



Received: 16 April 2017  
Accepted: 24 August 2017  
First Published: 31 August 2017

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## GEOGRAPHY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Moments of suffering, pain and resilience: Somali refugees' memories of home and journeys to exile

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**Abstract:** This article is based on a collection of stories about victimisation and resilience, told by thirty Somali refugees in Cape Town, South Africa. It seeks to understand how this group of displaced persons remembers their experiences of homelessness in their ancestral home and their tumultuous journeys to exile. Using excerpts from the stories, the article attempts to unearth the multiple meanings of home and flight and connect these to the xenophobic experiences of Somalis residing in Cape Town. From the narratives, Cape Town-based Somali refugees attributed their resilience to xenophobic violence to their experiences of political and social violence in Somalia, their development of survival strategies and their ability to deal with hostilities during their journeys to exile.

**Subjects:** African Studies; Asylum & Immigration Law; International Relations; Security Studies - Pol & Intl Relns; Government; Race & Ethnic Studies; Violent Crime

**Keywords:** Al-Shabaab; migrant journeys; flight; home; memory; Somalia

### 1. Introduction

This article is based on oral accounts of home and exilic journeys told by 30 Somali refugees and asylum seekers residing in Cape Town. It seeks to understand how this group of exiles remember their experiences of homelessness in their ancestral home and their tumultuous journeys to exile, as well as implications for victimisation, resistance and resilience during xenophobic violence in Cape Town. Using excerpts from their stories, I attempt to unearth the multiple meanings of home and

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### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Post-apartheid South Africa is now the home of many Africans who have been forced to leave their countries because of political instability, wars, ethnic conflicts and economic deprivations. Today, many citizens blame Africans for crime and high unemployment and this feeling has resulted in several violent attacks of many Africans. In this article, I describe the experiences of Somalis in Cape Town and how they have managed to survive the violence against their community. I argue that Somalis are targeted because they run successful businesses in different parts of South Africa, including townships. Although, they are prime targets, they have been able to resist the attacks and they continue to do business in very unsafe areas. I also argue that they are resistant to the attacks on Africans because they experienced worst forms of violence in the war-torn Somalia and during their escape to South Africa.

flight and connect these meanings to the social experiences of Somalis living in Cape Town. The article is therefore framed around two key research questions: (1) How do Cape Town-based Somali refugees remember and reconstruct home and journeys to exile? (2) How do their experiences from home and during flight shape their resilience to victimisation during xenophobic violence Cape Town? Here, the notion of resilience is understood as “exposure to significant threat or severe adversity” and as “the achievement of positive adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543).

In this article, I argue that although the modes of violence in Somalia are different from xenophobic violence in South Africa, their survival in a mutilated state like Somalia emboldened and prepared Somali refugees for the hostilities associated with forced migration. From the narratives, the participants tended to attribute their resistance and resilience to xenophobic violence to their experiences of political and social violence in Somalia, the development of survival strategies and their ability to deal with hostilities during their journeys to exile. To explain this argument, firstly I position Somali experiences within a historical and political context, and I provide a theoretical framework for analysing Somali memories of home and journeys to exile. Secondly, I describe the methodological approach and data-collection procedures, and finally I analyse the data and discuss the multiple meanings embedded in Somali memories of home and flight.

## 2. Background and historical context

Somali migrants in South Africa are mostly asylum seekers and refugees and their memories of displacement begin with remembering experiences of homelessness at home and the psychological and physical pain of flight to exile. To write about Somalia is to write about its state of statelessness and the archetypal collapse of a sense of nationhood and ethnic solidarity (Menkhaus, 2004; Sadouni, 2009). It is a grand narrative of tribal disputes, armed conflicts, piracy, and foreign incursions, as well as countless attempts to broker long-lasting peace. The stories told by Somali exiles are often fraught with disconcerting and traumatic images of savagery, banditry, human rights abuses and forced displacement (Bakonyi, 2010; Besteman, 1996; Ibrahim, 2010; Ingiriis, 2016). This conflict-ridden postcolonial state has been chronicled in a corpus of literature, which has for many years focused on Somalia’s unprecedented history of armed insurgency, an “epidemic of piracy, massive displacement, and a humanitarian crisis deemed as the most dangerous in the world” (Menkhaus, 2010, p. 320). Today, Somalia is an exemplar of a mutilated postcolonial state, which “reveals itself in the guise of arbitrariness and absolute power to give death anytime, anywhere, by any means, and for any reason” (Mbembe, 2001, p. 13). The collapse of political and economic institutions in Somalia has led to massive forced displacement and the influx of Somali asylum-seekers into Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa.

In South Africa, the population of Somali forced migrants has grown exponentially since the collapse of apartheid. This is because Somalia remains a politically unstable state, still plagued by armed incursions and piracy, and also because post-apartheid South Africa is seen as the beacon of hope for many Africans (Anderson, 2010; Charman & Piper, 2012; Crush, 2008). Today, there are approximately 20,000 Somalis living as refugees and asylum seekers in Cape Town; many of them have appropriated spaces and set up businesses in several suburbs and townships, despite recurring violent attacks on African migrants.

