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Risky business and geographies of refugee capitalism in the Somali migrant economy of Gauteng, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Research on migrant livelihoods in South Africa reveals links between social exclusion and migrant ‘cosmopolitan tactics’, including multi-sited socialities, diverse spatial business strategies and orientations precluding integration into a ‘xenophobic’ host society. Drawing on 10 months of ethnographic research, this study explores how Somali migrants’ business practices and tactics of mobility within and beyond Gauteng Province, South Africa (which encompasses Johannesburg and Pretoria) articulate with both broader transnational flows and investments in the local economy. Since the end of apartheid, Somalis and other migrants from the Horn of Africa have carved out an economic niche in peri-urban townships where high risk and frequent movement characterise workers’ lives. The Somali enclave in the neighbourhood of Mayfair, Johannesburg, links local and national circulations of people, goods and money to international circuits of the Somali ethnic economy—an economy that also involves non-Somali groups, mainly from Kenya and Ethiopia. These diverse dynamics of human mobility and financial circulation complicate bounded conceptualisations of transnationalism and also illustrate how tactical cosmopolitanisms may be grounded in spatial and social arrangements. The convergence of migrant mobility and financial flows produces distinctive patterns of livelihood embedded in a multi-scalar geography of movement, remittance, investment, risk and opportunity.

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Introduction

During the 2010 FIFA World Cup, virtually everyone in South Africa became familiar with the work of at least one Somali refugee: ‘Wavin’ Flag’, by Somali-Canadian singer K’Naan, blared in shops and could be heard hummed in Johannesburg’s taxi ranks and whistled in the streets. Many of Johannesburg’s youths knew every word of the song describing a proud African hope, written by a singer who embodies possibilities of refugee transnationalism. For less-known refugees and other migrants in South Africa whose work has produced more visible impacts on the economic and social landscape, these ideals of African unity and transnational possibility are uncomfortably juxtaposed to realities of violent exclusion for African migrants (Neocosmos 2010). Somali businessmen in South Africa’s townships feature in press and research as targets of ‘xenophobic’ violence (Moftah 2015; Fihlani 2011; *Mail and Guardian* 2009). Vicious anti-foreigner spectacles circulate in online videos, such as the YouTube clip showing Abdinasir Mahmoud being stoned to death near Port Elizabeth in 2013 (Essa 2013). Despite such dangerous prospects, Somalis continue to operate shops in South Africa’s townships and to consolidate close-knit enclaves in inner-city areas.

Socially and discursively defined by their displacement, some migrants adopt sets of practices that Landau and Freemantle (2010, 382) term ‘cosmopolitan tactics’, entailing multi-sited socialities, economies and categories of belonging ‘that transcend national borders and are, in some cases, so fluid as to almost transcend territory altogether’. Such de-centred sets of practices reveal the limitations of bounded concepts of transnationalism as a linkage between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’ (Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007) and indicate the need to reconceptualise the multiple sites and nested scales involved in geographies of migrant life and livelihood. Cosmopolitan idioms of belonging and transnational activities may transcend territories to varying degrees, but everyday practices of migrants are inscribed in South Africa’s urban fabric as groups carve out spaces of belonging and livelihood, such as business enclaves, ethnic malls and economic networks that exploit niche markets (Grant and Thompson 2015; Zack 2015).

This article explores how cosmopolitan tactics and more grounded modes of belonging and investment articulate within processes of migration and financial circulation across multiple scales. Somali migrants’ business strategies and economic networks map onto the fractured post-apartheid socio-economic landscape of Gauteng Province—the site of South Africa’s most populous city-region (cf. Murray 2011; Crankshaw 2008)—in ways that produce distinct life patterns and economic opportunities. Somalis and other migrants from the Horn of Africa have carved out a business niche in South Africa’s sprawling townships, where bootstrap entrepreneurship and diaspora finances overlap to provide high-risk livelihoods for refugees working to create a new life and to support families left behind in the Horn. The tight-knit Somali ethnic enclave in the neighbourhood of Mayfair, Johannesburg, serves as a hub of social, financial and physical infrastructures that facilitate the circulation of people, goods and money within Gauteng while also linking these movements to international circuits of the Somali ethnic economy. Processes of circulation and investment produce a distinct migrant space that is nevertheless embedded in the local economy and urban fabric of Johannesburg.

The paper proceeds in five main sections. The first briefly reviews conceptual underpinnings of transnationalism and forms of migrant integration, connecting these themes with studies on social and economic dynamics in the Somali diaspora. The second outlines the methodology of the study, which draws on 10 months of participant observation, focus group discussions, and structured interviews with Somalis in 12 sites across Gauteng.¹ The third contextualises Somali migration and business in South Africa. These provide the background for the fourth and fifth sections, which explore the two primary spaces of Somali economic and social life in Gauteng—dispersed township businesses and the close-knit ethnic enclave in Mayfair—and analyse how these lived spaces are reproduced and co-constituted through the articulation of a broader Somali diaspora society and economy with the post-apartheid landscape of South African urbanism.

