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Between the Ruins and the Otherwise: Liberatory Community Psychology as Decolonial Praxis

Abstract

I offer a critical-reflective account that advances a liberatory community psychology grounded in decolonial thought. It emerges from the lived contradictions of knowledge-making in South Africa. Written between the ruins of coloniality and the horizons of the otherwise, the article traces a praxis woven through decades of community-engaged scholarship, collective struggle, and methodological invention. I propose a psychology that reckons with its complicities while remaining answerable to those who enact life otherwise. Contributing to broader debates on decolonial and Global South psychologies, I situate liberatory community psychology as a praxis of epistemic accountability, relational ethics, and collective world-making. Two interwoven trajectories structure the argument: advancing knowledge as accountability through reframing violence, cultivating care-worlds, and enacting solidarities; and developing methodologies of refusal and relation through refusal as stance, relation as praxis, and collective authorship as insurgent knowledge-making. I conclude by turning to the university itself, read through the lens of emancipatory breaches, or insurgent openings where collective accountability and the unfinished labour of liberation can still take hold. In thinking from the ruins and towards the otherwise, I offer a vision of psychology remade through struggle, responsibility, and relation.

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The war will end.
The leaders will shake hands.
The old woman will keep waiting for her martyred son.
That girl will wait for her beloved husband.
And those children will wait for their heroic father.
I don't know who sold our homeland.
But I saw who paid the price.
- Attributed to Mahmoud Darwish

This article recasts my inaugural lecture as a contribution to debates in liberatory and decolonial community psychology, translating years of engagement into written reflection that bridges analysis and lived reality. I approach this task reflexively, considering what it means to speak and write as a Black scholar-activist located in the contradictions of the South African university, an institution shaped both by the ruins of apartheid, and by the abiding violences of racial capitalism and coloniality. The "I" that writes here is not a solitary author – what I offer emerges from collective labour, mentorship, collaborations, and community engagements, and each "I" carries within it a "we."

The reflections that follow emerge from a psychology grounded in South African histories and in the evolving praxis of my own work within them. It is within this context that I locate what I call liberatory community psychology: a decolonial and critical tradition that centres radical justice and collective freedom, reimagining psychology's aims, methods, and ethics through sustained relation with communities. I approach liberatory community psychology as a situated and relational praxis shaped by the challenges, potentialities, and contradictions of place. This orientation carries limits and incompleteness – moments of tension, failure, complicity, and reorientation in pursuit of decolonial ethics.

Specifically, this critical-reflective intervention situates a scholarly journey between the ruins and the otherwise. In South Africa, as in much of the Global South, the psychic and material consequences of colonialism endure as structural and embodied violence that persists in the present. Darwish's[1] words, which open this contribution, remind us that such violence outlives its apparent endings. Such continuities reverberate through resurgent fascisms, genocidal wars, ecological catastrophe, institutional neglect, the systemic reproduction of social death, and the persistent erasure and disavowal of subjugated knowledges and knowledge systems. Closer to home, these violences take form in spatial apartheid, entrenched class inequalities and economic exclusion, racialised and gendered disposability, and the regimes of a university system still ambivalent about its obligations to Black life and thought (Baderoon, 2018; Bond, 2014; Booysen, 2016; ka Canham, 2023; Manganyi, 1973; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). I have grappled with these conditions through my work in psychology – its complicities with colonial and apartheid orders, and its uneven efforts at reckoning and renewal. My reflections are shaped by this disciplinary legacy and by the intellectual history of critical and liberatory psychological work in South Africa, of which I am both a witness and a participant.

Psychology has been deeply implicated in sustaining these arrangements. The discipline, in its hegemonic forms, has too often legitimised domination by individualising social harm, rendering collective trauma as pathology, and deflecting structural and epistemic

1 Source unverified; widely circulated online and often cited in contexts of genocide and resistance, these lines are attributed to the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

critique (see, for example, Adams et al., 2015; Bulhan, 1985; Nicholas, 1993; Seedat, 1997). In South Africa, this complicity is bound up with the discipline's formative investments in colonial governance and racial science, where psychology repeatedly naturalised systemic violence as individualised and racialised deficit (Dubow, 1995; Stevens et al., 2013). At its core, this complicity reflects psychology's allegiance to Euro-American epistemologies and colonial orders of power (see Bulhan, 1985; Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Kessi et al., 2021; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Malherbe et al., 2024; Malherbe, 2025b; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Nicholas, 1993; Seedat, 1997, 1998; Suffla & Seedat, 2020; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022a). This allegiance displaces psychology's centre of gravity, tethering it to paradigms divorced from local histories, social formations, and ontological assumptions. The result is a profound incongruity between the lived realities of Black, Indigenous, and dispossessed communities and the frameworks through which those realities are comprehended and addressed (see ka Canham, 2024).