In Cape Town, as elsewhere in South Africa, Somali migrants are largely focused on business. This community comprises migrants who are willing to risk everything for business success. Somalis’ appropriation of business spaces and their outsmarting of local competitors in peri-urban and urban areas have been attributed to *muthi* or black magic. Consequently, their business tactics have made them prime targets during xenophobic violence, as locals associate their “economic misfortunes like poverty, joblessness, and the consequent inability to marry...” with a spiritual spell cast on them by successful foreign business owners (Hickel, 2014, p. 108). Somalis’ business success is but one of several factors responsible for the violent attacks on Africans by South Africans. For example, the narrative of criminality links South Africa’s high crime statistics to the presence of Africans, while

some political aspirants blame xenophobic violence on an outburst of frustration because of poor delivery of social services (see Hassim, Kupe, & Worby, 2008; Nyamnjoh, 2006). Despite the multiple causes of xenophobic violence and the effects on the livelihoods of Somali refugees, the Somali community still live and operate businesses in volatile localities such as Nyanga, Khayelitsha, and Mitchell's Plain, peri-urban areas in Cape Town.

We cannot possibly understand Somalis' suffering, pain and resilience to victimisation during the xenophobic attacks in South Africa without making sense of their social histories of home, dislocation from family, and their journeys through and to hostile and unfamiliar spaces (see Collyer, 2007; Mwangi, 2012; Sadouni, 2009). In fact, Somalia's history of civil wars and piracy has "structured Somali modes of socialisation into the new South Africa" (Sadouni, 2009, p. 235). The Cape Town-based Somali community is unquestionably a community of forced migrants whose national identities and sense of belonging have been shattered by "destructive insurgency and counter-insurgency campaigns, intensification of Al-Qa'ida activities and counter-terrorism actions by the United States" (Menkhaus, 2010, p. S320). Life for Somali migrants is about learning how to survive in hostile spaces and the violent images during the xenophobic attacks in South Africa are indeed familiar scenes. It is not surprising, then, that they operate businesses in crime-ridden and anti-African spaces dreaded by other African migrants.

### **3. Theorising home, migrant journeys and the construction of memory**

To understand how Somali refugees reconstructed home and journeys to exile, I returned to the theoretical conceptions of home, migrant journeys and the construction of memory. In forced migration studies, these conceptions provide a prism for multidisciplinary debates about the ambivalences of social exclusion and inclusion, displacement and homelessness, as well as refugee identity and feelings of belonging (see BenEzer & Zetter, 2015; Brun, 2001; Collyer, 2010; Kabachnik, Regulska, & Mitchneck, 2010; Malkki, 1995; Mallett, 2004).

The meaning of home and homelessness continues to lend itself to multiple and often contradictory interpretations in studies on human mobility and discipline within different academic disciplines such as sociology, migration studies, refugee studies, and human geography (see Brun, 2001; Mallett, 2004; Massey, 1994; Pineteh, 2010). In some of these studies, the notion of home has been imagined as a physical locality, an imagined space, or simply as an emotional feeling of belonging. Against the backdrop of the discrepant narratives about home, Brun (2001) argues that "becoming a refugee or a displaced person means that one, by some degree of force has to move from one's place of residence to another place" (p. 15). This argument embeds itself in discursive dualities about home, such as "displacement" and "emplacement" "de-territorialisation" and "re-territorialisation", or "rooted" and "uprooted", suggesting that human beings have a natural place of origin and that "home is located in a place" (Douglas, 1991, p. 289; Malkki, 1995). Although this is an essentialist representation of home, for refugees, "home is a site of attachment" emotionally connected to their "sense of identity and lived experiences" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p. 2).

Writing about home in narratives of displacement is not just linking exiles to fixed places, but also about using spatial metaphors to illustrate the continuum between displaced persons' sense of the past and the meanings they attach to their present lives. Here, home is not only a "fixed entity", it is "cultural construction", a site of memory associated with time, family and kinship as well as with "feelings of comfort, ease, intimacy, relaxation and security, and/or oppression, tyranny and persecution" (Brun, 2001, p. 19; Mallett, 2004, p. 84). In this article, I attempt to analyse Somalis' reconstructions of home through these pluralistic meanings of home, because "diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and of attachment".

To become a refugee and/or migrant implies movement from one place to another, a physical and emotional journey through time and space. Understanding the processes and patterns of flight or journey to exile is essential for unlocking the asymmetries of displacement and refugees'

experiences. However, BenEzer and Zetter (2015) lament the lack of research, interest in, and paucity of literature on refugee journeys. They argue that while there has been a plethora of studies on the push and pull factors of human displacement, and the conditions of refugees and migrants in the host countries (see, for example, Nyamnjoh, 2006; Pineteh, 2015), researchers have neglected the fact that “refugee journeys are powerful life-changing events that greatly influence whoever experiences them” (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015, p. 297). Despite the paucity of research, a refugee journey is in fact a nexus between the here and there, the rite of passage, the “lived experience [and] metaphor” which shapes the lives of refugees in the host countries (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015, p. 301; Pineteh, 2005). The flight to exile is therefore a transformative process which helps us to understand “the relations between meaning and coping, social and individual resilience” or “how communal and cultural resources are drawn on to deal with trauma, and the encounter with and adaptation in the new society” (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015, p. 303).

