

How Eritreans in South Africa talk about their refugee experiences: A discursive analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study that explored how Eritrean refugees¹ in South Africa – part of a generational wave of emigrants labelled ‘generation asylum’ by Hepner (2015) – make sense of their refugee experience and identities, herewith referred to as interpretative repertoires. Interpretative repertoires is a concept coined by sociologists, Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) and later adopted by Potter and Whetherell (1987), to refer to the different and at times contradictory ways in which social actors characterise or describe a phenomenon. Five dominant interpretative repertoires were identified based on a discursive analysis of interview transcripts with ten participants living in Pretoria: (1) a ‘rights’ repertoire; (2) an ‘embrace your refugee identity’ repertoire; (3) the ‘victimised refugee’ repertoire; (4) the ‘protected refugee’ repertoire and (5) the ‘criminalised refugee’ repertoire. It is argued that participants deployed contradictory and yet complementary repertoires, drawing primarily on lived and imagined experiences in their country of origin and asylum as resources to give meaning to their refugee identities. These repertoires demonstrate refugees’ ambivalence. It surfaces tensions they experience between South Africa’s constitutional promise and their relative legal security, on the one hand, and the everyday threat of xenophobic violence and negative public sentiment, on the other.

Key words: Eritrean, South Africa, Refugees, Identities, Interpretative Repertoires.

¹The distinction between refugees and asylum-seekers is a legal category. A ‘refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence’ and who ‘has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group’ (UNHCR 2017a). An asylum-seeker is ‘someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed’ (UNHCR 2017b). In this article, although some mention will be made of asylum-seekers, the main focus is on refugees.

INTRODUCTION

Since democratisation in 1994, South Africa has witnessed a significant increase in the numbers of persons seeking political asylum (Crush 2001; Hassim, Kupe and Worby 2008). South Africa is one of the main destinations for refugees. The settlement in South Africa of Eritreans with refugee and asylum-seeker status was prefigured by the dispatch between 1999-2001 of several hundred former University of Asmara students by the Eritrean government to pursue higher education studies in South Africa (Hepner 2015:196). At the same time, following Conrad (2006: 2), the border war that erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia from 1998-2000 led to large numbers of Eritreans, especially those who lived along the border towns and villages, fleeing (Conrad 2006:2). Currently, Eritrea is a one-party state ruled by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). It is reported that thousands of Eritreans flee the country each month because of deteriorating human rights conditions in Eritrea, including arbitrary arrests, detentions, disappearances linked to religious and political views and most importantly, indefinite military conscription (Human Rights Watch 2015; Hepner 2015; Belloni 2016). The 2015/16 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report described the political situation in Eritrea as a 'no war, no peace' situation (HRW 2015/16). From a low of only one recorded Eritrean refugee in South Africa in 2004, by 2012 the number increased to 660 (UNDATA 2014) and increased further to 821 in 2013 (UNDATA 2014). This figure continues to increase as the human rights conditions in Eritrea worsen. The continued inflow of Eritreans in South Africa is encouraged and facilitated by the social networks within the Eritrean refugee communities in the country; the pull factors related to relative protection and ease of settlement also play some role (Araia 2005).

Eritreans with refugee status in South Africa find themselves in a context where they are legally protected under the Constitution which gives them a plethora of rights (Crush 2001; Hepner 2013).² However, despite the constitutional dispensation, Eritrean refugees, like other refugee communities in South Africa, encounter xenophobia and hatred in their everyday lives (Crush 2001; Hassim, Kupe and Worby 2008; Landau 2010: 217; Chinomona and Maziriri 2015: 23; Hepner 2015:196; Inaka 2016). Refugees are often discursively

²By contrast, asylum-seekers are in a somewhat more vulnerable position as they are still awaiting the processing of their application for refugee status.

positioned as criminals, both by local South Africans and the media (Blignaut and Sadiki 2013; Hweshe 2013).

