizations, social movements, artists, and migrant women, men, and transgender persons, including those involved in sex work and sex worker activism. Elsa is the co-founder and co-coordinator of the MoVE project at the ACMS, where she is also exploring how less traditional research approaches might be used to generate more respectful research, engagement, and dissemination *with* rather than *on* those whose lifeworlds and meaningful actions are under investigation (Oliveira, 2019). Rebecca, a British-born woman, now permanent South African resident, has also worked with diverse marginalized populations in South Africa and Sri Lanka, including migrant sex workers, unaccompanied girls crossing borders, and refugee mothers (e.g., Walker 2016a, 2016b; Walker & Oliveira, 2015; Walker, Vearey & Nencel, 2017). Rebecca completed her doctoral studies in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh before moving to South Africa in 2014. She uses both ethnographic and arts-based methods in her research and has collaborated with a number of local and international organizations.

Project Design

> It is important for people to learn about the things we are facing. Maybe then people can learn about the life and not ignore. Maybe if people hear from us things can change for the better. That is our hope. (Kabibi, DRC)[3]

Mwangaza Mama was designed to allow room for different kinds of stories to emerge and be reflected upon, from the stories we keep hidden inside us, to the stories we share with other people, and the stories that are told about us, and the places we live or come from (Oliveira & Walker, 2019). Rather than selecting a specific art medium before beginning the project, we felt that it was important to offer the women in our group an opportunity to experiment with different art forms and expressions.

Building on the idea that migrant women produce knowledge through their lived experiences (Kihato, 2013), our primary motivation was to prioritize

[3] All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms that we chose for the participants. Although all of the women selected the names they wanted to use in their public outputs we felt it was important to change these as an additional step to protecting their anonymity.

the participant's voices and position them as experts of their own lives. This recognition of women's agency and power coupled with our "slow approach" to research offered everyone involved in the project *time* to get to know one another and *time* to build trust and confidence. Validating different forms of knowledge and varying levels of expertise also opened up the intellectual and practical space for the women to help guide the pace and direction of the group.

The Participants

All of the participants who took part in the *Mwangaza Mama* project were over the age of 18 years. With the exception of one, the other six women are mothers, raising children as single parents – the fathers of the children were either killed during conflict in their home countries or simply not around.

Priscilla from the DRC is a mother of two young children; the youngest was born with physical disabilities, and the other has some learning disabilities. Pricilla is a trained nurse but has not been able to work in her field because she has not been able to get her qualifications recognized in South Africa. Kabibi, also from the DRC, has four children ranging from four to 12 years of age. Her youngest child was conceived as the result of a rape, and her husband, a political activist in the DRC, was murdered by an opposing faction. Kabibi is a trained hairdresser. In the DRC, she owned her own beauty salon and in Johannesburg, Kabibi rents a chair at a local hair salon. Agape, originally from Rwanda, is a mother of a five-year old boy and a newborn. She runs a small stall near the Johannesburg train station, where she sells purses, make up, and other accessories. Agape fled to South Africa after a policeman raped her and she became pregnant; she was two years away from completing her university degree in engineering when she was raped. Agape lost her father and siblings in the Rwandan genocide, and to this day has not seen her mother, who remains in Rwanda. Jacqueline, from the DRC, has two young girls and earns money by washing other people's clothes. She came to South Africa for marriage, but her husband and his family were abusive so she decided to leave and raise her children as a single parent. Mary, also from the DRC, has two children who still reside in her birth country. Mary describes herself as a "business woman," earning money through informal trading: buying and selling clothes and various food products in and around the greater Johannesburg area. Hannah, an Angolan-born woman who fled her country of origin 16 years ago, is a mother to an adult son and twin girls. She is a trained seamstress and currently studying to be a care provider for elderly people. Hannah earns money as a domestic worker and does "piece-meal jobs," such as *ad hoc* sewing and cleaning. Pauline, a woman from the DRC, served two roles in the project: she was a participant and translator. Pauline speaks four languages: Lingala, French, Swahili, and English. She was orphaned at a young age and brought up her

younger siblings before they were adopted by a family who attended the same church in the DRC. Pauline is married and lives with her husband in Benoni, a town in the East of Johannesburg.

