Beyond Resettlement as Refuge: 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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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.
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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.’

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

March 22nd, 2013 – A regional city in Australia

At 7am I receive a panicked phone call from Solange.¹ In her alarmed state, I am unable to understand much of what she is saying. I can only ascertain that she has been admitted to the local hospital. When I ask why she is there, Solange can only sob in response.

After I arrive at the hospital I am directed to a post-surgery recovery ward. Solange is sitting up in a hospital bed, gazing at a strip of sunlight that streams in from a nearby window. She appears calmer than when I had spoken with her on the phone. I go to the bedside. We do not speak for a moment. Then, Solange tells me, quietly but emphatically, ‘I have lost another baby here.’

Solangé is recovering from an emergency dilation and cutterage procedure. She relays to me how, the previous night, she began to experience unexpected bleeding. After arriving at the hospital, she had been informed that her pregnancy had miscarried.

Solangé speaks in a slow drawl. She is heavily sedated, both to manage the pain of the procedure and to calm her emotional response to it. There is a protracted silence between Solange and I, before she begins, softly, to speak again.

‘This . . . this problem,’ she says, ‘it never happened to me before coming here.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask her.

‘In Africa, I was bringing babies with no problem. But since coming here, since being around these problems here, I have had troubles. This is the . . . the second time . . .’ She trails off.

‘It is the problem of the life here,’ she continues, eventually. ‘Coming here, to Australia, it is too hard to make a life.’

Interwoven within the refugee settlement experiences of Central African women are dimensions of displacement that cannot be reduced to the ruptures of social, legal, political, and spatial

¹ To maintain the anonymity of informants, all names referred to in the thesis are pseudonyms. In addition, identifying information has been omitted.
location that characterise exodus, forced migration, exile, and resettlement. For the Central African women who I conducted fieldwork with in settings of refugee settlement in Australia and Uganda, displacement is a lived experience that, whilst oriented through the complexities of shifting socio-spatial and politico-legal aspects of forced migration, cannot be singularly and universally reduced to such shifts. As Solange’s experience in the epigraph implicates, it is the existential dimensions of lived experience, as conditioned within particularities of refugee settlement, through which tensions of displacement are mediated and manifest. For Solange, the experience of her miscarried pregnancy is a layer of intimately embodied dislocation within a broader narrative of refugee displacement. In her perspective, the potential to bear a child is cosmologically intertwined with the capacity to experience existential viability in resettlement. Solange herself expresses this constraint on existential viability as the capacity to ‘make a life.’

Throughout this thesis I critically unsettle the concept of displacement as automatically produced through the socio-spatial and politico-legal shifts of forced migration and refugee exile. I approach the concept instead as a lived experience that is shaped within the specificities of the lives of the Central African women who participated in this study. What subjective understandings orient how these women interpret and experience ‘displacement’? And, more broadly, what does it mean to say that a population is ‘displaced’?

The concept of displacement as an experiential condition, rather than an automatic effect of forced migration, was problematised by Malkki (1992:33, 1995a, 1995b:496) in her work with Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania. Malkki (1995a) showed that, for refugees residing in the Mishamo refugee camp, the experience of displacement is interpreted through a cosmological lens. For them, interwoven experiences of isolation and exile are perceived as a necessary process of purification that is required if they are to ever return as ‘rightful’ occupants of their homeland. What emerges from Malkki’s (1992, 1995a, 1995b:496) work is that displacement is not a mechanistic product of the shifts of socio-spatial and politico-legal contexts that characterise forced migration. Instead, displacement is a lived experience that is conditioned through the temporal, cultural, and social specificities in which refugees experience their everyday lives in settings of exile. Critically unsettling the concept of displacement as broadly and uncritically applied in scholarly accounts and humanitarian characterisations of the

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2 ‘Central Africa’ here refers to the countries of Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic republic of Congo. The women who participated in the study were born in one of these three countries. The choice to delineate the research population as based on this regional label reflects UNHCR (2015c) regional categorisations. The specific use of the ‘Central Africa’ label in the thesis is outlined later in this introductory chapter. The ‘Central African’ label does not, here, refer to the country of the ‘Central African Republic’

3 That the term ‘displacement’ encompasses temporal, cultural, experiential, and social specificities that cannot be concentrated to a universalised meaning is the basis of inquiry and problematisation in this thesis. The further use of the term throughout the thesis is in reference to these contingencies.
‘refugee’ narrative requires exploring what it means to be displaced as lived by refugees, themselves.\(^4\)

Despite Malkki’s (1995b:496) call for research with refugees to unsettle self-evident conceptualisations of displacement, the term continues to be applied to the experiences of refugee subjects in scholarly research, with little critical attention to the ways in which forced migrants themselves interpret and live the experience of being displaced, with a few significant exceptions (e.g. Sørenson 1997; Sui 2007; Jackson 2013b:99-104). This need to critically unsettle the concept of ‘displacement’ is similarly recognised by Sørenson (1997:144) in a study that explores how villagers in Sri Lanka experience dislocation and relocation. Sørenson (1997:144, emphasis in original) argues for displacement to be addressed in terms of how ‘people really live with and continue to reinterpret and elaborate on their experiences, depending on context and purpose.’ Informed by Malkki (1992:31) and Sørenson’s (1997) call to move beyond conceptualisations of ‘displacement’ as an automatic product of the socio-spatial and politico-legal shifts of forced migration, this thesis explores ‘displacement’ as an embodied experience through which particularities of refugee settlement, as lived by the Central African women themselves, are oriented and expressed.

I. BACKGROUND TO THE THESIS

Given the plethora of academic essays, white papers, and compendious monographs devoted to refugee issues, why are there so few studies that give voice to and work from the lived experiences of refugees themselves? To what extent do we, in the countries of immigration, unwittingly reduce refugees to objects, ciphers, and categories in the way we talk and write about them, in roughly the same way that indifferent bureaucracies and institutional forces strip away the rights of refugees to speak and act in the worlds of their own making? (Jackson 2013b: 92-93)

It was within the context of an ‘indifferent bureaucracy,’ as Jackson (2013b:92) describes it in the quote above, that I first came to know and encounter refugees. Between 2009 and 2012 I worked as both volunteer and employee in the non-government sector, in organisations funded to provide ostensible ‘support’ to resettling refugees. In practice, these organisations can also serve to inculcate refugees to comply with specific expectations of lifestyle, culture, and behaviour in Australia (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003; Westoby 2009:162-164; Colic-Peisker 2009; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). Within such organisations, I myself witnessed numerous situations in which refugee women had their experiences, stories, and voices silenced. It was my professional and personal experiences within these bureaucracies that formed the impetus for

\(^4\) The theoretical conceptualisation of the term ‘displacement’ is explored further in Chapter Two.
me to explore displacement from the lens of ‘refugees themselves’ (Jackson 2013b:92). In privileging the voices of the women in this research, I aim to avoid reproducing refugees as passive objects.

Over an 18-month period between August 2012 and March 2014 I was immersed in the everyday lives and practices of women who had experienced forced migration from countries in the region of Central Africa—meaning, in this thesis, Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo—due to conflict and civil unrest. The majority of fieldwork was conducted in Australia with Central African women who had been resettled from refugee camps through a program of refugee settlement labelled by the Australian government as the ‘Humanitarian Program.’ Through this program, refugees are selected from camps to be resettled in Australia, provided with an information session on the expectations of life in Australia prior to their departure, and eventually flown to Australia to be met by caseworkers from non-government organisations and housed in temporary accommodation (Department of Immigration and Border Protection [DIBP] 2013). For a six- to 12-month period following their migration, resettled refugees are provided with a program of intensive resettlement support that includes casework assistance to access long-term rental accommodation, set up bank accounts, arrange welfare payments, and enrol in English language tuition (Department of Social Services [DSS] 2015).

The women I conducted fieldwork with in Australia had proceeded beyond this intensive period of initial orientation that characterises the first six- to 12-months of resettlement. The average resettlement period in Australia for the women who participated in this study was five years. In this post-immediate settlement period I witnessed the Central African women being nonetheless confronted with adverse aspects of resettlement Australia. Personal troubles stemming from past trauma, social and cultural isolation as well as current concerns about being apart from family who remained in Africa became, for the women, intersected with immediate problems of negotiating the bureaucratic expectations of everyday life in Australia. The following are issues that I witnessed them encounter whilst conducting my fieldwork: retaining housing in an often unstable rental market and subsequent threats and experiences of homelessness; accessing childcare; finding employment; financial insecurity; negotiating relationships with children’s schools; unfamiliarity with the health care system; misunderstandings about how to pay bills; transportation limitations due to an inability to afford a car or driving lessons to gain an Australian drivers license; social and cultural tensions; legal problems; and encounters with child protection agencies either threatening to, or subsequently removing, their children. All of these experiences for the refugee women manifested within a broader context of Australia as a

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3 The historical backgrounds of the women are the basis of analysis in Chapter Four.
6 The Humanitarian Program of refugee resettlement is described in detail in Chapter Five.
site of resettlement in which they are also confronted with both overt and implicit discrimination (Colic-Peisker 2005; Windle 2008; Fozdar 2009; Nunn 2010), and within neoliberal cultural systems of individualism and personal responsibility that often differed to their own values (Ong 1996, 2003; Westoby 2009; Colic-Peisker 2009:177; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). 7 I explore in this thesis how the bureaucratic institutions that structure resettlement in Australia, and particularly the child welfare system, can lead to a disjuncture between meaning systems. In these encounters, structures of subjugation and control can subsequently manifest.

II. EXPLORING THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

Within these contested domains of refugee resettlement in Australia, I witnessed the Central African women become confronted with new and enduring forms of displacement. Such forms of insecurity as experienced by the resettled women form part of the reason why the majority of them maintained almost daily contact with relatives and friends that remained in Africa. The other aspect of this enduring relatedness to relations in Africa, as I was to directly observe, was that these women are deeply implicated within the provision of support to relations who remain there in asylum.

In thereby recognising that experiences of refugee resettlement often unfold across and between different locales, I did not delineate a distinct ‘field’ site for the research as defined by spatial boundaries. Instead, I conducted fieldwork in the vein of Marcus (1998:90), who suggests a multi-sited approach to ethnographic research that aims to ‘follow the people’ as a way of exploring interconnections of lived experiences across the social and spatial domains through which lives unfold. Over 18-months, I conducted multi-sited ethnographic research tracing the lives of Central African women across the disparate domains of geographic and social space through which their experiences evolved. I spent approximately 17-months visiting and periodically living amongst women resettled in regional and urban areas in Australia, and approximately one month living amongst Central African refugee women in the capital city of Uganda, Kampala, after literally ‘following’ a participant from Australia back to this setting in which she had previously lived in asylum. In Kampala, I participated in the daily lives of my key informant and her immediate family members who lived with us, as well as other Congolese refugee women with whom we interacted on a regular basis. This period of supplementary fieldwork in Uganda demonstrated my determination to explore the broad dimensions of refugee

7 Aiwha Ong (1996, 2003) describes how implicit neoliberal values shape how refugees experience resettlement. Although Ong (2003) refers to the United States context of refugee resettlement, specifically, I observed how the implications of cultural dominance that she draws out similarly characterised how the women I conducted fieldwork with encountered bureaucracies in Australia.
settlement as lived across and between socio-spatial landscapes. In total, I conducted in-depth ethnographic research with 35 participants.

III. REVISITING COSMOLOGY IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

The aim of allowing the research to unfold according to the agendas and mobilities of my participants was to explore refugee settlement as an experience that is lived and understood by the Central African women themselves. A central tenet in anthropological research is to explore the subjective logics through which research subjects draw on to interpret and experience their worlds. Yet, in much work that categorises research subjects as ‘refugees,’ assumptions of past trauma, suffering, and abjection often become attached to refugee experiences as self-evident truths of displacement (Marlowe 2010; Jackson 2013b:93). This means that ‘refugees’ as a subject of anthropological knowledge are frequently reduced to objects defined by constructed assumptions of their displacement (Malkki 1992:33; Fuglerud 1999:3). Conflating refugee subjects with traumatised objects serves to eclipse the subjectivities through which refugees experience exodus, asylum, and resettlement.

Despite Malkki (1995a) demonstrating that refugees within Central African contexts can draw on cosmologies to interpret and experience their displacement, there has been little further research with refugees from this region that considers how their experiences of displacement intersect with cosmological logics. This neglected focus in the literature is also significant considering the body of Africanist anthropological works that document the cosmologies through which persons with in the Central African region interpret lived experience, broadly (c.f. Taylor 1988, 1990. 1992, 1999; Devisch 1993; Kaspin 1996; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). Given this focus on cosmologies that emerge from this region in Africanist anthropology, it is surprising that research which documents the experiences of refugees from countries such as Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo does not consider how cosmologies might be drawn on to interpret and experience displacement (Sommers 2001; Peter 2010; Mann 2012; Sandvik 2011, 2012). In particular, there is little attention to the ways in which cosmological meaning systems are re-negotiated following refugee resettlement, and how the logics of government institutions and social welfare bureaucracies that operationalise resettlement impact on the cosmological assumptions that are embedded in refugee’s worldviews.

A significant exception includes Taylor’s (1999) analysis of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the exodus of refugees that followed. The forms of violence through which the genocide was

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8 Further detail regarding these sources, and their implications for the theorisation of cosmology in the thesis, are outlined in Chapter Five.
enacted are, according to Taylor (1999:146), unable to be reduced to acts of senseless barbarism. Instead, the violence was often organised according to cosmological logics, in which acts of violence were enacted to ‘block’ trajectories of ‘flow.’ Interviewing refugee survivors of the genocide, Taylor (1999) was told how, within the ordeals, the body was targeted as symbolic conduit of regenerative flow, with forms of violence intended to obstruct the digestive and reproductive systems of the body. These systems were specific targets of violence because they are routes through which metabolic processes ‘flow’ through the body; thereby symbolising the continuity of filial and social existence.

Despite the work of Malkki (1995a) and Taylor (1999) emphasising the significant role of cosmology in orienting how Central African refugees interpret and experience displacement, this focus remains underexplored in anthropological literature. In particular, there is little recognition of how cosmological logics of regenerative flow may persist within, and be shifted through, experiences of resettlement beyond continental Africa for Central African refugees. This gap in the literature forms the rationale for this study. Subsequently, the ways in which cosmological logics are a basis from which experiences of displacement are oriented for Central African women forms the platform of inquiry throughout the thesis.

IV. ON TERMINOLOGY AND LABELS

The anthropologist is not a neutral instrument through which objects of knowledge are interpreted and monographs of ‘culture’ produced (Abu-Lughod 1991:468). Instead, anthropologists are positioned within an ethnographic setting through a subjective gaze drawn from their own composite of lived experiences (Pratt 1986; Scheper-Hughes 1992:23). However, the design of anthropological research frequently rests on delineations of ‘culture’ through which ethnographic description serves to reproduce homogenous ‘Others’ defined primarily by their perceived difference to Euro-American, and often male-centric, scholarly arenas (Abu-Lughod 1991). In consideration of these problematics of ethnographic research, I recognise here a dual imperative to acknowledge the salience of labels that reproduce refugee women as ethnographic ‘Others’—and which serve to reduce them to objective terms of analysis—whilst reflexively acknowledging these categorisations and my own positionality as implicated within the production of knowledge. Subsequently, in the sections below I outline how specific categorisations in this research are employed through a critical lens.

THE ‘REFUGEE’ LABEL

The term ‘refugee’ evokes the eponymous figure of the vulnerable victim within both popular and humanitarian imaginaries (Malkki 1995b; Agier 2011; Jackson 2013b:91-92). However, in
scholarly arenas the homogeneity implied within the ‘refugee’ label is widely contested. The most commonly cited definition of a refugee draws on the UNHCR (2011:3) delineation of a ‘refugee’ as:

Any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

There are multiple aspects of this UNHCR definition of a ‘refugee’ that undermine its continuing relevance in the context of contemporary experiences of forced migration, particularly in regards to African migrant flows (Malkki 1995b; Zetter 2007; Agier 2011). Primarily, the UNHCR definition is grounded in epistemological assumptions of the nation-state system as a self-evident organising factor of human experience (Zetter 2007). Whilst the definition can, and has, been expanded through resolutions and regional appendices to the convention, the territorialised logics at the basis of the UNHCR definition of a refugee assume that the nation-state system is politically neutral way of classifying displacement (Souter 2014).

Yet, the experience of being a refugee in many contemporary contexts does not automatically presume a condition of ‘statelessness,’ and vice versa (Malkki 1995b:501-502). As Malkki (1992, 1995b) argues, efforts to conceptualise and determine refugee status through the territorialised logics of the UNHCR definition serve to dehistoricise, politically neutralise, and objectify refugees. Firstly, this mode of determining refugee status renders the ‘refugee’ as an essentialised figure outside of a ‘national order of things’ and, therefore, a problem to be solved (Malkki 1995b:506, 1992:26). Secondly, particularising the refugee as ‘stateless,’ and others as not, is a dichotomy that ignores the increasingly mobilised condition of humans within and beyond circumstances of displacement (Malkki 1992:25), which in many cases transcend the salience of territorialised identification and the significance of national borders (Appadurai 1988, 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

It is important to consider that the legal context of resettlement can differ from how it is represented in political and humanitarian discourses. Analysing the historical and legal background to resettlement, Chimni (1999:1) points out that the practical operations of resettlement differ to the ways they are imagined in humanitarian arenas, stating that: ‘the solution of resettlement was promoted in practice, even as voluntary repatriation was accepted
in principle as the preferred solution.’ In a review of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and other aspects of international refugee law, Sharma (2015) also describes how implicit practices of selectively choosing refugees for resettlement operate despite non-discrimination clauses in international law. This thesis does not specifically critique these legal frameworks, but instead recognises the discourses that implicitly influence and characterise understandings of resettlement. In particular, it is the tendency for resettlement to be represented uncritically as a ‘durable solution’ (UNHCR 2015b), and for receiving states to, paternalistically, characterise resettlement as resolving the ‘displacement’ of refugees (DIAC 2011), that positions the analysis in this thesis. Through such discourses, resettled refugees are often treated as helpless victims to be ‘saved’ (Jackson 2013:95).

To transcend the essentialism of the ‘refugee’ as figure whose identity and experience is inherently defined by the ways in which their links to place and the nation-state system are essentialised (Malkki 1992, 1995b), ethnographic work with refugees must consider how refugees themselves construct and imagine their relatedness to space and place. Subsequently, the term ‘refugee’ is utilised here in reference to experiences of migration that are recognised by Central African women to stem from social, political, and cultural forces rather than personal choice. I therefore draw on the ‘refugee’ label as an idiom of experience, and not as a politico-legal category, that is constituted within particular social realities.

THE GENDER-SPECIFIC FOCUS

Ethnographic accounts of forced migration frequently assume that lived experiences of displacement are analogous for men and women (Berger 2004). Given that gender shapes particularities of lived experience, there is a need to consider the ways in which women, specifically, experience displacement. However, in emphasising the specificities of gender through which experiences of forced migration are lived, there is a risk that the experiences of women can be reproduced as an inherent ‘problem’ (Hadjukowski-Ahmed 20013:3). Subsequently, in this thesis, I do not attach specific assumptions to the women-specific experience of displacement as intrinsically problematised, but aim instead to recognise that their experiences of forced migration are distinct and unique from males. Although any focus on the experiences of women implies a relational connection to the experiences of men, the construction of this interconnection exclusively through the perspectives of women forms a pivotal point of distinction in this research, due to reasons outlined below.