Little is however known about the everyday experiences of Eritrean refugees in South Africa in order to shed light on their positionality as refugees. An exception is the study done by Hepner (2013) on the political subjectivities and transnational networks of former University of Asmara students who founded the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights. This article, therefore, examines how Eritrean refugees talk about their everyday lives and their identity and/or their positionality as refugees in South Africa and the discursive resources (interpretative repertoires) from which they make sense of their refugee experience. It examines how they embrace, resist, and negotiate their ascribed refugee status, and how these resonate or not with the experiences of Eritrean refugees in the Diaspora. This article excluded asylum-seekers, as they have more precarious status and shorter duration of stay than those with refugee status. This article gives voice to refugees' subjectivities whose lived experiences have largely been dominated by representations by dominant institutions and organisations (Zetter 1991; Soguk 1999; Rajaram 2002; Vicsek 2008; and Khosravinik 2008). Refugees rarely own their own stories and their discourses are often marginalised (Zetter 1991). It adds to a growing body of scholarship on Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers conducted in various national contexts such as Sudan (Kibreab 2000; Noronha 2004; Treiber 2009, 2013, 2016; Hepner 2015), Ethiopia (Treiber 2009, 2013, 2016; Hepner 2015); South Africa (Hepner 2013); Italy (Arnone 2008; Abraha 2011; Belloni 2016); Malta (Lutterbeck 2009; Mainwaring 2012); Germany (Hepner 2013), the USA (Hepner 2013) and Israel (Yacobi 2009; Afeef 2009; Lutterbeck 2009; Paz 2011; Lijnders 2012; Mainwaring 2012; Campbell, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Yaron 2013; Müller 2016).

This article argues that the multiple and at times contradictory repertoires of the refugees reflect the context of their current location (South Africa), that of their country of origin (Eritrea) from which they fled, and experiences from the Eritreans in diaspora. The particularities of post-apartheid South Africa explain these multiple and contradictory repertoires, with participants mobilising the positives of having various rights, being protected by South African refugee law, and of embracing their refugee identity; mixed in with negatives of being victims of xenophobia and hostility and being perceived as criminals

by local South Africans. The Eritrean context also has influence as the participants characterised life in Eritrea as devoid of rights and freedom.

Section one provides an overview of the literature on Eritrean refugees' experiences in different host societies. In section two, I outline discursive analysis, particularly the concept of interpretative repertoires, as a theoretical framework for the study. Section three discusses the research strategy for the study. In section four, I present and discuss the dominant interpretative repertoires. Finally, section five concludes the study.

ERITREAN REFUGEES EXPERIENCES IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Literature on the subjective experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers in their settlement societies including North America, Europe and Africa, increased in recent years. It has been demonstrated that the nature of the subjective experiences of Eritrean refugee communities were largely a reflection of the policies and attitudes of their respective host societies; their past experiences in their country of origin, Eritrea; and the transnational realm and the extent to which the latter impacts on their experiences (Hepner 2013, 2015).

Hepner (2015: 187) argues that Eritrean refugees in various host societies emphasise their identification with an Eritrean national identity. In most host societies where the dominant model of refugee reception favours encampment rather than integration, refugee repertoires emphasise a negative attachment to their refugee identity. For example, in the Sudan, where refugee integration is minimal, Kibreab (2000) and Noronha (2004) found that Eritrean refugees rejected self-identification as refugees and instead emphasised their national identity as 'Eritrean'. In Ethiopia, Eritrean refugees who lived in refugee camps described their refugee identity as dehumanising, while those who could afford to live in cities or towns described their refugee experience in more positive terms as 'free' refugees (Woldemikael 2013; Hepner 2015). Treiber (2013) too found that Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan described their refugee existence as insecure, and felt entrapped in refugee camps and without a future, resulting in constant dreams and actions to re-migrate to North America and Europe.

In societies where there is a strong anti-immigrant state policy and/or public sentiment, refugee narratives tend to associate the refugee identity with experiences of alienation and marginalisation. This is attested by studies such as by Hashim (2012) of Eritrean refugees in Egypt, and of Eritrean asylum-seekers in Israel by Afeef (2009), Yacobi (2009), Paz (2011), Lijnders (2012), and Müller (2016). In Israel, the state designates African asylum-seekers as ‘infiltrators’ and the public perceives them as ‘unwanted persons’ who are accused of perpetrating crimes and loitering (Hashimshony-Yaffe and Campbell 2013). Similarly, in other contexts such as Italy, Milan in particular, Eritreans narrate their refugee experiences largely in a negative light, characterising their existence as one of exclusion, alienation, difficulty (in obtaining documentation), and criminalisation (as smugglers by the media) (Arnone 2008: 325; Belloni 2016). These experiences prompt Eritreans to seek asylum in other European countries with more liberal immigration policies (Arnone 2008: 325; Belloni 2016). Belloni (2016) and Arnone’s recent work is also backed up by Abraha’s (2011) study that showed that Eritrean refugees in Italy experienced marginalisation by the state and racism by the host society. In a related study, Eritrean asylum-seekers in Malta – a country with restrictive and hostile immigration control policy and detention practices – characterise their experiences as living a life of uncertainty amid constant fear of being deported (Lutterbeck 2009; Mainwaring 2012).