Migration, transnational finance and forms of integration

By mid-2011, the displacement of Somalis in the wake of the Somali government’s 1991 collapse was estimated at nearly 1.5 million persons. At the outset of the conflict, many fled to the Somali regions of Kenya and Ethiopia, but hundreds of thousands gradually dispersed across the Middle East and refugee-receiving countries of the Global North (Hammond 2013). By the late 1990s, as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) resettled Somali refugees in Europe and North America, many households relied on money transfer networks and instant communications technologies as they adopted strategies that separated families according to labour market conditions and resettlement opportunities. As an example of the numerous social-spatial differentiations within the Somali diaspora, by 2000 it was estimated that 80% of Somalis living in Saudi Arabia were men, while over 60% of those in the UK were women (Ahmed 2000). Likewise, hundreds of Somali women pursue domestic jobs in Italy and send money to husbands and children residing elsewhere (Decimo 2007).

The multi-sited networks of the Somali diaspora reflect certain aspects of transnationalism—defined as ‘grassroots’ international activity ‘conducted by the foreign-born as part of their daily lives abroad’ (Portes, Escobar, and Radford 2007, 252). Among the most widely studied facets of transnationalism is the flow of money (often through informal channels) back to migrant communities of origin, a central part of migrant participation in ‘globalisation from below’ (Vertovec 2004; Portes 2003). Remittance flows to the Horn of Africa are immense, comprising an estimated 25–40% of Somaliland’s GDP in 2013. Remittances from Somalis in America in 2012 (estimated at over US\$200 million) approached the total humanitarian and development assistance provided to Somalia by the US government that year (Orozco and Yansura 2013). Some studies argue that the regularity with which migrants engage in transnational activity reflects deterritorialised orientations that discourage integration into a host society (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994), but recent analysis suggests that transnational activism may enhance forms of integration. For example, Somali migrants seek social and economic security in the UK in order to be more effectively involved in the Horn of Africa, even if this does not mean becoming ‘more British’. While most Somalis in the UK engage in transnational activities, those who have citizenship and enhanced access to education and employment generally have the greatest capacity for fulfilling transnational obligations including political involvement in the Horn and remittances to family members (Hammond 2013).

Today’s massive system of Somali money transfer operators (MTOs) that facilitates networks of transnational finance evolved from the *franco valuta* system utilised by Somali migrants working in Persian Gulf oilfields during the 1970s. Aid agencies working in Somalia after the collapse of the government in 1991 encouraged the growth of ‘informal’ financial infrastructure, frequently using Somali MTOs to pay employees and local contractors (Lindley 2009). The international expansion of Somali MTOs undergirds multinational Somali business networks (Little 2013) and complex patterns of human mobility that stretch beyond relations between ‘home’ and ‘abroad’. Durand’s (1988) term ‘migradollars’ conveys the multidirectionality and numerous uses of such financial flows. Remittances to families constitute the largest flow of migradollars and are crucial for fulfilling basic needs of individuals left behind in the Horn (Hammond et al. 2011; Lindley 2010). Yet migradollars are also important for other uses: an estimated 80 per cent of all business investment financing in Somalia is diaspora money, and many businesses in Somalia are run by Somali migrants returned from abroad (Sheikh and Healy 2009). Steady migradollar flows reinforce the argument that the Somali diaspora’s success in transnational development stems from ownership and trust kept within the Somali community, consolidated by common experiences of displacement (Hammond et al. 2011).

Despite the hailed status of the Somali diaspora as ‘the very epitome of transnationalism in its outlook and behaviour’ (Jones, Ram, and Theodorakopoulos 2010, 566), practices of multinational mobility and migradollar flows that are not ‘remitted’ to home countries push the conceptual boundaries of transnationalism. Consider the case of an Ethiopian Somali migrant who received citizenship in Norway and learned Norwegian and English before moving to South Africa to start a business. Through his South African enterprise, he provides for his father in Ethiopia while also occasionally receiving financial support from his mother and sister in Sweden. Perhaps this example reflects a more deterritorialised ‘cosmopolitan’ relationship to globalising processes, entailing philosophical individualism, cultural openness and disembeddedness from local contexts (Hannerz 1990; Pogge 1992). Nijman (2007, 182) conceptualises cosmopolitans as ‘highly mobile’ and ‘generally affluent’, many of them holding dual citizenship and international connections. Landau and Freemantle’s (2010) tactical cosmopolitanism entails shallowly rooted practices that draw on local institutions and socio-legal structures while avoiding close association with either locals or other migrants. Vernacular cosmopolitanisms may exhibit various scales, from acting as bulwarks against ethnic mobilisation in certain neighbourhoods (Landau 2015) to distancing migrants from compatriots even within ethnicised spaces. In Johannesburg, tactical cosmopolitanism’s de-centred nature appears in migrant discourses that reveal ‘a tactical effort to gain access to the city, but without a view of becoming exclusively or even partially bound to it or any other concrete locale’ (Landau and Freemantle 2010, 384).

While individual migrants may voice cosmopolitan discourses, ethnic and immigrant economies in South Africa have anchored themselves in concrete locales, particularly in inner-city areas. Exclusion from the host society and soaring unemployment rates encourage migrant self-employment in niche markets, giving rise to such discernible migrant concentrations in Johannesburg as the Ethiopian business district on Jeppe Street and the Somali enclave of Eighth Avenue, Mayfair (Grant and Thompson 2015; Zack 2015; Jinnah 2010). The intersection of transnational practices and cosmopolitan orientations in these migrant zones of the city raises questions about how different types of mobility and multi-scalar economic flows connect with social and spatial patterns of migrant life and livelihood. This study explores these issues in the context of the Somali migrant economy of Gauteng, revealing the interplay of disembedded mobility and local investment, as well as stratification and solidarity, inherent in Somali 'refugee capitalism' in Gauteng.