In exploring the experiences of everyday life for Central African refugee women, particularly, I illuminate how they experience refugee resettlement according to gender distinctions (cf.
Devisch 1993). Within some African cosmological meaning systems, women occupy distinct roles as child-bearers; with their bodies emphasised as the vectors through which the regenerative potential of future lives is nurtured (Moore 1999:21). In the cosmological beliefs of many cultural groups in Central African regions, a similarly gendered lens of everyday life distinctly positions women as nurturers of filial descent and sustainers of familial life, in which the experiences of women are emphasised as distinct from men (Devisch 1993; Kaspins 1996; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Moore 1999). It needs to be recognised, however, that the personhood of ‘African’ women, as a broad and homogenous group, has historically—and in anthropological scholarship, particularly—been treated as wholly reducible to motherhood. The sexuality and role of African women has long been refracted through a romanticised stereotype of fertility, childbearing, and motherhood (Johnson-Hanks 2005). For the women I conducted fieldwork with, bearing children and being a mother emerged as one of the most significant aspects of their lives from which all derived social recognition of personhood. However, their lives and sense of purpose cannot be totalised to the role of ‘mother.’ Indeed, I have departed from this generic conflation of African ‘womanhood’ with ‘motherhood’ in Chapter Seven, in which I describe how women also derive purpose and meaning in their lives from education, employment, and social connections beyond the mother-child dyad (c.f. Johnson-Hanks 2005). The meanings of motherhood depicted in the thesis are drawn from the women themselves, what they say about motherhood, and how it is culturally situated (and problematised) in the particular social and political milieu of resettlement.

The decision to focus specifically on women is, nonetheless, grounded in both practical and theoretical considerations. Based on encounters with resettled refugees in previous research (Ramsay 2011), I was conscious that gendered distinctions exist within the lives of resettled African refugees in Australia. I realised that if I aimed to work with both genders, my access to particular ethnographic settings could be potentially obstructed. I decided subsequently to focus specifically on the experiences of women. Being female myself, this decision was based on practicalities of access. However, I also aimed to address the lack of distinct female voices within refugee studies particularly (Berger 2004), and anthropological studies more broadly (Abu-Lughod 1991:469).

Significantly, my specific focus on female Central African refugees endeared my potentially intrusive presence in the lives of these women. The women interpreted my singular focus on their experiences to mean that I had an intrinsic respect for them and their roles within everyday life. Consequently, I became enthusiastically incorporated into their social structure. Because of my characteristics as a relatively young and unmarried woman without children, I was with most women immersed into a ‘daughter’ role that was accompanied by specific expectations
and duties. This incorporation into their social structure, involving obligations of domestic work and expectations about ‘appropriate’ dress, was pivotal to the collection of data in this research. My willingness to participate in their lives as an accepted ‘family’ member enabled the participants in this research to become familiar with my presence. Although the role of ‘daughter’ endeared me to participants, it also came with limitations. Specifically, I was often relegated to ‘duties’ such as watching children and preparing food, which meant that I was occasionally excluded from conversations and settings in which the women with children gathered together. I was also treated, in most respects, as a novice; and was subsequently made the frequent subject of reprimand for social mistakes I made whilst in the field, as was due to me as a younger woman without children who held less social status. Overall, however, this recognition of gender-specific experience capacitated the extent of my immersion within the lives and routines of these Central African women.

**The ‘Central African’ Label**

In applying a regional categorisation of ‘Central African’ to delineate the characteristics of the women based on their countries of birth, I do not mean to categorise them as culturally homogenous. When working with a cohort of women whose ethnic, national, and cultural backgrounds are different, it would be erroneous to characterise them as a collective without internal differentiation. Yet, it is difficult to refer to this group as a research population without reifying them through a linguistic category. To try and mediate the complexities in this labelling process, I have used the term ‘Central African’ to refer to this cohort of women. In doing so, I aim to recognise similarities of experience that are associated with persons from this region, without implying that their experiences can be treated as homogenous.

I have purposely chosen not to refer to the women under the label of ‘African-’ or ‘sub-Saharan-African’ women. In Australia, refugees from African countries are frequently referred to in public and political discourse collectively under the label of ‘African refugees.’ However, this collective label most frequently attaches specific characteristics, usually negative, to persons who originate from continental Africa—and, specifically, ‘Black’ Africans—despite the internal cultural and social diversity that the label obscures (Windle 2008). I have avoided the general use of ‘African refugees’ when referring to the women in order to avoid reproducing this racialised and uncritical discourse.

Rather, in using the label of ‘Central Africa,’ I am purposefully reproducing the regional determinations that are practically applied in global humanitarian operations; and particularly those utilised in UNHCR determinations of regional origins (UNHCR 2015c). This label of
‘Central Africa’ is applied because it captures commonalities of experience that have impacted on persons from countries of Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite significant internal national, ethnic, and cultural differences. This region, and those nations, have been the epicentre of mutually informing conflicts that have often spilled over, across, and between national borders. For example, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was directly informed by similar acts of genocidal violence in Burundi in 1993. Indeed, both nations were once ruled as one country under colonial administration. Similarly, the 1996 and 1998 outbreaks of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo were deeply informed by regional relations in amongst nations in Central and East Africa. The formal wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo were instigated following the installation of a Rwandan national to the head of government. To refer to the women in this research under a broader, more generic label of ‘sub-Saharan African’ refugees, would be to obscure how these relations between nations and persons within the Central African region have impacted on their lives. The ‘Central African’ label, in contrast, captures these complexities and internal differentiations by recognising how cross-national relations have shaped similar processes of forced migration in this region, but within contexts of cultural, ethnic, and national difference.

Mostly importantly, the women themselves recognised collective aspects of experience between persons from Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They would point out the ways in which their lives intersected as originating from this particular region: describing shared dimensions of experience, and at times, also emphasising the differences. For example, I observed that women from Burundi, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo often congregated together for church meetings and other events as a group. In particular, the common use of the Swahili language, and occasionally French, meant that women from these different nations built relationships amongst each other in resettlement and often shared experiences such as religious worship and community events. I saw friendships between women of different national origins, and indeed some of the closest relationships I observed were between women from Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, there were also situations in which the women emphasised differences between them. In particular, ethnic and national categories were a distinct point of contention. I heard women who had been born in the Democratic Republic of Congo refer to particular other resettled refugees as ‘Rwandese,’ but as a derogatory label intended to recognise the shared history of political conflict between the nations. Therefore, whilst it is important to recognise that these women may share similar and mutually informed experiences of conflict, exodus, and forced migration, they did not automatically delineate themselves as a distinct group of ‘Central African’ women without cultural, social, and political differentiations. Hence, in using the label of ‘Central African’ I am recognising dimensions of experience and cultural understandings that are common for persons
who have originated from this region, but not implying that these shared aspects of experience exist without significant internal differences, conflicts, and tensions.

V. THESIS STRUCTURE

The objective of this thesis is to provide insight into the ways in which Central African refugee women experience ‘displacement’ as an existential condition oriented through cosmological logics, rather than a mechanistic effect assumed within the process of forced migration. In Chapter Two, I situate this perspective within a broad set of literatures by providing a review of research pertaining to forced migration, refugee resettlement, and the politics of humanitarianism; as well as literatures related to anthropological theoretical paradigms of embodiment, ontology, and cosmology. The methodological framework of the research is detailed in Chapter Three. There, I outline the research methods undertaken whilst developing the thesis, and situate such methods within disciplinary dialogues about the production of anthropological knowledge and, particularly, the locating of ‘refugee’ subjects within these processes. The historicities of the Central African women are the focus of Chapter Four, where I document the contexts of conflict that are the basis of their experiences of forced migration. In that chapter, I contextualise the concept of displacement within the personal histories of trauma, sexual violence, and suffering that the women experienced prior to resettlement.

The ethnographic context of Chapter Five is the regenerative potential that the Central African women perceive in the growth and cultivating of plant foods. In that chapter, I build on discussions of cosmology outlined in previous chapters to analyse how the refugee women who participated in this research come to know and understand the world through logics of regenerative flow. The growth of plants, which parallels a cosmological dialectic of regenerative potential and cyclic obstruction, is analysed in that chapter as a practice through which the refugee women locate a sense of existential continuity in their lives. However, the failure to cultivate plant foods is concurrently drawn on the by women as symbolising forms of discontinuity that they can be confronted with in settings of resettlement.

In Chapter Six, I document how practices of preparing, cooking, and distributing food amongst family and social others similarly express cosmological logics for the Central African women. Practices of food sharing are a sociality through which the women seek to expand and affirm their nexus of social relatedness. Conversely, avoiding food sharing is a way to obstruct the formation of social relatedness in settings of uncertainty. Whether in the context of sharing food or avoiding food sharing, forms of commensality both capacitate, and restrain, the regenerative potentiality of existence.
Extending on the analysis developed in previous chapters of how everyday practices participated in by the Central African women are oriented through a cosmology of regenerative flow, in Chapter Seven I show that this cosmology of regeneration culminates in, and is epitomised through, acts of bearing and rearing children. There, I show that the reproductive potentialities of female bodies are perceived and experienced by the Central African women as fundamentally interwoven within a broader cosmological trajectory of existence as unfolding in accordance with logics of regenerative flow. It is through the embodied capacity to bear children that the Central African women are able to locate and experience an enduring sense of existential continuity.

In contrast, in Chapter Eight I describe how the reduced capacity to bear a child is experienced by the Central African women as a fundamental axis of existential discontinuity. For these women, a sense of ontological security is interwoven within the process of existing as a mother. Through being a mother who is tasked with bearing and rearing children, the Central African women embed themselves within their intersubjective domains as agents who are actively contributing to the regenerative trajectory of worldly existence. Documenting two case studies of reduced fertility, I show that the inability to bear a child is, therefore, perceived by the women as inverting cosmological logics of regenerative flow. Women who experience reduced fertility are confronted with a discontinuity of cosmological logics through which their sense of existential purpose is, consequently, ruptured.

It is not simply the reproductive capacities of bodies that determine whether the Central African women are able to locate and experience existential continuity through existing as a mother. In Chapter Nine, I document two case studies of women who have had maternal relatedness to their children abruptly severed through interventions of forced child removal at the mandate of the Australian state. With their children forcibly removed from their lives until each reaches the age of 18, these women are confronted with an irrevocably ruptured sense of existential continuity. Since the removal of their children, these women have experienced homelessness, social ostracising from their friends and family, and an enduring sense of trauma that they describe as eclipsing their past experiences of fleeing their home country and living in asylum in Africa. Without their children, the lives of these women are suspended within a seemingly ceaseless trajectory of displacement.

Chapter Ten concludes by directly problematising the concept of ‘displacement.’ Reflecting on the enduring experiences of displacement that emerge for the Central African women across settings of ostensible ‘refuge’ in Australia and Uganda, I critically analyse the intent and
purpose of refugee resettlement in relation to the various agendas of the stakeholders engaged within these processes. There, I describe how processes of refugee resettlement can reproduce the agendas of humanitarian agents and state actors, rather than recognise the needs of refugees themselves. In reference to the significance of cosmological logics in determining how the Central African refugee women locate and experience a sense of existential continuity, it is there that I advocate for future research to approach humanitarian systems of refugee settlement by exploring and examining the subjective experiences of the refugees who are directly involved in these processes. In doing so, the assumptions of benevolence that are attached to systems of refugee resettlement can be critically unsettled.
Without critical problematisation, the concept of displacement evokes an implicit assumption of human identity and experience as inherently defined by attachment to place; and, specifically, to place as defined by the borders of nation-states (Malkki 1992:31-33, 1995b:514). Yet, displacement is depicted in much scholarly work as naturally equivalent to territorial uprooting, with little attention to this concept as a lived experience (Malkki 1992:31-33, 1995b:514; Sørenson 1997; Brun 2001; Sui 2007). In this review, I problematise the concept of ‘displacement’ within literatures that pertain to the refugee studies broadly, as well as the experiences of refugees resettled in Australia and emerging critiques of the humanitarian logics through which experiences of refugee settlement are structured. To elaborate on this focus, I describe how anthropological notions of embodiment, ontology, and cosmology can be drawn on to explore subjective dimensions of ‘displacement.’ In doing so, I emphasise the need for the subjectivities of refugees to be incorporated within theoretical approaches to ‘displacement,’ and the unique contribution of this thesis in that regard.

I. REFUGEES AND THE ‘NATIONAL ORDER OF THINGS’

The logics through which ‘displacement’ comes to be conflated in much political, humanitarian, and scholarly rhetoric with a primary condition of statelessness stems from the constructed naturalness of what Malkki (1992, 1995b) refers to as the ‘national order of things.’ This concept of the ‘national order of things’ is theorised by Malkki (1992, 1995b) as a global cultural system that is organised around the perception of nation-state borders as natural—and subsequently unquestioned—categories that are then used to organise, understand, and evaluate human experience. However, nations are not naturally self-delineating spaces. Rather, the concept of the ‘nation’ is a particular form of identity myth, often cultivated through media, which naturalises identification to and with a nation-state (Anderson 1983; Kapferer 1988). Persons that fall outside of these logics of national identity, such as refugees, are ambiguous within this globalised system of categorising and organising human experience through socially constructed borders of nation-states. They thus represent a ‘problem’ to it (Malkki 1992).

In outlining how the category of ‘exile’ differs to that of ‘refugee,’ Said (2000) emphasises that statelessness is a politicised classification. He argues that:
Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word ‘refugee’ has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas ‘exile’ carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality (Said 2000:144).

The concept of the ‘refugee’ is not, then, politically neutral. Rather, in Said’s (2000) analysis, the ‘refugee’ represents an epitomised condition of statelessness. This image of the ‘refugee’ serves to emphasise, within the globalised logics of a ‘national order of things,’ that to be without a form of state identification is to be vulnerable, and potentially victimised (Malkki 1995a). This universalised figure of the ‘refugee’ in political, humanitarian, and scholarly imaginaries thereby reproduces the constructed logics of a global cultural system that depends on mythologies of state identification as an instrument of population governance (Kapferer 1988; Malkki 1995b:516-517).

The concept of displacement as conflated with a process of deterritorialisation is crucial to the naturalisation of the nation-state system (Malkki 1992, 1995b). The uncritical use of the term displacement as a self-evident category of socio-spatial rupture and politico-legal ambiguity that emerges through processes of forced migration thereby overlooks the fluidities of lived experience as unfolding across and between the increasingly deterritorialised boundaries of the nation-state system (Appadurai 1988, 2001; Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997; Marcus 1995). Yet, the term remains unproblematised within much anthropological research (Sui 2007). 9

The ‘rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people’ has already resulted in a ‘profound sense of loss of territorial roots’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:9). In Gupta and Ferguson’s (1992:9) characterising of cultural and territorial uprootedness, the categorical figure of the ‘refugee’ emerges as a construction that reduces, collapses, and conflates what is a potentially universal experience of statelessness to a specific category. As such, the figure of the ‘displaced’ refugee obscures the fluidity and complexity of territorial belonging as pertinent to broader ethnographic contexts. 10 It is to the ways in which this figure of the ‘refugee’ is

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9 In contrast, research also emphasises that the territorial specificities of refugee experience should be recognised as an important factor that shapes how forced migration is experienced (e.g. Kibreab 1999; Brun 2001; Boer 2015).

10 For example, conflating ‘displacement’ with territorial uprooting leaves the position of persons who are displaced from their homes, but who remain in their country of origin and citizenship. It is estimated that the number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) across the globe currently outweighs that of asylum seekers and refugees who reside in nations outside of their origin country (Hampton 2014). Yet, despite this significant field of ‘displacement’ experiences manifesting within national boundaries, the concept of a ‘refugee,’ and the assumptions of deterritorialisation attached to this category, continues to be the central organising factor through which researchers approach the study of displacement; although an emerging body of literature seeks to unsettle this conflation with specific reference to the experiences of IDPs (e.g. Muggah 2003; Cohen 2007; Bakewell 2008).
constructed in public, political, and scholarly rhetoric, and the politicisations that underlie it, that I now turn.

II. THE CATEGORICAL FIGURE OF THE ‘REFUGEE’

In bureaucratic discourse, public vernacular, and much scholarly research, the term ‘refugee’ is invoked as a self-delineating category of experience encompassing assumed dimensions of persecution, trauma, exodus, and hardships of protracted exile. As Fuglerud (1999:3, emphasis in original) contends, refugees are treated as a ‘cultural category’ that maintains an ‘explicit or implicit understanding that one can deal with people in their capacity as refugees without taking into account their cultural background and the political circumstances of their flight.’ Starting with this cultural figure of the ‘refugee’ when representing or attempting to explore the experiences of persons who have fled their home serves to reproduce refugees as an inherent ‘problem,’ and, subsequently, reduce their experiences to the assumed problematics of their ‘refugeeness’ (Malkki 1995a:7, 1996; Jackson 2013b).

The uncritical use of the term ‘refugee’ in anthropological research obscures the specific processes that have shaped flows of forced migration and the particularities that condition how refugees within them have experienced these processes. Reduced through such forms of ‘dehistoricizing universalism’ to objects of anthropological knowledge defined by assumptions of suffering, Malkki (1997a:224) shows how, when representations of forced migrants stem from the uncritical categorisation of the ‘refugee,’ they then become treated as dehistoricised—and often depoliticised—objects of inquiry. The particular circumstances that led to their being situated within the category itself are rarely a platform from which to analyse refugees as historicised agents (Malkki 1997b:63).

In attempting to historicise the experiences of refugee subjects, however, the sensational aspects of their forced migration experiences can be treated as paramount. Even when specifically seeking to recognise the particular histories that have shaped the lives of refugee subjects, a majority of research focuses only on the most traumatic aspects of their past experiences (Marlowe 2010). This refracting of refugee experience through a lens of trauma can occur even if refugees themselves identify their suffering as ‘ordinary,’ or if their own primary concerns are not directly related to specific violences of the past. In emphasising that refugees are ‘historical actors’ whose experiences of displacement are oriented within specificities of past experience, Malkki (1992:37, 1997b:63, 1995a) did not imply that it is only the dimensions of trauma within their pasts that hold salience. Conversely, she called for researchers to consider the points of significance that refugees themselves historicise as important. As such, it is necessary for
research to transcend the ‘tragic circumstances and unsettled states of mind that we conventionally encapsulate in the concept of “refugee”’ (Jackson 2013b:93).

III. TRANSLATIONALISM AND REFUGEE STUDIES

An aspect of refugee experience that is often overlooked in academic research is the ways in which their lives unfold through complex networks of transnational relatedness. Instead, literature on displacement primarily focuses on the experiences of refugees as unfolding in one distinct and geographically bounded space: primarily as either encamped refugees (e.g. Black 1994, 1998; Agier 2002, 2008, 2011) or urban refugees (e.g. Kibreab 1996, 1999; Jacobsen 2006). Refugees are imagined as ‘stuck’ and immobile in their circumstances of statelessness. Subsequently, the fundamentally transnational and mobile experience of refugee displacement is overlooked (Warner 1999; Koser 2007:237).11

Broadly conceptualised, the term ‘transnationalism’ refers to ‘multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states’ (Vertovec 1999:447). Transnationalism is a burgeoning focus in migration research, in which the ties between sending and receiving nations are examined in terms of social, symbolic, and material networks that manifest within and across national boundaries (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1992, 1994, 1995; Faist 2008:23). In anthropological research, the transnational facets of migrant experience have been explored in a variety of contexts, including in terms of voluntary migration (Olwig 2007; Lee 2011) and labour and economic migration (Ong 1999; Fan 2008).12 The experiences of refugees, however, are often subsumed within transnational analyses of migrant experience without consideration of how specificities of forced migration may shape particular kinds of transnational experience (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001:615; Koser 2007). Recognising the transnational forces that condition refugee experiences illuminates the networks of economic, social, and moral support that emerge between refugees in sending and receiving nations (Shandy 2007; Horst 2008, 2006; Lindley 2009, 2010).