Somali narratives of home and journeys to exile are therefore tropes of memory that can help to shape our understanding of Somali migrants’ resilience to post-apartheid violence and their strategies to belong in spaces where they are not wanted (Gibson, 2011; Hassim et al., 2008; Landau, 2011; Neocosmos, 2010). Given that war, famine and humanitarian crises are prime causes of human displacement in Somalia, I am particularly interested in the reconstruction of memories of these postcolonial pathologies and how they mediate trajectories of xenophobic experiences (Arthur, 2010; Landau & Freemantle, 2010). This includes exploring how Somali migrants remember navigating hostile spaces using varied survival tactics, and how flight experiences provide them with the mental and physical capacities to cope in South Africa (Baynham & De Fina, 2005; Malkki, 1992; Sadouni, 2009).

To make sense of Somali refugees’ reconstructions of memories of home and journey, I turned to the politics of memory. The representation of exile in narratives is in a way a process of recollection of specific moments in the lives of migrants. This process is expected to show some “consistency of consciousness and a sense of continuity between the actions and events of the past, and the experiences of the present...” (King, 2000, p. 2). The narratives evince Somalis’ sense of personal identity and connection to space and time, because the process is a “journey into the memory and imagination that negotiates between old and new, past and present, self and other, safety and danger” (Henderson, 1995, p. 4). The need to remember or forget the past is often triggered by a major rupture in the life of an individual and in the case of Somali migrants, this rupture is the political situation in Somalia or their experiences of flight. The construction of memory therefore involves painful journeys into the past to help us to make sense of the present and the future. When an experience is remembered, “it assumes the form of narrative of the past that charts the trajectory of how one’s self came to be” (Freeman, 1993, p. 33). The meanings of our lives are buried in our memories, and the transformation of memories into narratives gives us a sense of place and time. Here, I examine the contents of Somali memories of home and flight as a process of reinventing the self and as subjective meanings about the generalised conditions of Somalis in post-apartheid South Africa.

The process of remembering enhances the ability to challenge tragic happenings in life while establishing links between members of communities and nations (Eckardt, 1993). In the context of Somali refugees, remembering lived experiences provides a prism through which they make sense of their individual selves, their collective identity, and the events that have shaped their lives. Remembering or forgetting past events is about the way memory is realised, textualised, ruptured or suppressed, buried or avoided (Freeman, 1993; Pineteh, 2005; Thelen, 1989). For example, Labov (2013), Schiffrin, De Fina, and Nylund (2010), Bal (2009) and Jackson (2002) argue that human beings remember and make meaning of their worlds through storytelling. For Jackson (2002, p. 13), the stories that human beings tell about their experiences involve “an ongoing struggle to negotiate, reconcile, balance or mediate ... antithetical potentialities of being”. This implies that human lives are storied lives in that “telling the story of the life we have lived thoroughly and deeply shows us the powerful presence of archetypes, those common elements of being human that others, through time and across all cultures, have also experienced in their lives” (Atkinson, 2011, p. 41). In this article, I

attempt to analyse Somali memories as stories that attach political and social agency to their sense of belonging, and which help us make sense of their social conditions in the new South Africa.

#### 4. Methodological approach and data collection

To collect rich oral accounts of home and journeys to exile from Somali refugees, I adopted a qualitative methodology and narrative study design approach. To glean data from participants, I used an in-depth, semi-structured interview method. The questions were open-ended, which gave each participant unrestricted space to negotiate and connect their personal experiences to broader and collective notions of exile, home and flight (Baynham & De Fina, 2005; Schiffrin et al., 2010). These methodological approaches offered each participant the opportunity to “portray a multi-layered experience which uses facts from outer and inner reality—objective occurrences together with emotional states and attitudes towards what happened and what one did or felt at the event, or when one recounts it” (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015, p. 313). With the aid of a Somali research assistant, a snowballing approach was used to select the 30 participants cited in this article. At the time of the interviews, 25 participants had been granted full refugee status and 5 were still on temporary asylum seeker permits. However, both permits legitimise Somalis’ residence, with explicit rights to study and work in South Africa. All the participants were business owners, small traders, or shop attendants, residing in Bellville and Khayelitsha. They comprised 20 males and 10 females between the ages of 25 and 45 at the time of the interviews, some of whom were members of the Somali Association in Cape Town, and most of them had lived in South Africa for at least three years, between 2006 and 2015. The dominance of males in the sample population is because at the time of this study, the Somali community in Cape Town was predominantly male and they were easily accessible than females. I decided to focus on the period 2006–2015 because it was characterised by an upsurge in violence against African migrants (see Hassim et al., 2008; Neocosmos, 2010).

Although Somali refugees operate businesses in Cape Town, they struggle to communicate fluently in English, thus responding to several questions in English during a 30–60 min interview was a major challenge for most participants. To mitigate this challenge, each participant was given the opportunity to choose their preferred medium of communication, whether Somali or English. However, after a pilot interview conducted in English, I realised that regardless of the preferred language, conducting most of the interviews in their home language would generate richer and more descriptive testimonies. To achieve this, I turned to my Somali research assistant to schedule interview appointments, and to conduct and transcribe the interviews. I bestowed this responsibility on the research assistant because he was not only familiar with the Somali community in Cape Town, but had done similar work with Somalis for several NGOs in Cape Town. As such, he had the relevant experience to conduct and transcribe interviews conducted in Somali or Arabic. To ensure the accuracy of transcription, I solicited the services of a Somali translator, working at the Cape Town Refugee Reception Centre, to randomly verify some of the original interview recordings and transcripts.