Methodology

Participant observation in Gauteng's Somali community began in June–July 2010, primarily through informal language lessons, time spent in Somali restaurants and lounges in the Mayfair Somali enclave, and participation in community social events. In 2011 and 2012 the author conducted research while staying in a lodge on Eighth Avenue, which provided insight into the daily workings of the ethnic economy. Three focus groups with Somalis in Mayfair centred on perspectives about the Somali economy, violence against township businesses, and the relative safety of townships around Gauteng. Most individuals involved in the focus groups (predominantly men)² had previously worked in townships, which informants referred to almost exclusively as 'the locations' (*tuulooyinka*, Somali for rural villages). For consistency with informant reports, the term *location* is used interchangeably with *township* in this article.

Informed by focus group results, in late 2011 and early 2012 the author conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with Somali men in Mayfair and 43 in selected locations surrounding Johannesburg and Pretoria (see Figure 1). Because randomly visiting migrant shops in townships could draw unwanted attention to these businesses, a snowball method was used to locate township shops, and two to eight shops were visited in each location. Interviews were also conducted in Pretoria West³ and the Asiatic Bazaar area of Pretoria. The interviews were conducted in English or in mixed English and Somali, with a translator assisting to ensure clarity of information. Interviews focused on (1) firm and worker attributes and histories; (2) economics of the enterprise; and (3) connections with and perceptions of the host society in Gauteng. Some informants preferred not to offer specific, detailed information, and it was often difficult to interview more than one employee per shop due to the busy nature of business operation. Many migrants volunteered to share the entire history of their migration and life in South Africa, and selections have been drawn from some of these narratives.

Somali migration and settlement in South Africa

Somali migrants from Kenya and Ethiopia⁴ joined refugees fleeing the collapsed state of Somalia during the 1990s and heading southward, drawn by economic opportunity in South Africa's newly opened markets. Following South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, Somalis gradually took over several blocks along Eighth Avenue in Mayfair, an inner suburb west of the Johannesburg central business district (CBD). The Somalis joined an established South Asian Muslim community in the neighbourhood (Sadouni 2009). Through a combination of exclusion and choice, Somalis differentiated themselves from the beginning, establishing their own mosque and *madrasas* (although many Somalis continue to worship at mosques with predominantly South Asian congregations) and setting up a shopping centre that caters primarily to Somali customers. At first, many Somalis rented houses and commercial buildings on and around Eighth Avenue, but as the Somali community established itself, migrants began purchasing structures and



Figure 1. Map of Gauteng showing study areas.

reconstructing them to fit their needs, including constructing business spaces in former residences and splitting lots into multiple premises.

While studies have suggested that Gauteng's Somalis 'are located almost exclusively in the neighbourhood of Mayfair' (Krause-Vilmar, and Chaffin 2011, 4), it was amidst the burgeoning populations and growing purchasing power in the predominantly Black peripheral townships that Somalis discovered a promising retail market niche. Sprawling, largely impoverished residential townships lie on the margins of most of South Africa's cities and exemplify racial and economic divisions that linger decades after apartheid (Crankshaw 2008). Historically, most townships were residential zones where Blacks were barred from conducting formal business. The collapse of apartheid opened opportunities for entrepreneurs to bridge spatial divisions by purchasing goods from urban (usually White or Indian) wholesalers and re-selling them in marginalised and sometimes dangerous areas where many business people were reluctant to take the risk. Numerous Somali migrants who arrived in South Africa during the 1990s report having begun business as itinerant hawkers and eventually saved enough money to open small convenience stores known as *spazas* in the locations (cf. Gastrow and Amit 2013). Other migrant groups also entered this economic space, but informants claim that Somalis came to predominate in more dangerous areas partly because of the willingness of young Somali men to take the risk in order to provide for their families left at home in the Horn. Low wages required by newly arrived refugees, ethnic social capital facilitating trust and employment, and networks with South Asian wholesalers in Mayfair and Fordsburg also enabled Somali location enterprise.

Somali migrants have continued to move southward through the present, drawn by chain migration and pushed by insurgent violence. Recent estimates place the number of Somalis residing

in South Africa between 25,000 and 45,000 (Krause-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011). Generally spoken of as a ‘refugee’ community (Jinnah 2010; Sadouni 2009), South Africa’s Somali population exhibits heterogeneity in background, wealth and migration status, suggesting the usefulness of conceptualising the group as ‘practical’ rather than strictly bounded by ethnicity or refugee status (Bourdieu 1985). The ethnic economy is constructed and reproduced by practices differentiating spaces and networks characterised by shared region of origin and experience of displacement. It includes individuals from groups such as Borana (Oromo) and Gabbra that hail from the East African borderlands where, according to one Oromo informant, ‘the government wasn’t looking after us’ (Z, Mayfair, January 2012). Sloughing off identification with their home countries, ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia and Kenya often seek and receive the same legal status as refugees from Somalia; Ethiopian nationals are also granted political asylum in the country. Meanwhile, wealthy Somalis frequently obtain business visas or become citizens in South Africa while remaining engaged in the Somali migrant economy and community. Somali citizens of North American and European countries also play a significant role in the ethnic economy, whether by moving to South Africa for business or investing from abroad.