It is from within these ruins of discipline, institution, and structure that I frame my central concern. I treat ruins as active formations – infrastructural processes that fragment social life, extract and destroy labour and knowledge from dispossessed communities, and foreclose collective possibility. Reading ruins analytically also links these macro-political violences to disciplinary practices in psychology, such as curricular silences, pathogenic individualisation, and research practices that reproduce extraction rather than reciprocal accountability. Yet, attending to ruins in this way also makes visible the otherwise they almost inevitably carry – the creative, resistant practices that persist within devastation and point towards possibilities of remaking. These practices – contingent, relational, and often fugitive – echo what Sharpe (2016, p. 22) calls "living in the wake" and Wynter (2003) theorises as resistance to the overrepresentation of Man as the universal subject of knowledge. The otherwise is then not a counterpoint to ruin but its immanent underside – life-affirming, insurgent enactments of care, community, and solidarity that resist containment and full legibility within the dominant terms of the present and that exceed liberal frames (see Hartman, 2024; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

At stake here is more than critique. As Fanon (1963) insisted, critique without praxis risks reproducing logics it opposes. While critique of psychology's apartheid entanglements has been essential, it alone does not undo epistemic violence – the systemic subjugation and marginalisation of knowledges through the epistemic hierarchies of Euro-modernity (Ndlovu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024). What is required is a praxis that disobeys colonial epistemic demands while opening space for knowledge otherwise: an affirmative, practice-oriented project that reclaims method as ethical and political labour, foregrounds relation and accountability, resists liberal recuperation, and enacts forms of fugitivity answerable to collective struggles (see, for example, Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021). In this view, knowledge is generated as situated co-production underpinned by responsibility, relation, and radical possibility.

A liberatory orientation is necessarily fraught and unfinished. In South Africa, as elsewhere in the Global South, it takes shape under the constraints of institutional life – funding regimes, disciplinary enclosures, and the politics of academic recognition – even as it insists on fugitive openings. For Harney and Moten (2013), the undercommons names this fugitive planning, the collective refusal to be fully included. ka Canham (2023, p. 4) calls this a way of "looking askance," a refusal of capture by disciplinary and colonial demands. Even within the university, an institution that routinely marginalises Black, Indigenous, and community-grounded knowledges, there are flashes of radical possibility (see Harney & Moten, 2013; Kessi et al., 2020). My concern is with practices of navigation – remaining in the university without being fully claimed by it; sustaining community-engaged research that does not betray those it names as partners; and writing without erasure while keeping accountability to struggle at the centre (see Seedat, 2023).

This orientation builds on intellectual and activist lineages that have shaped me. South African scholar-activists such as Mohamed Seedat, Saths Cooper, Lionel Nicholas, Norman Duncan, Umesh Bawa, and Cheryl de la Rey, among others, working alongside broader movements for justice, redirected psychology from its colonial enmeshments towards liberatory possibilities. This work formed part of the critical debates of the mid-1980s, from which community psychology in South Africa emerged (see Seedat & Suffla, 2017; Seedat & Lazarus, 2011). Subsequent feminist, queer, Indigenous, Black, and Global South scholarship has opened new trajectories of thought within the discipline of psychology[2]. Decolonial work in psychology has increasingly shown that theory is not confined to the academy but emerges from the wider terrains of struggle, pressing psychology into deeper reckonings with its epistemic complicities and political obligations. As Suffla and Seedat (2020, p. 295) observe, "engaging possibilities for radical mutations in our thinking and doing – for new forms of psychologies – is to work towards the praxis of radical humanism." My own engagements in community-led storytelling, participatory visual projects, and transnational editorial collectives and solidarities are part of these formations, where knowledge emerges through relation, struggle, and collective labour. The work that I trace in this article emerges from years of co-theorisation and collaboration with communities, comrades, and collectives across Johannesburg, Cape Town, and other national and transnational sites of struggle, where knowledge is generated in the pursuit of what decolonial scholar Hilda Lloréns (2021) – in her work on Afro-Puerto Rican women's struggles for environmental justice – calls liveable worlds: the grounded, everyday labour of building generative alternatives amidst structural violence, sustained by resistance, dignity, care, love, and joy.

2 This body of work includes the contributions of Kopano Ratele, Nick Malherbe, Hugo ka Canham, Brendon Barnes, Puleng Segalo, Floretta Boonzaier, Shose Kessi, Peace Kiguwa, Ronelle Carolissen, Rashid Ahmed, Umesh Bawa, Sipho Dlamini, Christopher Sonn, Glenn Adams, Geetha Reddy, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Urmitapa Dutta, Lara Sheehi, Stephen Sheehi, and Devin Atallah, whose scholarship spans decolonial, feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous, and community psychologies across diverse geographies.

In what follows, I trace how these commitments are enacted in my work – across the entangled domains of theory, praxis, method, and institutional life – organised into two interwoven trajectories. First, I advance an understanding of knowledge as accountability, positioning community as co-theorist and disciplinary disruptor through three intertwined themes: reframing violence as political and epistemic rupture, cultivating ecologies of care and healing as care-worlds of radical life-making, and advancing knowledge in struggle through decolonial solidarities that enact relation as world-building. Second, I turn towards method as ethical and political labour, elaborating on methodologies of refusal and relation that resist extractive research, disciplinary enclosure, and colonial metrics of legitimacy, while affirming collective authorship, relational praxis, and insurgent knowledge-making as the foundations of a liberatory community psychology. These reflections converge in a concluding turn that returns to the contradictions and possibilities of the university itself – reimagined through the lens of emancipatory breaches and the unfinished labour of collective world-making.