An additional dimension of insecurity and stigmatisation in the experiences of Eritrean refugees has been identified in societies where there has been a long history of Eritrean settlement, linking back to the 1960s and the long-standing conflict with Ethiopia. To make sense of this phenomenon, the issue of generational waves of Eritrean emigration and the political context of such migration is important to note (Hepner2015). Consequently, in North America and Western Europe, recent Eritrean refugees have reported experiencing hostilities by being branded ‘traitors’ by fellow Eritreans who support the government in Eritrea from which the recent refugees fled (Hepner2015: 188). Importantly, Hepner argues that accounts of the lived experiences of Eritrean refugees in societies that the Eritrean state penetrated tend to be coloured by narratives with a transnational focus instead of primarily reflecting the conditions encountered in the host society. As an illustration of this phenomenon, Treiber (2009) found that recent Eritrean urban refugees in the USA described their refugee lives in a positive light, relative to living in Eritrea and in other

African-refugee-receiving countries. However, they also described the host society as criminally violent and themselves being victims of hatred and hostility from fellow Eritreans who support the ruling party and who consider recently arrived young Eritrean refugees as traitors. Here, the phenomenon of a more ambiguous, but positively tinted perception in relation to the host society and to refugee identity is visible.

In a study concerned with the political subjectivities of Eritrean refugees, Hepner (2013) found that Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers who formed human rights-based movements in Germany, USA and South Africa were mobilising in relation to the rights extended by their respective host states. According to Hepner (2013), Eritreans mobilised rights enjoyed to make sense of their relatively favourable position in contrast to that of fellow Eritreans living in Eritrea under a repressive political system, and were able to translate that into a set of claims for reform in Eritrea.

However, as the above review of the literature illustrated, much of contemporary scholarship on the experiences of Eritrean refugees and asylum-seekers appear to be located outside the context of South Africa as a country of settlement. There is a paucity of research on the subjectivities of Eritreans in South Africa in relation to their everyday experiences as refugees.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the emphasis on the subjective meaning-making capabilities and agency of refugees, this article employs a poststructuralist approach to analyse the textual data and construction of meaning as well as the variegated ways of characterising what refugees' experiences mean to them. In this discursive tradition, the specific approach of Potter and Wetherell (1987) is deployed. According to Potter and Wetherell (1987: 149), interpretative repertoires are available in a particular social group from which members draw upon when giving meaning to a particular phenomenon. Along with Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Fairclough (1995, 2003), I argue that broader contextual factors and conditions such as those in South Africa and Eritrea as well as the immediate interview context itself shaped the types of interpretative repertoires mobilised. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 6) are mindful of the fact that 'social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and

categories pre-existing in the social and natural world'. Instead, they see texts and utterances as doing things; as having social and political implications and effects. From this perspective, a focus on the strategic deployment for particular effect requires attention. This theoretical position rejects the idea of the singular subject and understands identities as fluid and context-bound.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was employed to explore how research participants talked about their everyday lives as refugees in South Africa. Specifically, Eritrean refugees living in Pretoria, one of the South African major cities, were interviewed with the view to examining their interpretative repertoires drawn from their refugee experiences. Six males and four females were interviewed. A convenience sampling technique was used to identify and recruit participants. All ten research participants were self-employed and had refugee status. Their ages ranged from twenty-three to thirty-eight. I conducted the interviews at the homes of the interviewees as well as at two Eritrean restaurants in cases where the latter were preferred by interviewees. All interviews were conducted in Tigrinya, which was the preferred language of the interviewees. I am a Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean refugee; I therefore did not need an interpreter.