Two contexts of violence—war at home and xenophobia in South Africa—frame Somali identity and experience in South Africa, frequently described along the lines of ‘out of the fire, into the frying pan’ (X, Mayfair, January 2012). The journey from Somalia to South Africa is no walk in the park, either: numerous informants, particularly those who migrated after 2006, reported having been imprisoned or bribing corrupt officials along the way. After arriving in South Africa, many Somalis look for opportunities to move on to other countries. A number of men working in the townships send money to wives and children left behind in Kenyan refugee camps to await resettlement. Husbands then seek to re-join their families if the wives and children are selected for refugee relocation to Europe or North America. Xenophobic violence also enables migrants to open hardship cases for UNHCR resettlement from South Africa.

Research elsewhere suggests that the extent to which economic and spatial practice contributes to the reproduction of the migrant identity may make Somali migrant communities ‘more Somali’ than families in Somalia (Isotalo 2007), indicating how ‘Somaliness’ (*Soomaalinimo*) is constituted through practices that enact group boundaries. A typical statement reveals the intersection of identity and economic practice: ‘When we came to South Africa ... we never got people to employ us. So we employed ourselves’ (E, Pretoria West, January 2012). Closely concentrated in space and niche markets, and loosely bounded by ethnicity, language and a sociality of statelessness, the Somali ethnic economy also has its rivalries, clan divisions and violence, paralleling the complex interplay of homogeneity and division in the Horn of Africa (Thompson and Grant 2015).

The expansive distribution of Somali-owned shops in townships generates the financial backbone of the Somali economy in South Africa, and the remainder of this article explores how business dynamics and circulations through far-flung township enterprises reproduce the tightly knit ethnic enclave in Mayfair as they articulate with international flows of people and money. Migradollar networks in which township shops are inserted are an important and yet under-theorised aspect of Somali migration in South Africa, and have recently received attention amidst media charges of Somali township shops ‘funding African terror’ (Child 2015). Such accusations are tied up with migrant extraction of finances from impoverished township areas and with frustration amidst the success of migrant businesses in a country where the unemployment rate remains upwards of 25% (Statistics South Africa 2014). The combination of violent exclusion and business opportunities in townships, and the ways in which these shops function within migradollar networks, produce a distinct social and economic geography of Somali life in Gauteng.

The Somali location (township) niche

Somalis’ work as middlemen connecting White- and Indian-owned wholesalers in cities with customers in surrounding townships places them in a particularly dangerous social space. Surveys of

townships across South Africa reveal that migrant shopkeepers are more frequently targeted in violence against businesses than are South African nationals (Gastrow and Amit 2013; CDS 2010). Violence against foreigners is most likely to occur in poor (but not the poorest) townships with a high population of young males (Polzer 2010). Attacks are often fomented by rival business owners or local leaders seeking to strengthen their political and economic positions (Krause-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011), but are undergirded and legitimated by anti-immigrant rhetoric and official practice that tends to inspire little fear of reprisal or imprisonment (Neocosmos 2010). Increasing numbers of Somali-owned shops over the past decade and the low cost of Somali goods likely contribute to violence-inducing business competition (Misago 2009). Somalis report that their business strategies that facilitate business competitiveness involve low margin and high turnover, long hours of operations, breaking down goods into small quantities (a single tea bag or $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sugar), and extension of credit to impoverished customers. Somalis' main contribution to the local economy, according to informants, is to bring low-cost goods to South African consumers in the locations.

From its beginnings as a self-employment survival strategy for Somali migrants, *spaza* business in the locations has expanded into capitalist enterprise characterised by shops with multiple shareholders and usually three to five employees (see Figure 2). Premises are usually rented from township residents, providing income for South African landlords. Somalis also often hire a South African woman to clean the shop, but rarely (if ever) retain male South African employees—their main connections to the local setting are relationships with consumers. While many migrants work in a shop in which they also share ownership, the business space is increasingly dominated by investors who do not necessarily work in the shops themselves, instead employing recent refugees and spreading risk by holding shares in multiple businesses. The market niche even draws investment from wealthier Somalis who have already established themselves in Europe or North America but seek to extend their investments while keeping finances within trustworthy kin and clan networks.

Employment in Somali-owned location shops serves as the entry point for the majority of young Somali men entering South Africa in hopes of providing remittances to families in the Horn. Upon arrival, a migrant will look for his or her family, and 'if he doesn't have family, he will get his tribe. So



Figure 2. Somali location spaza shop (Photo by author).

his tribe will help him when he is a newcomer' (Q, Mayfair, January 2012). Obtaining a job, however, in some cases requires special connections, and it is common for a recent migrant to work as a 'helper' in a shop before obtaining a paid position. Somali location firms are largely, though not universally, characterised by clan ties or shared cities of origin: 17 of 23 township shops that provided information on ethnicity and clan ties reported that all employees were members of the same clan or originated in the same region (*gobol*) of Somalia.

Family and clan ties serve to produce a social infrastructure that supports newly arrived migrants. Yet social capital that facilitates employment may also present obligations that place individuals in dangerous or exploitative situations. New arrivals may also be hired without clan connections because of their ignorance of the situation in the locations: some arrive thinking 'that they are going to change their life. And at last they will find different things ... different from the previous opinion they had about [South Africa]' (K, Mayfair, January 2012). The story of informant Q reveals a dangerous side of social capital and the obligations that may come with it, and suggests the reliance of business owners on hiring relatives and newly arrived Somali migrants. A wealthy South African citizen, Q's uncle owned a shop near Rustenburg that became the sight of several dramatic incidents:

[Thieves] killed in my uncle's shop in the locations ... They killed two guys; they shot them ... My uncle called me. I left my job here [in Mayfair] and went to my uncle's shop ... My uncle gave me a gun. He said I must stay there. I was working—me and my uncle's brother's son were there—only the two of us ... Early in the morning they came to us—the same guys who killed those [other Somali workers]. They just tied us up. That day I survived. I could have died ... I told [my coworker], 'Give whatever money you have. Let them take it'. Because life is more important than money.