For those of us working within and against psychology's bequests, pursuing a liberatory community psychology is not about tidy prescriptions. It has meant confronting the discipline's complicities and turning towards the contested politics of knowledge. What I seek is a remaking of the discipline's epistemic foundations, undertaken from a particular location rather than as a claim on psychology as a whole. In a world riven by colonial and capitalist devastations, I have learned that psychology matters – if at all – only when remade through collective, situated practices that open cracks in the present and make more liveable futures imaginable.

Knowledge as accountability: Community as co-theorist and disciplinary disruptor

> *Nizalwa ngobani? (Who are you born of?)*
> - Thandiswa Mazwai, Zabalaza (2004)

If psychology is to claim any ethical or political legitimacy in a world structured by coloniality – the enduring organisation of power, knowledge, and being that survives the formal end of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) – it must confront a question that has long guided this work: to whom is knowledge answerable? This is a question that I have returned to time and again in research, supervision, and collaboration. In liberatory community psychology, this question marks essential ground on which the discipline either stands or falters.

Psychology in its dominant form – and even in its community-inflected variants – secures itself through the fiction of expertise: observing, interpreting, and intervening from a position of epistemic authority (see Dutta, 2018). Liberation psychology's earliest articulations, most notably in the work of Martín-Baró (1994), challenged precisely this

fiction by calling for a psychology rooted in the historical suffering and collective agency of oppressed peoples. Within this frame, "community" is cast as backdrop, as data mine, or as object in need of transformation. The decolonial orientation from which I speak instead conceptualises community – the collectives and relations through which I work – as co-theorist. More than that, community is disciplinary disruptor. It unsettles psychology's self-authorised claims to legitimacy by insisting that knowledge is made in relation, by refusing hierarchies of expertise, and by exposing the myths of neutrality to which the discipline remains attached – a position resonant with scholars whose analyses of relationality, embodiment, community, resistance, and knowledge-making continue to reconfigure psychology's epistemic and ethical horizons (see, for example, Atallah, 2025; Barnes et al., 2025; Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019; Carolissen et al., 2017; Ciófalo & Ortiz-Torres, 2024; Dutta, 2018; Fernández, 2024; Kessi et al., 2022; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2019; Malherbe, 2022; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022a; Ratele, 2019; Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022; Seedat & Suffla, 2017; Seedat et al., 2001; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; Suffla & Seedat, 2021; Stevens & Sonn, 2021). To name community as co-theorist is to move beyond inclusionary rhetoric; it signals a methodological and ethical reorientation in which epistemic authority becomes migratory – shared, wrestled with, contested, and unsettled. To understand community as disciplinary disruptor, by contrast, is to recognise its capacity to reconfigure psychology's boundaries – to compel the discipline to reckon with its colonial foundations and to remake the very conditions of knowledge production. From this stance, three themes have taken shape in my praxis.

Reframing Violence as Political and Epistemic Rupture

A core contribution of my work has been to challenge psychology's dominant terms for understanding violence. Against dominant behaviourist, individualised, and depoliticised framings, I conceptualise violence as a political and epistemic rupture, produced through the long durée of colonial conquest, systemic dispossession, epistemicide, climate collapse, gendered domination, and racial capitalism. I use rupture here in a double sense: as the violent fracturing of life, relation, and knowledge under colonial and structural domination, and as the epistemic opening through which both this violence and the possibilities of knowing and living otherwise become visible. This understanding resonates with Fanon's (1967) conception of sociogeny, through which he locates the human condition within the entanglement of the psychic and the social, refusing any separation between the personal and the structural. To think violence sociogenically, then, is to apprehend how colonial domination inscribes itself simultaneously in the body, the psyche, and the world, and to recognise that repair must be as collective and structural as the harm itself. These violences are sustained when disciplines translate structural abandonment into "risk factors" or episodic dysfunctions, thereby obscuring the historical and systemic conditions of harm. This reframing foregrounds how disciplinary knowledge itself participates in the reproduction of violence. Even community psychology, for all its counter-disciplinary intent, has too often remained tethered to

interventionist logics, positioning communities as objects of intervention rather than as epistemic agents and critical producers of knowledge. To reframe violence as structural, collective, and historically inscribed is thus to refuse these disciplinary reductions of violence to manageable interventions and to demand that psychology reckon with the systemic and epistemic conditions it too often leaves untouched. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) reminds us in her analysis of unchilding under settler colonialism, violence is not only material but deeply epistemic – it operates through erasures of memory, futurity, and political voice. In Palestine, this is evident in the destruction of archives, schools, and universities, amounting to a sustained project of scholasticide (see Ahmad & Vulliamy, 2009) that seeks to annihilate a people's intellectual and cultural life. In Gaza, where students, teachers, and entire institutions of learning have been systematically targeted, we witness the deliberate obliteration of memory and futurity: the attempt to extinguish both the capacity to know and the right to dream. In South Africa, too, apartheid's racialised spatialities and epistemic orders have worked to sever Black communities from their histories, languages, and ways of knowing, a dispossession that continues to shape whose knowledge is rendered legitimate, and whose is foreclosed. Reading from this perspective thus clarifies how psychology's epistemic silences are themselves complicit in sustaining the conditions of harm.