Research that documents the transnational dimensions of experience for refugees emphasises the links between resettled refugees and their family and friends who remain in conditions of protracted exile. Working with Somali refugees, both in camps in Kenya and resettled in Norway, Horst (2008) describes how the political, social, and economic lives of refugees in both settings are interwoven through enduring relatedness between these geographically distant

11 Displacement is also experienced by Internally Displaced Persons, who do not cross the borders of their country to flee persecution and civil unrest but who nonetheless experience exodus and exile.
12 This is not to imply that ‘economic migrants’ are a self-delineating category of persons who immigrate by ‘choice’. Economic insecurity that drives flows of migrants for employment opportunities is itself a form of ‘forced’ migration (Castles 2003).
spaces. Focusing on remittances from the perspectives of Somali refugees in London, Lindley (2009) describes how sending money to family in exile is not only driven by financial imperative, but has a distinctly social texture of maintaining relatedness and obligation to kin. Moreover, Shandy (2007), who lived with Nuer refugees resettled in the United States and who also conducted fieldwork with Nuer refugees in Ethiopia, explores in her work the ways in which enduring forms of relatedness shape experiences in both contexts. Based on insights from each setting, Shandy (2006, 2007) illustrates that these transnational networks are more than just axes of financial stability: they are the basis of a Nuer community that transcends geographic borders. Whilst these works emphasise that a sense of continuity for refugees necessitates moving beyond the notion that physical place equates to ‘refuge’ for those in exile, the ways in which ‘place’ and ‘emplacement’ intersect for refugees is still an emerging focus in refugee studies literature.

IV. BEING IN (AND OUT OF) ‘PLACE’

Community, locality, and emplacement are subjective experiences that cannot be reduced to, or conflated with, geographic location and national identification (Appadurai 1988; Malkki 1992, 1995b; Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6). Whilst providing refugees with physical safety, resettlement does not automatically result in a sense of belonging (Fozdar and Hartley 2014). The characteristically transnational experiences of refugee subjects complicate conventions of the ‘natural’ relatedness between persons and geographic place (Malkki 1992, 1995b), which has been a central problematic in anthropology over past decades.

The ‘spatial turn’ in anthropology, which emerged in the late 1980s, recognised that the localisation of lived experiences within distinct ethnographic settings does not mean that there exists a ‘natural’ link between people and place (Warf and Arias 2009:2). Instead, anthropologists like Appadurai (1988) and others (Rosaldo 1988; Rodman 1992) became concerned with the assumption of cultural cohesion implied in ethnographic fieldsites bounded by place; a concern that was to be expanded on in work by Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997), in which anthropology conducted on the basis of a bounded geographic location was critiqued as reproducing relations of power. These works imply that relation to place is shifting, dynamic, and unable to be automatically conflated to physical positioning within a geographic space. Instead, ‘social and political processes of place making’ are formed through those ‘embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistance’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6).

When theorising how refugees develop a sense of emplacement in settings of resettlement, social networks often emerge as a central platform from which to forge belonging and
community.\textsuperscript{13} Yet, the ways in which social networks can also constitute a locus of anxiety is less understood (Menjivar 2000). In a study exploring how Somali refugee women experience social connectedness in Melbourne, McMichael and Manderson (2004) describe how intergroup gossip, financial hardship, distance from extended family, and lack of physical proximity to other Somalis in Australia can develop into a sense of social isolation. Re-establishing networks of trust is not automatic for the Somali women in McMichael and Manderson’s (2004) study, but is oriented through the incremental development of informal relationships as well as participation in formal ceremonial and religious events. Also working with resettled refugees in Melbourne, Lems (2013, 2014) discusses how emplacement is forged for them through connectedness to the ‘everyday.’ Once familiarity is developed with the people, practices, and places of resettlement for refugees, this ‘centrality of actively growing an attachment’ is a platform of social and existential trust from which broader relations of community can develop (Lems 2014:14-15). What these works point to is that a sense of connectedness to place for refugees in resettlement is not reducible to ethnic or cultural communality, but is cumulatively constituted over extended periods of time as refugees become familiarised with, and trusting of, their social surroundings. However, the subjectivities through which refugees resettled in Australia rebuild their sense of continuity and emplacement remains an underexplored focus in this body of literature. Instead, research that examines the experiences of refugees in Australia is frequently designed to respond to policy shifts in relation to refugee settlement (Nuemann et al. 2014:2).

Policy-driven research is important in terms of analysing how refugee resettlement is operationalised, but this focus risks reproducing the agendas of bureaucratic stakeholders rather than those who are the subjects of policy interventions (Bakewell 2008). Despite a dearth of ethnographic research documenting lived experiences of refugee settlement in Australia (e.g. McMichael 2002; McMichael and Manderson 2004; Wise 2006; Askland 2009; Aidani 2010), there is a burgeoning body of literature that examines the ways in which refugees are positioned within Australian settings of resettlement as politicised subjects (Nueman et al. 2014:13). In particular, research with refugees resettled in Australia often describes how ‘belonging’ is structured through forms of implicit paternalism (e.g. Silove and Rees 2010; Due and Riggs 2009; Lange, Kamalkhami, and Baldassar 2007; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003). What these

\textsuperscript{13} A debate regarding the relationship between refugees and ‘place’ was published in the Journal of Refugee Studies Volume 12, Issue 4 in 1999. There, Kibreab (1999) argued that because access to humanitarian aid depends on geographic locality, the experiences of refugees are not relevant to contemporary theories of the increased deterritorialisation and mobility of global citizens. In response, Warner (1999) argued that whilst specificity of space is indeed important, the ways in which ‘place’ is constituted in refugee contexts necessitates consideration of global forces of deterritorialisation. The existence of this debate, and the divergent perspectives within it, suggests that ‘place’ for refugees cannot be conflated singularly with geography; but requires examination as a processual and subjective sense of emplacement through which specificities of geography, social, and political context intersect.
works imply is that there exists a paradox of multiculturalism in Australia, whereby members of the dominant Anglo-Australian population implicitly control the constructed migrant ‘Other’ even when intending to welcome them in to the Australian populace. This tendency stems from the coercive nature of multiculturalism in Australia as a system of dominance cemented in unequal settler-colonial relations (Povinelli 2002); in which ‘white’ Australians are positioned as ‘governor’ figures who are exclusively tasked with determining whether to tolerate, accept, or disdain the ethnic minority ‘Other’ (Hage 1998; Perrera 2009). With political, social, and economic power thus concentrated within populations of ‘white’ persons, this means that the bureaucratic structures through which everyday life is oriented in Australia serve to position their lifestyles as the standardised norm of lived experience.

Although also nuanced by class and gender identities (Perrera 1999), the practice of ‘multiculturalism’ in Australia is an exercise in positioning those who are visibly different to the dominant ‘white’ population as people ‘one can make decisions about: objects to be governed’ (Hage 1998:17, emphasis in original). The subjectivities of refugee and migrants require recognition if such implicit power structures of belonging and exclusion are to be critically examined. The ways in which African refugees, specifically, are incorporated into such modes of discursive silencing in public vernacular and academic research is an emerging focus in studies of Australia as a setting of refugee resettlement, as discussed below.

V. CONSTRUCTING THE AFRICAN REFUGEE ‘OTHER’

The forms of marginalisation that refugee settlers from Africa are subjected to in Australia can be historicised within the nation’s history of official policies of racism. Following Australian federation in 1901, immigration to Australia became subject to the applicant being able to pass a dictation test (Jupp 2002:8-9). Whilst primarily conducted in English, the test could be given in any ‘European’ language the immigration official saw fit. The explicit intention of the dictation test was to restrict immigration to Australia to those born in Europe, and allowing migration only to those born in Great Britain. This was the basis of what was to be explicitly termed the ‘White Australia Policy,’ a policy of formally restricting immigration to persons on the basis of perceived race (Jupp 2002:9). The policy was not officially abandoned until 1973. However, a ‘white bias’ has persisted beyond this period of formal immigration restriction (Jupp 2002:114).

Indeed, even in contemporary public and political attitudes toward migration in Australia, there exists a preferential bias toward resettling those migrants who are visibly and culturally similar to the ‘white’ population (Hage 1998; Jupp 2002).
Asylum seekers and refugees have been the target of this enduring ‘white bias’ (Jupp 2002:114). An example of this is the case that has become known as the ‘children overboard’ incident. This event marks a critical point upon which public perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees came to be positioned in political discourse as inherently different from, and thereby threatening of, an idealised imaginary of civil life in Australia (Perrera 2009). In 2001, Prime Minister John Howard publicly announced that asylum seekers on board a boat to Australia had thrown their ‘children overboard’ in an attempt to be taken seriously in their goal to be received as refugees (Clyne 2005). This allegation was later proved to be false. Yet, the framing of asylum seekers and, by association, refugees as distrustful and void of human empathy has remained part of the discourses that surround refugee settlement in Australia. The ‘White Australia policy’ no longer remains a formal aspect of immigration in Australia, but its effects of racialised bias and xenophobia persist in contemporary political discourses pertaining to migration in Australia (Jupp 2002; Colic-Peisker 2005), as the discussion below implies.

The resettlement of refugees from Africa is frequently depicted in Australian popular media and political discourse as problematic (Windle 2008; Nunn 2010; Nolan et al. 2011). This perspective of African refugees as ‘problems’ was mainstreamed in 2007 when the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC] abruptly reduced the number of migration placements made available to refugees from Africa. The Minister for Immigration attempted to justify this decision by outlining that ‘African refugees don’t seem to be settling and adjusting into the Australian life as quickly as we would hope’ (cited in Windle 2008:553). The minister’s statement broadly categorises refugees originating from African countries not only as a homogenous group with shared characteristics, but, more insidiously, as a group that share specifically problematic characteristics. This uncritical perspective from a representative of the federal government is indicative of the broader forms of naturalised political subjugation and casual racism that characterise how the Australian state receives refugee settlers from Africa. Conflating geography, perceived race, and assumptions of culture onto one group of persons as a homogenous entity is a way to construct persons positioned within this group as inherently ‘Other’ to those dominant within a social landscape (Abu-Lughod 1991:470).

Analysing how representations of ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’ depict inherent categories of difference in Western imaginaries, Said’s (1978) work is an examination of how the archetypal ‘Other’ is a constructed category of misrepresentation that does not reflect the lived realities of those to whom such categories of difference supposedly pertain. For Said (1978:27), the ‘Other’ is a discursive category produced from collectivised notions of imagined difference that describes the historical—and also contemporary—European fascination with the Orient. The ‘Other’ is not, however, a neutral category. The ‘Other’ is produced within a specific nexus of
knowledge and power in which the representation of social groups as homogenous serves to obliter ate the subjectivities, agency, and social particularities of persons positioned within them. Whilst the specific example in Said’s (1978) work on Orientalism is the construction of ‘the Orient’ as a category of persons able to be distinguished by homogenous attributes, the concept of the constructed ‘Other’ is applicable to how African refugee settlers experience settlement in Australia. And, for them, being positioned as the ‘Other’ is not only a matter of being homogenised as one ‘African’ cohort, but relates as well to this category representing negative and devalued difference.

The framing of Central African refugees as ‘Other’ in this context relates to what Hage (1998:133) refers to as the problem of the ‘Third World-Looking Migrant’ in the Australian imaginary; whereby migrants, by virtue of being visibly different to the dominant ‘white’ population, are positioned as therefore inherently problematic to it and in need of governance (Hage 1998:133-143). The casual racism of referring to African refugee settlers as a homogenous group, as evoked in both public vernacular and political discourse (cf. Windle 2008; Nunn 2010), evidences how African refugees in Australia become constructed as ‘Other’ to, and thereby threatening toward, the dominant population of Anglo-Australian persons. In so positioning African refugee settlers as ‘Other,’ refugee resettlement in Australia emerges as a domain of contested power relations.

VI. PROBLEMatisING THE HUMANITARIAN BASIS OF RESETTLEMENT TO A THIRD COUNTRY

Upon resettlement in Australia, refugees are confronted with these naturalised forms of unequal power relations. These are neutralised, however, through humanitarian discourse in which resettlement to a third country like Australia is positioned as politically neutral and inherently benevolent in rationale (Souter 2014). To examine how forms of inequality embedded in the resettlement process are naturalised and neutralised, it is necessary to consider the framing of resettlement as a ‘durable solution’ to displacement.

The UNHCR outlines three options to resolve the insecurity of protracted displacement for refugees in exile. These include voluntary repatriation to their country of origin, integration within the country in which the refugee has sought asylum, or resettlement to a third country in those situations in which it is impossible for a person to return to their origin country or remain in the host country (UNHCR 2015b). Whilst not overtly stated, the aim of each of these three ‘durable solutions’ to refugee displacement is to re-insert refugees within a recognisable national identity, whether that be from the origin country, the country of asylum, or the third
country of resettlement. The ‘durable solutions’ to refugee displacement as outlined by the UNHCR thereby position the figure of the ‘refugee’ as a person inherently defined by, and reduced to, a condition of statelessness.

For many refugees in exile across continental Africa, neither of the first two options of these ‘durable solutions’ to displacement are feasible. Return to their country of origin is not possible because of enduring civil unrest. Integration in the country of asylum is often impossible because the majority of legal frameworks in African countries do not allow refugees to permanently settle and receive access to the same civil rights as citizens. Resettlement to a third country is often the only feasible option. Yet, the narrow intake quotas of the third country nations that offer to permanently resettle refugees means that resettlement is a possibility for very few refugees. Jacobsen (2005:55) describes how ‘many people in refugee camps think of resettlement as akin to winning the lottery’ because the opportunity for resettlement is so coveted.

As part of the UNHCR ‘durable solutions’ framework to address refugee displacement, a condition of the third country resettlement program is that receiving countries provide resettling refugees with permanent protection guarantees, legal residence, and integration within the national community, including access to most of the same civil rights accorded to naturalised citizens (Jacobsen 2005:54). In particular, refugees that migrate to Australia through the UNHCR program receive rights upon their resettlement as a ‘permanent resident.’ As permanent residents, resettled refugees receive unemployment payments and social welfare services to support them to access housing, education, and basic necessities for survival. Access to civic rights such as these does not, however, mean that refugee settlers will automatically experience security in Australia (Fozdar and Hartley 2014).

Over the past decade, ethnographic research has problematised the notion that the resettlement of refugees in Australia is a self-evidently benevolent process. The social welfare and educational institutions through which resettlement is operationalised are increasingly recognised as contested domains in which the social and cultural worldviews of refugees are routinely undermined (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2003; Colic-Peisker 2005; Lange, Kamalkhami, and Baldassar 2007; Fozdar and Torezani 2008; McPherson 2010; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). It can be considered, then, that refugees resettled in Australia are confronted with a paradox of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012). In resettlement, refugees are provided with

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14 All of the women who participated in this project had migrated to Australia after being recognised by the UNHCR and its administering institutions as ‘refugees’ under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, in their country of asylum.
nation-state identification; and, therefore, access to material necessities for survival such as shelter, food, and water. But in receiving these resources, refugees become subjected to a regime of political and social subjugation; or what Jackson (2013b:95) describes as ‘righteous indignation.’ What this means is that the structuring of refugee resettlement often accords privilege to the agenda of the settlement nation as the ostensible redeemer of refugee suffering.

In drawing a parallel between the systems of third country resettlement that offer refugee settlers with a permanent ‘solution’ to their statelessness, and the ‘civilising’ missions of colonial intervention, Jackson (2013b) has emphasised that the relationship between resettled refugees and the nations within which they are offered permanent resettlement are never inherently benevolent. Providing refugees with a solution to their statelessness means embedding them within a potentially coercive relationship with the state that receives them. The provision of a form of national identification to refugees within programs of humanitarian resettlement is interwoven with implicit expectations that they will act as ‘good’ members of the populace under guidelines that are set by the state (c.f. Ong 2003). Their own agendas, needs, and concerns are subsumed within this objective.15

The attempt to provide ‘humanitarian’ support to resolve the suffering of refugees can result, therefore, in the reproducing of new forms of violence. This paradox of humanitarian intervention is what Fassin (2013) terms ‘humanitarian reason.’ As an ostensible ‘solution’ of providing permanent residency to refugees, third country resettlement is a case of humanitarian reasons that can serve to reduce refugees not to objects of ambiguity within the logics of the nation-state system—as in the case of asylum seekers and exiles (c.f. Fassin 2013)—but to objects of bare charity who must show unconditional gratitude and subservience to the ‘host’ nation-state. Even following resettlement, then, refugee subjects are defined by, and reduced to, the ways in which they are located within a globalised cultural system organised with reference to constructed, but implicitly naturalised, borders of nation-states.

VII. REFUGEES AND HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

It is evident that refugees, whether in asylum, exile, or resettlement, represent a ‘threshold of inclusion and exclusion’ (Stepputat and Sørenson 2014:89) in regards to state sovereignty. Whilst there are significant legal, social, and political points of distinction between the

15 Jackson’s (2011b) conceptualisation of the ‘righteous indignation’ of the state that receives refugees, and then expects them to be unconditionally grateful for the opportunity for resettlement, resonates with Fassin’s (2012) notion of ‘theological-political’ logics, will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Theological-political logics, in Fassin’s (2012:250-251) sense, refer to when political systems draw on logics of suffering and redemption, as principles garnered from a Christian theology, to organise ostensibly secular and neutral humanitarian interventions.
experiences of refugees resettled in a third country with permanent residency rights, and the experiences of those that exist in settings of asylum without access to a status of state recognition, the logics of the nation-state continue to organise, manage, and control refugees. This problem of what the ‘refugee’ category represents to the sovereignty of nation-states has been taken up in research with reference to Agamben’s (1998) conceptualisation of ‘bare life,’ which describes the condition of being so absolutely stripped of political significance that one is rendered exposed to state violence (e.g. Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004; Darling 2009; Hanafi and Long 2010; Agier 2011:155). Refugees are theorised as the ultimate representation of ‘bare life’ by virtue of their often residing in refugee camps, where state authority is administered to non-citizen refugees by virtue of being, regardless, within the locus of a sovereign power (Agier 2011:155). Agamben (2004:20) himself refers to the categorical figure of the refugee as an exemplar of an existence that is, as defined by a condition of ‘statelessness,’ situated so far outside of state sovereignty so as to be reduced to a ‘pure human’ biological state. In that perspective, the refugee can become the target of murderous state violence by virtue of physically existing within sovereign borders, but the infliction of violence on the refugee is stripped of political significance because they are excluded, as non-citizens, from the normative regulatory structures of the state.

