

# **Borders and Boundaries in Daily Urban Mobility Practices of Refugees in Cape Town, South Africa**

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# Introduction and Background

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This ethnographic study investigates how the category refugee creates and reinforces particular kinds of boundaries and borders in mobility and survival efforts.

The movement of refugees in the town of Bellville, which makes up part of the Greater Cape Town Metropole

(1) how state and local level barriers impact intra-city refugee movement; and (2) the tactics adopted by refugees to respond to these obstacles, refugees' attempts to find forms of localised protection and locate long-term strategies to survive in these spaces.

Data were collected between 2017 and 2020 in Bellville, Cape Town, as part of my doctoral research on Mobility and Sociality in Africa's Emerging Urban (Before and during the COVID-19)

Why focus on Bellville?

- a) It used to be the heart of white Afrikanerdom, with now a diverse population of South Africans and foreign nationals living there.
- b) The town can be described as “super-diverse”. Most of the individuals who migrate there are in search of greener pastures and opportunities such as shopkeeping, informal trading, and other ad hoc livelihoods.
- c) Bellville was selected because the police see it as a key area where cross-border buses pick up and drop off passengers going to or coming from Durban and Johannesburg through the N2 or the N1 highways.

# Introduction and Background continued

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The majority of participants were from countries experiencing extreme difficulties (war, conflicts, floods, drought, famine)

Identified themselves as asylum-seekers and refugees due to push factors

Many participants choose when and when not to identify as refugees, opting to be "visible" or "invisible"

This research does not categorize participants solely based on national origin, avoiding the adverse tone prevalent in South Africa

South Africa's tendency to categorize people by nation-based identification can carry negative connotations

I deliberately avoid a priori categorization based on state terminology

Participants have multifaceted identities beyond nationality and ethnicity/race

Identities are open-ended and fluid, shaped by relationships and individuality

# Conceptualising Borders and Boundaries

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Borders and boundaries define distinctions between "us" and "them", shaping concepts of inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and identity

Borders specify socio-economic constraints for refugees, hindering access to essential services and legal rights

Boundaries create social and geographical divisions, limiting refugees' access to places, opportunities, and livelihood support

Physical boundaries include natural or man-made infrastructures, hindering spatial accessibility and defining exclusion

Borders and boundaries emerge as responses to refugee mobility, involving infrastructure, technology, law, and culture

Mobility constraints affect refugees' access to space and interactions within the city

Refugees develop pragmatic strategies to navigate restrictive borders and boundaries in South Africa

I focus on roadblocks, documentation and lockdown and curfews a

# Documentation and Roadblocks

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Roadblocks play a crucial role in defining internal boundaries and borders within Cape Town, restricting refugee mobility

Historically used to monitor and control movement in South African cities, with objectives evolving over time

In Cape Town, roadblocks serve as internal borders, targeting mainly foreign nationals, including refugees

Checkpoints in Bellville, a hub for cross-border buses, subject refugees to scrutiny based on religion, language, ethnicity and clothing

Police discretion in roadblocks leads to selective policing, impacting refugees disproportionately

Targeting of Uber drivers and Uber Eats motorcycles by undercover police adds to mobility challenges for refugees

Refugees feel profiled and discriminated against based on their belonging or lack thereof

Adoption of informal roadblocks by local organizations intensifies anti-immigrant sentiments and restricts refugee movements further

Overall, roadblocks and checkpoints hinder refugee mobility and perpetuate barriers to inclusion and belonging

# Lockdown Regulations and Curfew

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COVID-19-induced lockdowns in 2020 significantly impacted refugees' experiences in Bellville

Lockdown measures suspended movement, including that of transport operators, hindering refugees' ability to operate and earn income

Restrictions on movement undermined refugees' coping mechanisms reliant on social networks and mobility

Governments' response packages often excluded refugees due to documentation requirements, exacerbating their vulnerability

Refugees faced difficulties accessing state-provided social relief, healthcare, and livelihood support during the pandemic