Despite the fact that all of the Mwangaza Mamas have lived in South Africa for several years, only Priscilla has refugee status. The other six are still waiting for decisions to be made on their asylum applications or are appealing rejections[4].

The project initially began with six women, all of whom were referred to us by Johanna Kistner, Executive Director of the SCPS, and therapist to many of the participants. About eight months into the project, one participant dropped out after she decided to move away from South Africa in the hopes of finding work elsewhere. It was around this time that we invited Hannah, who initially took care of the young children who attended project workshops with their mothers. The other woman we invited to participate was Agape. She had been receiving therapeutic support at the SCPS for a few years and Johanna hoped Agape might benefit from participating in group work with women who also faced similar hardships since fleeing war in their birth countries. For the remaining 18 months of the project, the core group of seven women consistently attended the fortnightly workshops, which were held at one of two SCPS buildings.

Perhaps one of the greatest methodological challenges of the *Mwangaza Mama* project was partnering with an organization that continues to provide much needed psychosocial (and sometimes material) support to the women who participated. Although Johanna identified clients that she believed were mentally and emotionally stable enough to engage in (and benefit from) group work, many had never participated in research prior to their involvement in our project. The women's links (and our links) to Johanna, and the SCPS, naturally, led many to conceptualiaze the project as another space where they could receive therapeutic support . As we discuss in greater detail later, during the early stages of the project many of the women often arrived at the workshops wanting to share intense experiences of personal trauma such as rape or witnessing loved ones murdered. Although these testimonials offered us important insights into the women's past and present circumstances, there were also moments that we wondered if we were out of our depth as researchers.

Unlike positivist approaches to science, where the focus is often on eliminating bias and subjectivity, quantifying constructs into measurable units, and prediction and control, participatory research and feminist research traditions prioritize multiple perspectives, and the assessment of researcher's social positions so that distortion, silencing, and misrepresentation are

[4] South Africa's asylum system is highly dysfunctional, overburdened, and plagued by widespread bribery, corruption, and abuse at Refugee Reception Offices (RROs) (Amit, 2015; Gandar, 2019). Applicants often wait years for a resolution on their application and often have to renew their existing permits regularly in expensive and cumbersome ways (Walker & Vearey, 2019).

(hopefully) less likely to occur (Reid, 2004). A democratic approach to research can, however, make it difficult to determine what constitutes data, as informal and formal relationships between researchers and participants often become "muddled" over time (Mayan & Daum, 2016). Moreover, as O'Neil (2001) explains, arts-based researchers can also risk being seen as "little more than pimps," coming into the field to take before going back to analyze, publish, and build careers "on the back of 'others' they took data from" (p. 50). This is why it is important for researchers, regardless of methodological approach, discipline or location, to nurture an ethic of care, meaning that we "accept responsibility for the protection and fair representation of participants" (Swartz, 2011, p. 49) and continuously interrogate our own neoliberal assumptions and agendas, as well as those of the institutions we work in and partner with (Oliveira, 2018a, 2019). Our research praxis carefully considers (or at least tries to consider) ways of ethically and respectfully "giving back" to those who help us answer our questions.

In qualitative research in general, the researcher is considered the primary instrument of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In feminist and participatory research traditions, however, everyone involved (participants, researchers, collaborating partners) are considered research participants (Oliveira & Vearey, 2017a). Our biographical descriptors, as well as Johanna – three "white" adult women – positioned us as players in historical discrimination and current inequalities in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. Yet, at the same time, many of the participants considered us friends and allies. Navigating these rich and layered relationships was sometimes difficult - not only with the women but also with the SCPS staff. Throughout the study, we attempted to limit evidence of approval or disapproval of what the women told us, and of their opinions and behavior, unless, of course, we felt that their lives or other people's lives were in danger. On reflection, we believe that partnering with the SCPS enhanced, rather than limited our research, but we also recognize the precarious role(s) that we (and our research participants) often found ourselves in as a result of our affiliation with a psychosocial support organization.