All interviewees signed consent forms and the interviewees were told that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any time. All research participants were first generation refugees at the time of their recruitment and have lived in the Republic of South Africa for at least five years. The average time taken to conduct the interviews was forty-five minutes to an hour. Data was collected through semi-structured interview questions. The names of study participants have been withheld and replaced with pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality. Analysis of the data was carried out by identifying interpretative repertoires salient across interview data. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by myself. The analysis of data in order to locate interpretative repertoires followed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across the ten interview transcripts, five dominant interpretative repertoires were identified. These interpretative repertoires are varied, with some reinforcing each other, whilst others contradicted each other. It is important to indicate that a single respondent sometimes would move across a range of repertoires during an interview. Below, I discuss a few selected excerpts illustrating the way in which dominant interpretative repertoires function in practice, closely analysing the shifts in emphasis that take place as well as the implications of these 'subject positions' in relation to the literature. Due to space limitations, I discuss only two excerpts for each repertoire. However, during interviews, there were countless instances of this kind of talk, both within and across participants' accounts, thereby qualifying it as 'dominant' and yet contradictory interpretative repertoires. The five interpretative repertoires are the 'rights' repertoire; the 'embrace your refugee identity' repertoire; the 'protected refugee' repertoire; the 'victimised refugee' repertoire and the 'criminalised refugee' repertoire. These are presented below.

The 'rights' repertoire

Most of the participants invoked this type of repertoire suggesting that living in South Africa as a refugee is advantageous in terms of enjoying certain rights and privileges such as living without fear of being arbitrarily arrested and incarcerated; and the right to free movement. They also talked about the right to study and work. In this interpretative repertoire, therefore, South Africa is constructed as a country which provides rights and freedoms to all refugees. Note for instance, Elsa, a twenty-seven-year-old female refugee who has been in South Africa for six years. After staying in the national service for more than seven years, Elsa fled Eritrea in 2008 by crossing the border into Sudan with the help of smugglers in Eritrea. Elsa emphasises the importance of human rights, in her response when she said:

One thing that really makes me feel great about my refugeeness is the fact that I have the freedom of movement. I can work and go to college. I mean, as a refugee I am treated the same as South African citizens. I am really grateful to this country. We are not alienated as refugees but have rights and privileges as respected human beings. In other African countries, they don't extend such rights. I realised how much a human being is treated with respect when I came to this country. Back home, people are treated as prisoners, because people are not free. We have no rights in our home country and we are treated like slaves back home. *(Elsa, female participant)*

In the above response, being a refugee is associated with an identity that benefits from rights and privileges extended by the South African state. Elsa's mobilisation of the repertoire of rights could be interpreted as a reflection of the relative lack of rights which she experienced in Eritrea and certain rights she enjoys in South Africa. However, Elsa also compares South Africa with other African countries and claims that refugees in South Africa are better off. The productive tension between 'real' and 'imagined' experiences and the way in which this informs Elsa's interpretations and accounts are demonstrated by the fact that Elsa generally demonstrated a recognition that the basis of comparison is not just Eritrea, but the continent more generally, showing the effects of global connectedness and a transnational sensibility.

Another participant who mobilised the rights discourse is Abel, a twenty-nine-year-old refugee who has lived in South Africa for six years. He was in the military service in Eritrea and did not see a future for himself. He crossed into Sudan and eventually landed in South Africa upon hearing from friends that South Africa is a free country. I interviewed him in an Eritrean-owned restaurant. He drew on the rights repertoire, emphasising the effect of sadness he felt about living in Eritrea, where a 'rights' discourse is impossible:

We don't have rights back home, you know. Back home you don't own your own life. Your own life is controlled by the authoritarian government. It is a sad experience to live without rights. We refugees have rights in this country. We have too many rights here; as long as you are in this land, you are treated as a person with dignity. Back home there is no right, but here in South Africa it is different. *(Abel, male participant)*

In this excerpt, Abel mobilises the rights discourse in almost the same way as Elsa. Abel compares living in South Africa as a refugee with living in Eritrea. He emphasises that being a refugee in South Africa is comparably much better. Abel paints a picture of Eritrea as a country of no rights and ruled by authoritarianism. By doing so, he underscores his preference for living in South Africa as a refugee with rights and freedom. The mobilisation of the 'rights' discourse in Abel's account also attests to the variety of rights present in South Africa as opposed to the absence of rights in his home country. This discourse reflects the lived experiences of Abel and other refugees in South Africa who enjoy the right to

work, study, conduct business, access education, the freedom to movement and other rights and freedoms.