This perspective has been applied to the situations encountered by asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat, and who are then detained in immigration detention camps prior to their claims for refuge within the sovereign state being processed. It is argued that such systems of immigration detention allow the Australian state to inflict violence on asylum seekers without repercussion, because their ‘bare life’ renders their suffering void of political significance (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). Yet, Agamben’s (1998:134, 2004:20-21) sense of the ‘refugee’ is as a ‘concept’ rather than a living, experiencing subject. Agamben (2004:21) himself argues for the ‘refugee’ to be approached as a categorical figure of ‘bare life,’ and not a living exemplar. In some anthropological work, however, refugees have been analysed through this lens as reduced to ‘bare life’ without recognition of how their subjectivities and sense of agency nonetheless operate within settings of exile (Agier 2008, 2011). As Fassin (2012:152) points out, refugees—even those encamped—are not so stripped of political agency that their experiences can be conflated with regimes of totalistic governance.

In showing how refugees and asylum seekers are nonetheless treated as ambiguous within nation-state systems of administration, anthropological research illustrates how refugees can become embedded within the governance regimes of humanitarian institutions (Hyndman 2000; Fassin 2005; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, 2007; Cabot 2013). For example, Fassin (2012:226, 2005) and Fassin and D’Halluin (2005, 2007) describe how the process of ascertaining refugee
status within French systems of status determination is structured within a naturalised ‘politics of life,’ whereby it is implicit forms of biopolitics, rather than direct forms of sovereign power, that inflict violence on refugees.

This conceptualisation of the politics that situate refugee lives extends on Foucauldian notions of biopolitics. In analysing the historical basis of how scientific logics come to be constructed and reproduced as ‘truths’ in contemporary societies, Foucault (1977) describes how the body becomes reduced to a thing: a docile and mute object from which the power to discipline and control stems. Where sovereign power works through centralisation to repress and control a population through sporadic interventions of punitive violence, contemporary forms of biopolitics operate through disciplinary power; in which control, via regulatory agencies, is dispersed through a social body and instantiated ‘within the social body rather than from above it’ (Foucault 1980:39). Through biopolitics, the state still governs and controls, but does so through regulatory regimes that are centred on historically constituted normative procedures that are applied to, and regulated from, the social body in numerous fields of force relations. These are the kinds of implicit power relations that Fassin (2012, 2005) attaches to contemporary regimes of ‘humanitarian reason’ in contemporary contexts of seeking asylum, and which Ong (2003) attaches to refugee resettlement.

The concept of biopolitics refers to such ways in which political systems are able to control populations through tacit power relations that nonetheless govern human life. Foucault (2008:243) uses neoliberalism in America as an example to make this point. He describes how capitalist economic market forms are capacitated through, and necessitated by, values of neoliberalism: including individualism, economic rationalism, and efficiency. These values become generalised throughout the social system in America beyond monetary exchange as naturalised and ‘normal’ ways to live and behave in American society, so that whole aspects of life for American populations are dictated by taken-for-granted logics of neoliberalism. Such neoliberal expectations, as forms of internalised and generalised political control, resonate into the most intimate practices of human bodies. Foucault (2008:243-244) describes how the relationship between mother and child within this model becomes experienced as a regime of neoliberalism. The shaping of mother and child relatedness in a neoliberal model means that time and activities spent with the child are designed to accord with aims, efficiencies, and intentions of neoliberal success; such as preparing the child for employment through activities that are designed specifically to ‘develop’ the child’s skills and abilities (McRobbie 2013). Work by Ong (1996, 2003) builds on this analysis of biopolitics through neoliberal normalisation, and shows how social welfare institutions, such as the child welfare system, can operate as regimes of governmentality that seek to ‘normalise’ the behaviours of refugee women.
in the United States to fit within expectations of ‘white,’ middle-class, neoliberal self-reliance. An example of this coercive ‘normalisation’ of parental caregiving is described in Chapter Nine, whereby state agencies of child protection seek to assess and modify the behaviours of Central African mothers according to conventions of neoliberal parenting, which are constructed as detached from socio-historical context.

Intersecting this analysis of control of the body as central to the ways in which governments maintain control over broad populations in his theory of governmentality, Foucault’s conceptualisation of biopolitics is centred on the politics of broad populations, rather than the specificities of whether particular bodies within a population are given the right to life (Fassin 2009). This is the extension that Fassin (2012:226) draws on in his work with the biopolitics of asylum seeker determinations in the French context, which he refers to as the ‘politics of life’ as opposed to the specifically Foucauldian terminology of ‘biopolitics.’ Whilst Fassin recognises that humanitarian apparatuses, as operationalised in the context of refugees, do indeed manage and control broad populations, there are specificities of biopolitics in that arena that serve, at an intimate and highly politicised level of individual bodies, to conflate the determination of ‘refugee’ status with the ill, suffering, and eventually dead body. This is what Fassin (2012) characterises as the ‘politics of life,’ whereby the humanitarian system of managing refugees is organised with the survival of the living body being the core aim of humanitarian intervention. These are a logics of ‘biolegitimacy,’ as Fassin (2012:249) terms it, through which being physically alive is privileged as the penultimate evidence of humanitarian ‘good.’ Within this system, however, forms of political, cultural, and social recognition that make physical existence ‘worth living’ are, subsequently, devalued (Jackson 2013b:91).

The logics through which this assumed beneficence of humanitarian intervention can come to be experienced by recipients as encompassing forms of malignant and concealed violence requires careful attention to ethnographic specificity. Overgeneralisation of humanitarian reason can

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16 Fassin (2009) differentiates between a Foucauldian ‘biopolitics’ as applying to populations rather than a ‘politics of life’ as pertaining to individual lives within biopolitical regimes of dispersed power relations. In theorising a ‘politics of life’, Fassin (2009) is careful to note the social, as well as biological, basis to this conceptualisation of ‘life’. When referring to how the state governs ‘life’, he is not just invoking a politics of ‘life itself’ in the sense of existence being dependent on, and thus reducible to biological properties (Rose 2001). Rather, he extends on how Arendt (1958) analysed the human condition of ‘life itself’ as not simply biological, but also encompassing a vitality of social function and purpose. Fassin (2009:48) refers to this intersection of the social and biological properties of an embodied subject privy to all the social, cultural, political, and moral conditions of a life-course from birth to death as a condition of ‘life as such.’

17 Combining broad theorisation with case studies from diverse ethnographic settings, Fassin (2012) sets out in his book, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, an analysis of humanitarianism as the primary organising factor of contemporary world politics, including global policies of immigration. Fassin (2012) develops an analysis of different cases of humanitarian intervention to illustrate how each reveals the logics of a humanitarian reason in which the beneficence of the encounter is dependent on the visceral suffering of the victim. A strength of Fassin’s (2012) work is the uncovering of suffering as a product of humanitarian intervention through processes of individualising the victims within regimes of biolegitimacy that reduce the dimensions of violence they have suffered to the ‘truth’ writ on the body, rather than with recognition of social and political suffering wrought through ‘structural violence’ and ‘communal problems’ (Dunn 2014:193).
reduce the reality of violence as lived to stereotypes of ‘victims,’ which can serve to reproduce the forms of objectification that often structure the concealed violence to which they have been subjected (Dunn 2014). In examining the ways in which bureaucracies of refugee settlement can operate to obfuscate the social, political, and cultural contexts of refugees, it is necessary to move beyond rhetoric and to instead explore the ways in which practices of humanitarianism that conceal malignance stem from intersecting logics. Throughout the thesis, it is the experiences of the Central African women themselves, and the ways in which their everyday lives are structured within humanitarian bureaucracies, that emerge as the basis of analysing systems of refugee settlement. Through attention to ethnographic specificity, intersecting logics of humanitarian intervention are revealed.

Far from a setting of ‘refuge,’ the literature reviewed here implies that resettlement in Australia is a domain of contestation between systems of state governance and refugee’s socio-cultural historicities of lived experience. However, despite an emerging influx of literature that seeks to position resettled refugees in Australia as politicised agents (e.g. Lange, Kamalkhami, and Baldassar 2007; Fozdar 2009; Correa-Velez, Spaaij, and Upham 2012; Fozdar and Tilbury 2014), a majority of research in the field of refugee resettlement in Australia continues to be focus on the policy agendas of resettlement (e.g. Westoby 2008; Sidhu and Taylor 2007, 2009; Mitchell and Correa-Velez 2010; Mwaitelek 2011). The structure of refugee resettlement in Australia, as a domain of contested humanitarianism, should, however, not be beyond the lens of scholarly research. Indeed, Neuman et al. (2014:13) argue that the Australian program of humanitarian settlement support for refugees requires critical attention in future research conducted. They emphasis that this attention to the Australian program has been largely avoided in scholarly research, ‘as if a critical investigation of humanitarianism represented a betrayal of the very people on whose behalf much of the scholarship is produced’ (Neumann et al. 2014:13). Continuing to reproduce terrains of refugee resettlement in Australia as being beyond critical assessment can enable the systems of misrecognition and structural violence they may encompass to be perpetuated (Fassin 2012:252). As such, there is a need for research that examines the experience of refugee resettlement in Australia to transcend this assumption of resettlement as a self-evident practice of humanitarianism.

VIII. APPROACHING SUBJECTIVITY

Aiming to insert refugee subjectivities within this field of resettlement studies produces, however, another question: how is, or how can, the study of refugee subjectivities be approached in anthropological research? In analysing how lived experience is mediated through a ‘mindful body,’ Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) describe how the embodiment of lived
experience always concurrently encapsulates an existential dimension. Based on the contention that the concept of ‘displacement’ cannot be reduced to shifts of social and geographic space (Malkki 1992:31; Sorenson 1997), ‘displacement’ can also, then, be approached as a lived experience grounded in an existential condition of being. The immediacy of experience, in which one’s subjective lens is directly coalesced within the conditions of their world prior to reflexive reasoning, is what Jackson (2013c:251) describes as the ‘existential’ basis of lived bodily experience. However, even this supposedly unmediated level of embodied experience is oriented through cultural particularities. For example, referring to hunger as lived experience manifested at an existential level of embodiment, Schep\-er-Hughes (1992:136, emphasis in original) asserts that:

The unquestionability of the body-self is . . . where all knowledge and certainty of the world begins. And yet it is difficult to even imagine the first, most “natural” intuition of the body-self as unmediated by cultural meanings and representation. And so even at this primary level of analysis, the biological, psychological, and symbolic meanings of hunger are merged in the experience of bodies that are mindful and minds that are culturally embodied. What does it mean then to speak of the primary, the existential, experience of hunger, or to say that a population is ‘hungry’?

The same perspective can be applied to the concept of displacement, whereby examining what it means to be displaced can be considered at an existential dimension of lived experience, rather than abstracted process of socio-spatial dislocation. However, the basis of examining how subjectivities orient displacement as an existential condition requires, in the vein of Jackson’s (2013c) approach to ‘existential anthropology,’ recognising that lived experience, and the ethnographic encounter that aims to document lived experience, is fundamentally intersubjective in nature. As similarly conceptualised by Schep\-er-Hughes and Lock (1988), and in Schep\-er-Hughes’ (1992) later work, experience, as an existential condition, is only possible because being is oriented through a lived body. The body emerges from this analysis as the experiential origin of all lived experiences (cf. Csordas 1990, 1994, 1999). An emphasis on the body as the starting point of experience does not automatically conflate the body with the concept of an individualist entity. Rather, bodily experience encapsulates an intersubjective process in which the body, and subsequently all lived experiences as manifested through the body, are socially situated (Csordas 1990, 2008). Csordas (2008) emphasises the body as an intersubjective tool in which all bodily interaction manifests a view of the world that is indeterminate and temporally contingent. Intersubjectivity, in Csordas’ (2008:113) terms, refers to the ‘reciprocity of subjects’ that characterises how persons engage lived experience. That is, intersubjectivity is the concept of all lived experience being interpreted through, and
understood within, the ways in which the experiencing subject feels themselves positioned in relation to their world; and with other the subjects within it. This coalescence of subjectivities and worldly materialities as oriented through intersubjective experience is the axis through which a subjective sense of relatedness with the world is mapped through a single corporeal, yet embodied, being.

This intersubjective experience of being-in-the-world incorporates the expansive potentialities of the world that are external to the subject but which are perceived and understood according to the historicity of their existential sense of knowing the world. This existential lens of mediating experience in the world is, according to Schutz (1974:72), constituted from:

[T]he intersubjective world which existed long before our birth, experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, as an organized world. Now it is given to our experience and interpretation. All interpretation of this world is based upon a stock of previous experiences of it, our own experiences and those handed down to us by our parents and teachers, which in the form of ‘knowledge at hand’ function as a scheme of reference.

In this work, Schutz (1974) is extending on Husserl’s (1970) concept of a ‘lifeworld.’ Husserl (1970) recognises that existence is an inherently intersubjective process of being-in-the-world, which is a coalescence of the individual’s own sense of ‘being’ as separate to, but inextricably interwoven within, the material environment and worlds of others. The ways in which this coalescence shapes the individual’s sense of being in particular ways is referred to as the ‘lifeworld’ (Husserl 1970). In this sense, a ‘lifeworld’ refers to the experiencing subject’s singularised sense of being that is nonetheless constituted in intersubjective relation to their surrounding world. Schutz (1974) illustrates how interpretation of lived experience through the lifeworld is oriented according to logics of past experience that are particularised through the personal experiences of each individual, but which often reflect shared understandings because lifeworlds are shaped within social arenas. Immersed in this ‘flow of duration’ (Schutz 1974:62), this is how experiencing subjects develop a naturalised, but nonetheless constructed, sense of the world and worldly existence.

IX. EMBODIMENT AND MULTIMODAL ONTOLOGIES

The concept of a lifeworld presumes that a world exists outside of the experiencing subject; but that only in the process of ‘being-with’ the world are externalities of experience, in this intersubjective ‘thrownness together,’ perceived and lived (Das et al. 2014:5). However, through what has been termed the ‘ontological turn’ in the discipline of anthropology, this intersubjective relatedness between world and experiencing subject has been problematised by a
multitude of works that seek to examine what, precisely, ontology means and implies for lived experience.

In a basic conceptualisation, the notion of ontology refers to a sense of being, and the ways in which experiencing subjects know and make their worlds (Harris and Robb 2012; Das et al. 2014). Contemporary anthropological debates pertaining to ontology, however, problematise the ways in which subjects perceive, and are perceived as being with or apart from, ‘nature’ (Harris and Robb 2012). The separation of the experiencing subject from their surrounding world of ‘nature’ as a taken-for-granted paradigm in anthropology is, in this problematisation, framed as a distinctly Western perspective (Henare, Holbraad, Wastell 2007). In being applied to anthropological analyses of ‘Other’ cultures through ethnography, the implication is that this lens perpetuates the ethnographic encounter as an enduring imperialist engagement.

To overcome this potentiality, it is argued that anthropologists need to reconceptualise the notion of ontology. The relatedness between ‘nature’ and subject is problematised as not simply a matter of the same universalised process of human existence being particularised through ‘cultural’ representation. Instead, it is argued, subjects exist within and occupy worlds and ways of being that are, in themselves, unique (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2004; Blaser 2010; Kohn 2013; Descola 2013). What these researchers are suggesting is that there is not one universalised structure of human existence in the world that is then perceived and experienced through representations of ‘cultural’ variation. Rather, because existence is oriented through a body—or an intersubjective encounter through the body—that is unique; the subject then experiences life through a perspective—that is, a sense of ontological being—that is similarly unique.

In that view, the subject’s sense of ontological being is not able to reduced to an object of simplistic comparison. An example of how this developing conceptualisation of ontology as more than a culturally particularised way of being is documented in Kohn’s (2013) work among the Amazonian Runa. In this setting, both Runa, and the forest comprising of other beings such as animals and spirits amongst which their lives are interwoven, ‘think’ together. In relating to these beings, the thinking Runa and the thinking forest together produce an intersubjectively unique ontology of being that is no longer distinctly human, but which encompasses the ways in which being is oriented through humans and the beings that occupy their worlds. The central problematic that emerges in Kohn’s (2013) work, and in other explorations of ontology, is the question of whether there are not just multiple ontologies of being in the world, but whether there are, by virtue of there being multiple ontologies, therefore multiple worlds. The lived body of the experiencing subject, and what this presence of a body implies and how it is shaped
within intersubjective encounters, emerge within such anthropological debates about ontology as a central problematic of analysis.

The body therefore remains a fundamental locus from which understandings and conceptualisations of what it means to exist, and how existence is therefore oriented and experienced, is grounded. Recognising this, Harris and Robb (2012:676) assert a generalised theory of ontology as unique and multimodal, through which ontologies are generated and lived through the contingent social-material contexts in which bodies and existence are interwoven. In this perspective of ontology, Harris and Robb (2012) coalesce a conceptualisation of ontology with reference to the anthropological paradigm of ‘embodiment.’

The paradigm of embodiment as broadly utilised in anthropological literature refers to the idea that the body is the fundamental platform from which all facets of existence are lived (Csordas 1994, 1999). The aim of the embodiment paradigm in anthropology is to overcome the discursive bias of separating mind and thought from body and practice, as is habitual in many Euro-American contexts. Instead, it is emphasised that it is only through the mind and body as experiencing subject through which lived experience in the world is oriented (Jackson 2013c:51). The body is the indeterminate methodological field through which experience is oriented, thereby producing the body itself not as purely an object through which experience manifests but also as a coterminous object-subject mediated and lived through specific historicities, materialities, and immediacies of the present (Csordas 1999). In merging a conceptualisation of ontology with this paradigm of embodiment, Harris and Robb (2012:676) recognise that ‘because the body is always a source of experience and something that is conceptualized in a specific way, there are different ontologies of the body.’

Consequently, there are, potentially, as many ways of world making as there are experiencing subjects, each of whose sense of being will be particularised according to the unique trajectory of their past experiences. In line with the existential philosophy of being put forward by Husserl (1970) first, and extended on by both Schutz (1974) and Jackson (2013c), it can be considered that ways of being are at once unique to each experiencing subject by virtue of their fundamentally embodied basis of existence. However, this unique sense of embodied being is particularised through the intersubjective contingencies in which existence takes place. Through the intersubjective orienting of lived experience, subjects at once form, and are informed by, logics of the assumed nature and potentialities of the world. These constructed logics give meaning, purpose, and a illusory sense of determinacy to what is an inherently unstable process of ontological being (Schutz 1974:72; Jackson 2013c:5).
X. COSMOLOGY AND CONTINUITY

Within the anthropological paradigm of embodiment, it is recognised that the relatedness between body and world is fundamentally indeterminate (Csordas 1994, 1999). This indeterminacy is what Jackson (2013c:9) refers to as the ‘paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life.’ Because the nature of the surrounding world can only be known in the immediacy of intersubjective engagement, there is an element of this encounter between experiencing subject and the unfolding of their ontological existence that is characterised by indeterminate potentialities, or as Jackson (2013c:9) writes:

Although we exist as both singular beings and participants in wider fields of being that encompass other people, material things, and abstractions, our relations with ourselves and with others are uncertain, constantly changing, and subject to endless negotiation.