Project Workshops

The *Mwangaza Mama* workshops typically took place twice a month on Friday mornings, from 10am to 1pm, while some of the participants' children were in school. During the first few months of the project, we invited the women to engage in various creative storytelling activities, such as multi-media collaging, painting, drawing, narrative writing, and simple body-mapping exercises. Prior to one of the workshops, we decided to buy some textile materials to add to the arsenal of creative resources available to the women. On the day we presented the fabric, thread, and yarn to the

participants, we quickly learned how much they enjoyed working with textiles.

Many grew up embroidering with their mothers, grandmothers, and aunties, and many also made their own clothes, and the clothes of their children. Working with textiles was more familiar to the participants than painting or drawing. This is when the group decided that we would work towards making a collective quilt that could be shared with public audiences. The idea for the quilts was, in many ways, iterative, in that it built on the interests and areas of expertise of the participants, and on a previous quilt project, entitled *Stitching our [HIV] Stories*[5], that Elsa was asked to facilitate with sex worker migrants in Johannesburg.

Each of the seven participants (plus the two of us) created one or two individual quilt pieces, approximately 42 x 59.4cm in size, which were then stitched onto larger pieces of fabric. Some of the women's individual quilt stories were based on work they had begun using other art mediums, such as collage or painting, and others developed the content of their visual stories over the duration of the project. Each woman also wrote one to two narrative stories about a personal experience or topic that she wanted to share with public audiences.

Telling Stories Through Art Forms

The name of the project was selected by the women about halfway through our time together. "Mwangaza" is kiSwahili for "light," but some also described it as meaning "joy", "love" and "caring". Although the women speak various languages, kiSwahili is a common language for all of them; kiSwahili is either their mother tongue, one of various languages that is spoken in their countries of origin, or it a language that the women learned during their journeys to South Africa. Although most of the participants are mothers, they told us that the word "mama" is a term of respect that is often used in South Africa and other parts of the continent to refer to a woman, whether she is a parent or not. As Priscilla explained, "this name shows that our group is supportive of one another, and all women in the world" (September, 2017).

[5] For more information see: https://www.mahpsa.org/stitching-our-hiv-stories-2016/

Figure 1. Most of the women completed their individual quilt pieces during project workshops, but a few also took them home to work on in their own time (photo: Rebecca Walker)

During project workshops, the women often spoke of their journeys to South Africa and the deep longing they feel for loved ones and places. They described their everyday experiences in Johannesburg and shed light on the

physical, social, and imagined borders they encounter, traverse, and negotiate on a daily basis. Most narrated intense struggles of rejection and abuse, including different forms of indirect and direct structural violence, gender-based violence, xenophobia, and sexism. Many also shared details of the challenges they experience when accessing free public health care treatment, and the difficulties of getting their children a place in school due to xenophobic discrimination, lack of documentation, or not having enough money to pay school fees. These and other experiences blister the surface of what it means to survive and thrive in Johannesburg, a place that is simultaneously hopeful and hostile, caring and brutal (Walker, 2018). Indeed, the Mwangaza Mamas' narratives and artworks clearly reveal that migrant women in Johannesburg often experience their lives in a prism of hyper-visibility and invisibility – a tricky balance between needing to remain visible enough to gain a footing in the city and invisible enough to elude persecution and harassment (Oliveira & Walker, 2019).

Holding Space

Working alongside the women for two years has re-affirmed our commitment to developing an iterative, engaged, reflexive scholarship. Nevertheless, we continue to grapple with how best to conceptualize this type of research practice, including how best to support participants in moments of acute duress. As Ramona Beltrán and Stephanie Begun (2014) explain, the mimetic re-telling of life stories and the process of public witnessing to pain and suffering can be transformative and healing for everyone involved. During the workshops, participants often spoke of the importance of having spaces they can go to receive support and comfort. For many of the participants, the *Mwangaza Mama* project offered them a space where they could share, listen and reflect. As Hannah explained during a group discussion:

> I know that I can talk or not talk when I'm here and it's ok. I even come when I'm feeling sick because I want to be here. I go lie down on the bed over there and someone will bring me tea and biscuits, and check to make sure that I'm ok. It's so nice to have this space—to listen to what other people say while we are busy making quilts. Like this we get power from each other. It's also too important for me to talk when I want because then I can let go and know that I'm not alone (February, 2018).