This discourse of rights mobilised by the participants corroborates Hepner's (2013) findings on Eritreans living in South Africa, Germany and the USA who draw on the rights found in their respective host countries whilst at the same time lamenting the absence of rights in Eritrea. Such a discourse tends to be absent in the experiences of Eritreans in host countries with hostile immigration policies, such as in Israel (Yacobi 2009; Lutterbeck 2009; Paz 2011; Lijnders 2012; Mainwaring 2012; Campbell, Hashimshony-Yaffe, and Yaron 2013; Müller 2016) and Malta (Lutterbeck 2009; Mainwaring 2012).

The 'embrace-your-refugee-identity' repertoire

This interpretative repertoire was mobilised by most of the study participants, who embraced their refugee identity without reluctance. Letay, a thirty-year-old female refugee in Pretoria, who has lived in South Africa for almost eight years, left Eritrea in 2001. Letay explained her acceptance of her refugee status as a kind of identity:

You have to be proud of who you are. I mean for now, 'refugee' is my identity. It is like if you are attending school, people will normally refer to you as 'student', because that is who you are. Even if you try to deny it, people will always see you as 'student'. I am not in my own country and I cannot return back to my country because it isn't safe to do so in a country of your own, and you are living as a refugee in another country, that is who you are. You have to accept it. Let's not live in denial, instead let's be realistic and accept who we are. *(Letay, female participant)*

Letay accepts her refugee identity as part of who she is by comparing it to other identities. She doesn't seem to resist or have a strong need to negotiate her refugee identity. Instead she normalises her refugee identity by claiming that since she could not return back to her home country in the foreseeable future, she had to live with her new-found refugee identity and embrace it. The interpretation of this discourse also needs to be seen in light of the perceived danger, for Eritreans who left Eritrea illegally, of returning back home due to possible imprisonment and other human rights violations. Letay, moreover, accepts her refugee identity as natural and as a salient feature of who she is. Nevertheless, the

comparison with a school-going 'student' suggests a transitory quality to the refugee identity too, underscoring her understanding of identities as fluid.

Another participant who mobilised a similar discourse is Ermias, a thirty-two-year-old refugee in Pretoria, who lived in South Africa for seven years and left Eritrea over ten years ago by crossing the border into Sudan. He did not like living in Sudan and therefore came to South Africa by crossing the border through Zimbabwe. 'To be a refugee is much better', he said. He is comfortable with his refugee identity in South Africa as demonstrated in his account, in a similar fashion to Letays:

As long as I am in this country with this refugee document, [displays his section 24 refugee document] then I will always remain a refugee. I shouldn't be negative about that because I should learn to live with this new identity. I mean, I should live with the fact that I am a refugee. Furthermore, it should be remembered that this refugee identity that I have is a source of safety for me. In fact I have to be proud of it and there is nothing to be embarrassed about it.
(Ermias, male participant)

Ermias accepts his refugee identity without question or resistance. He justifies his strong identification with his refugee identity by arguing that as long as he carried his refugee status document, he remained a refugee. Ermias rationalises his acceptance of his refugee identity by arguing that to be a refugee guarantees safety in terms of protection. Ermias' discourse on the embrace of his refugee identity appears to reflect both the influence of an ascribed refugee identity and his relative sense of safety as a refugee in South Africa compared to living in Eritrea.

This discourse seems to lend support to the experiences of recent Eritrean asylum-seekers in the USA and parts of Europe who embraced and asserted a refugee identity to emphasise and justify their asylum claim based on past experiences of human rights abuses back in Eritrea (Hepner 2013; 2015). This discourse is generally corroborated by studies such as McAfee (2012), who found that Iraqi refugees in the US embraced their new identity position as refugees, seeing the US as their new home. However, what is interesting about this discourse is that the refugee status document Eritrean refugees possessed largely informed their sense of who they are. The 'embrace-your-refugee-identity' repertoire can

be contrasted with findings by Kibreab (2000) on Eritrean refugees who distanced themselves from self-identifying as refugees, and who emphasised their national-origin identity as 'Eritrean', instead.