Addressing ethical issues is critical to any investigation on refugee experiences because forced migration is a physically and emotionally painful lived experience. Recounting different episodes of this human experience is a journey down memory lane that many refugees are not always willing to undertake (McMichael, 2002; Sirriyeh, 2010). In this case, some of the ethical issues that the research considered were lack of willingness to participate in the study, emotional distress during the interview, permission to be recorded, withdrawal from the study, and confidentiality. To deal with these issues, I obtained ethics clearance to conduct the research from the University’s Ethics Committee and permission from leaders of the Somali Association in Cape Town. During my meeting with the leaders of the association, I explained the purpose and motivation for undertaking this study, and their concerns about ethical issues such as risk, anonymity, participant consent and confidentiality of information. This explanation was accompanied supported with the informed consent form, which explained exactly how each of these issues would be addressed. After the explanation, I was granted unfettered access to participants who were members of the association.

All participants signed an informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the research and the ethical considerations. In this form I requested permission to conduct and audio-record all the interviews and I guaranteed the confidentiality of information as well as the anonymity of the participants. Also, I assured participants that they would not be coerced to answer any question(s) and that they could withdraw from the project at any time. Finally, I offered to refer participants to psychologists who provide free services to refugees and asylum seekers, should they require counselling. The informed consent form was written in English, so to avoid any misunderstandings, my research assistant interpreted and explained all the key points to participants.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I have used pseudonyms to represent the interviewees and no quotations that could reveal any participant's identity have been used in the article. The interviews were arranged during a time and at a place convenient to each participant. Some of the interviews were conducted after business hours and the venues were the participants' business premises, my car, or their homes. Timing of interviews was crucial because we had to make sure that we did not interfere with participants' dinner and/or prayer routines. These were some of the challenges that the research assistant and I had to overcome in order to collect their stories. After each successful interview, the interviewees referred us to other possible participants, and despite difficulties, there was a general willingness to participate in the project. For participants, it was an opportunity to add their voices to the debates about xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa.

The interviews were conducted in the frame of narrative account understood as interconnectedness between the narrator, the story and the meaning associated with the story (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Maree, 2007). With this in mind, each interview took the form of a storytelling event about the participants and how they remembered different events or experiences at home and during their flight to exile (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Maree, 2007). After setting up appointments with possible participants, I met the first participant on 20 July 2015 at 8 pm for a pilot interview in English; this interview lasted for about one hour. The questions were framed around the participant's life before exile and the journey to exile. The interviewee eloquently narrated a logical story about his experiences from home to exile. Although he was not fluent in English, he remembered key events through intermittent code switching with his mother tongue, thus creating an intricate and rich narrative. His story helped me to "fully understand the phenomenon [of memory] by grappling with people's particular representations of otherness" (Hickel, 2014, p. 104). After this interview, the other 29 interviews were conducted from 23 July to 30 September 2015. The entire research data-collection process took approximately three months and it included preliminary consultative meetings, setting up of appointments, and the actual interviews.

In terms of data analysis, I used ATLAS.ti to organise the multi-layered oral accounts collected during the interviews. This computer package assisted in preparing and importing the texts, coding the data and retrieving key themes, and quotations related to the conceptions of home, migrant journeys and memory (Babbie, Mouton, Vorster, & Prozesky, 2001; Maree, 2007). Some of these themes included, but were not limited to, refugees' sense of belonging, survival strategies, resilience, violence, dislocation, family relationships, nostalgia, pain and suffering. After coding, excavating and organising relevant themes and quotes, a conceptual content analysis approach was used to connect themes and theoretical conceptions as well as make meanings from the quotations. Here, I examined how narrative elements and/or linguistic symbols in Somali reconstructions of migratory experiences expose us to some of the implications, assumptions and contested views about home and migrant journeys. Furthermore, I concentrated on the multiple and often discrepant meanings in the narratives and how they provide clues to interrogate connotations and conceptual relationships between migration, space and belonging (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delpont, 2005; Henning et al., 2004).

## **5. Data analysis, interpretations and discussion**

As noted previously, this article is framed around the epistemological conceptions of home and flight, and how Somali refugees remember and make meanings from their exilic conditions, as they

experience xenophobic violence in South Africa. Drawing on studies such as those of BenEzer and Zetter (2015); Collyer (2010) and Mallett (2004), I attempted to intersect Somali refugees' past and present experiences. As a result, the analysis and discussion of data focuses on multiple meaning of these two concepts, as I use Somali experiences of homelessness and their perilous journeys to exile to understand their resistance and resilience to xenophobia. Although Somali refugees' experiences in South Africa are equally painful and traumatic, this article has not addressed this phase of their lives, since it is one of three interrelated articles from a broader project on the xenophobic experiences of Somali refugees in Cape Town. One of these articles concentrates on social conditions in South Africa, but as I have argued, we cannot make sense of Somali refugees' lives in Cape Town without intersecting them with their previous social experiences in Somalia and during flight to exile. To explicate the intersection between Somalis' past and present experiences, this article is bound to refer sporadically to Somalis' resilience and resistance to xenophobic violence in Cape Town.