One of the assailants was someone that Q knew by sight, who lived near the shop. Q reported that this man asked the other thief in Zulu if Q had seen his face, and the other said he had not.

But that guy saved me, man. God saved me, but that guy talked, he says, 'he didn't see you.' He should have killed me. Same time I called my uncle, I said, 'Uncle, here is your gun, here is everything. I'm out of here. Whatever money you pay me, I'm not staying here.' But Somalian newcomers came ... they worked in the shop. Three months back, another Somalian guy got killed there. (Q, Mayfair, January 2012)

While Somali location enterprises often rely heavily on newly arrived migrants, a significant number of Somalis continue to brave the location context for years after their arrival, some earning enough to invest in their own businesses and dramatically increase their wealth. The perspectives of many Somalis who have fled the locations reflect the combination of lucrative and tragic possibilities that the townships hold: according to an informant who had previously worked in Soshanguve and Mamelodi, in the locations 'you can make more money, but it's not safe' (S, Pretoria, January 2012).

Among the primary motivations for undertaking risky work in the locations are the prospect of making enough money to support family members in the Horn of Africa and the possibility of saving enough money to branch out into other business. The need for remittances was the most common impetus expressed by informants: 'I left behind brothers, mom, other close relatives ... It was the main reason I arrived in this country, to work for them, so it was compulsory' (K, Mayfair, January 2012). Families in the Horn 'are waiting for something from me every month' (AO, Mayfair, January 2012). Of 22 township shopkeepers who provided information on remittances, 19 (86%) reported sending money every month, two (9%) said they could only afford to send money occasionally, and one had brought his family to South Africa and did not regularly send remittances. The average reported monthly income of the 10 township informants who provided this information was about US\$412.⁵ The three informants who both worked and held shares in township *spazas* reported much higher earnings of \$780 per month on average, while the seven employees reported an average of just under \$260 per month (the lowest reported income for shareholders was \$650 and the highest for employees was \$300). The average amount *spaza* shopkeepers reported remitting was US\$167.50 per month, with employee remittances averaging nearly 54% of their income and shareholders

about 40% of theirs. These self-reported figures may be exaggerated, but informants consistently emphasised that a major draw of location employment is that employers provide housing (usually in a back room of the shop or in an adjacent structure) and food is taken from the stock, which allows employees to remit more money.

These practices also enable employees to save money in order to start their own businesses in the future. The small amount of start-up capital required and the high turnover make the locations a potential stepping-stone for entrepreneurs. 'In town, actually, the sales are so small. In the locations it's better', reported one informant who in 2011 became a shareholder in a large shop in Pretoria West after working in other locations for over seven years. 'That's our foundation we started from' (E, Pretoria West, January 2012).

Township violence and social relations

Within Gauteng Province, several locations were consistently named as more dangerous than others—including Soweto, Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, Katlehong, and Thokoza. Interviews were conducted in each of these locations except for Mamelodi, and also in several other townships (Tembisa, Matholeville, Kagiso, Bram Fischerville). Of the 43 location shops visited, three reported attempted robberies within 24 hours prior to the interview. One of these attacks was allegedly carried out successfully by the thieves and sent a Somali employee in Soweto to the hospital with a skull injury. An additional four shops reported an attempted or successful armed robbery within the previous 10 days. The average for all 43 shops was about one attack every three months. One employee in Soweto reported having worked there for two years without ever seeing an attack. In some areas, violence appeared very localised: in Thokoza, for example, one shop reported one month since the most recent violent incident while two nearby shops reported attempted robberies within the previous 48 hours.

Most of the violent incidents reported were robberies or attempted robberies rather than murders or shop burnings like those that characterise broader outbreaks of xenophobic violence such as those in 2008 or early 2015. However, several shopkeepers reported being shot, being shot at, or having their shop burned. 'Every night we are at war ... especially weekends', reported a shareholder in a shop in Katlehong that had bullet holes in the roll-down sheet metal door. In a nearby *spaza*, the cashier held a handgun beneath the counter in his left hand while distributing change to customers with his right. Only a month prior to our interview a local gang had attempted to burn the shop down with paraffin while the three workers were sleeping inside. The shopkeepers phoned the neighbouring Somali shop (the one with the bullet holes in the door), whose employees put out the fire with wet blankets.

Township violence does not emanate solely from civilian residents, or even from South African nationals. Shopkeepers consistently reported police negligence and abuse, and informant narratives portray social divides and fragmented legal order. A common claim was that police arrive hours after emergency calls are made and turn on the lights and sirens of the squad car en route to warn thieves of their approach. A shopkeeper near Katlehong reported a story of police corruption that he had experienced during a previous stint of work in Tembisa:

The criminals came and robbed while I was away. After six months they came back and robbed again. The police came to write the case number and the criminals were there outside the shop. They hid the loot, then came back and they had different clothes. So the police left, we caught the criminals ... and took them to the police station ... One policeman took me outside, said 'that's my brother. We'll pay you back for what they stole if you drop the case.' So we agreed ... At the police station the biggest officer was an Indian; another policeman already told him about the case. So the Indian said even if you drop the case, this is the law, it must go through. The [policeman] who told [the Indian officer] was killed after that ... The same police officer came to us and told me the policemen had fought because one was Xhosa and the other was Zulu ... the police threatened us when the police case went to court. The night the case was there in court the shop was raided. (M, Katlehong, January 2012)

In attempting to draw on migrant rights of access to justice in South Africa—a facet of ‘tactical cosmopolitanism’—this informant found rejection not in exclusion from a unitary ‘host society,’ but in the complex interplay of tight-knit kinship socialities and fractures within South African society that obstructed justice. Informants repeatedly described differences in dealing with South African Blacks, Indians, and Whites in the contexts of business, social relations and interactions with police and officials.