The 'protected refugee' repertoire

In this discourse, participants positioned themselves as secure and protected in South Africa. They cite their refugee status document as a shield against deportation. This discourse was ubiquitous across respondent accounts and emphasised the benefit of having a refugee status document in South Africa, as it saves them from being sent back to Eritrea. One of the participants who deployed this discourse is Lemlem, a female participant who was in the national service for more than six years before she crossed the border to Ethiopia and made her way to South Africa. She has been staying in South Africa for about eight years. Lemlem constructs being a refugee as a privileged status compared with non-refugee groups such as asylum-seekers:

That day I realised how lucky I was because at least I am not on asylum paper, you know. Because you can be deported any time if you are an asylum-seeker and if your claim is eventually rejected. In this country, having a refugee status document saves you from living in uncertainties. Therefore, for me it is a guarantee to have this refugee status document. I mean, I don't have to be worried. I mean, I am at least privileged to be a refugee, because I can live without worry; because getting deported means unsafe for us Eritreans.
(Lemlem, female participant)

Lemlem describes her refugee identity as a shield that protects her against deportation. Lemlem justifies this by comparing her refugee status, which she describes as a guarantee, with asylum-seekers whom she positions as a vulnerable group in South Africa, prone to possible deportations. Lemlem characterises Eritrea as an unsafe place to be sent back to. She appears to be horrified by her imagined return to Eritrea. This imagined danger of being deported back to Eritrea seems to reflect both Lemlem's past personal experiences in Eritrea and the general lack of freedom in Eritrea.

Similarly, Abel feels secure to have refugee status in South Africa:

Sometimes being a refugee makes you realise that your life is secure, you know. Let's say suddenly the government decides to arrest all

illegal immigrants in this country and deport them, who do you think will stand a chance to not be deported? It is a refugee. I suppose there are many illegal immigrants in this country. That is why to be a refugee is an advantage. I mean in such situations, having a refugee status document gives you security. You would even be motivated to display your refugee identity to let people know that you are legal in this country. (*Abel, male participant*)

This 'protected refugee' repertoire is mobilised to show the power of refugee status in South Africa as a guarantee against deportation. In Abel's account, a hypothetical scenario is presented in which mass deportation of undocumented migrants in South Africa occurs. Therefore, a strong sense of the 'relative advantage' of refugees over other vulnerable groups in South Africa seems to have shaped Abel's views. There is also evidence of an underlying concern about the possibility of a large-scale state intervention, perhaps pointing to a general sense of insecurity about the situation in South Africa.

Moreover, the imagined fear and terror of being deported back to Eritrea tends to reflect deteriorating human rights conditions in the country, such as forced conscription, absence of freedom of expression and movement, political repression and pervasive state surveillance (Treiber 2009; Hepner 2013, 2015; Belloni 2016). The 'protected refugee' repertoire seems far less pronounced in Eritrean refugee/asylum-seeker communities found in settings with harsh immigration policies such as Israel (Lutterbeck 2009; Yacobi 2009; Paz 2011; Lijnders 2012; Mainwaring 2012; Campbell, Hashimshony-Yaffe and Yaron 2013; Müller 2016) and Malta (Afeef 2009) where asylum-seekers are threatened with deportations.

The 'victimised refugee' repertoire

By drawing upon this repertoire, participants made sense of their refugee experiences as targets of violence by local South Africans. Particularly, participants stated that they felt uncomfortable with disclosing their refugee identity and their foreignness to local South Africans who they did not know, for fear of being targeted. They perceived cities in South Africa to be safer spaces, whereas smaller towns were deemed unsafe for refugees.

In the following response, Medhin constructs refugees in South Africa as targets of hostility. Medhin is a business man, and has shops both in Pretoria and in Soshanguve, a township located 20km away from Pretoria. He travels frequently to Soshanguve to his shop. He said he did not disclose his refugee identity when in townships for fear of encountering hostility by local South Africans in those spaces:

Therefore, as I have told you, to people that I know, or to people that are very close to me, yes, I let them know that I am a refugee, so yes. But, I think it isn't safe to disclose who you are when you go to smaller towns; they aren't safe unlike Pretoria. I mean in almost all the towns outside the big cities, there is a lot of hostility and danger. Especially the people there are hostile to foreigners. I don't feel safe in those places to let people know who I am, I mean to let them know that I am a refugee because it isn't safe. (*Medhin, male participant*)

Medhin exhibits fear when talking about disclosing his refugee identity to strangers and especially those living in townships where he believes, violence towards refugees is rampant.