Despite this fundamental indeterminacy of intersubjective life, subjects nonetheless experience, for the most part, the unfolding of their existence through a concurrent sense of continuity, coherence, and stability. This sense of continuity that is imbued within the passage of ontological existence is a product of the formation and mediation of historicised logics in pre-objective bodily experience (Merleau-Ponty 2004:53-59). The ways in which a subject perceives, interprets, and experiences the world is, in this understanding of ontology through embodiment as developed above, oriented through the generative capacities and historicities of their lived body. These capacities are at once particularised according to the specificities of their past, but always oriented in relation to broader worldly potentialities. As implied in this conceptualisation of embodiment, lived bodily experience cannot be separated from historicised logics that orient practice in the world.

The philosophical phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004) explains how such logics are oriented through embodiment to imbue ontological existence with a sense of continuity. The process through which the experiencing subject comes to interpret and understand lived experience within a concurrent sense of coherence and stability is, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004), capacititated through the experiential process of sensory perception. Perception is not an uninformed or static biological act. Rather, perception is described by Merleau-Ponty (1962) as the sensory constituting of impressions of the world. These impressions are at once compositely constituted in relation to those perceptions that have come prior; and, subsequently, in relation to those assumptions of worldly experience yet to come. Contemporary experience, as suspended between these informing points of perception and projection, is lived as coherently intertwined within past historicities and assumptions of the future moments that will
immediately follow. These historicised logics that thus orient lived experience, as both a sensate bodily engagement with the world and socially particularised process, are characterised by Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004) as a perceptual lens.

This perceptual lens is a set of historically, culturally, and temporally particularised logics that unconsciously attach meaning to the unfolding of existence. This process imbues the unfolding of existence with a sense of continuity, because the constructed logics through which perception is mediated continue to be engaged and affirmed in the practice of lived experience. In Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 2004:53-59) theorisation of perception, there is, therefore, no objective basis to the sense of continuity that guides experiencing subjects through their existence with a sense of stability and coherence. Instead, the habitual unfolding of existence is oriented through this lens of perceptual unity that allows lived experiences to manifest for experiencing subjects with an illusory sense of familiarity and cohesion intact. This lens of perceptual unity is constituted from and of those logics of worldly existence that come, for experiencing subjects, to be taken as the definite qualities or self-evident principles of existence.

These unifying logics, as constructed from past experience but contemporaneously experienced as self-evident facts of the world and worldly experience, serve to imbue the unfolding of existence with an illusory sense of continuity. Cosmological logics emplace the unfolding of human existence within an ordered situatedness beyond the individuals’ immediate socio-spatial present (c.f. Douglas 1973; Tambiah 1985). In terms of the conceptualisation of ontologies as oriented through the specificity of embodied being, as described above, this means that cosmological logics are those implicit understandings through which subjects locate their lives within broader patterns of significance.

XI. CONCLUSION: TRANSCENDING THE ‘REFUGEE’ AS PROBLEM

The ways in which persons who have experienced conflict, exodus, forced migration, and protracted displacement locate a sense of ontological continuity during and following these experiences is often subsumed in academic work within a presumption that, due to these experiences, their lives have been irrevocably disrupted and displaced (Marlowe 2010). This

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18 The term ‘cosmology’ is described by Tambiah (1985:3) as the ‘frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an order system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter, and motion, and peopling it with gods, humans, animals, spirits, demons, and the like . . . Cosmologies (and cosmogonies) nearly always, and classifications frequently, tend to be viewed as enduring arrangements of things and persons, their underlying premises and initial ordering seen either as having an existence outside the flux of ordinary and everyday changing events and expectations, or as motivating and generating to some degree the surface everyday phenomena of the present time. As outlined further in Chapter Five, both Tambiah (1985) and Mary Douglas (1973) view cosmologies as those logics of the ‘nature’ of existence that imbue lived experience with meaning.
uncritical, but nonetheless pervasive, approach to the notion of refugee displacement is unsettled by Malkki (1995a), whose work emphasises taking into account the cosmological logics through which specificities of refugee displacement experience are lived and understood. Malkki’s (1992:31, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2002) broader corpus of work is a call for studies of refugee displacement to move beyond the assumed problematics of the ‘refugee’ as a self-delineating category, and the associated assumptions of their displacement as able to be characterised by mechanistic forces of socio-spatial dislocation. Considering the complexities that are recognised in broader anthropological paradigms in regards to the ways in which human subjectivities are constituted and shaped within lived experience, it is significant that, despite Malkki (1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996) situating the study of refugees within broader disciplinary dialogues pertaining to subjectivity, cosmology, and nationhood, the particularised ways in which refugees themselves live displacement—and the cosmological specificities that orient these experiences—remains an underexplored focus in anthropological research.

In the chapters that follow, I refer to and extend on the themes referred to in this review in order to document how Central African refugees resettled in Australia experience and understand displacement. As is developed throughout the thesis, these women draw on cosmological logics as constituted from principles of regeneration, blockage, and flow—with the specificities of this cosmology explored and contextualised in detail in the analysis chapters of the thesis—as the basis from which a sense of ontological being and existential continuity is oriented for them within settings of resettlement. The ways which these women interpret, experience, and live ‘displacement’ is, as documented throughout this thesis, thus oriented through their capacity to have these cosmological logics affirmed, made precarious, or ruptured within settings of refugee resettlement.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

January 26th, 2013 – M1 Freeway from a regional Australian city to Sydney

‘Where are you?’ I ask Nyomanda through the wavering reception of my mobile phone, hoping that the rising panic in my voice is only noticeable to myself. With only two hours before check-in for our flight to Kampala closes, the traffic I have been driving in to Sydney has come to a standstill on the freeway. My progress is immobilised, and I am still at least an hour from the airport. Nyomanda and I are travelling together to Uganda on the same flight from Sydney, but she is making her way to the airport from the opposite direction.

From Nyomanda’s end of the phone, I hear a child screaming and a loud thud. This is followed by a torrent of forceful Swahili. Directing her fury away from the phone, I listen to Nyomanda fiercely reprimanding the children that presumably surround her before she finally turns her attention to the phone and answers my question.

‘We are at the petrol station,’ she replies.

‘Which one?’ I ask, trying desperately to sound casual. Another pause.

‘Fernleigh, I think,’ she says. Immediately, I begin calculating distances and times. I realise that Nyomanda is still two hours drive from Sydney.

Casually confirming my nightmare, Nyomanda continues, ‘We have just left now.’ I am unable to speak. Sensing my alarm through the phone line, Nyomanda adds, chidingly, ‘Do not worry, Georgina. We are coming.’ The child continues to scream in the background. Then, our phone connection is abruptly lost.

An hour and a half later I am negotiating the masses of people in the departures hall of the airport. My mother and a friend await me, having come to see me before the flight. Standing beside the airline departure desk, we wait for Nyomanda to meet us. Fifteen minutes prior to the closure of our flight check-in, Nyomanda comes striding across the departures hall to envelop us in an embrace. Even without the enthusiastic greeting, her arrival would be difficult to miss.

Nyomanda is trailed by a seemingly overwhelming number of companions, including her husband, children, and another family of Congolese refugees. Preparing to check in to our flight, Nyomanda and her husband exchange purposeful dialogue about the practical aspects of the trip. Her friends also interject to talk with her, providing guidance and expressing their own
excitement. When Nyomanda and I make our way together to the check-in desk, I glance back at my own humble entourage of two parting companions. The differences between Nyomanda and I feel, suddenly, particularly vast.

To focus on the lived experiences of resettled refugees in Australia requires a flexible methodological approach that explores refugee lives as negotiated between disparate social, spatial, and imaginary sites and settings of exile (Malkki 1992; Marcus 1999:6; Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; Horst 2007; Shandy 2007; Van Hear 2006, 2008). The above vignette documents an example of what it is like to be suspended across and between settings of exile: in the anonymity and ambiguity of an airport travelling between Australia as a site of permanent refugee resettlement, and Uganda as a site of protracted refugee exile. This suspension of the resettlement experience across the geographic boundaries of defined nation-states is the lived reality of refugee resettlement in Australia for many Central African refugees, not only Nyomanda. Whilst these continuities between resettlement and asylum are an underexplored focus in forced migration research (Muggeridge and Doná 2006; Van Hear 2006, 2008; Jeffery and Murison 2011), it is these enduring empirical links that exist between Central African women in Australia and Uganda, particularly, that informs the methodological approach of this thesis. I trace the lived experiences of Central African women through an emergent multi-sited methodology across social and spatial sites of settlement spanning different towns, cities, Australian states, and eventually continents; as determined by the movements of refugee women themselves across these spaces. This methodological approach led me to question whether ‘displacement’ and ‘refuge’ can be treated as distinct categories.

I. Fieldwork at ‘Home’

Between August 2012 and March 2014, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork through participant observation research with a group of Central African women that spanned relations within, across, and between that countries of Australia and Uganda.19 I initiated fieldwork for this study in August 2012. I had undertaken my first recruitment visit to a refugee settlement agency in the morning, and been invited by a Congolese caseworker employed there to the home shared by him and his wife that same afternoon. This was to be my first encounter with Nyomanda, who would become a participant, travel companion, and ‘mother’ to me throughout the course of my fieldwork.

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19 This project was approved by the University of Newcastle’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-2012-0234
That afternoon, I sat on the veranda of Nyomanda’s dilapidated rental property located in an impoverished neighbourhood of a regional city in Australia, sharing a meal with her, her husband, and their children. Thus began a relationship from which was to emerge seemingly countless fieldwork visits, introductions into the lives of other Central African women, and—six months after that initial fieldwork encounter with Nyomanda—the experience of accompanying her to Uganda and living with her in a small room, sleeping side-by-side on cheap foam mattresses.

That warm afternoon with Nyomanda and her family was the first fieldwork encounter for this research: sitting on a veranda in a suburban neighbourhood of the regional city that I, myself, had called ‘home’ for many years. The notion of ‘home’ as a specific site of anthropological fieldwork, however, reproduces the notion of an ethnographic ‘other’ as able to be delineated by geographic locale rather than ethnographic specificity. Anthropological conventions of conducting fieldwork emphasise the immersion of the ethnographer within a cultural context different to their own, so that the process of attaining cultural understanding from the perspectives of research subjects is unambiguous and not obscured by the researcher’s own familiarity with the ethnographic setting (Pratt 1986). However, disciplinary dialogues over the past two decades contest the notion that anthropology at ‘home’ is inappropriate (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). It is instead recognised that all field sites, either ‘home’ or ‘away,’ are dynamic; and, thus, unable to be reduced to static terrains of an objectifiable ‘culture’ (Marcus 1995). Hence, fieldwork for this research originated with the sharing of a meal on the veranda of house in a suburban neighbourhood of the town I considered my ‘home’; a setting in which I was at once intimately familiar, but with dynamics of ethnographic context I was to become incrementally immersed within.

II. MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

January 26th, 2013 – Sydney Kingsford Smith International Airport

After our initial greeting, Nyomanda and I make our way to the check-in counter. I help Nyomanda with her luggage because she is unable, alone, to manage the four massive suitcases that she has brought with her. Each is high enough to come up to my hip, and each is too wide to

20 With increased recognition of ethnographic context as being defined by globalised networks of people, materialities, and technologies, the distinction between fieldwork at ‘home’ and ‘away’ has been collapsed as a constructed categorisation (Marcus 1995:98). Extending on earlier considerations of ‘community’ as an imagined construction unable to be reduced to groupings of persons in physical places (Anderson 1983), Appadurai (1990, 1996) pioneered a theory of globalised ‘–scapes’ to characterise shifts of persons, media, and imaginaries across space and time. In thereby unsettling the anthropological subject as unable to be defined by their attachment to place, the notion of ethnographic specificity being defined by geographic locale became, similarly, uprooted.
be placed on the airport luggage trolleys. I sling my duffel bag onto my back then take one of
Nyomanda’s suitcases in each of my hands. Together, we manage to arrive at the counter with
only minimal struggle.

At the check-in desk, the total weight of Nyomanda’s luggage comes to 120kg; quadruple what
one passenger is allowed to take onto the flight. Neither Nyomanda nor I can afford to pay for
the extra weight, so we have only one option available to us. We must leave behind at least two
of her suitcases, and the items from them. The airline worker sends us away from the counter to
sort the luggage, with less than fifteen minutes remaining before the flight closes for check-in.

What follows is a disorganised flurry of hastily sorted clothing, toiletries, and shoes being
shifted across the four suitcases. Nyomanda’s companions approach, and begin to obtrude in the
process of determining the items to be taken to Uganda. Suitcases are opened, clothes and other
items are strewn across bench seats and the tiled airport floor, arguments break out over what
items should stay and which should remain, forceful bursts of Swahili spoken quickly and
furiously are exchanged between Nyomanda and her entourage. The whole time, a young child
maintains an incessant wailing.

Despite the noise and frantic movements I observe that only one suitcase, the smallest, contains
Nyomanda’s personal items. Two other suitcases consist entirely of children’s clothes, and
another is packed with shoes in children’s sizes. I notice that Nyomanda has carefully written a
name on the sole of each shoe (Figure 1).

I ask her, despite the rush, why she has done this. Hurriedly rummaging through clothes and
making piles out of which to pack and which to leave, Nyomanda replies impatiently, ‘They are
for the children. I have to make sure I have enough for each of them. It is easier to set it out if I
label all the things I am to take, so I don’t miss any of them out. I must provide for all of them,
you see?’

The children Nyomanda refers to here are her nieces and nephews that live in a refugee
settlement in Uganda. They had previously lived in Congo, with their mother, who died the
previous year following an unexpected illness. As a family member resettled in Australia,
Nyomanda is best positioned, despite the vast geographic distance that separate her from settings
of daily life in Africa, to absorb these children as their ‘mother’ and claim responsibility for
them in a way that her impoverished family members, who are spread throughout Congo as
internally displaced persons and Uganda as forced migrants, are not. She travels to Uganda with
the primary purpose of provisioning to them directly the support and intimacy of immediate
motherly contact.

Returning to the airline counter with rapidly reduced luggage in tow, we finally receive our
tickets and the hastily re-packed baggage is transported away. Before we go to say our goodbyes
to family, Nyomanda turns to me and says, frustrated, ‘I am worried now, about what happened. About whether there is enough there, for them all. I have to leave behind some things now. I hope there is enough, for the children.’

FIGURE 1: SHOES THAT NYOMANDA PACKED TO TAKE TO UGANDA. SHE HAS WRITTEN THE NAME OF THE INTENDED RECIPIENT ON THE SOLE OF EACH SHOE.

Within a body of forced migration literature in which there has been ‘little recognition of the fact . . . that increasingly refugees travel to and from countries of origin and settlement countries where other family members are living’ (Neumann et al. 2014:12), this thesis is an innovative exploration of refugee ‘displacement’ in which the experiential constituting of forced migration experiences is examined through critical continuities between sites and settings of exile.  

Empirically and theoretically, this thesis is distinct from other research in the field of forced migration because a central point of analysis is the comparative lens on asylum and resettlement. Similarly to recent work in anthropology in which the ethnographer has physically travelled with research participants across international borders (Holmes 2013), this book uses a multi-sited methodology of conducting fieldwork across transnational contexts of forced migration in order to explore, and reveal, what the thresholds through which these crossings of geographic, social, and emotional borders imply for the supposedly distinct experiences of ‘displacement’ and ‘refuge.’

According to Marcus (1999:6), the study of refugees, migrants, and diaspora is an ‘obvious case of multi-sited ethnography.’ However, such a supposedly obvious approach to the study of refugee experience is not reflected in the corpus of forced migration literature. Instead, a

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21 Other anthropological research that has documented refugee lives as multi-sited studies includes: Holtzman (2000); Shandy (2007); Horst (2007, 2008); and Lindley (2009, 2010).
significant body of research in refugee studies focuses on the specific experiences of refugees in bounded locales of encampment, with some notable exceptions (Holtzman 2000; Van Hear 2006, 2008; Shandy 2007; Horst 2007, 2008; Lindley 2009, 2010). This thesis forms part of this shift towards locating refugee experiences, particularly, within the dynamism of lives experienced across geographic spaces.

There is a tendency, however, in anthropological research to conflate multi-sited fieldwork conducted with a specified migrant population dispersed across physical locations as automatically constituting the study of a distinct diaspora (Hage 2005). The study of a diaspora is, however, not mechanically traced through conducting multi-sited fieldwork with migrant populations dispersed across geographical terrains (Clifford 1997). Such an assumption reproduces the notion that people who share an attachment to a specific territorial place subsequently share generalisable attitudes and characteristics. Instead, ongoing forms of connectedness to an imagined ‘homeland’ are the basis of diasporic relatedness between populations of refugees deterritorialised from a specific nation (Cohen 1997). However, whilst some theorists posit the notion of ‘diaspora’ as a descriptive term to refer to the dispersal of migrant groups across international arenas (Cohen 1997), others argue that such mechanistic applications of the term do not recognise that these forms of connectedness are experiential and manifested in lived experience (Clifford 1994:197; Hage 2005). The Central African women whose experiences are documented in this thesis do not mechanistically constitute a diaspora simply because they share a common regional or, for some, national affiliation. Instead, these women experience the processual constituting of connectedness to and from others with whom they share an origin country as a dynamic and temporal social condition (c.f. Clifford 1994, 1997). In this thesis, the deployment of a multi-sited methodology to explore the lived experiences of Central African women illustrates the continuities that they experience through imaginaries of, and ongoing relations to, the spaces of their prior asylum, particularly. These Central African women do not simply share a collective attachment to a specific geographic

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22 The concept and use of ‘diaspora’ varies greatly in anthropology. Theorists who use the concept can be broadly divided between those who adopt diaspora to describe a distinct population dispersed across nations but with a central origin point (Cohen 1997; Safran 1991) and those who adopt it as a processual and dynamic social experience (Clifford 1992, 1994, 1997; Brah 1996). In the latter ethnographic approaches, the concept of a diaspora as lived realities relates to the ways in which migrants and exiles maintain an active sense of belonging and connection to another place that then links to others who share this same origin. The global dispersion of the Central African population can be identified in line with the ‘classic perception of a diaspora as a population removed, often by force, from its original homeland and which retains its collective identity through ongoing support for the homeland and a desire for return’ (Askland 2009: 40). Nevertheless, the concept of ‘diaspora’ is not directly applicable to this research. This rests on two primary reasons: firstly, whereas the women who participated in the study maintained a connectedness to their county of origin, they emphasised a more intensely localised concept of home that focussed on a very specific geographic location such as a town or village. Secondly, I did not set out to analyse the collective ‘processes of multi-locality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries’ (Brah 1996: 194) but rather the women’s subjective experiences of displacement. Thus, whilst the dissertation is underpinned by questions related to the diasporic condition of ‘being from one place and of another’ (Anthias 1998: 565), an in-depth analysis of the scholarship of diaspora is beyond the scope of this thesis.
locale, but memorialise and maintain continuities with persons in, and imaginaries of, these spaces across and within settings of refugee settlement.23

III. CENTRAL AFRICAN REFUGEES IN AUSTRALIA

To be resettled in Australia refugees apply, whilst in a camp or urban situation of exile, to be assessed for resettlement to a third country through the UNHCR and their operational partners. Representatives of the Australian state then select refugees from this pool of applicants to be resettled in Australia. These screening processes, and the ways in which they ‘very clearly signpost the criterion of “suitability for social integration”’ (Agier 2008:95), are elaborated in Chapter Six.