Such distinctions parallel dynamics within the Somali community, where social divisions provoke conflicts that are facilitated by the lack of legal enforcement, demonstrating that township violence is not merely nativist:

Somalis have difficulty understanding each other ... Like another Somalian tribe will come in the location, and see some shops ... They will see your shop selling 20,000 or 30,000 [rand] per day—in maybe a month you can save 150,000 rand ... They see your shop and they open a shop next to you—maybe one block or two blocks from here. That guy will take out a gun ... he chases him away from there, or creates trouble. (Q, Mayfair, January 2012)

Tensions also simmer between migrant groups over township opportunities. Conflicts among and between these migrant groups centre on access to prime *spaza* sites on main roads and important crossroads, and migrants complain about other groups setting up shop in close proximity to an existing establishment (CDS 2010). Somali shopkeepers in Tembisa indicated that in the past several years more Ethiopians and Bangladeshis had bought Somali shops in the area. According to discussions with Bangladeshi community leaders in Fordsburg, many of the Bangladeshi *spazas* are owner-operated. While most Somali *spazas* must earn enough profit to satisfy a group of investors, owner-operated shops are more survivalist than capitalist enterprises and thus require lower profit margin.

Given the heterogeneity perceived within the host society and the complex inter- and intra-group dynamics, at what ‘level’ is one to understand social integration and social distinction? Survival in South Africa relies on some level of participation in the broader Somali migrant community to provide employment opportunities and business networks, but these networks and spaces of opportunity are mapped onto a landscape that is heterogeneous, dangerous, and rapidly changing due to market penetration and decreasing profits. Consequently, location labour tends to be highly mobile across these risky spaces, but typically remains firmly within ethnic and clan networks that constitute a social infrastructure (cf. Simone 2004). The Somali ethnic enclave of Mayfair serves as a hub of this social infrastructure, tying together the Gauteng Somali economy and linking it to broader circuits of migration and finance while at the same time concentrating the contradictions of the Somali economy in a tight geographical space.

The ethnic enclave

Most Somali *spazas* in Gauteng report that owners or significant shareholders are based in Mayfair; even those owned by Somalis living in Europe or North America have financial links to Mayfair through Somali MTO offices located in the neighbourhood. Located just west of the Johannesburg CBD, Eighth Avenue, Mayfair is a migrant-dominated area of mixed business and residence in which Somali residential concentration and transnational financial flows shape a distinctly Somali space targeting ethnic customers (Grant and Thompson 2015; Jinnah 2010). Eighth Avenue functions as a vibrant ethnic enclave (cf. Portes and Jensen 1987), but also as a space of unemployment and marginality through which township workers and newly arrived migrants circulate. Researchers point to statistics of shared living quarters in Mayfair as an indicator of poverty: ‘44.1 per cent of Somalis share a room with four to six people ... A third of Somalis surveyed lived in hostels or boarding houses, compared to 13 per cent of other migrants’ (Krause-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011: 14). This section demonstrates how Somali migrant capitalism reproduces and benefits from financial circulations and the mobility of newly arrived migrants (usually refugees) and township shopkeepers.

Fridays (prayer days), Muslim holidays, and flare-ups of township violence bring location shopkeepers flocking to the enclave. The circulation of migrants through the enclave requires facilitative infrastructure, a link between various scales of shallow-rooted cosmopolitan mobility and more embedded forms of belonging and investment. Many shopkeepers visiting Mayfair stay in the numerous lodges along Eighth Avenue that present a range of costs and housing options (see [Figure 3](#)). The primary residence option is a room with multiple beds for men traveling alone, catering specifically to these highly mobile migrants and to newly arrived refugees waiting for work. More luxurious lodges in the centre of the enclave serve Somalis visiting from abroad on temporary business, who also frequently share sleeping quarters during their visit. Lodges at either end of the enclave offer low rates for long-term residents and are inhabited by male migrants who are unmarried or whose wives and children live abroad. The prevalence of shared living quarters suggested as an indicator of poverty (Krause-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011) may indeed be such in some instances, but also points to a culture of transience, remittances and social ties across diverse geographies.

Within these lodges or near them are leisure areas such as lounges and hookah bars lined with comfortable seating and frequently the site of long sessions of *qat* chewing in the evenings (an illegal activity in South Africa). One lodge purchased several pool tables and between 2011 and 2012 converted two former sleeping quarters into a space where competitive pool tournaments are played weekly. Similar lodges, restaurants and leisure spaces characterise smaller Somali enclaves in other South African cities such as Durban and Port Elizabeth. On weekends township shopkeepers sometimes take turns spending a day in Mayfair chewing *qat*, smoking hookah, and drinking tea and soda. This has led to a plethora of competing *qat* dealers and transporters who purchase plant shoots from farms in South Africa or import stalks from Kenya and Ethiopia. The *qat* grown in South Africa is smaller and perceived as lower-quality than imported varieties, and in 2012 fresh local *qat* sold for R 25–30 (about US\$3.50) per bunch (called ‘kg’, though weighing less than a kilogram) while fresh imported *qat* usually cost well over R 100 per bunch. *Qat* brought into the Somali enclave also makes its way into the Ethiopian community centred in Jeppe Street, as many Ethiopian highlanders also chew the popular stimulant.