Another participant who also drew on a repertoire of victimhood is Sibhat, a twenty-four-year-old refugee who lives in Pretoria. Sibhat has been living as a refugee for over six years in South Africa. He left Eritrea a decade ago after serving in the military for over five years. In the following extract, Sibhat notes that being a refugee in South Africa could mean being a target of violence:

I reveal my refugee status to the people I feel secure around, not just to anyone else because I always would like to identify myself as a refugee if the person I am interacting with is not hostile. I mean, there are some local people who want to know who you are, just because they intend to take advantage of you. I mean, you know, they won't treat you in the same way as local South Africans. I mean once you reveal yourself as a refugee, people can take advantage of you and approach you in a hostile way. I mean, you have to be cautious sometimes. I mean, I am not saying all South Africans are hostile towards refugees, but there are those who target those that are not South Africans. (*Sibhat, male participant*)

Sibhat is careful not to disclose his refugee identity during social interactions with strangers for fear of being targeted. By doing so, he positions himself as a victimised refugee in South

Africa. He regards his refugee identity as a marker that attracts hostility from local South Africans. By mobilising the repertoire of victimhood, Sibhat positions some South Africans as being hostile towards those who they perceive to be foreigners.

The interpretative repertoire of a 'victimised refugee' mobilised by the participants above seem to reflect concern about xenophobia and hostility in South Africa towards those perceived as foreigners. This is backed up by research such as by Crush (2001) and Hassim, Kupe and Worby (2008). The victimhood repertoire and the need for concealment were also noted by Polzer's (2004) study in relation to Mozambican refugees in South Africa. It also appears in other settings, for example Yacobi's (2009) findings on racism expressed towards asylum-seekers in Israel by local communities. It also corroborates findings by Vanderhurst (2007) that asylum-seekers in Ireland attempted to conceal their asylum-seekers immigration status to avoid marginalisation and hostility by locals. Importantly, in contrast to the rights repertoire, the victimhood repertoire constructs ordinary South Africans as the danger rather than the state.

The 'criminalised refugee' repertoire

In this interpretative repertoire, participants described their refugee identity as an object of negative stereotypes that criminalise all refugees. Across most of the individual interviews, participants argue that local South Africans tended to perceive refugees as the cause of crime in South Africa.

In the following response, Letay, who previously embraced her refugee identity, talks about her experience of her refugee identity as criminalised:

Some people talk about refugees in negative ways and I feel uncomfortable when I hear such things. Foreigners are always seen as people who commit crimes and this makes me uncomfortable and uneasy. Every time negative comments are made about refugees, such attitudes make me to always be self-conscious. I mean it isn't a good thing. All foreigners are not the same because we have a lot of differences. Therefore, people shouldn't generalise. It doesn't mean all of us are involved in crimes, you know. *(Letay, female participant)*

Letay mobilises the 'criminalised refugee' repertoire to explain how refugees and foreigners are erroneously associated with criminal activities. She claims that the refugee/foreigner label in South Africa invokes images of a criminal outsider for local South Africans, and is seen to have come to South Africa to perpetrate crimes. She maintains that the association of crime with refugee and foreigner is pervasive. Letay, towards the end, describes the criminalising of foreigners/refugees by the South African mainstream society as irrational since foreigners and refugees are not a homogenous group.

In the following extract, Abel, who deployed both the 'rights' and the 'protection' repertoires, shifts position in describing his refugee identity as a negatively stereotyped identity:

As refugees, we are always judged as criminals. People say negative things about refugees and due to this reason I try to hide my refugee identity. I mean, sometimes I overhear people talking about refugees negatively. I mean, they say that we are the cause of all the crimes in this country. But we all refugees aren't the same. Some are good and some are bad. As a refugee, I always feel like hiding my identity, you know. People here sometimes blame bad things happening in this country on refugees. *(Abel, male participant)*

In an almost similar fashion to Letay, Abel describes his refugee identity as a demonised label in South Africa's public discourse. He relates how pervasive, within the South African society, this discourse of criminalising refugees/foreigners is. And like Letay, he characterises the negative stereotyping of all refugees as irrational, arguing that all refugees in South Africa were not the same. In Abel's discourse, South Africans are positioned as people who do the stereotyping and criminalising, while refugees living in South Africa are positioned as the objects of such a negative stereotype. Furthermore, Abel emphasises how such criminalisation prompted him to attempt to hide his foreignness order to remain invisible.