Liberatory community psychology, as I have come to practise and theorise it, demands more than the addition of 'context' to pre-existing frameworks; it calls for the remaking of the epistemic foundations of the discipline through and within context. This means recognising that violence is not only material but also epistemic – the destruction of bodies and everyday worlds as well as the silencing of memory, the erasure of histories, the theft of language, and the dismemberment of ways of knowing – such as cosmologies, languages, and relational epistemologies. Fanon (1963, p. 149) reminds us that colonial violence is "not satisfied with snaring the people in its net or of draining the colonized brain of any form or substance. With a kind perverted logic, it turns its attention to the past of the colonized people and distorts it, disfigures it, and destroys it." My research seeks to work within and against these ruptures: to reveal how violence fractures both life and meaning and to recover the conditions under which new forms of knowing might emerge. Through collaborative work on gendered violence, for example, I have demonstrated that such harm cannot be disentangled from the political economies and spatial arrangements that render Black lives disposable. Working with communities in South Africa's informal settlements – including Thembelihle in Johannesburg and Broadlands Park in Cape Town – my colleagues and I have traced how systemic unemployment, insecure housing, fractured infrastructures, and militarised policing converge to produce conditions in which violence is not aberrant but structurally enabled. In such contexts, violence is both intimate and institutional, threaded into the material and affective textures of everyday life (Cornell et al., 2022; Day et al., 2024; Omarjee et al., 2025).

Confronting epistemic rupture is, however, only one part of the task. Equally crucial is recognising the epistemic labour that emerges from within these conditions – the counter-knowledges and creative practices through which communities theorise their own survival. In my work, I have witnessed how Black women, so often positioned solely as victims, enact forms of resistance that are simultaneously analytic and life-making. As organisers, carers, and knowledge-bearers, they generate practices of survival, refusal, and reconstruction that are themselves modes of theorising (Suffla et al., 2020). These everyday enactments of endurance and creativity redefine how we come to understand violence: not only as a narrative of dispossession, but as a site of resistance, relational repair, and radical possibility. To centre these practices is to position communities as co-theorists and epistemic interlocutors, disrupting psychology's epistemic authority and extending its ethical and methodological reach (see Collins, 2002).

It is here that liberatory community psychology most sharply distinguishes itself. It does not end with documenting the effects of violence; rather, it takes violence as a condition that demands psychology remake itself to reckon with its complicities: naming structural harm without reducing it to individual pathology, and by grounding its methods in the knowledges communities generate through struggle. Yet, accountability alone is insufficient. What is required is an epistemic restlessness – a mode of praxis through which psychology learns from the ruptures it has historically disavowed, refusing the comfort of resolution, holding itself within the tensions of power and relation, and allowing its frameworks to be reshaped by the insurgent knowledges that emerge from struggle. In this sense, reframing violence as political and epistemic rupture becomes both critique and commitment – it calls psychology to learn from rupture and to locate in acts of refusal and renewal the conditions of its own transformation.

Ecologies of Care and Healing: Building Otherwise

From within these ruptures, another obligation becomes clear – to attend to the ecologies of care and healing that communities build for themselves. Where dominant institutions abandon, people do the painstaking work of holding one another – keeping life going in conditions designed to extinguish it. In the collaborating early childhood development (ECD) centres in Johannesburg, for example, caregivers have created spaces of sustenance for children despite systemic neglect. My work has traced these embodied, relational, and often improvised formations where collective care becomes method, theory, and survival (Suffla et al., 2020). I have come to think of these as care-worlds: assemblages through which communities make and remake life in the midst of destruction and dispossession. Within such constellations, care emerges as struggle, a radical labour of living that reclaims possibility from within the ruins.

Care-worlds are then living ecologies of relation – moral, affective, spiritual, and material – through which life is tended and remade amid abandonment and disposability. Formed

in the wake of violence, they are community-driven rather than institutional, arising not from policy or programme but from the everyday acts through which people hold one another in contexts of harm and suffering: the sharing of food and stories, the bearing of grief, the tending of gardens, the singing of ancestral songs, the braiding of hair, the passing down of recipes, proverbs, and rituals, the ululations that mark celebration and becoming. Here, care becomes relational praxis that contests and sustains life. As Malherbe (2022, p. 98) reiterates, "care is crucial for making, remaking, and repairing the world in which we live" – a reminder that care is itself a practice of world-making within the ruins of abandonment.

In these care-worlds, healing emerges as theorising-in-action – an embodied and situated praxis that enacts ways of knowing and doing interdependence, imagination, and endurance. Healing, in this sense, is a collective refusal of disposability, a refiguration of relational life as shared responsibility and ethical labour. Following Sylvia Wynter's (2003) call to re-envision the human as praxis, I read these enactments of healing as insurgent humanisms – everyday practices that sustain existence within the ruins of its systematic destruction. Healing here is world-building, both reparative and generative: a labour that binds survival to meaning-making and reorients psychology's ethical imagination from abstraction to the situated work of living otherwise.

This conceptualisation finds expression in my collaborative work on the Community Storylines: Epistemic Justice and Representation project (see Suffla et al., 2020). In communities marked by state neglect and precarity, residents have fashioned spaces of sustenance and solidarity – community kitchens and gardens, ECD initiatives, home-based care networks, art collectives, and digital story archives. Within Community Storylines, participants engage as co-authors and co-curators of meaning, generating living archives that resist reduction to data or catharsis. These narrative practices reopen the social, transforming the weight of survival into political claim and testimony into solidarity. They embody forms of relational care that turn survival into epistemic labour and repair into the situated creation of liveable worlds, resonant with the participatory and liberatory commitments that Seedat and colleagues (2017) identify within emancipatory community psychology (see also Sonn et al., 2024). Through this work, knowledge emerges as a modality of care, and healing as the ongoing labour of liveability.