Uber drivers were unable to operate after hours, and small businesses in informal markets suffered

Achimwene, a refugee trader, was unable to sell goods due to immobility caused by the lockdown, facing financial difficulties

Lockdowns were perceived as an opportunity to restrict migrant movement, exacerbating suspicion and mistrust within refugee communities

# Negotiating Boundaries and Borders

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Adoption of Nyamnjoh's concepts of "nimble-footedness" and "conviviality" to understand refugee strategies in navigating the city

Nimble-footedness is defined as refugees' ability to quickly and effectively navigate challenges and opportunities in Cape Town

Refugee performances lead to practices where visibility and invisibility become strategies for adaptation

Tactics for contesting, avoiding, or removing borders become central to refugees' lives

Conviviality is described as the formation of critical social networks by accommodating fellow refugees and locals (including the police) for survival

Conviviality entails processes of interaction and cohabitation that make multiculturalism a part of refugees' everyday social life

Integration of nimble-footedness and conviviality enables refugees to create social networks as a safety net to reduce vulnerability

These concepts encourage refugees to experiment with new ways of thinking, connecting, and networking to navigate city life

# Nimble-footedness as a Response

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Lack of legal, social, and economic belonging differentiates refugees' movement in Bellville from locals

Nimble-footedness enables refugees to swiftly navigate challenges and opportunities in Cape Town, including physical, virtual, social, and psychological movement

COVID-19 lockdown measures, including curfews, presented challenges for refugee mobility, leading to innovative responses such as alternative delivery services

Breaking curfew rules becomes a method of making income and surviving for refugee taxi and Uber drivers

Vaya-Vaya: Refers to the swift, meandering movement adopted by refugees despite lockdown regulations, taking risks to subvert the law

Curfew presented both obstacles and opportunities for refugees to earn income, although it increased vulnerability to law enforcement

Detention without deportation is common for refugees without papers, illustrating the precariousness of their situation

Refugees' expertise in navigating borders and boundaries in Bellville highlights their resilience and adaptability in urban living

Responses and strategies are forced upon refugees due to structural issues and often come with real risks and dangers



# Conviviality as a Response

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Conviviality emerges as a reaction to the complex and dynamic encounters refugees face in Bellville, fostering social networks through everyday interactions

Social networks created through conviviality enable refugees to negotiate exclusion and navigate life in Bellville

Friendship networks with police officers facilitate access to vital information, aiding refugees in mitigating risks and adapting to challenges. (illegality doesn't mean immorality)

During the COVID-19 lockdown, convivial networks were crucial for sending remittances and accessing essential services, showcasing mutual trust and cooperation

Convivial gatherings such as social soccer create opportunities for refugees to find employment and support each other socially and economically

Conviviality fosters unity and cohesion across nationality divides, allowing refugees to bypass boundaries and access resources

Conviviality encourages experimentation with new ways of thinking and networking to navigate city life

Conviviality does not imply the absence of conflict but promotes sharing, tolerance, and acceptance among migrants and locals in Bellville

# CONCLUSION

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Despite legal frameworks protecting refugee rights, ambiguity arises in their implementation, exacerbating refugees' challenges

Refugees employ nimble-footedness and conviviality to navigate challenges and form social networks

Nimble-footedness enables refugees to negotiate obstacles effectively, while conviviality fosters social networks across differences

The article proposes a conceptual approach through nimble-footedness and conviviality to engage with urban displacement beyond Cape Town

Refugees' social tactics and networks enable them to negotiate boundaries and borders, fostering mutualism and interdependence

This article has offered important insights into the social engagement and survival of refugees in the everyday contested urban space of Cape Town.

This article has moved away from the binaries that have traditionally been used when exploring movement and migration: locals vs. foreigners, legal vs. illegal, documented vs. undocumented, xenophobic vs. welcoming.

In their place, this article has focussed on people's interactions and relationships to discover how despite the wider social environment being hostile to "foreigners"