The 'criminalised refugee' repertoire seems to reflect both the personal lived experiences of the study participants and pervasive media images and public perceptions in South Africa that associate the refugee/asylum-seeker/foreigner with criminality (Blignaut and Sadiki 2013; Hweshe 2013). As noted above, Letay and Abel mobilise contradictory repertoires

when talking about their experiences. She accepted her refugee identity earlier while simultaneously juxtaposing this against a negative repertoire of a 'criminalised refugee'. Abel also mobilised a rights repertoire commending the South African state for extending various rights, yet, he also drew upon a 'criminalised refugee' repertoire to make sense of his everyday encounters with local South Africans.

CONCLUSION

The article illuminates some of the interpretative repertoires the Eritrean refugees adopted to make sense of their experiences as refugees in South Africa. By describing their refugee identities and experiences in positive ways, such as expressed by their 'we have rights', 'embrace your refugee identity', and 'the protected refugee' repertoires, participants maintained and glorified their refugee identities. These were however contradicted by their negative description through the 'the victimised refugee' and 'the criminalised refugee' repertoires, through which they demonstrated resentment towards their refugee identities and experiences. Participants, therefore, gave meaning to their refugee identities and experiences through multiple, contradictory interpretative repertoires. Such multiple, contradictory repertoires did not only feature in individual participants' responses but were common across their responses. In part, this can be ascribed to the study design, which is explicitly focused on a close analysis of discourse and therefore pays attention to seeming inconsistencies. However, these inconsistencies and contradictions also give rise to a specific constellation of meaning, which I describe as ambivalent and to some extent 'bipolar'.

In order to make sense of this phenomenon, it is necessary to understand that the content of these repertoires are a reflection on, (1) the specific political conditions in participants' country of origin from which they fled; (2) their experiences of the South African social and political contexts; and (3) to some extent also the broader transnational context linked to the Eritrean Diaspora. Seen like this, it is the South African experience in particular that seems to be generative of the contradictory repertoires Eritrean refugees deploy, indicating strong acceptance, ambivalence as well as rejection of the refugee identity. Similarly, the participants' past experiences in their country of origin, Eritrea, lacking in a culture of human rights and ruled by repressive authoritarianism generated negative repertoires. On

the other hand, ordinary South Africans are constructed as possibly rejecting and as potential sources of xenophobic violence. In this regard, respondents seem to suggest that they feel freer and more protected in cosmopolitan cities rather than in rural towns. A strong awareness of their relative security in relation to more vulnerable groups, including asylum-seekers but also undocumented and illegal migrants, contributed to the more positive associations ascribed to being a refugee. The distinction between the construction of 'the state as provider of rights' and 'ordinary citizens as sources of threat' then explains why respondents tend to employ contradictory repertoires.

In contrast to some recent scholarship on Eritreans, participants in this study did not report on experiences of hostility from pro-Eritrean government Eritreans as was the case with Eritreans in other countries such as the USA and Germany. While it is not clear why this is the case, it could be due to the fact that the interviewed participants are from 'generation asylum' who fled persecution and repression by the current government (Hepner2015). The current Eritrean regime is therefore seen as a source of threat.

Participants did not evoke much of the transnational context linked to the Eritrean Diaspora, or settlement elsewhere on the continent as a strong reference point for their interpretative repertoires. When they did, it was mostly as a negative foil for their experience in South Africa, and seemed to be based on experiences in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia.

Finally, interpretative repertoires should not be understood as consistent and fixed ways of describing and talking about experiences, but as illuminating situational discursive resources deployed by interviewees. A focus on interpretative repertoires counters a tendency towards one-dimensional accounts of refugee identities (and of research subjects more generally) as unified and fixed. In this article, refugee participants demonstrated agency as competent social actors capable of interpreting and reflecting upon their experiences, thereby resisting the dominant institutional representations perspective on refugees, and thus adding to our understanding of the experience of being a refugee for a particular group of refugees in a specific socio-historical context.

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