To engage care-worlds within liberatory community psychology is then to recognise care as political labour – a site where communities theorise existence, contest disposability, and enact new otherwise practices of relation. Through my work, I have come to see how these practices expose the limits of psychology's epistemic boundaries, calling the discipline to account for the lives and knowledges it too often renders peripheral. Care-worlds reveal the political and psychological as intertwined terrains of struggle over how life is valued and imagined. To centre care as both concept and condition is therefore

to reclaim the human as a collective and ethical project brought into being through the labour of relation.

Knowledge in Struggle: Enacting Decolonial Solidarities

If the first two components of this work have foregrounded how communities name violence and make life in its wake and midst, this final focus turns to the question of how we build and struggle together. In recent years, my solidarities have taken form through, for example, decoloniality schools, community dialogues, colloquia, and editorial collaborations. I take solidarity here as a practice of entanglement that involves a continual remaking of relation across the asymmetries of power, dispossession, and the geopolitical and epistemic divides through which domination persists and resistance takes form. In the spirit of Fanon Mendès France and Maldonado-Torres (2021, n.p.), who speak of "maximizing the possibilities of connection between the condemned of the earth and between their various struggles," a project that "requires the will and ability to connect with others and to engage in collective movement against coloniality," I understand solidarity as the work of weaving life through the fractures of coloniality, as a labour of relation that transforms complicity into collective movement. It is an ethics and practice of co-struggle that unsettles distance and remains attentive to the tensions and contradictions it may hold. In this sense, as Malherbe (2025a) argues, transformative solidarity is sustained through agonism and difference, demanding the ongoing labour of relation and collective effort. From this perspective, relation itself becomes a site of world-making – an ongoing experiment in living, thinking, and resisting together.

To enact solidarity in this sense is to recognise that knowledge is, of course, never neutral, and to perceive it as always made within struggle – shaped by the frictions, risks, and relations that accompany the pursuit of liberation. What matters, then, is not only what we know but with whom knowledge is made and towards what worlds it moves. Within liberatory community psychology, I suggest, solidarity functions as epistemic praxis – a mode of co-theorising and co-struggling through which meaning is generated in relation rather than abstraction. Such solidarity demands that we move beyond professional alliances towards relationships that are transformative and willing to risk the securities that insulate knowledge from struggle. These are relations that refuse the hierarchies of North-South expertise, unsettle academic and disciplinary borders, and insist that liberation is indivisible.

In my work within the Institute for Social and Health Sciences (ISHS), solidarity has unfolded as the deliberate labour of building and remaking together, focused on assembling networks of thought and action with communities of resistance across South Africa, the African continent, and other sites of colonial violence and collective resistance, such as Palestine and Puerto Rico. This praxis has taken concrete form through various modalities, more recently through the Black Epistemologies and Praxes Programme, an

intellectually grounded and politically engaged site of collective inquiry that cultivates decolonial community. The programme creates conditions for collaborative theorising and creative-critical praxis through symposia, public lectures, community dialogues, writing collectives, student-led projects, and co-authorships that blur the boundaries between scholarship, activism, and life, and bring into conversation the psychic, embodied, material, and epistemic dimensions of decolonial struggle (see Lugones, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Sheehi & Sheehi, 2022). It has meant building research infrastructures that support grassroots intellectual life, crafting spaces where knowledge circulates horizontally, and ensuring that institutional resources move in the direction of those historically dispossessed from them.

Such solidarities are, in themselves, forms of knowledge. They generate concepts, methods, and vocabularies that may traverse the academy but find their deepest resonance when they circulate through struggle, relation, and collective practice. As Cabral (1966) articulated, struggle itself is a form of thought – a way of knowing, born in motion. In my own work, I have witnessed how shared colonial histories can become grounds for theorising, and how collective refusal can open the space for radical imagination and insurgent futures. These solidarities remind us that intellectual work is not confined to the academy but extends into the street, the community hall, the protest, the ritual, and the drumming. It is here, in these fugitive and world-making spaces of encounter, that liberatory community psychology unfolds – as a relational praxis that refuses the separation between knowledge and life. Solidarity, then, becomes both method and orientation, the condition through which new configurations of the human, and of community, come into view.

Enacting solidarity in this way requires a different temporal sensibility. It cannot be hurried into outputs or condensed into deliverables; it moves instead through practices that, as Mountz et al. (2015, p. 1237) argue, "foreground collaborative, collective, communal ways forward." This temporality resists the extractive logics of the academy, privileging relation, return, and reciprocity, over acceleration and closure. It is a temporality of struggle that foregrounds relation rather than resolution, echoing Harney and Moten's (2013, p. 110) description: "study … is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice." To stay with this temporality is to remain, at times, with dissonance to work through uncertainty and to remake relation even when consensus falters. Such a praxis redefines solidarity as both methodological orientation and ethical commitment that insists on co-sovereignty, collective labour, and the reconfiguration of intellectual and institutional resources.