The Australian government delivers an extensive program of refugee resettlement in which, each year, approximately 13,500 refugees are permanently resettled (DIBP 2013:3). This program of resettlement accords with a designated UNHCR ‘solution’ to protracted refugee displacement: that of resettling refugees residing within conditions of protracted exile to a third country of settlement in which they are provided with permanent residency rights. Data obtained from the 2011 census estimates that 2,576 refugees that originate from the Democratic Republic of Congo have, specifically, been resettled in Australia, with lesser numbers of Burundian and Rwandan refugees (DIBP 2014:3). This population of Central African refugees has increased significantly over the past decade, with the Democratic Republic of Congo in particular remaining across the past ten years within the top ten source countries for refugees resettled in Australia.

IV. CENTRAL AFRICAN REFUGEES IN UGANDA

As I spent less time conducting fieldwork Uganda, I did not achieve the same level of immersion with as many research participants there as I did in Australia. However, I did share a three-room apartment at different points with three Congolese women, who became participants within the Ugandan research setting. In addition, the housing compound in which I shared these quarters comprised of 12 apartments in total, with six other Congolese refugee women residing in close proximity to me within this residential complex. Whilst in Uganda, I became deeply immersed in the everyday lives of the Congolese women whom I lived with. I also conducted fieldwork with women who temporarily visited the housing compound in which I lived, or who I got to know at local events or church services. The women in Kampala communicated with me through a combination of Swahili and English. On average, the women had resided in Kampala

23 Research by Boer (2015) also explores how Congolese refugees experience and constitute relatedness to memorialised spaces in exile. However, Boer (2015) does not examine empirical links between spaces, but instead shows that relatedness to socio-spatial place for Congolese refugees is also characterised by temporalities.
for less than two years, and had directly fled their countries of birth prior to their settlement in Uganda. The majority had formal refugee status from the UNHCR but had specifically chosen not to reside in a camp.  

V. RECRUITMENT

Having been previously employed within a settlement support agency, I drew on my contacts within the social welfare sector to initiate recruitment for the Australian-based part of the research. I initially worked with staff from a regional settlement support agency to approach potential participants and inform them about the project, who were then able to contact me should they be interested in participating. Some of the staff involved in recruitment had themselves been resettled in Australia as refugees from Central Africa. Their own connections with refugee women from Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda was integral to the recruitment of participants for the research. The response to this method of recruitment was overwhelmingly positive, with a majority of Central African women approached agreeing to work with me and, almost immediately, inviting me into their homes. An initial cohort of women to participate in the project was sourced through this method of indirect recruitment through the refugee settlement agency staff contacts. Then, with the explicit permission of women already recruited to the project, I drew on their own social networks to recruit further participants.

VI. THE BACKGROUNDS OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN WOMEN

The majority of my time in the field was spent with Central African women resettled in Australia, so it was their experiences that I became most familiarised with. Every woman that I conducted fieldwork with in Australia had migrated to Australia through the Humanitarian Program of offshore refugee resettlement and had been recognised under the UNHCR 1951 Convention as ‘refugees.’ These women had all previously resided in a refugee camp, and had been selected from within the camp for resettlement to Australia by agents of the Humanitarian Program. About half of the women resettled in Australia had migrated as part of a family group comprising of their husband and children. Approximately a third had been settled as single mothers with their children. Other women had resettled as part of a family group, and did not at the time of their migration have children. Five participants were women under the age of 25, who were resettled in Australia as minors within a family group but at the time of the research had reached the age of 18. The participants’ cohort was aged between 18 and 40, with the majority aged between 30 and 35.

24 The motivations to reside in urban Kampala rather than a camp are described in detail in Chapter Six.
The majority of women—approximately 15—resided in a Newcastle, a regional city in the Australian state of New South Wales located two hours north of Sydney. Five of the women lived in a regional city on the state border of New South Wales and Victoria. Another five women resided in suburban-metropolitan areas of Sydney, and in Wollongong, a city located approximately an hour south of Sydney. Some of the women had been directly resettled in these regions; others had relocated there after they had been resettled elsewhere in Australia. One of the women relocated to a regional coastal town on the eastern coast of New South Wales during the research, and I visited her in that setting. To contextualise the backgrounds of the women it would be useful to provide a chart outlining specific details. However, given this small sample and the specific geographic locales in which I conducted fieldwork, to detail the demographic particularities of the women in an organised chart would risk identifying them, even without attaching their specific pseudonym. Indeed, the potential to identify particular participants from the ethnographic vignettes and stories that are relayed in this thesis is significant, and I have had to obscure or change particular demographic details that do not impact on the meaning of their experiences so that these women are not directly identifiable.

The background experiences of the women, prior to being resettled in Australia, were diverse. Many of the women had been educated with primary and secondary schooling. Some women had been teachers, administrators, and social workers prior to fleeing their country of birth. A smaller number of others had no formal education. All of the women had at least a basic grasp of English, but the majority had been participating in English lessons since their arrival in Australia and, for the most part, were familiarised with English to the point where conversational discussion was unproblematic. I also communicated with a basic level of Swahili, which is a regional vernacular commonly spoken within refugee camps across Central and Eastern Africa. On average, these women had been residing in Australia for approximately five years. The majority of the women were mothers.

The women in Kampala differed in significant ways to the participants in Australia. These differences led, for me, to an increased awareness of the ways in which humanitarian intervention into the lives of refugees is shaped by categorisations that do not reflect the lived realities of refugees, themselves, but are based on agendas encompassed within these structures. As I outlined above, approximately half of the women in the Australian cohort of this research had been resettled as part of a nuclear family group. In contrast, the majority of the women in Kampala were widows. The educational histories and employment backgrounds of the women in Kampala were considerably more varied than the women in Australia. In noting such differences, it became apparent that Australia’s ostensibly humanitarian intervention of offshore
VII. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Based on an intention to reduce ethnographic typification of the women, I conducted participant observation research with them and intentionally avoided methods of formal interviewing. Instead, by immersing myself in their everyday lifeworlds through the anthropological method of participant observation, I aimed to position them as agents actively involved in constituting the parameters of the research and the scope of its findings. Subsequently, stories of their lives were evoked gradually over the entire period of fieldwork through multiple conversations, primarily held over simmering pots of cooking food or whilst caring for children. It was the women themselves who directed conversations, whilst I primarily listened in order to avoid seeking within our dialogues an overarching ‘meaning’ through which to ‘explain’ their understandings (Abu-Lughod 2008:xxxi). The production of knowledge in this research was thus produced through mutually constitutive dialogue and attention to embodied practice (Oakley 2000). The approach utilised to document data whilst achieving this intention was through conducting ethnographic fieldwork, and particularity through the use of participant observation research methods. In this way, I remained immersed in the setting of the Central African women’s lives for the 18 months of fieldwork by concurrently participating in, and observing, the ways in which their lives unfold in settings of refugee settlement.

VIII. THE FIELD SITES

The women who participated in the research very generously allowed me into their homes and the practices of their daily life. An observation from my fieldnotes emphasises the intimacy of my position within the lives of these women:

November 14th, 2012 – Nyomanda’s home in a regional Australian city

This afternoon, I am sitting in the kitchen of Leonie assisting her to peel potatoes for the afternoon meal. I am left alone in the kitchen for a moment whilst Nyomanda takes a shower. With a plastic bucket of water between my knees and a knife and potato in my hands, I look up when I hear laughter directed at me. There is a woman standing in front of me; another guest

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25 Methods of participant observation, as originally depicted in Malinowski’s (1922) archetypal account of the Trobriand Islands, fundamentally inform methodological conventions in the discipline of anthropology, are based on the assumption that the anthropologist enacts a balance of subjectivity and objectivity whilst collecting data from everyday life practices in a particular field site (Clifford 1986:13).
within Nyomanda’s home. This new arrival is Leonie. This is the fourth time in three weeks that she has come to visit Nyomanda at home, only to find me in the kitchen instead. I have come to be a fixture within the kitchens of Central African women.

‘You again,’ she says. We both laugh.

Primarily, fieldwork with women in Australia took place in their homes and frequently within their kitchens (Figure 2), which is where a good part of their own days are spent preparing food and cooking for their families. Another significant proportion of fieldwork was, accordingly, spent partaking in meals with Central African families. Other common activities included: sharing conversations in dining rooms and sitting rooms, grocery shopping trips, caring for children, cleaning, preparing for parties and social events, providing learner driver supervision, attending and participating in community events, going to church, and relaxing together; often watching television shows imported from the United States.
In contrast, in Uganda I primarily conducted participant observation within one spatial arena: a housing complex in a sprawling outer suburb of Kampala called Namasuba, located halfway up a small mountain and almost inaccessible by vehicle. Nyomanda, my key informant and travel companion, had drawn on her network of relations in Kampala and sourced our accommodation in a spare apartment within this housing complex prior to our arrival there. The housing compound in which our apartment was situated comprised of a single block of 12 semi-detached residential units leased to independent family groups, with the compounds perimeter enclosed on all sides by a tall fence topped with razor wire. Each apartment comprised of either two or three rooms, and most had a separate space outside of the residence to be used as a kitchen. A separate block of toileting and bathing amenities was located behind the central residential building, for the use of all residents within the compound. Our own apartment had three rooms, and Nyomanda and I shared this space with up to six of her relations at any one time, who would come out from the refugee settlements in rural Uganda to stay with us.

At the time I conducted fieldwork in this housing compound, families comprising of Congolese refugees occupied five of the 12 available residential apartments. However, residence in this space of urban refuge was not a formal arrangement for Congolese refugees set up through any specific system of refugee support in Uganda, but was housing sourced independently by them. Daily life in this space of exile was mediated without access to formal sources of humanitarian support because the legal apparatus in Uganda demands that refugees who require settlement assistance must reside within contained spaces of encampment located in rural areas of the country. Accordingly, the Congolese refugee families able to reside in this housing compound were privileged in an economic sense to be able to afford rent. They were only able to do so, however, because they received remittances from family members living overseas. Most of the Congolese refugees residing in this housing compound were unable to secure regular work in Kampala. Subsequently, whilst their Ugandan neighbours were absent for large parts of the day to participate in employment, the Congolese people residing in our shared compound formed an active part of the social fabric and everyday rhythm of daily life there.

The practice of daily life for the Central African women with whom I conducted participant observation with in Uganda was, in many ways, marked by similar activities to those in which I participated in Australia. Preparing and cooking food was a common activity that took up much time (Figure 3). Unlike in Australia, however, the sourcing of food in Kampala and the construction of family meals from very little ingredients was the common theme of cooking endeavours, based on the general impoverishment within which everyday life for these women was situated. Having arrived in Kampala in the dry season, our access to running water in the compound was almost non-existent (Figure 4). Each morning involved a kilometre hike to the...
nearest well to source jerry cans of water, which we then spent time boiling for our later consumption. A significant part of the morning was dedicated to clothes washing, cleaning, and tending to the small gardens that women maintained in the small spaces of empty soil around the central building. In the afternoons, the Congolese women in the compound and myself would often pull up a plastic chair and sit together to pass the time in conversation, or braid the children’s hair. The evenings were spent preparing food; but, as I outline in Chapter Five, each household undertook the cooking of food separately. Unlike in Australia, where families of Central African refugees make a point of sharing meals together, in the Ugandan field site food was not shared between refugee families. Overall, the women in Uganda shared similar fundamental concerns over food, plants, and children as the women that I worked in Australia, though, the structures of daily life in each setting conditioned how these attentions were lived and experienced.

FIGURE 3: THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE: WHERE THE CULTIVATING OF PLANT FOODS; COOKING OF FOOD; AND REPRODUCTION OF CHILDREN REGENERATES A SENSE OF CONTINUITY FOR CENTRAL AFRICAN WOMEN. ABOVE, MYENI, EIGHT-MONTHS-PREGNANT, PREPARES A MEAL OF CASSAVA LEAVES THAT COME FROM HER GARDEN
IX. RECORDING AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Fieldnotes were initially compiled through hand-written notes taken regularly over the course of a day in the field, to note particular points of activity or discussion. These notes were then typed and filed as soon after the field activity as possible, usually on the same day. These notes were the basis of what Geertz (1973) refers to as ‘thick description,’ in which I was dedicated to documenting ethnographic detail indiscriminately throughout the process of my fieldwork in order to avoid reproducing my bias of what is significant within the ethnographic encounter. In doing so, I acquired over the course of 18 months a corpus of ethnographic fieldnotes pertaining to diverse facets of lived experience for Central African women. These notes included detailed accounts of daily life activities for them, such as cooking and gardening, which I had not initially considered to be significant. Later, these aspects of everyday life emerged as fundamental to how these women mediate existential purpose within their everyday lives.

The formal process of data analysis was initiated by taking handwritten fieldnotes compiled from a day in the field, and typing them into a Microsoft Word document at the conclusion of each day’s fieldwork. Transcribing fieldnotes into a technological format enabled me to identify and search for potential key themes as they emerged during the course of fieldwork. As a study overseen by a single researcher, I was familiar with the data and did not require the use of standardised data analysis software to assist in the process of analysing typed fieldnotes.
Instead, I relied on the editing mechanisms of Microsoft Office programs to firstly compile data, and then identify, categorise, and theorise key themes. Using this format of transcribing handwritten fieldnotes into typed documents, I was able to code, compare, and contrast my fieldnotes across and between different encounters in the field. In formally codifying data in this way, I produced a schema of key themes as deriving specifically from my activities in the field. After 18 months of compiling data in this manner, I contrasted my data across comparative fields of scholarly analysis and began to draw out thematic patterns from the fieldwork.

X. ON ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Throughout the thesis I rely on passages from recorded fieldnotes to represent the experiences of the Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork. The quotes and conversations included in these panels of ethnographic engagement are taken from direct quotations noted at the time and place of the encounter. In order to ensure the readability of the ethnographic accounts and quotes, I have necessarily made small adjustments that do not shift the meaning of the text.

However, to consider that any specific method of ethnographic portrayal is able to holistically encapsulate the lived realities of research informants is to ignore the role of the ethnographer as the lens through which these encounters are recorded. Ethnographic encounters are partial, and always shaped within the intersubjectivity of the ethnographic engagement (Clifford 1986; Das et al. 2014:3). Hence, the ethnographic encounters documented throughout the thesis as much pertain to my own familiarity with the women as they do describe the women’s lives and practices. The vignettes interspersed throughout the thesis therefore refer to distinct intersubjective moments between myself as the researcher, and the women as participants in the study. Despite the singularity of these ethnographic moments, themes and commonalities of experience for the women emerge; which suggest that the women share some collective understandings of lived experience. However, in attempting to communicate these commonalities of their experiences as generative of theory, the process of representation through ethnographic text often means that I rely on specific instances of ethnographic engagement. As such, I necessarily draw on cases of ethnographic specificity to ‘exemplify wider patterns’ (Malkki 1995a:56).

The ways in which to draw from ethnographic specificity broader generalisations of experience about a particular research population or situation through ethnographic textual representations depends on the types of encounters that emerge within specific research contexts (Malkki 1995a:56). The patterns of cosmological logics I witnessed during fieldwork were not expressed
through uniform utterances, but were manifested through the practice of everyday life for these women and the activities to which they accorded privilege: primarily being those acts of sustaining gardens; preparing, cooking, and distributing food; and bearing and rearing children. In some way, every woman with whom I conducted fieldwork affirmed an imperative of regenerating life through privileging practices of reproduction in one or more of these arenas. I am, of course, unable to communicate the experiences of every woman representing this pattern of cosmological order to which I observed. Subsequently, the ethnographic vignettes are those in which these arenas of everyday life concerned with gardening, food, and biological reproduction intersect in ways that overtly demonstrate their relation to a cosmology of regenerative flow. Therefore, whilst I document vignettes as particularised cases to demonstrate the basis of theoretical development in each chapter, the experiences of the women in each represent specific instances of broader cosmological patterns.

XI. CONCLUSION

With lived experience inherently emergent within a field of social relations that span disparate social, spatial, and imaginary terrains, conducting fieldwork is always a multi-sited endeavour aiming to examine the ways in which such relations are shaped through shifting cultural, social, and temporal locales (Marcus 1995, 1999). This notion of ethnographic dynamism has guided the methodology undertaken in this project. The aim of this research is to examine how Central African women experience refugee settlement in a way that privileges their own subjectivities, whilst concurrently documenting the impact of conditioning structures on the unfolding of their lives following forced migration. Subsequently, this aim is complemented by the methodological approach to this project in which refugee women emerge as the agents constituting the parameters of the fieldwork, as well as the knowledge produced from it. The complexities of their lives, and the histories of violence that have shaped them, are the focus of discussion in the next chapter.
The lives of the Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork had been disrupted by events of conflict, genocide, forced exodus, and protracted exile. These histories of exceptional violence inform how they experience everyday life as resettled refugees. It is the histories of these women, and the extent of the violence encompassed within their pasts, that is the focus of this chapter. When, in later chapters, women sincerely express their desire to return to these conditions of suffering, the traumas that emerge in resettlement can be compared with the horrors of conflict, exodus, and exile described in this chapter. For example, whilst conducting fieldwork I encountered Central African women who claimed that their lives in Australia had left them more traumatised then their experiences of conflict, exodus, and asylum in Africa. As Lina told me:

_March 29th, 2013 – Lina’s house in a regional Australian city_

When they told me I would be going to Australia, I thought: this is good! My children will have a life . . . I wish I could take them back there, to Africa. Or I wish we had all died there, and not come here. I am dead, now.26

To respect the reality of this statement as intended by Lina, and to realise the exceptional extent of the violence from which this suffering stems, it is necessary to consider the historicities that shape how Central African women interpret and experience displacement. The purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to recognise how the historical backgrounds of these women inform how I witnessed them experiencing emergent and enduring forms of displacement within their contemporary contexts of refugee settlement. Describing both historical and contemporary experiences of suffering for these women throughout the thesis subsequently reveals the exceptional dimensions of violence that can emerge in supposed sites of ‘refuge.’

It is important that in recognising and recounting the dimensions of violence that punctuate the personal histories of my participants, their experiences are not sensationalised. Their experiences of violence, whilst often exceptional, are a lived reality. To sensationalise their pasts through a lens of abjection—emphasising only the horror and trauma of their experiences—would reproduce the trope of these refugee women as ‘pure victims’ rather than agents and subjects within their own lives (Malkki 1997a:224; Jackson 2013:91-93). To avoid

26 The circumstances that led this informant to make this claim are outlined in detail in Chapter Nine.
this potential for sensationalism, I describe how their experiences of violence, genocide, and conflict are not abstracted instances of senseless barbarism. Instead, these histories of violence are lived brutalities that are structured by, and experienced through, cosmological logics of blockage and regenerative flow that imbue the acts with power and meaning.

I. HISTORICAL BLOCKAGES AND CONTEMPORARY FLOWS

Anthropological works that document cosmologies of regenerative flow within sub-Saharan ethnographic contexts (e.g. Moore 1999), and Central African ethnographic contexts more specifically (e.g. Turner 1967; Taylor 1988, 1990, 1992, 1999; Devisch 1993; Malkki 1995a:92-93; Kaspin 1996), note how principles of regeneration inform how subjects within these settings interpret meaning in their worlds. For example, referring to a Rwandan context specifically, Taylor (1992:8) describes how an ‘ideal of continuity’ underlies Rwandan symbolic structures, in which existence is perceived as a cosmological dialectic of blockage and flow. Continuity, and the subsequent capacity for regeneration and reproduction, is possible when this dialect is properly expressed through symbolisms of mobility and flow in everyday life. The cyclical character of day and night, the rotations of planting and harvesting, and the biological reproduction of humans through the fertile potentialities of female bodies are processes through which this ‘flow’ of cosmological continuity is perceived and understood (e.g. Delaney 1991; Devisch 1993; Kaspin 1996).

