Beyond Resettlement as Refugee: Enduring and Emerging Dimensions of ‘Displacement’ as Cosmological Rupture for Central African Refugee Women

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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ABSTRACT

The resettlement of refugees to a third country is characterised in dominant humanitarian and political discourses as a durable solution to ‘displacement.’ This thesis challenges that presumption through an ethnographic exploration of how ‘displacement’ is experienced by Central African women living in different contexts of refugee settlement in Australia and Uganda. It illustrates how, for the small number of refugees who are offered resettlement to a third country, a sense of ‘displacement’ can both endure and emerge within such settings. ‘Displacement’ is critically explored here as an embodied experience that is oriented through the subjectivities of Central African women across settings of refugee settlement in both Australian and Uganda. Through a comparative, in-depth analysis of ‘displacement’ in both contexts, the assumption that resettlement offers a durable solution of ‘refuge’ is critically unsettled.

The thesis draws on 18-months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with Central African refugee women resettled across regional towns and urban settings in Australia, as well as a shorter period of fieldwork with Central African women living as refugees in Uganda. In documenting experiences of ‘displacement’ from the subjectivities of the Central African women, refugee settlement emerges here as a process that is oriented for them through cosmological logics of regenerative flow. Broader insecurities of ‘displacement’ manifest within, and are expressed through, the women’s everyday practices of cultivating plant foods, cooking food, and bearing and rearing children. In particular, it is the capacity to contribute to this regenerative flow of life through existing as ‘mother’ that is a fundamental basis of their sense of stability and ‘refuge’; or, conversely, rupture and ‘displacement.’ Subsequently, for the Central African women who participated in this research, ‘displacement’ cannot be mechanistically reduced to the socio-spatial and politico-legal shifts that are encompassed within experiences of forced migration. ‘Displacement’ is the experience of having their cosmological logics of regenerative continuity ruptured within the conditions of their settlement. The thesis thus transcends static notions of refugee ‘displacement,’ to consider instead the lived experience of being displaced as an existential condition of cosmological rupture.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On an unseasonably warm August afternoon in 2012 I was invited to visit a Congolese woman after beginning the recruitment process for my doctoral research. She welcomed me into her home and life with characteristic warmth; along with a meal that we shared with her family whilst sitting outside on the verandah of her house in a suburban Australian neighbourhood. Since that afternoon, and especially for the 18-months of ethnographic fieldwork that followed, I have been deeply interwoven in her life, and the lives of many other Central African women. In their particular ways, each has taught me much; not only about their experiences of refugee settlement, but also about life itself. I am eternally indebted to them for sharing their lives, stories, and food with me. The meaning of sharing food together is not lost on me. No matter what happens in my future, I will always be, to them, a ‘daughter.’

Although I cannot acknowledge them by their real names, special thanks must be given to two of the women I conducted fieldwork with. Firstly, to ‘Nyomanda,’ for her deep and unfaltering investment in this project. My family and I are eternally grateful to you for being another ‘mother’ to me when I needed it most. And to ‘Lina.’ I cannot adequately express how deeply sorry I am for what you have experienced in Australia. I have put your story into these pages as you asked me to. I am sorry I could not do more.

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throughout all of this. And Jo: you have remained a voice of reason amongst an often exhausting (and at times inebriated) bunch of postgraduate students. I am especially thankful to Debbi, for giving endless guidance throughout this process and knowing from the outset the potential significance of my work. I also need to thank my companions in the ‘post-grad’ room, Joel and Emma, for being a friendly source of distraction and incredibly patient with my inability to use the photocopy machine.

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And to Chris: you were an unexpected encounter, supposed ‘competitor,’ and (almost) instant friend. Thank you for trusting your first impression, even when I did not trust mine. As they say: ‘Fortune favors the brave.’
MAP OF AFRICA

(Google Maps 2015)
MAP OF CENTRAL AFRICA

(Google Maps 2015)
MAP OF AUSTRALIA

(Google Maps 2015)
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