To speak of knowledge in struggle, then, is to affirm that solidarity is itself an epistemic event that unsettles the logics of knowledge – its production, its circulation, and the

ends to which it is put. Within this praxis, liberatory community psychology takes form not merely as an analytic framework but as a living practice – a collective endeavour where theory and method are remade through the labour of survival, imagination, and accompliceship. It calls psychology to become answerable to the worlds that make its knowing possible, to build relations that are at once intellectual and material, speculative and grounded: that is, the kind of relations that make new forms of life thinkable and liveable. Such is the praxis of a psychology in motion, in relation, in response, and in revolt.

Together, these three foci – reframing violence, cultivating care-worlds, and enacting solidarities – mark what it means to treat community as co-theorist and disciplinary disruptor. Community does not merely inform psychology; it interrupts it, reorients it, and at times refuses it altogether. This is an insistence that knowledge be made in the everyday labours of survival, relation, and resistance that exceed the academy's reach. Such labours compel us to recognise that accountability, in this sense, is not simply procedural but ontological – it demands the remaking of psychology itself as a practice tethered to struggle and answerable to those whose lives it claims to understand.

To hold this stance is inevitably to accept its friction. Disruption slows research, unsettles authorship, and contests the reward structures of the university. It demands that scholars like myself relinquish control and reimagine what it means to work with rather than on. Yet, it is precisely in these sites of disquiet and undisciplining, where certainty gives way and relations deepen, that liberatory community psychology finds its most vital possibilities. Here, method becomes inseparable from ethics, and knowledge becomes a site of relational struggle. It is from this space of interruption and re-orientation that I now turn to consider what it means to practise a methodology of refusal and relation, and to ask how psychology itself might be remade through the very struggles it seeks to name.

Methodologies of refusal and relation: Practising liberatory community psychology

> *We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize.*
> - Biko (2004)

Within liberatory community psychology, I have come to understand method not as a technical apparatus of discovery, but as a site of struggle where the relations of power, ethics, and participation that shape knowledge are continually negotiated. This understanding recognises that research is never innocent. The questions we ask, the forms of evidence we privilege, and the vocabularies we deploy are shaped by the enduring logics of coloniality and disciplinary power that delimit what can be known and who is authorised to know. Practising method otherwise has therefore required me to

interrogate these questions, to resist their seductions of neutrality and mastery, and to cultivate orientations that are responsive to context, open to uncertainty, and grounded in relation.

I have thus come to think of methodology less as design and more as an ethico-political field. By this I mean the space where methodological practice is inseparable from the ethical and political relations that constitute it – where knowing becomes a mode of relating, and accountability itself becomes method. This framing builds on feminist and decolonial epistemologies that treat research as a situated and contested practice (see Collins, 2002; Haraway, 1988; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). It also extends the liberatory, participatory action research tradition (see Fals-Borda, 1985; Seedat et al., 2017), which I read here through refusal and relation rather than its reduction to technique. Conceiving methodology as an ethico-political field recognises that every act of inquiry is also an intervention in the worlds it studies, shaping not only what can be known but also how we enact our ethical and political responsibilities within those worlds.

Two methodological imperatives have been especially generative in my practice. The first is refusal: a stance that questions the epistemic assumptions embedded in dominant research paradigms and resists extractive, objectifying engagements with community life. Following Simpson (2014), I understand refusal not as rejection but as an affirmative stance – a methodological and political practice that interrupts extractive relations of knowing, asserting the right to determine the terms of engagement, and to make knowledge otherwise. The second is relation, conceived as an ethical and methodological commitment to reciprocity, accountability, and collective meaning-making. Here, relation shifts inquiry from observation to accompaniment, from representation to co-production, and situates research within shared processes of theorising and action.

Approaching methodology through refusal and relation has meant re-imagining method as a practice of co-constitution rather than application. It asks that I remain attentive to the asymmetries that shape my own research and collaborative engagements and allow my own frameworks to be unsettled by the epistemic and affective labour of those with whom I work. Within liberatory community psychology, this orientation insists that epistemic practice is inseparable from ethical and political practice. From this stance, three interwoven themes have guided my methodological work and collaborations.

Refusal as Methodological Orientation

Having introduced refusal as a methodological imperative, I turn here to its practice. In practice, these theoretical insights have guided my own decisions in fieldwork and collaboration. In my work, refusal is not an act of withdrawal or negation but a mode of generative disobedience that unsettles the extractive logics of conventional research. As Audra Simpson (2014) argues in her work with the Kahnawà:ke Mohawks, refusal

is not merely saying no; it is a sovereignty claim, a decision to protect what is sacred, untranslatable, or not meant for institutional consumption. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) extends this understanding, describing refusal as a practice of making room for other worlds. Within liberatory community psychology, I have come to practise refusal as methodological redirection: declining to frame communities through deficit logics, declining to transform suffering into mere data, and declining to separate analysis from relation.

Refusal, as I have come to learn, is also an ethics of care. Hsueh (2024) argues that care occupies a crucial yet often overlooked place in the politics of refusal, particularly within decolonial and Indigenous traditions where care is neither passive nor apolitical. In this sense, refusal is not to resist knowledge-making but to insist that knowledge be made differently, under conditions that preserve dignity, opacity, and relational integrity. It is an ethics of preservation that attends to what cannot or should not be translated into institutional vocabularies. McGranahan (2016) writes: "To refuse is to say no. But, no, it is not just that. To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another" (p. 319). This insight resonates within community psychology, which continues to wrestle with how the violences of abstraction, extraction, and depoliticisation can accompany research in marginalised contexts.