Figure 3. Lodge in the Eighth Avenue Enclave (Photo by author).

The concentration of Internet cafés on Eighth Avenue signals the multinational orientation of the neighbourhood, and at the same time this business niche is at least partially a product of Somali international investment. One Somali capitalist moved from Southall, London, after completing a Master's degree in Public Health at Middlesex University. He invested in the first Internet café on Eighth Avenue, expanded the enterprise to two other sites, and in late 2011 was constructing a new dry-cleaning business on the west side of the enclave. Raised in Mombasa, this informant says that he did not even speak Somali well until he moved to South Africa (Author field notes, August 2011). Numerous Internet cafés have sprung up across the neighbourhood and receive constant business from migrants desiring to make phone calls, check email or facebook, or Skype with friends and family members living abroad.

On a daily basis, Eighth Avenue's lodges and leisure spaces host an assortment of unemployed Somalis (many of whom previously worked in locations); location shopkeepers seeking work, taking a day off, or sheltering from violent flare-ups in the townships; individuals awaiting refugee resettlement; and business owners who live largely on enterprise profits. Overall, informants residing in Mayfair had been present in South Africa on average more than twice as long as those working in the locations (6.38 years for the 19 informants in Mayfair; 3.12 for the 37 location shopkeepers who reported a date of arrival); enclave workers had also worked at their current jobs more than twice as long on average as township shopkeepers (30 months in Mayfair, 13 months for locations). Most informants in Mayfair had worked in at least three or four locations prior to finding work in Mayfair, 'retiring' from township business (sometimes to live off of township shop investments), or establishing their own enterprises on Eighth Avenue. The tactics bringing these individuals to Mayfair may shift over time between seemingly cosmopolitan disembeddedness and more grounded forms of belonging in the Somali community.

For example, informant AG left his wife and two children in Kenya while he worked in Gauteng's townships to send them remittances and saved to start his own shop. When UNHCR resettled AG's family to Minnesota, he quit his *spaza* job and relied on remittances from his wife while completing paperwork for family reunification. After completing the paperwork, AG again took a position at a *spaza* in Tembisa to pass the months until his resettlement and to earn some money to take gifts to his family when he re-joined them in 2013 (Author field notes, 2011–2013). Temporary strategies reflect varying degrees of practical 'integration' in South Africa at different points in migrant trajectories. Nevertheless, these shifting practices are crucial to the sustenance of the Eighth Avenue enclave as they provide business for lodges, MTOs, restaurants, and the numerous Somali Internet cafés in the neighbourhood.

Increasingly in 2011 and 2012 Somali investors were visiting South Africa from the US, UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway and Sweden. One informant who lived in Mayfair had spent eight years in Norway prior to arriving in South Africa in 2004. With about US\$6,000, he bought his own shop in Khayelitsha, Eastern Cape. Over the next three years he bought three different shops, employing some of his cousins. After his shop was looted during an upsurge of xenophobic violence, he fled and began working as an employee in a *spaza* near Plettenberg Bay, eventually saving enough money to buy the shop for US\$8,000. He still owns this shop and lives relatively comfortably in Mayfair on its profit, also receiving occasional remittances from relatives in Sweden. With his savings he was able to bring his wife and children to Mayfair from Norway. Individuals involved in such strategies may be difficult to differentiate at first blush from unemployed Somali refugees—some capitalist investors frequent the same spaces, chewing *qat* with their unemployed and impoverished compatriots, somewhat masking the economic and social segmentation within the community and the scales at which opportunities are available to different individuals.

Circulations, investment and diversification

Somali MTOs (*hawilaad*) such as Amal and Kaah, tucked away inside nondescript buildings on the east end of Eighth Avenue, provide an invisible anchor for the Somali ethnic economy. Somali

workers in the most distant townships of the province send money through these MTOs in Mayfair on a monthly basis, and based on a conservative estimate of \$150 sent home per month by a majority of workers, the annual remittance outflow alone could be estimated at several million dollars. But these MTOs are not merely agents of extraction: recent Somali migrants report carrying as little cash as possible during their overland journeys to South Africa, relying on family members to send money through MTOs when necessary. Investors from North America or Europe also send money through MTOs to agents acting on their behalf in South African business ventures. The influxes of money for investment in township businesses have the effect of multiplying the number of remittance flows by providing income for Somalis who send part of their wages home. These circulations are grounded in the local economy and increasingly visible in the infrastructure of the Somali enclave as these financial transfers undergird business diversification and construction that grounds the ethnic economy in the landscape of Mayfair, as well as connecting the Somali economy to South African wholesalers in Mayfair and Fordsburg who supply township shops.