The Central African women I worked with drew on similar cosmological logics of regeneration, blockage, and flow to reconcile the multiple and contradictory threads of dislocation and continuity that structure their lives as refugees. In particular, they interpret the violences that have erupted in their lives through such patterns. Depicting periods of hardship and redemption as an accepted dialectic of the forced migration experience, the excerpt from my fieldnotes, below, gives insight into the ways in which Central African women broadly contextualise their forced migration experiences through cosmological logics of blockage and flow:

February 15th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

It has been a difficult day. My afternoon has been spent listening to the exodus stories of Congolese women. Each of the seven women I spoke to had recounted to me a story of suffering. As the afternoon unfolded, each story had seemed, to me, to be more heinous than the last. After returning to my apartment, I retreat to the bedroom to contemplate the stories I have heard.

Having noted my obviously fraught appearance, I am soon joined in my solitude by Nyomanda. We begin to talk about the struggles of what it means to be a refugee, and the violences
encompassed within refugee experiences. Without providing details, I tell Nyomanda that the stories I have heard today have been horrendous, and that I am struggling to comprehend them.

Nyomanda shakes her head, and sighs.

‘It is terrible,’ she says, ‘Terrible. Terrible.’

Neither of us speak for a moment. She then puts her hand on mine in a display of attempted comfort.

‘But this is the way. The suffering. To leave this is to suffer. People like me, and my family, we suffered to leave this place. For those refugees, if they are good people, they will have that too.’

This attempt to explain the injustices that confront refugees by Nyomanda locates their suffering within a cosmological patterning of blockage and flow. Nyomanda’s characterising of exodus, forced migration, and protracted exile provides insight into the ways in which she, and potentially other refugees, are able to reconcile the brutalities of their past with a persistent hope that the future will provide them with opportunity for growth and renewal.

This tendency to view existence as a cycle of hardship and renewal reflects a cosmological orientation toward the world in which the periodicities of existence—that is, the cyclical periods of plant growth and decomposition, sunrise and sunset, birth and death—come to be seen as an axiomatic pattern of hardship and renewal that characterises other facets of life. Periods of hardship can be viewed as a ‘natural’ state of existence that will be eventually be overcome by periods of rejuvenation. In such a cosmological orientation underlain by the periodicities of ‘nature,’ attention to gardens, foods, and human reproduction come to symbolise the cosmological trajectory of existence, as Kaspin (1996) has described in regards to the Chewa of Malawi, in which social practices are intimately interwoven with the cyclic progression of harvesting crops. The organising pattern of this cosmology is that existence is a trajectory of fluctuating periods of regeneration and stagnation. In similarly perceiving existence as a cyclic unfolding of blockages and flow, the hardships that refugees suffer in their circumstances of asylum are considered by Nyomanda, and expressed in the vignette above, to be temporary.

II. LIVELIHOODS

In this section I describe how women from the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly, characterised their lives prior to forced migration. Whilst lamenting the conflicts that have emerged in the Congolese nation in past decades, the women in this research who were born and
raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo relayed to me—emphatically, and on multiple occasions—that their lives there, prior to exodus, cannot be reduced to dimensions of terror, trauma, and impoverishment that are so frequently attached to popular depictions of the Congolese conflicts (Trefon 2004:1).27 Aware of the ‘heart of darkness’ imaginaries that are connoted with the Democratic Republic of Congo (Trefon 2004:1), the women frequently emphasised the happiness that they had experienced whilst living in Congo. Unlike the assumptions of refugee histories as a constellation of inherent trauma and suffering, these women were eager to identify aspects of their past that showed their ingenuity, agency, and happiness in Congo, prior to their experiences of forced migration.

In particular, it was social experiences that many women reflected on when describing their lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Although many women had lived and worked in cities prior to fleeing Congo, a majority had been raised in small-scale villages within a close-knit nexus of social and familial relations. Although I did not ask the women directly to share experiences of their past, over long periods of fieldwork in kitchens, chopping and preparing vegetables and other items for meals, it was natural for conversations to turn to the ways in which such activities of daily life were experienced in their past. Seemingly in direct contrast to the sterile, enclosed, and, often, isolated environments of domestic kitchens in Australia, many women described to me the joy they experienced by being raised in close proximity to extended family and friends.

Within these narratives of a past memorialised by social connectedness, many women were also keen to also emphasise their eventual ‘progression’ from the rural village life. While growing up, many of the women had moved beyond the villages of their youth to either reside in their husband’s villages, larger regional centres, or urban cities. The duality of these narratives—emphasising the apparent nostalgia of village life in contrast to the cosmopolitan connotations of residing in a city—mirror similar ambivalences between ‘bush’ and ‘village’ that are a common metaphor in many ethnographic contexts in Africa. The distinction between ‘bush’ and ‘village’ is described by Jackson (1989:40), with specific reference to the Kuranko of West Africa, as an allegory that can be drawn on to explain negotiations between numerous dialectics of existence, including: self-interest and social responsibility; nature and culture; and, specifically, the distinction between ignorance and knowledge. Similarly, multiple women keenly emphasised to me their apparent ‘progression’ from ostensible ‘ignorance’ by describing

27 The women often referred to the Democratic Republic of Congo as, simply, Congo. There is another country in Africa named the ‘Republic of Congo.’ However, when referring to ‘Congo’ in this thesis I am specifically referring to the country of the ‘Democratic Republic of Congo,’ as intended by participants. At times, these two labels are used interchangeably.
how their lives unfolded from being born in either a ‘jungle,’ ‘bush,’ or ‘village,’ to relocating when they were older to the ‘city,’ primarily for educational purposes.

These women did not, however, underplay the hardships of life in Congo. Instead, they often drew on narratives of self-progression as a means to express the potential for agency within broader experiences of struggle. The discussion reported from my fieldnotes, below, emphasises this duality of hardship and ingenuity as characterising life in Congo prior to forced migration:

September 29th, 2013 – Gloria’s house in a regional Australian city

‘In the village,’ Gloria tells me, ‘there was only a small school, and it was not enough for me when I became bigger. My uncle, who lived in a city, looked after me.28 He made sure I was sent to a big school in a bigger village. But it was not easy. Firstly, I did not have shoes. They would not let me go to school without them. So from his own money he gave me shoes so I could go to school . . . When I finished school, I got a job. It was only because I could go to that school that I found good work, good employment. I worked in administration for another school.’

‘Did you ever want to go to university,’ I ask her, ‘or do more study?’

‘Yes,’ she replies, after a pause. ‘Of course. But I could not pay for that. It is very expensive. So I just had to work.’

Even when describing hardships of daily life in Congo, the women emphasised the potential for growth, progression, and regeneration they experienced within those circumstances. However, experiences of everyday life such as these were disrupted for them by the civil wars that erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 1990s and early 2000s. Forced to flee Congo, this cosmological cycle of periodic stagnation and regeneration was to be temporarily ruptured.

III. LIVES DISRUPTED

The conflicts that characterise the wars of recent decades in the Democratic Republic of Congo cannot be isolated from earlier contexts of colonisation and post-colonial political fragility in the country. Throughout an extended period of colonial governance by the Belgian state from 1895, the local populations in Congo were systemically subjugated by ruling administrations to harvest the country’s natural resources. In 1960, however, the then-titled Republic of Congo was declared an independent nation. The disintegration of colonial governance was, however,

28 The term ‘Uncle’ that is used here does not refer to an uncle as an extended kin member, as is frequently meant in Euro-American kinship contexts, but refers to the ‘mother’s brother,’ which is in Gloria’s cultural background a relationship in which a maternal uncle holds similar responsibilities of a niece as a ‘father.’
superseded by a fragile political administration (Barume 2000:24). Following a coup in late 1965, Joseph Desire Mobutu seized the leadership of the country and political power was concentrated within one party. This process silenced political dissidents, but stifled democratic expression.

The social and material infrastructure of the country, and the subsequent welfare of its citizens, was continuously neglected throughout the period of the Mobutu administration from 1965 to 1997 (Chretien 2003). Civil insecurity was inflamed by frequent political unrest that was intimately interwoven with other conflicts in the Great Lakes region, in particular the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the ensuing influx of refugees from Rwanda into the Democratic Republic of Congo. This unrest eventually culminated in 1996 with a political coup and military occupation of the Congolese state by Rwandan forces. Between 1996 and 1997, the conflicts that erupted in Congo are collectively referred to as the First Congo War (Stearns 2011). Many of the Congolese women in this research fled Congo in this first instance of outright war, as a result of their persecution from incoming Rwandan soldiers and from other militarist groups that arose in response to the occupation.

To end the conflict in Congo, Laurent Kabila, the leader of the Rwandan military occupation, was formally installed as head of the Congolese state with approval from the heads of foreign states; he was positioned by allies in Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and some Western nations as a safer alternative to other Congolese rebel militarists. With a Laurent Kabila formally appointed as head of state in the newly formed government of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997, the First Congo War was declared over. However, the circumstances of Laurent Kabila’s installation led to increased militarism in the country. Hostilities and tensions remained salient, and only a year later war was again a reality. The Second Congo War officially lasted from its declaration in 1998 to the signing of peace accords in 2003 (Stearns 2011). Major conflicts associated with this unrest erupted well beyond the signing of the peace accords, however. In periods as recent as April 2012, December 2012, and August 2013, conflicts that have resulted in further deaths and mass flows of refugees into neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda, have erupted. Despite difficulties in ascribing a numerical value to the impact of the Congolese war in terms of forced displacement, estimates suggest that the number of Congolese contemporaneously affected by conflicts as asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons approximates to four million people (UNHCR 2015d).

IV. SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS LIVED REALITY

These ordeals of conflict and exodus were exacerbated for Congolese women by the widespread sexual violence perpetrated during the conflicts (Banwell 2014). The use of sexual violence as a
strategic mode of inflicting terror by militarist groups in Congo and other areas of Central Africa is well documented (Pratt and Werchick 2004; Bosmans 2007; Kelly et al. 2011; Kelly et al. 2012). Acts of sexual violence encompassed within the conflicts cannot, however, be reduced to senseless barbarism.

In referring to conflicts in Burundi, Malkki (1995a:92-93) describes how acts of violence that penetrated and occupied the body in that context sought to invert logics of regeneration. The intent of such occupations is, Malkki (1995a:92) asserts, to represent ‘a complete reversal of the “progress of nature.”’ Acts of rape and sexual violence in Congolese contexts are similarly underlain by cosmological purpose. Rape can be a way through which militarist groups aim to literally ‘occupy’ a social milieu by impregnating women with children who bear not only their genetics, but who are imagined to impose their ethnic heritage on the dominated group (Bosmans 2007). Impregnation as an intentional act of violence can be a way to dominate both the individual bodies of affected women and, through negative associations with the children of these encounters, to disrupt and dominate the social body within which such women, and their lineages of familial descent, are situated.

As distinguished from acts of male to female rape specifically, other practices of sexual violence also invert cosmological logics of blockage and flow. Whilst many women described in Uganda identified themselves in privacy with me as victims of rape in Congo, there were some others who described further dimensions of sexual violence. These admissions included instances of sexual violence where family members were forced into sexual relations with each other, or in which specifically older or younger persons—that is, outside of child-bearing years—were specifically chosen by militarists to be the target of sexual violence. In perpetrating sexual violence in these specific forms, the intention is to invert sexual relations as conducive to regenerating life. That is, to bastardise the procreative capacities and behaviours of these groups by forcing them into ‘unnatural’ sexual relations. In addition, some women had witnessed or been subjected to acts deliberately intended to inflict physical harm on the reproductive capacities of victims. This includes the practice of impaling persons on sharpened poles through their reproductive orifices, which is also described by both Malkki (1995a) Taylor (1999:137), and which was experienced by a participant in this research. These forms of violence are extreme, but they are not ‘appear haphazard or accidental’ (Malkki 1995a:92). Instead, these modes of inflicting violence operate ‘through certain routinized symbolic schemes of nightmarish cruelty’ (Malkki 1995a:92) in which the body is a conduit through which to symbolise the blockage of regenerative flow (Taylor 1999:135-139). The intended purpose of such acts of sexual violence is to symbolically and physically invert the reproductive capacities and regenerative potentialities of victims.
In aiming to document experiences of displacement for Congolese women from their own perspectives, I did not presume that they had themselves experienced sexual violence as part of their experiences of forced migration. I did not pursue direct questioning in this regard unless initiated by, and deemed relevant to, the women themselves. Significantly, none of the women resettled in Australia made direct reference to any instance of sexual violence within their pre-flight experiences in Congo. Yet, in Uganda, a number of women relayed to me specific experiences of sexual violence. Whilst in Uganda, Nyomanda provided me with insight into this apparent paradox:

*February 17th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala*

Sitting in the small room in which we both sleep, Nyomanda and I are discussing the differences between settlement in Australia and Uganda. From where we sit, we can hear her sister’s children—who she refers to as sons and daughters—talking outside, and playing with the other children who live in the compound. This mundanity is in deep contrast to the stories of exodus I have been listening to in interviews. Over the past two days, a number of women have come to the compound to talk with me, and tell me their stories. All have described horrific instances of sexual violence. As I verbalise my own difficulty in processing these experiences, Nyomanda nods sympathetically, but says little.

‘It seems as though all of the women here have had some kind of violent sexual experience, or know someone who has,’ I say, then add, ‘but in Australia, none of the Congolese women talk about that.’ There is a long pause before Nyomanda replies.

‘They do not forget,’ she says. ‘In Australia, the life is hard, but you are trying to look to the future even if the past is there. To speak it is to make it real. Here, the people are trying to make their life less hard, too, but the way to do that is to get out. To get out, they must speak.’

There is a silence for a moment as we both contemplate these differences. While not depicting life in Australia as idyllic, Nyomanda is describing how differences in exilic terrains are reproduced in the particular ways in which refugees historicise the past. Eventually, she adds, ‘They do not forget, in Australia.’

Nyomanda’s perspective suggests that whilst acts sexual violence are inscribed in the memories of women who experience them, their lives cannot be defined by such acts. The histories of refugee women cannot be singularly reduced to such instances of exceptional violence. Dimensions of violent experience inform, but do not determine, how Congolese women mediate their lives in particularised ways in settings of refugee settlement.
V. BEYOND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Within humanitarian discourse, depictions of the conflict in Congo are frequently characterised by an emphasis on the use of rape as a weapon of war. As such, other brutalities of the violence are often silenced (Kirby 2013). The broad and complex facets of social and political devastation encompassed within these conflicts are, in such discourses, obscured by a focus on heterosexual sexual violence (Kirby 2013; McQuaid 2014). It is important, however, to give broader context to the conflicts that lead Central African women to become refugees, beyond assumptions of sexual violence. The ethnographic vignette below, taken from fieldnotes from an encounter with a Congolese woman in Uganda, gives devastating insight into other ways in which these conflicts affected the women:

February 19th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

Sitting opposite me in the main living area of the apartment in Kampala, Sifa speaks softly and does not meet my eyes as she talks. She has come to speak with me alone. Although I do not ask her to tell me why she fled Congo, she begins nonetheless to recount her story of exodus. The experience appears to have had an indelible impact on the ways that she negotiates her existence as a refugee in Kampala. As her story progresses, I soon come to understand why.

Sifa tells me about the day she fled Congo. ‘We did not even know that the soldiers were near. We did not know . . . ’ She shakes her head. ‘If we did . . . ’ There is a long pause, before she adds, ‘but we did not know . . . ’

‘Our church, it was about an hour walk from the house. That morning was a Sunday, so my husband and I left the children there while we went to church. Everything was normal. We did not know the soldiers were there. We were at the church for many hours. When we left, we walked the path to our village. We knew something was bad. We saw bodies on the ground. Dead people, dead children. And smoke, so much smoke ahead.’

There is a pause before Sifa continues. Her expression does not shift. She only stares blankly ahead.

‘When we got to the house, where it should have been, it was not there. It was gone. Burnt. They had burnt it . . . We looked all over for the children . . . Screaming, screaming for them. But the children . . . They were inside. They were inside the house when it burned.’
Sifa’s six children perished as a result of conflict-fuelled violence in Congo. She and her husband fled Congo on that day, and have not returned. For Sifa, and other Congolese women, their own experiences within these conflicts cannot be reduced to assumptions of sexual violence. Whilst sexual violence is a significant and terrible dimension of conflict violence in Congo, it is not the only story of absolute devastation that emerges for women within those contexts. For Sifa, the genesis of her subjectivity is oriented, at least in part, through filiation and uninterrupted lineage. The violence of conflict in Congo has annihilated and destroyed her relatedness through, and continuity of, family life.

The devastating fate of Sifa’s children can be considered here within the framework of what Malkki has termed (1995a) ‘necrographic maps.’ Malkki (1995a:89-90) describes ‘necrographic maps’ as the charting of techniques for mutilating and killing that are intended to target and obstruct the reproductive potentialities of victims. Whilst the atrocity that Sifa has experienced does not directly target her own body she is, nonetheless, made an embodied victim through the logics of the violence intending, and succeeding, in destroying her familial lineage by ending the lives of her children. It is necessary, in this context, to take Malkki’s (1995a:89-90) concept of ‘necrographic maps’ beyond the limits of individual bodies. Within a sense of social ‘necrographic’ mapping, the targeting of children and biological reproduction within contexts of violence in Central Africa can be examined as a ‘necrography’ of the social body. In this sense, necographic mapping is not simply inscribed on the individual bodies of direct victims, but is imprinted on their social milieu through the destruction of familial lineage. The violence aims to obstruct and decimate the regenerative potential and corporeal presence of victims, and in doing so to devastate the lives and futures of those interwoven within their social worlds.

VI. MASSACRES AND DECIMATED FAMILIES

Women who had fled Burundi and Rwanda had experienced similar atrocities of conflict violence. All of the women born in Burundi and Rwanda who participated in this research became refugees as a result of the genocidal massacres and violent unrests that erupted in their countries in the 1990s. These women did not often refer spontaneously to their pre-migration pasts, and I made a point not to specifically inquire into the women’s personal histories, particularly in terms of the genocides and violent unrest. On one occasion, however, whilst discussing differences of family structure between Australian families and African families with a participant from Burundi, the sensitivities interwoven with memories of her past became evident. This encounter in my fieldwork emphasised, for me, the necessity of allowing the women themselves to direct discussions of their history:
Rosine and I sit on her sofa. Her house is unusually quiet: her husband is out, studying English at the local vocational institution, and most of her children are at school. Still in pyjamas, with her two-month old infant son cradled in her arms, Rosine talks to me about the surprise that Australian people react with when she tells them that she has eight children. We both laugh.

‘For us,’ I say, ‘eight is many. Too many!’

‘No, no!’ she responds, still laughing, ‘Eight is good . . . Maybe, one more!’ Rosine says to me, with a sly glance. The baby gurgles in her arms, and we soften our laughter.

‘In Africa,’ she continues, ‘that is normal. Me, I am one of ten. My husband, one of eleven. That is normal.’