Figure 2. Arts-based methodologies, such as those used in this project, allow for journeys of self-discovery that are relational and not restricted by the limits of categories or labels (Photo: Elsa Oliveira)

Although the fluidity and openness of the project nurtured a space whereby the women could speak candidly and openly about difficult moments in their lives, there were also times that we struggled to acertain if we were out of our depth in our role as researchers. Experiences of internal dissonance were particularly poignant for us when the women shared stories of trauma and intense suffering. According to Indigenous scholar Ramona Beltrán and her colleagues' project at the University of Denver, *Our Stories, Our Medicine*,[6] the process of creating and sharing stories can be a transformational tool for highlighting resiliencies and reclaiming knowledge. Indeed, over the years, one of the things we have come to enjoy most about fieldwork is "the

[6] For more information, see https://socialwork.du.edu/research/project/our-stories-our-medicinearchive

opportunity to learn by listening, and the possibility of making a difference through active witnessing" (Oliveira, 2019, p. 524). As the research developed over time, and as our relationships with the women deepened, we noticed that the group conversations seemed to pivot from intense experiences of struggle and hardship to discussions pertaining to the social, political, and economic realities impacting their (and our) everyday lives. We also learned the critical role that the group played in offering support and comfort in difficult moments. How we collectively responded to trauma by listening emphatically and being present with the narrator is something that we have found reassuring in this and other projects. In other words, we understood (and accepted) that our role as researchers was limited, meaning that we could not offer therapeutic services to the women, but at the same time recognized the importance of holding space for those wanting to participate. Having the guidance of the SCPS, and holding project workshops on the same grounds, allowed us to access immediate support if needed, particularly if somone was experiencing an acute moment of stress and turmoil. Knowing that the women had other spaces they went to for support and assistance, such as church, and having a space where we, as researchers and facilitators, could also go to debrief if we needed, was fundamental to the success and integrity of the *Mwangaza Mama* project.

Talking Back

> We chose to make two quilts instead of one because we have many individual quilt pieces. Black for the background helps our art stand out, and we picked blue African fabric for the border because we are African and because blue represents hope and joy, like the sky and water. Red for the letters of the title because when people read *Mwangaza Mama* we want them to feel the love and strength of this group. (Priscilla, DRC)

The project culminated in the production of three visual artefacts for public audiences: two large quilts that include everyone's individual quilt pieces, and one smaller quilt that features the project name and logo (Walker, 2018). The women's creative works reflect many strands of their lives, from being accused of witchcraft to the difficulties of being poor and raising a child with physical disabilities. Although these creative artefacts make an important contribution to the stories that are told *about* women migrants, equally significant, is the process through which the works were created.

Figure 3. Collective Quilt 1: Mixed-media on fabric, 292 cm x 164 cm (Photo: Quinten Williams)

It's All About Process

It is difficult to put into words the process that goes into a project like *Mwangaza Mama*. Besides logistical preparations and the time spent doing and undoing, making and re-making visual and narrative stories, the process also involved less tangible, more ephemeral aspects (Oliveira & Walker, 2019). The process created both material and immaterial spaces: the anticipation of seeing one another, sharing hugs, and genuinely asking how others in the group were doing. It was huddling around space heaters in winter, the deep sighs of relief, subtle glances, and the anger and frustration that often came and went. It was the Whatsapp messages, the pieces of fabric that covered the workshop floor, and the glitter we found on our clothes many days later. It was the contagious (sometimes uncomfortable) laughter and the moments that we struggled with not knowing what to do or say. Like the quilts, the process of *Mwangaza Mama* was a collage made up of different moments, people, ideas, tensions, and contradictions: *encounters* that were experienced, sometimes all at once, as both silencing and deafening. It was also about knowing that one day the project would end. While this triggered a level of sadness and anxiety around losing something that had become routine and reliable in their largely unpredictable everyday lives, all of the participants understood and accepted this reality. We all believed that our time together had also fostered the development of relationships that would continue beyond the material life of the project.