### **5.1. Nostalgic memories of home and the meaning of belonging**

I began the interview by asking participants about their families and why they decided to flee from Somalia. The intention was to establish how their memories connected their lives at home with a historical context and with their lives in South Africa through different temporal and spatial trajectories (Agnew, 2005; Sadouni, 2009). Somali oral accounts of the experiences of xenophobia began with nostalgic memories of a fractured homeland, the painful dislocation from family, and an imaginary sense of reunion with family. In re-storying episodes of their lives in Somalia, the participants constructed contesting narratives framed around their personal identity, family histories and a political discourse characterised by military incursions. These narratives tended to focus on civil conflicts in Somalia and the contributions of Al-Shabaab insurgents to destabilise the state. One participant testified:

I left Somalia because of the civil war which broke out 1990 and I am looking for a peaceful place to live the way I lived in Somalia. It is a long story. I came to South Africa in 2001 because of the massive killing which was taking place so I decided to leave in order not to become a victim... The situation at that time was quite complex and everywhere there were gun sounds and the citizens were running away. I personally was not willing to die. (Mohammed, male 35 years old)

The narrator paints a graphic image of a Somalia dismembered by indiscriminate killing of civilians, a screenplay of a postcolonial state grappling with the physical and psychological effects of unending political violence. This Somali migrant uses "gun sounds" and the frantic image of people running for their lives to capture the state of lawlessness and insecurity in Somalia that precipitated his departure. It is a narrative about victimisation which seems to fluctuate between "taking stock, bearing witness, shaping new forms of social identification or composing coherent versions of self and social experiences against a turbulent past and uncertain future" (Adams, 2009, p. 161).

Somali narratives of home and a sense of belonging were constructed as a political discourse, illustrating how Al-Shabaab, the Islamic fundamentalist movement that has for years used arbitrary and coercive force as well as tactical violence to terrorise civilians, has legitimised its existence in Somalia. Here, memories of war, murder and forced displacement represent Al-Shabaab as a political ideology which seems to rationalise violence as a symbol of Islam's notion of war as jihad (Bakonyi, 2010; Ibrahim, 2010; Mwangi, 2012).

It was chaos, it was chaos—there was no peace. Al-Shabaab had taken over the country and was forcing us to work with them and if you didn't cooperate with them they would kill you ... they were killing men and children, raping women ... I wasn't ready to join them so I left. I didn't want to become a rebel; I didn't want to carry a gun and to kill other Somalis. I wanted a better, a bright future for myself, so decided to leave to look for a different life in another country... (Abdul, male, 38 years old)

This narrative is constructed against the backdrop of bestial images such as killing and rape, showing the fragility of Somalia, a state incapable of protecting its own citizens. It also uses imagery of the worst lived experiences they remember, to illustrate the morbidity of a state which has not only provided Al-Shabaab with a unique opportunity to legitimise itself while garnering political support from community members, but has also forced many Somalis to seek refuge in other countries. This narrative reconstruction provides an opportunity to reread painful human experiences that connect the past to the present and future, while conveying displaced communities' pre-migration myth that exile is a safe haven, especially in conditions of war (Malkki, 1995; Pineteh, 2005).

This autobiographical narrative about homelessness and Somalis' construction of the self during Al-Shabaab's insurgency recurred prominently in memories about home, providing a multi-layered interpretation of a social history fraught with images of terror, fear and pain, stemming from Al-Shabaab's "destructive power of perpetrating violence on others [and] the pernicious wounds occasioned by inequity [and] injustice" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 51). This is evident in the following narrative:

The central government of Somalia was destroyed and civil war broke out in the country; warlords had destroyed all facilities in our country. They attacked us at our homes, they killed my father, looted all our properties and they threatened to kill me. So I fled because of these terrible things that were happening. When they killed my father and raped my sister, [and] looted our property, I fled away from Kismayo to Mozambique and then to South Africa... (Abdullah, male, 40 years old)

In this excerpt, I began to make sense of Somalis' determination to implant themselves in South Africa, despite the merciless attacks on foreigners stemming from local South African narratives that African migrants are reaping where they did sow. However, with the slew of tragedies that disrupted their lives in Somalia and which continue to dismember this state, Somali refugees have no choice but to be more resilient to xenophobia. The narrative shows how unending political violence and acts of banditry have forcefully displaced Somalis, disrupting their patterns of social existence in their homeland. Again the stark images of rape, killing and looting illustrate a withering Somalia state where violence is used by Al-Shabaab to claim legitimacy (Bakonyi, 2010; Mwangi, 2012). These memories of an atrocious social history do not only justify Somalis' struggle for inclusion in South Africa but they also reconstruct xenophobic violence as a form of *déjà vu* for many Somali migrants.

Although of the modes of violence in Somalia and South Africa are different, participants tended to narrate their experiences of xenophobic violence as a familiar way of life. There is a sense of *déjà vu*, which seems to normalise xenophobia. The following quotations exemplify this:

There is no difference between xenophobia and the war in Somalia. When I was leaving Somalia I thought I would live in peace and be free from all sorts of problems if I reached South Africa. But I just found out this country is not different from Somalia. I am saying this because all the things that made me to escape from Somalia have happened to me here. I have been robbed, my shop has been burnt and I have been shot. It is bad here but this violence is nothing new to many of us. (Faduma, female, 28 years old)

I left Somalia because there was no stable government and the civil war in my country was very bad. Hence I came here to look for a better life. I also left my country because of drought, hunger and lack of stability. I came to live with my fellow African brothers but now South Africa is like my home country. I live in fear every day. (Souleyman, male, 32 years old)