MTOs, lodges and leisure spaces are not the only enterprises benefiting from the articulation of migrant mobility and foreign investment. Numerous restaurants serve Somali and Oromo food, stores cater clothing and cultural goods and electronics imported from Dubai, and a few smaller wholesalers supply stock goods for location shops. The location economy has also generated an industry of self-employed real estate speculators and negotiators who either purchase township *spazas* and resell them to Somali investors, or serve as middlemen in negotiations when shops change hands. The three informants in Mayfair who were involved in this activity had significant experience working in location shops. Flipping *spazas* involves networks stretching beyond Gauteng: the three informants engaged in this sector reported selling shops across South Africa, and said that investors sometimes contact them from abroad seeking to invest in a location shop. Entrepreneurship in this sector often involves long waits between transactions, but can be more profitable than location employment: 'Maybe I can get 3000 [rand] per month', reported one informant, 'but it comes all at one time. Today and tomorrow maybe I don't get a cent' (M, Somali, Mayfair).

While the location economy is dominated by males, Eighth Avenue and other central urban areas present examples of women gaining economic power. Somali women own a number of the restaurants and lodges along Eighth Avenue. Amal plaza offers a space in which many women sell cultural goods and clothing to Somali consumers, drawing on overseas connections to secure their positions. Though rarely seen chewing *qat* in public, some women sell the popular stimulant, with wealthier individuals distributing from within their houses or lodges and poorer women sometimes selling it on street corners along Eighth Avenue. Women own enterprises in other towns as well. Two female informants had previously worked in the small Somali enclave of Durban Street, Port Elizabeth, before moving to Pretoria to attempt resettlement through UNHCR. One male informant in Pretoria West was 'helping' in a shop owned by his wife and another migrant. His wife had received 5000 rand from Jesuit Refugee Services, which she invested as a shareholder in a small shop. The informant did not appear to consider himself as sharing in his wife's ownership of the shop.

Although South Africa presents many opportunities for investment, for most Somalis, life in Gauteng is 'just business'. About half of Somalis interviewed in a previous study felt excluded by South Africans and South African institutions (Grant and Thompson 2015), a dynamic that reinforces the exclusive orientation of the Eighth Avenue enclave as Somalis self-segregate to create a safe space. For migrants without sufficient capital or networks, the urban enclaves might be safe, but they are frequently spaces of unemployment and waiting in which migrants may draw on the work of family members in locations or even abroad to sustain their livelihood. For those with financial resources and/or social capital and connections—including many who come from the Global North to invest—South Africa's urban enclaves are spaces of opportunity to profit from the mobility of location shopkeepers, the period of waiting for individuals seeking relocation, and the desire of Somali migrants to participate in Somali culture and eat Somali food. Overall, Somali men working in Mayfair reported higher incomes than those in the locations, but the sample from Mayfair

included more shareholders, business owners, and self-employed entrepreneurs. Many of Mayfair's unemployed were reluctant to disclose how much money they received in remittances.

Conclusion

Varying temporal and spatial scales of mobility, migrant tactics and migradollar flows converge in Gauteng's fragmented social and economic setting, where these circulations produce a particular social and economic geography of Somali livelihood. The dominant economic niche for Somalis, refugee capitalism in South Africa's townships is a make-or-break business that involves intense risk but also potential for high rewards, including the possibility for impoverished refugees to become investors in multiple businesses across South Africa or even beyond. Foreign investment in this niche market creates jobs and multiplies remittance flows back to the Horn of Africa, but also invites Somali migrants to risk their lives in order to support their families and seek a better life.

As the Eighth Avenue ethnic enclave has increasingly linked international diaspora circuits with the township economy, these circulations have become grounded in social, financial, and physical infrastructures that generate a Somali space in Johannesburg distinct from other immigrant-dominated areas (Grant and Thompson 2015). On an individual basis, Somalis in Gauteng meet the unpredictable setting through a strategy entailing high mobility and transnational orientations, relying on shifting cosmopolitan tactics and rarely becoming attached to communities in which they work (cf. Landau and Freemantle 2010); yet the ethnic economy as a whole bridges divides between city and township, provides goods to township South Africans with purchases from city wholesalers, and brings foreign capital investment into the country.

At the intersection of these networks, the Mayfair enclave is characterised by creative entrepreneurialism and upward mobility for some refugees, but also by a fundamental duality: a highly mobile labour force facilitates the establishment of more entrenched business interests, reflected in infrastructure investment and lower frequency of mobility among those working in the ethnic enclave. The circulation of township shopkeepers here meets a larger scale of international mobility, sometimes entailing back-and-forth migration to Europe or North America, or else refugee resettlement to the Global North. The township and the enclave co-constitute each other as spaces of different types of circulation—and different forms of articulation with the local economy—nested within multiple scales of mobility and financial networks held together by loose and stratified practices of migrant solidarity.

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Notes

1. Formal research was supplemented during the study period by informal discussions with Somali migrants in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and Durban. Between trips to South Africa in 2010–2012, the author also spent time with Somalis in Eastleigh (Nairobi), Kenya; Juba, South Sudan; Arusha, Tanzania; and Atlanta, Georgia, USA.
2. Despite changing gender roles among Somalis in Mayfair, the distinct gendering of social and physical spaces in the neighbourhood made it difficult for a male researcher to interview a representative sample of women. Three interviews with women were conducted in Mayfair and Pretoria. No Somali women were observed working in the locations.
3. While located close to central Pretoria, Pretoria West was described by Somalis as a location and was characterised by sales to the Black South African community, and therefore was grouped with townships in the analysis.
4. No Somalis from Djibouti were encountered during the study.
5. Informants typically reported remittances and wages in US dollars (units used by MTOs) whereas profits were sometimes reported in US dollars and sometimes in Rand. Conversions are based on the January 2012 exchange rate of US\$0.13 per 1 rand.

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