These imperatives have guided my participatory work with young people and communities across South Africa and the continent. In the Multi-Country Photovoice Project on Youth Representations of Safety, conducted through the ISHS and collaborating African partners, we refused the scripts that cast young people as either victims or threats. Instead, participants were positioned as co-theorists, shaping the questions, images, and analyses that emerged (Suffla et al., 2015). Their photographs and narratives complicated prevailing notions of safety, depicting it not simply as the absence of threat but as a negotiated condition entangled with geographies of structural neglect, and made liveable through everyday practices of care, connection, and the creation of spaces of material, emotional, and relational refuge and holding (see Malherbe et al., 2016; Suffla et al., 2012). Through exhibitions, dialogues, and public engagements, including the volume My Voice in Pictures, the work moved beyond data generation to become a platform for solidarity, activism, and mobilisation (Suffla et al., 2014). Practising refusal here also meant modulating institutional tempo to participants' lives and safeguarding interpretive integrity against reductive framings.

Refusal, then, is not the abandonment of method but a critical reorientation of its epistemic and ethical foundations. It compels me, and those of us engaged in liberatory research, to interrogate the institutional conditions and disciplinary assumptions through which knowledge is authorised, and to remain accountable to the social worlds our work

engages. Within liberatory community psychology, refusal functions as a methodological stance that disrupts hierarchies between knower and known, and between research and action. It demands inquiry that is dialogical, situated, and co-produced – methods that neither reproduce harm nor abstract struggle from its lived contexts. As such, refusal operates simultaneously as critique and as methodological proposition – it unsettles the logics that underpin epistemic domination while enabling practices of knowledge-making grounded in relation and accountability.

Method as Relational Praxis and Collective Holding

If refusal delineates the boundaries of ethical research, relation enables what becomes possible within them. In my work, method has never been a purely procedural exercise but a relational praxis – an ongoing process of co-presence, accountability, and mutual transformation. To think of method in this way is to foreground the with in knowledge-making – to recognise that inquiry is sustained through relationships that are affective, material, and political. Drawing from Wilson's (2008) work on indigenous research methods, I understand relational praxis as an epistemic condition rather than merely an interpersonal virtue, where knowledge is situated as something made through, and not merely about, connection. Within liberatory community psychology, this orientation insists that method cannot be disentangled from the social worlds it emerges within; it is both the means and the medium through which collective meaning, resistance, and care are produced.

In practice, this orientation has taken shape through the ISHS Community Conversations and Dialogue Series, regular gatherings that bring together residents, local leaders, scholars, collaborators, and ISHS researchers in partner communities in Johannesburg and Cape Town (see Kotzé et al., 2013). These gatherings are not designed as sites of data extraction but as methodological spaces of collective holding, where knowledge emerges through listening, shared analysis, and the careful labour of witnessing. In contexts marked by structural precarity and ongoing dispossession, such spaces create conditions for communities to articulate their own meanings of healing, dignity, solidarity, and collective resistance, often in registers that exceed psychology's dominant vocabularies. Working in this way requires what Wilson (2008) calls relational accountability: a commitment to remain answerable to all one's relations within the research process, human and otherwise. It also resonates with Tuhiwai Smith's (1999, p. 5) insistence that "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions." Within liberatory community psychology, such methodological practice redefines participation not as inclusion within an existing paradigm, but as co-production of meaning within shared struggle.

Working in this way has required ongoing commitment to method as co-presence rather than mere intervention. Within such spaces, relational praxis is enacted through being

with, an approach to inquiry grounded in listening, witnessing, and shared analysis that confronts oppression and social suffering. As Suffla and colleagues (2015) argue, such work demands a critical reflexivity that treats research as an ethico-political encounter, one rooted in accountability and care. Relational praxis, in this framing, transforms participation itself, shifting it from involvement in research to shared processes of meaning-making and accountability. The Series unfolds over extended periods, where the slow work of building trust and shared meaning becomes the method itself. This pace constitutes a deliberate refusal of the extractive temporalities that govern much institutional research. Relational praxis, then, reconfigures method as a shared holding environment through which meaning is continually produced and contested under conditions of constraint.

Conceived in this way, relational praxis unsettles the instrumental logics that have long governed community research. It repositions method as an ethical and political labour of relation through which the conditions of knowing are continually remade. Within liberatory community psychology, this entails recognising that the work of building relation is itself the site of knowledge production. It is at this juncture that epistemic and affective responsibilities meet – knowing demands response. Relational praxis, in this sense, is not an addition to method but its reconstitution – a practice through which psychology learns, however imperfectly, to think and act with the communities whose struggles give it meaning.

Collective Authorship and Insurgent Knowledge-Making

Over the years, I have come to understand writing as an extension of method – a way of sustaining the relations and responsibilities that underpin knowledge-making, and of approaching authorship as an act of accountability. In this sense, writing is a relational practice through which knowledge is made, translated, and circulated. Within liberatory community psychology, I argue that writing functions methodologically: organising how relation is documented, remembered, and made available for engagement. The act of writing thus extends inquiry's ethical demands, requiring the same attentiveness to context, dialogue, and reciprocity that guide community-based work. To write collectively is to affirm meaning-making as dialogical and interdependent. This is not a rejection of individual authorship, of course, but an acknowledgement of what becomes possible when ideas are developed in concert. The text, then, functions as a space of negotiation where thought is worked through together, voice is plural, and knowledge bears the imprint of the relations that make it possible.