These Somalis' reconstruction of home as resembling post-apartheid South Africa is somewhat exaggerated, but it renders the concept of home as amorphous and fluid. These interviewees see the xenophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa and clan-like military insurgency in Somalia as their normal existential human condition and the two states as spaces of their everyday life. As a result, when I enquired whether they had any plans to return home, many of the participants tended to imagine South Africa as their home away from home. For them home is always a "contested

space characterised by the mystification of a hegemonic system and the struggle to overcome it” (Niemann, 2003, p. 117). Their struggle over spaces and for social inclusion in a xenophobic South Africa is seen as the same spatial contestation in Somalia. This mode of diasporic memory shed light on Somalis’ sense of belonging and the forms of citizenship they claim, especially in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **5.2. *The journeys to exile and the development of survival strategies***

After narrating their experiences of not belonging in their homeland, Somalis’ memory of displacement shifted towards their flight experiences through other volatile spaces. Given the horrific stories of the Al-Shabaab insurgency in Somalia, the journeys were usually unplanned, clandestine and the final destination was not always decided before leaving home. Somalis’ journey to exile “is not simply a space in between [departure and arrive], temporary moment of mobility between ‘normal’ static existences, but a social process that shapes” their lives in exile (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016, p. 247). Their reconstructions of flight experiences therefore illustrate the time/space continuum of refugee journeys because each transit point in the process of flight creates a particular experience worth remembering or forgetting. Interestingly, because Somali journeys were usually unplanned, clandestine and fragmented, their narratives tended to refer to similar means of travel-land and sea. Through these modes of travel, they were able to circumvent formal visa procedures and other border restrictions especially since the final destinations of forced migrants are usually not premeditated before the journey. In this section of the article, the meanings of the narratives are not embedded in the similarities in modes of travel but rather in the travellers’ agency, personal/collective experiences and resilience during perilous journeys through different spaces as they fantasise a safe haven ahead. In this case, refugee journeys are often the interplay of sordid memories of home, the transformative nature of flight and the imaginations of exile, as well as the construction of new transnational identities (Arnone, 2008; Collyer, 2007; Hautaniemi, 2006; Munro, 2006).

Somalis’ narratives of flight were a continuation of episodes of pain and trauma as they escaped from the political insurgency in Somalia in pursuit of a safe haven. Their memories of journeys captured their experience of escaping across different national borders and through hostile spaces, and how both their individual as well as collective consciousness shaped their identities. The journeys did not usually follow a careful pre-migration plan, but were involuntary and clandestine escapes, as evident in the following quotation:

No, I had no idea where I was going. I just wanted to find a country where I could be safe. I didn’t want to go too far from Somalia because my family was still at home. Initially I thought of maybe Tanzania because it is not too far from home. I had never heard of Mozambique or South Africa and I had no information about the two countries but I ended staying in these countries. (Mohammed, male, 40 years old)

Here, the narrator remembers the experience of flight as an unplanned decision triggered by killings and increasing political uncertainty. The notion of time is critical as it is “perceived ... as a measure of the distance between events” such as the frequency of political murders and the flight to exile (Sanadjian, 1995, p. 4). The narration represents home not in characteristic metaphors of kinship and motherland, since it has become an undesirable space. Not knowing the destination implies that forced migration is a perilous adventure that requires extreme courage and conviction. The journey of forced migrants like that of the Somali cited above is a fragmented experience with no predetermined destination. The trajectories of this refugee’s journey are influenced by his agency and ability to deal with challenges encountered on the way. This dangerous and somewhat adventurist behaviour resembles what Charman and Piper (2012) refer to as a unique kind of violent entrepreneurship which has pitted Somalis against locals and led to the eruption of violence in commercial spaces in townships all over South Africa (see also Abdi, 2011; Crush, 2008; Dodson, 2010). Traversing unfamiliar and hostile spaces in the pursuit of safety is a common pattern of diasporisation and Somali journeys to unknown destinations had prepared them for a hostile reception in South African townships.

Escaping from a derelict homeland was remembered as a shared memory which tended to create a sense group identity among Cape Town-based Somali migrants. This was influenced by the unpredictability of their social existence and the fantasies of a safe haven beyond the borders of Somalia (Arnane, 2008; Collyer, 2007; Pineteh, 2005). Although their journeys to exile were undertaken spontaneously, they claimed that they were usually mentally and physically prepared to confront challenges. Through Somali memories of journey, we gain access to a somewhat frightening and a painful ritualistic exercise or rite of passage which has transformed and empowered Somali refugees in Cape Town. One participant remembers his journey:

The journey was very horrible; it was very horrific. You know... it was a situation whereby you didn't even know where you were going—you only knew where you were coming from. I had to leave because others who had crossed the border survived the war. Yes, sometimes you got into trouble with border guards, the migration officials, especially in Somalia but you were still determined to leave. When we were travelling from the border of Kiswayo to Kenya, it was very a risky journey, we were stopped at various border controls, searched and arrested, or we were attacked by the people of Kenya, but we kept going [sic]. (Aamiina, female, 27 years)

This particular interviewee claimed to be a victim of several violent attacks and robberies all connected to xenophobia. During the interview she showed me scars of wounds from the attacks. For her, living in South Africa is as dangerous as living at home, and the arduous journey, in her words, was “nothing I have not seen before”. By comparing her flight experiences to xenophobic violence in South Africa, this participant exposes the mutability in Somalis' social identities, and the complex processes and/or characteristics of forced displacement. Aamiina fashions her personal experiences of flight and xenophobia against the backdrop of a history of political uncertainties, fear and the escapees' survival instincts. This narrative pattern continues in the following excerpts:

The main thing that forced me to leave was insecurity and uncertainty. As a young man, I needed to think about my future life. I left the country because of the war that had been going on for several years. You can imagine, we couldn't go to school; that was the first thing we needed to secure a better future. Secondly, we couldn't do business because we would be risking our lives. So when I saw that I couldn't do anything that made sense, then I decided to leave. When I left, I was ready to face anything on the way because I did not want to come back to Somalia [sic]. (Bashiir, male, 30 years old)

I didn't know where I was going. I just heard about South Africa, but at that time I didn't intend to come to South Africa. I was just looking for a better life, where I could at least live peacefully. When I passed through other countries like Kenya, the people didn't like us and I didn't get what I wanted. I just stayed at the Kenyan border refugee camp for some months and the conditions were very bad, so [I] decided to continue my journey to look for a better life. The worst thing was that we had to travel through the sea [sic] and I had never travelled by sea, but I was ready to take the risk. (Ibraahin, male, 30 years old)

By remembering home against the background of experiences of xenophobia in South Africa, Somali refugees were able to recreate the hopelessness of existence in their homeland. In the above testimonies, the flight to exile is constructed as the pursuit of a good life and the respondents struggle to “maintain a secure sense of their capacities in the face of an unknowable future” (Mar, 2005, p. 366). In addition, the narrative mirrors the dialectical relationship between home and exile storied through contrasting images of fear and hopelessness, and an imaginary good life in an unknown safe haven.

Crossing Somali borders into countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya or Tanzania marked the beginning of a long and tumultuous journey to unknown destinations. In the case of the Somalis I interviewed, this journey has increasingly become a trope of memory which is not only necessary for excavating their exilic experiences, but also for building their sense of collective consciousness in the wake of xenophobic violence (Pineteh, 2005; Steinberg, 2014). As the participants narrated their journeys, they focused on individual and collective tactics for survival—similar tactics plotted during

xenophobic attacks. These stories also capture the difficulties of crossing borders, the hostile receptions in unfamiliar exilic spaces and the generalised social sufferings of a displaced person.

Somalis' journeys to exile were therefore remembered as "the process of passage from one state or identity into another, the freedom or right to pass through; passage in a temporal sense—the passage of time and the effects on the individual" (Munro, 2006, p. 35).

I left Somali in 2000 with other Somalis who were also escaping from the war. I came [by] a vehicle from Kismayo up to the border of Kenya. From the border, we managed to find our way into Kenya. We didn't enter directly through [the] border post because we thought they might arrest us. We came in through other means; we were smuggled into the country by special smugglers. We paid them and they smuggled us into the next country. I stayed in Kenya for quite some time, I think three years, and then, I left for South Africa in 2004 with the help of the smugglers. (Aamiina)

I started my journey at night by foot while hiding from Al-Shabaab because they were looking for me. Immediately, five minutes after I left, they came and searched my house. They tied my family up and hit them badly, while I was footing up to Kenya and that was how I left Somalia. I went to a place called Mombasa in Kenya and there I boarded a boat to Mozambique. In Mozambique I was arrested, beaten and jailed for fifteen days with other Somalis but we were freed later and then I came to South Africa [sic]. (Faduma)

These testimonies explain the precariousness of the passage from one space to another, represented here in images of silencing and victimisation through incarceration and existential estrangement, as well as emotional and physical separation from Somalia. Again, we see an uncanny resemblance between Somali experiences during flight and different forms of physical and mental resistance to xenophobic violence. There is a strong sense of resilience, the kind of resilience at the epicentre of Somali existence in South Africa. These experiences resulted in "the development of a particular historical consciousness and heightened a sense of group identity" (Besteman, 1996, p. 580), often displayed during violent attacks in South Africa.

Although fleeing from home was constructed as the pursuit of happiness or better lives, the journeys to exile prepared Somalis for a more tactical approach to finding happiness or a better life. Their memories of their uncertain lives in Somalia and the complexities of the journeys to freedom led to the development and application of myriad tactics to circumvent hostilities in different places. In the following quotation, one respondent narrates how they negotiated their passage to freedom:

Coming to South Africa was a long way from home and it was the worst experience of my life. Coming out from Somalia itself to Kenya I used four vehicles, and from Kenya to the border of Tanzania, three vehicles. I came [by] sea by boat to Dar es Salaam. From there I came [by] bus straight to a Malawian refugee camp, via the Mozambique border, and I jumped into another car and travelled the longest journey through Mozambique. After weeks, we reached the border of Mozambique and South Africa. I jumped over the fence and handed myself over to the government of South Africa [sic]. (Jamilah, female, 31 years old)

One distinct trajectory of memories of crossing borders was the influx of refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia into neighbouring countries. In this narrative of loss and struggle, there is an underlying imagery of a refugee crisis in countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania similar to that in South Africa (Hautaniemi, 2006; Kaiser, 2006). Her journey is storied as episodes of a never-ending struggle, because as in South Africa, Somali refugees are blamed and victimised for economic and social misfortunes in countries that they fled to. For example, in 1999 the Kenyan government tightened its borders to regulate the entry of Somali asylum seekers following the president's public statement "linking refugees to crime and illicit arms proliferation..." as well as security threats (Mogire, 2009, p. 21). By linking crimes to refugees, this political rhetoric spurred xenophobic violence in Kenya. Through Somalis' ethnographic accounts of flight, we are able witness the same patterns of social violence experienced in South Africa.