Figure 4. Collective Quilt 2: Mixed-media on fabric, 283 cm x 160 cm (Photo: Quinten Williams)

Reciprocity

It is impossible to speak of the process of *Mwangaza Mama* without also reflecting on the importance of reciprocity, a practice that has challenged our thinking and politics in unanticipated ways. As Dewey and Zheng (2013) write, "[w]e as researchers have obligations toward individuals who participate in our research and put our obligations into action through practice of reciprocity with those who help us with our research" (p. 52). Sometimes reciprocity took the form of taking calls in the evenings or weekends, speaking with a participant long after a workshop day had ended, and sharing details about our own lived experiences. Other times, reciprocity took the form of providing material assistance, such as buying food and diapers, paying for electricity or helping with emergency medical costs. We are aware that there may be some who find this level of engagement problematic, not only because we are empathetic but also because it raises questions of unequal power dynamics. As other feminists have also argued, however, when working in contexts of extreme inequality and dire poverty, it is neither responsible nor ethical to remain neutral or distant (Schwartz, 2011) While it is true that our financial situations made it possible for us to provide material assistance in moments of acute duress, it is also true that we needed the women to participate in our research. We believe (in line with

feminist researchers and activists) that social science research needs to interrogate what it means to conduct ethical and responsible research in contexts of extreme precarity and uncertainty. It also needs to recognise the importance of reciprocity. Research is not a one-directional activity, but a reciprocal relationship that is built on various power dynamics that cannot be mitigated through static boundaries (Oliveira, 2019). The type of social science research we conducted in *Mwangaza Mama* requires a dynamic understanding of power, and recognition that relationships are built over time.

Dialogical Negotiations

Participatory arts-based methods, such as those used in this project, allow us to see the intersecting social, political, and economic issues that shape and influence everyday life. The women's visual and narrative stories challenge hegemonic discourses of gender and citizenship. They also confront stereotypes of migrants, womanhood, and motherhood (Walker, 2018). It is, however, critical to note that the women produced their public works in a context of wanting to remain outside the gaze of those who might identify them. Similar to other marginalized population groups, all of the women in this project choose to remain anonymous due to fears of retaliation, further abuse or community stigma. Their visual and narrative stories, then, serve as symbols of the dialectical challenges of living in the margins – the ongoing negotiation of wanting to be seen and heard yet also needing certain degrees of invisibility (Kihato, 2013; Palmary et al., 2010; Vearey, 2010).

This tension brings into sharp focus important issues about the politics of representation and the ways representation is implicated in the research process. The women's participation in the *Mwangaza Mama* project influenced what they chose to reveal. Although we recognise that a "sewing project" can be critiqued by some for being sexist, the women choose needlework as a way to move beyond simple stereotypes. For them, quilting and sewing is a skill that helped make difficult, and often multi-layered, political observations visible and visceral. Their textile stories were also grounded in the texts they wrote, which help to ensure that the meanings and interpretations they wanted to share with public audiences are in focus. While these artefacts are powerful and poignant, their visuals and text must, nevertheless, be understood as embedded and entangled in the political, social, and economic contexts of the margins.

Figure 5. There are many dimensions to arts-based research, such as performance, writing, painting, photography, and installation art. While these activities can be used in a variety of ways, the aesthetic approach aims to broaden human understanding. (Photo: Elsa Oliveira)

A few of the participants identified specific people that they wanted to read and engage with their stories. Some of these people are family members who abused or shunned them; others are governmental officials, such as police, church members, and community leaders. Most of the women, however, also stated that they want their stories to be shared "with the world." As Pauline explained during a group discussion:

> [E]ach one of us has some power to change things in our lives, but we don't have the power to change our countries. We want the outside world to learn about us, and we want people who might be facing similar experiences to know they are not alone, and that situations can change. We are also telling these stories because we don't have the power to change political situations so we are pleading with those in positions of power to listen to us and bring about the right changes. (May 2018)

The *Mwangaza Mama* Ebook

> The quilts, our stories, and the book are things we can see when the project ends. We can hold the book in our hands and remember. We can also share it with people who do not believe us. (Priscilla, group discussion, November 2019)

We invite you to engage with the works that the Mwangaza Mamas produced for public audiences by downloading the project Ebook.[7] In addition to participants' thought-provoking narratives and visuals, the free publication also includes reflections by some of our colleagues working in similar areas.

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[7] To view or download a free copy of the *Mwangaza Mama* Ebook please visit https://www.mahpsa.org/mwangaza-mama/

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