This ethos of collective authorship finds expression in the editorial and writing collaborations that have shaped my practice. The Readsurama Decolonial Editorial Collective, comprising Kopano Ratele, Glenn Adams, Geetha Reddy, Nick Malherbe, and myself, was established not merely as a publishing initiative but as a political and

intellectual formation committed to reorienting the conditions under which knowledge is produced. Our work together enacts co-theorisation across geographies and positionalities, creating spaces where questions of epistemic justice, decolonial praxis, and disciplinary critique are worked through dialogically. This orientation is reflected in a series of collaborative publications and special issues (see Decolonial Psychology Editorial Collective, 2021; Malherbe et al., 2021; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective, 2022a, 2022b; Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective & Malherbe, 2023). Across these projects, the collective's editorial decisions are themselves methodological acts in that they refuse the depoliticisation of knowledge, centre marginalised voices and epistemes, and foreground writing as a practice of solidarity. In this sense, editing also becomes a continuation of method, an engaged and situated labour through which we attempt to shift the ecologies of academic publication towards more reparative and insurgent ends.

A similar commitment underpins my co-editorship of the Springer Community Psychology Book Series with Mohamed Seedat. The series provides a vital intellectual and political platform for advancing critical and decolonial currents within community psychology. Our editorial vision is intentionally disruptive, foregrounding scholarship that unsettles disciplinary boundaries, amplifies Global South epistemic and political perspectives, and centres collective, emancipatory praxis. This orientation is evident across the series' volumes. Each volume is treated not as a static contribution to the field but as a node in an evolving conversation on epistemic justice, decolonising knowledge, and the unfinished work of liberation across geographies[3]. These collaborations reaffirm that writing and editing are integral to methodological practice itself, extending the labour of relation into the textual and institutional domains of knowledge production, and asking, as I have already underlined, not only what and how we write, but with and for whom.

In this framing, collective authorship is not simply a matter of collaboration but a methodological and political practice that understands knowledge as co-produced within, and animated by, relation. Writing, in this sense, is not only a form of resistance but also a mode of world-making that refuses the disembodied authority of the scholar and reclaims the collective as a generative site of thought. As Mama (2000, p. 20) notes, "the act of writing presents us with the irresistible chance to talk back, to dare to dream, and to invoke a community that may share those dreams." My contribution to this conversation lies in extending these insights within the praxis of liberatory community psychology – locating collective authorship as a method for unsettling epistemic hierarchies, sustaining the labour of relation across institutional and community spaces, and enacting writing itself as a decolonial practice of knowledge production. In this sense, to write together is to practise method otherwise, where the act of co-writing becomes both an epistemic and ethical commitment to the collective conditions of liberation.

3 See https://link.springer.com/series/15965

Read together, these orientations – refusal, relation, and collective authorship – advance what I term a methodological praxis of accountability and co-constitution. They recast method not as procedure but as a site where ethics, politics, and epistemology are mutually implicated in the making of knowledge. Refusal opens the possibility of inquiry that safeguards dignity and opacity; relation reorients method towards co-presence and shared meaning; and collective authorship materialises these commitments through practices of collaborative theorisation and textual reciprocity. What binds them is a concern with how knowledge lives. This praxis points to a decolonial methodology that seeks to cultivate the conditions under which knowledge is made in fidelity to relation, responsibility, and liberation.

Conclusion: Between the Ruins and the Otherwise

> *What matters is not to know the world but to change it.*
> - Frantz Fanon (1967)

In drawing this manuscript to a close, I have tried to articulate a liberatory community psychology that remains rooted in the tensions of our times. My work in the South African academy unfolds from within, yet in tension with, the institution's logics of recognition and capture. To labour from within the ruins of the university is to live a paradox: it provides the material and institutional ground for our intellectual work even as it disciplines the very knowledges we seek to advance. Yet, within its cracks, possibilities persist. It is in these openings – what I call emancipatory breaches – that new forms of relational knowledge and collective life can emerge. These are not grand alternatives, but small acts of reorientation through which the script of the institution is momentarily rewritten in the service of shared humanity.

This is not a conclusion that offers neat resolutions. It is written in deep gratitude to the communities, comrades, and colleagues whose courage and creativity make such breaches possible, and to my beloveds, whose love, faith, and care have steadied and nurtured this work. If the university can be reimagined, it will be through the quiet, collective acts of those who, in different ways, hold open the possibility of the otherwise. My work, in this sense, is not simply a scholarly contribution but an offering born of these relations – to all who teach us how to dream and build amidst the ruins.

I return, finally, to Darwish's space between devastation and dreaming. It is here that a liberatory community psychology must dwell and persist, creating possibility within enclosure, cultivating relation within it, and tending to the fragile work of healing in the midst of harm. To remain here is to stay with the unfinished, with one another, and with the deliberate work of making life liveable – work that is never simple, demanding a continual grappling with complicity, fatigue, and the uneven labours of accountability and relation. This, for me, is where the labour of liberation continues: in the deliberate making of worlds that hold the weight of the present and the promise of the otherwise.

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