As they are victimised and ostracised everywhere they go, the Somalis' narratives tended to employ multiple storytelling strategies to describe and communicate related memories and key events during their journeys to exile. In the following testimony, one interviewee remembers a personal experience of incarceration during flight to explain a strong sense of collective identity that has strengthened during the struggle to belong in South Africa.

Indeed the journey to South Africa was very long, and the reason was that I was looking for a place that I could get an education and a better life. So I escaped to Tanzania, via the Kenya-Tanzania border, known as Namanga, and later I came to Arusha where I was arrested and imprisoned for six months. Later some Somali guys released me from the jail and I stayed with them in Arusha for 21 days and after that I went to Dar es Salaam, where I met a lot of Somali guys, around 21 of them living in a room, owned by one of the people who was helping immigrants to come to South Africa. That was when those guys told me about South Africa and that South Africa is a good country where I could get a good education and a better life. This is how I ended up in South Africa. (Aaden, male, 32 years old)

In this description of flight there is an interesting interconnection of different events which helps to shape our understanding of this refugee's experiences, exposing us to "complex webs of historical past in the present" (Hautaniemi, 2006, p. 82). His personal memory is marked by the tragic loss of dignity when he is jailed, and by images of hope as he imagines South Africa as a "good country". Through different events of flight and different spatial practices, we experience a narrative trajectory that constructs the past as the present and the present as the past through the contradictions of lived experiences (Agnew, 2005; Bakonyi, 2010; Fisiy, 1998).

The memories of perilous journeys through countries where Somali refugees were victimised and incarcerated help us to understand the complexities of forced displacement within sub-Saharan Africa and how migrant journeys are normalised as human beings' rites of passage. This interpretation interweaves the spectacle of social violence against Somali refugees and their uncharacteristic resilience to different forms of social suffering. As they traverse hostile spaces, they develop mechanisms for self-reliance and collective consciousness. Below, we see how crossing the South African border is negotiated.

I heard that South Africa was peaceful and that if one worked hard, they [sic] could make a good living, so I decided to come to this country. After several attempts, I finally arrived at the Musina border and the police arrested us, [and] transferred us to Johannesburg, where other police officers took us to Home Affairs. We were given three-month permits. We met some other Somali people in Johannesburg who welcomed us but we were not very happy with the way they treated us. (Yuusuf, male, 42 years old)

We crossed the border and the bus stopped somewhere. I didn't even know that we were close to a border, the border of Swaziland. We crossed the border and we walked like half an hour through the bushes and then we came back to the road, same road. The bus was waiting for us there. We took the bus again and came to the border of South Africa. The driver dropped us and left. We paid someone to take us through the border and we walked for three hours, before taking another vehicle to Johannesburg. (Khadra, female, 29 years old)

Through their interactions with the police officers, the intermediaries, and the Somalis, these exiles' experiences of flight expose us to "all sorts of social, geographic, generic and linguistic boundaries that need to be crossed" (Baynham & De Fina, 2005, p. 178). Here, the image of a safe haven is juxtaposed with images of a cold reception from fellow Somali migrants in South Africa, creating the impression that survival in South Africa is more about individual actions than about community participation.

## 6. Conclusion

To understand Somali experiences of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa, we have to trace their lives from home and their experiences in different spaces during the process of flight to South Africa. From Somali memories of home, I have argued that despite the pain and suffering caused by xenophobia, Somalis are still resilient to xenophobic violence, since they experienced similar violence in Somalia. Before migration, they lived through the devastating effects of the Al-Shabaab insurgency, which exposed them to extreme violence and fear. As the Somali refugees narrated their experiences, they tended to use phraseology indicating their immunity to social violence and their ability to survive in hostile spaces and under adverse conditions. Moreover, they are ready to defend themselves as they have done for years under the Al-Shabaab insurgency. Most importantly, they do not have a home to return to. Post-apartheid violence triggered memories of a similar history of political and social instability at home (Kaiser, 2006; King, 2000; Malkki, 1992), positioning home as both a trope of memory and a metaphor of displacement that help us to make sense of the Somali diasporic community.

As victims of a fractured state, they had to flee into exile, precipitating a humanitarian crisis in neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania. In the memories of flight, they described episodes of similar violence and hostilities in spaces where they sought asylum. Through individual stories, we see a community of forced migrants blamed for the host countries' social problems and victimised for seeking safety. The narratives constructed their journeys as being as perilous as their lives at home, yet again forcing the struggle for survival. During their journeys they developed critical skills and tactics, later deployed during xenophobic violence in South Africa. For them, xenophobic violence is similar to the violence experienced during the Al-Shabaab insurgency and victimisation during flight in places such as Kenya. The journey is not just a metaphor of displacement, but also an outlet for meaning making as we try to unlock Somali xenophobia experiences.

### Funding

This article is part of broader project on Cape Town-based Somali victims of xenophobia, funded by the American Council of Learned Societies through its African Humanities Program. I would like to sincerely thank this organisation for its financial generosity.

The article was written during a one-month visiting research fellowship at the Centre for Concurrences in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at Linnaeus University in Sweden. During the fellowship, I received financial support and I was provided with office space, internet, and library access. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Centre for hosting me.

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### Citation information

Cite this article as: Moments of suffering, pain and resilience: Somali refugees' memories of home and journeys to exile, Ernest A. Pineteh, *Cogent Social Sciences* (2017), 3: 1372848.

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