There is a pen and notepad in front of us, obviously left over from homework that one of Rosine’s children has forgotten to take with them to school. I take up the notepad, and begin the absent scribblings of a kinship diagram. Rosine watches, fascinated by the process. I draw up my own family diagram, and explain to Rosine the symbols for mother, father, children, divorce, remarriage, and death. She laughs at how small the diagram is: my family lineage reflects and reproduces the typical nuclear family model of mother, father, a boy child, a girl child, over again, with a few divorces and remarriages. Rosine demands that I draw her diagram, to compare. I am hesitant to do so. My absent scribbling was not intended to be a fieldwork exercise. I realise, however, that I need to respect her wish.

At first, the process of drawing up the diagram for Rosine is fun. We erupt into laughter as again and again I add the details of another one of her children. I hesitate, however, before heading up the diagram to Rosine’s generation of siblings.

She seems to sense my hesitation. She gives what I interpret to be a questioning look. I ask her if she would like to add in the details of her family: her siblings and parents. She responds, ‘Of course.’

Only two siblings into drawing the kinship diagram we encounter our first death.

‘He . . . he died, we found him . . .’ Rosine says, quietly. ‘No children,’ she adds. She is unwilling to provide his name.

We move to the next sibling, a sister. ‘We don’t know what happened to her,’ Rosine says. I do not put a line through the symbol, but the implication of death remains.
The next sibling is another death, then another missing, until the pattern emerges that Rosine only knows for certain that two of her nine siblings are alive. The fates of her many nieces and nephews is less certain.

We do not complete the kinship diagram. We end the morning with Rosine softly crying, my arm around her. I do not ask her about the experiences that led to this massacre of her family. She herself does not speak of it.

As survivors of genocidal massacres in Burundi and Rwanda, this decimation of family lineage, and the destruction of extended family responsibilities and networks, is a lived reality for many of these women. The imperative to bear children that I observed throughout my fieldwork with Burundian, Rwandan, and also Congolese women, takes on a specific meaning in this context of destructed families. As similarly recognised by Apter (2012) in his work with Congolese refugees in Zambia, within contexts of conflict in Central Africa in which family lineages are decimated by brutalities of violence, the capacity to bear children emerges as a vector of agency and continuity. It is through the bearing of children that women are able to exert active input within a trajectory of experience that has often been otherwise characterised by death and devastation.

VII. DIMENSIONS OF GENOCIDAL VIOLENCE

These lived realities of conflict shows that instances of violence are complicated by cosmological logics, and cannot, therefore, be reduced to one singular explanation. This is, however, how the genocidal conflicts in Burundi and Rwanda are often characterised in popular accounts. Multiple conflicts in Burundi and Rwanda, following the independence of the two nations in 1962, escalated in the 1990s into genocidal regimes that prompted a significant exodus in both countries to neighbouring nations. The genocidal massacres in Rwanda and Burundi are frequently depicted in popular, and even scholarly, accounts to be the product of an ‘ethnic’ violence between two broad categories of ethnicity referred to as ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ (Lemarchand 1994:3; Uvin 1999). However, these conflicts are not simply a result of ‘ethnic’ hatred, but are linked to broader historical processes and the structural conditions of everyday life that allowed constructed categorisations of ethnicity to wield divisive power (Malkki 1995a; Taylor 1999). The historicities that shaped the massacres that erupted in Burundi and Rwanda in the 1990s are complex and not able to be satisfactorily categorised as the singular product of

29 This preoccupation with conceiving, bearing, and rearing children is the specific focus of Chapter Eight.
ethnic violence. Regardless, these perceptions of the conflict as being defined by ethnic classifications persist. Even within contemporary settings of resettlement in Australia, the notion that Burundian and Rwandan refugees can be defined by ethnic classification endures, as the fieldnote below demonstrates:

June 12th, 2014 – Yolande’s house in a regional Australian city

Unable to speak, Yolande directs me to a pile of paperwork on her coffee table. Her husband sits beside us, grim faced and unspeaking. At the top of the pile is a report from a psychologist. In a court case Yolande is currently involved in, the magistrate had requested a psychological profile. The paperwork she hands me is the result of that process.

With a wave of her hand, Yolande encourages me to read the report. The summary statement on the first page labels Yolande as ‘hostile’ to the psychological inquiry. The opening pages contain a loosely recalled transcript of Yolande’s encounter, and immediately evidence to me why she experienced distress during her encounter with the psychologist.

One of the first questions the psychologist asked Yolande was, ‘You come from Rwanda, is that correct?’

Affirmatively responding, the psychologist goes on to ask, as if demonstrating his expertise in the matter, ‘And are you Hutu, or Tutsi?’ Such categorisations of ethnicity form part of why Yolande was forced to flee from violent conflict to become a refugee. Subsequently, Yolande could not verbalise a response to this question. She remained silent for almost the entirety of the encounter.

Evidently, the conflicts that occurred in Burundi and Rwanda in the 1990s—and, significantly, assumptions about them—continue to shape the contemporary lives of refugee women resettled in Australia. A brief background into the conflicts in Burundi and Rwanda is, therefore, necessary in order to contextualise how their lives continue to be impacted by these processes.

As one nation, entitled Rwanda-Urundi, the local people of Burundi and Rwanda were subjected to colonial rule during the 19th and 20th centuries under first Germany, and secondly Belgium. Whilst there is evidence that ethnic categorisations between dominant groups existed prior to colonial occupation, Chretien (2003) argues that the colonial administration specifically

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30 The historicities that shaped the genocides that occurred in Burundi and Rwanda are complex and unable to be fully recounted in this thesis. However, the work of Uvin (1999), Malkki (1995a, 1997b), and Lemarchand (1994) provides further insight into the circumstances that led to the genocidal massacres.
exacerbated ethnic difference. Inflaming ethnic antagonism during colonial rule was intended to reinforce a social hierarchy, in which residual political power became concentrated in the arenas of a marginal Tutsi population rather than a majority Hutu population (Lemarchand 1994:25).

In 1962, the colonial administration in Burundi and Rwanda was superseded by the formal recognition of the two countries as distinct and independent nations. The reduction of complex social systems to a dichotomised ethnic hierarchy persisted as a significant point of reference within the structuring of political regimes in both countries (Malkki 1995a:30). Within resulting political contestations, ethnic affiliation through categorisations of ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ came to ‘render other social divisions less meaningful and less powerful’ (Malkki 1995a:31). Such categories of ethnicity came to be reproduced in both Burundi and Rwanda as a distinct social reality, and conditioned the eruptions of politicised violence as these occurred in the late twentieth century.

Decades of political antagonism in both Rwanda and Burundi escalated in the 1990s. Tensions within and between the two countries were especially inflamed when, in 1993, Burundi held the nation’s first democratic elections. The newly elected Hutu president spent only 100 days in office before he was assassinated (Malkki 1995a:281). The assassination resulted in an uprising. To restore order, the Burundi army was organised and moved to dampen the uprising. In the mass killings of civilians that characterised this process of order restoration, it has been estimated that more than 100,000 people were killed (Malkki 1995a:285; Chretien 2003). To avoid the violence, it is estimated that at least one million people, primarily Hutu, fled the country as refugees.

The assassination of a Hutu president and the targeted attack on Hutu populations in Burundi provided a catalyst for the events that occurred in Rwanda the following year. In April 1994, the Hutu President of Rwanda was killed in a plane crash that is alleged to have been the target of an organised attack (Chretien 2003:329). In response to the President’s perceived assassination, the newly formed governing committee of primarily Hutu ethnicity ordered the strategic mass killing of thousands of Tutsi in retaliation. The violence forced over a million people to flee Rwanda as refugees (Chretien 2003:335).

It was these events that propelled the women from Burundi and Rwanda who participated in this research to become refugees. These women largely expressed to me that ethnic categorisations lead to harm. Hence, in this research I do not describe the women with reference to ethnic categorisations that have, for many, formed part of the circumstances that led to their forced migration. Regardless, ethnic objectification and other dimensions of forced migration
experience are not automatically resolved by through refugee resettlement, but are historicised structures that condition how everyday life in such settings unfolds.

VIII. FROM ACUTE CONFLICT TO ASYLUM IN UGANDA

After enduring acute instances of violence and being forced to flee their homelands, the majority of the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with fled to nearby nations, such as Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Kenya, and Uganda. Of the women resettled in Australia, a majority had previously lived in one or more of these countries, primarily within refugee camps. Whilst in conducting the research I did not witness life in a refugee camp, I did conduct fieldwork amongst refugee women living in asylum in urban Uganda.

Over past decades Uganda has received numerous asylum seekers due to conflicts that have erupted in neighbouring nations. Particularly, since civil war erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1996 Uganda has become a country of asylum for numerous Congolese fleeing violence, conflict, and persecution. UNHCR statistics from 2015 show that refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo remains the largest population of refugees in Uganda, with an estimated 226,880 Congolese people residing in the country (UNHCR 2015a).

The Ugandan state is considered by the UNHCR to be especially generous in terms of the way asylum seekers and refugees are treated (Bernstein and Okello 2007:45). This is because, unlike a majority of other African states, Uganda upholds Article 26 of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which outlines that:

Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully within its territory the right to choose their place of residence and to move freely within its territory subject to any regulations applicable to aliens generally in the same circumstances (UNHCR 2011:27).

This means that refugees do not have to reside in specific spaces of encampment in order to access the protection of Uganda as a host country of refugee settlement. In 2014, it was estimated that approximately 30,000 refugees reside in Uganda’s capital city, Kampala (Urban Refugees 2014).

This freedom of movement given to refugees by the Ugandan state must, however, be granted to them. It is not an automatic freedom (Sharpe and Namusobya 2012). Permission to reside outside of encampment structures in Uganda is conditional on refugees demonstrating a capacity to survive without access to humanitarian support (Bernstein and Okello 2007). To avoid meeting these conditions, some refugees eschew this formal process and reside without formal
permission in Kampala. In order to avoid severe impoverishment, Congolese refugees in such circumstances are vulnerable to exploitation, through taking up lowly-paid work in often-dangerous conditions (Women’s Refugee Commission 2011:1; Boer 2015) (Figure 5).

Despite the insecurities of life as a refugee in Kampala, many women still choose to reside there rather than in a designated refugee settlement. The ways in which settling as a refugee in Kampala is directly complicated by policy directives that can unintentionally constrain refugee livelihoods in the camps is highlighted in Divine’s story, below:

February 7th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

In the housing compound in Kampala, Divine relays to me how she came to reside as a refugee in Uganda. She tells me how, in 2006, heightened militarist activities in the South Kivu province of Congo erupted within the village in which Divine lived with her husband and young son. During the sudden incursion, soldiers entered Divine’s home. Multiple men proceeded to rape her in front of her husband, who was murdered following the ordeal. Fleeing the aftermath of immediate violence, Divine ran with her son and never returned to the village to confirm what had happened to her home, or her husband’s body.

With her son at her side, Divine managed to flee to Uganda by hiding with other Congolese asylum seekers in the back of a large transport truck. Taken to Kampala, Divine immediately sought medical care and was then housed with other newly arrived Congolese asylum seekers in a local church building. She approached UNHCR representatives and was granted refugee status. However, Divine was required, in accordance with Ugandan law, to relocate to a designated refugee settlement because she was unable to support herself independently as a self-settled refugee. Divine only resided in the refugee settlement for a year before deciding to return to Kampala, although with the permission from the Uganda government. Her reason for doing so relates to the hardship of life in the settlement.

Prior to fleeing Congo, Divine had operated a market stall in a nearby town where she sold fabric. Her skills as a businesswoman were not, however, particularly advantageous within the refugee settlement environment where access to food is made accessible, under the auspices of the UNHCR, through what is termed a ‘Self Reliance Strategy.’ In this model of humanitarian support as operationalised by the UNHCR and its partner organisations in the camps, every household that is established within a refugee settlement is allotted a small plot of land, seeds, and basic tools for subsistence agriculture. With these allocations refugees are expected to reach self-sufficiency in two years. Subsequently, over that period refugees are ‘phased off’ food rations (Hovil 2007:600).
With no extensive skills in subsistence agriculture, Divine was immediately disadvantaged in this model of humanitarian support. In addition, the production of food within one plot of land is, in the long-term, unsustainable for all refugees because it forces them to become reliant on a food source that, with constant use, leads the soil to become increasingly infertile. Through this model of self-sufficiency, refugees can, paradoxically, become more destitute than when humanitarian support is based exclusively on food rations (Hovil 2007:600).

IX. INSECURITY IN A REFUGEE CAMP

In contrast from the women I met in Uganda who lived as refugees in urban settings, the women I conducted fieldwork with in Australia had primarily resided in refugee camps prior to their resettlement. Just as every refugee camp encompasses its own structure (Malkki 2002), so to are the experiences of the refugees who reside within them unique. Subsequently, I am unable to characterise the women’s lives in the camps as a collective experience. Nor did I witness direct experiences of life within a refugee camp whilst conducting fieldwork for this research. Few women described to me details of their life in the camp.

The inability to essentialise refugee camp experiences was reinforced by the few conversations I did have with women about their lives within them. Some women told me, with pride, that they had worked in the camp in roles of social workers and assistants to camp administrators. Others referred to their time in the camp as a period of intense hardship. One woman described her experiences in a refugee camp as comparable to existing in a ‘deep dark hole of despair.’

![Figure 5: Informal work washing laundry is a common way for the women to supplement remittances as a form of income](image)
To contextualise the dimensions of violence that shape how these women live displacement within their contemporary resettlement experiences it is, however, necessary to provide some background into the types of experience that can manifest in refugee camps. I refer, in ethnographic vignettes below, to an experience of life in a refugee camp that was recounted to me by Camille, one of the women resettled in Australia. The extent to which Camille experienced violence during her time in the refugee camp is extreme, and not representative of how the majority of women experienced camp life. Nonetheless, the dimensions of displacement encompassed within her experiences express the extent to which violence can emerge in settings of refugee encampment. Significantly for Camille, the enduring exposure to forms of violence within the refugee camp meant that these experiences came, for her, to be rendered unexceptional:

*March 4th, 2013 – Camille’s house in a regional Australian city*

Having fled the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997, Camille has since led a tumultuous life. In the cramped living room of the small townhouse Camille now resides in, she relays to me the systemic violence of her experiences of daily life in the refugee camp in Kenya, where she lived for almost a decade. She begins by telling me that it was a ‘terrible life.’

As a single woman, she explains, she was immediately vulnerable in the camp. The water supply for the entire camp was located far from residential housing. Tracks to the water supply were isolated and rarely policed. It was only a month into her camp existence when Camille was first raped on the walking track on her way to collect water. Dragged behind a shrub, with her crying baby set aside, she was violated and powerless to stop it.

But, she explains, she had been expecting this. These sorts of incidents were common in the refugee camp. ‘So,’ she says, ‘I lay still, and waited for him to finish.’

In examining how subjective experiences of violence are expressed through discourse, Hastrup (2003: 312) suggests that violence produced in the form of rape is ‘bounded by the victim’s body.’ The implication is that the suffering inherent in experiences of rape is unable to be articulated through language. In conversing with Camille about her life in the refugee camp, she refers to being raped but uses language to describe these experiences that is detached and unemotional. Yet, Camille’s detachment is not necessarily a reflection of an experience rendered so powerful that she is unable to express it, as Hastrup’s (2003:312) analysis might suggest. The experience of sexual violence in the context of the refugee camp is, as described by Camille, somewhat normative.
This was the first incidence of sexual violence that Camille experienced whilst living in the camp. However, in similar circumstances she experienced further instances of sexual violence there:

March 4th, 2013 – Camille’s house in a regional Australian city

After disclosing her experiences of sexual violence in the camp, Camille notices my obviously concerned expression. Then, she tries to allay my anxiety.

‘I can’t remember how many times it happened.’ She shrugs, waving her hand dismissively.

The sheer pervasiveness of violent experiences in everyday life in the camp for Camille renders specific acts of violence unexceptional. However, the ongoing vulnerability to, and experiences of, rape as lived by Camille manifested in physical shifts of her bodily corporeality. Her experiences of sexual violence resulted in pregnancy.

For Camille, the intensely localised experience of rape as specifically targeting her physicality had its effects forcibly manifested in the plasticity of her fertile body. Unlike other contexts of violent experience in which the body can be a source of resistance (Feldman 1991), research pertaining to sexual violence shows that acts of rape, as targeting and localised through the body, can mean that victims experience their body as bounded and violated: as restricting agency (Hastrup 2003:312). Unplanned pregnancy as a result of rape is one outcome in which bodily corporeality may not correlate with the agency of the victim.

Camille, however, does not view the pregnancy that resulted from her experiences of sexual violence as inherently negative outcomes of violent experience. Instead, Camille places intrinsic value on motherhood as a social role. She tells me that she welcomed the birth of her child without associating it with her experiences of sexual violence. In contrast to Camille’s personal perspective, other research documents the multiple vectors of victimisation that sufferers of rape in Central African contexts can be subject to, and which endure beyond the acute trauma of the specific sexual violence experience (Pratt and Werchick 2004; Bosmans 2007; Kelly et al. 2011; Kelly et al. 2012). In particular, such research suggests that women who experience rape in Central African contexts frequently suffer ensuing social rejection, isolation, and stigma. Children who are borne from acts of sexual violence are frequently referred to by their family and community members in such contexts as ‘unwanted’ children, whose place within a social milieu is ambiguous (Bosmans 2007:6).
Camille’s perspectives depart from what is a broadly documented tendency to reject pregnancies that are conceived within circumstances of sexual violence (Bosmans 2007). Regardless of the circumstances in which her children were conceived, Camille views the fertility of her body not as a restrictive force that bounds her subjectivity to the experience of rape but as an experiential potentiality. Camille’s celebration of motherhood even within the context of sexual violence alludes to how cosmological logics orient how Central African women interpret and experience displacement. The regenerative potentiality of Camille’s body to conceive and bear a child embodies, for her, a thread of continuity within an otherwise insecure trajectory of being. With everyday life in the camp so significantly characterised by routinised forms of insecurity and enduring displacement, the capacity to bear a child within such conditions emerges for Camille as a source of continuity and regeneration.

This sense of stability was subsequently undermined for Camille through an experience of infant death. Out of four babies Camille gave birth to in the camp, only three survived to live beyond eighteen months. The short life of Camille’s other infant ended after the child fell ill with diarrhoea. Access to medical treatment in the camp was available, but not sufficient enough to successfully treat the child. As with many of the women, Camille found it difficult to discuss her experiences within the camp. However, this aspect of her past surfaced spontaneously during a fieldwork encounter with her, as described below:

March 14th, 2013 – A regional Australian city

I am accompanying Camille to a meeting with an early childhood educator. Camille has recently separated from her husband, so we attend the meeting without his presence. The meeting is intended to inform her about parenting practices in Australia. In the course of the meeting, the educator asks Camille many questions about her children. Eventually, the questions begin to exasperate Camille and she replies somewhat curtly, ‘I know how to be a mother. I have been a mother since I was fifteen.’

Camille and I exchange a glance. I snicker at her boldness. But, I then do the sum in my head. Camille could not have given birth to her oldest child at the age of fifteen. He is too young. Either Camille was exaggerating the age she gave birth, or there is another child she gave birth to that she has not told me about.

31 The concept of motherhood, and the term ‘mother’, are culturally constituted and cannot be applied uncritically across contexts as if these concepts encompass a universalised meaning. Throughout this thesis I critically explore how the Central African women who participated in this research understand and experience what it means to be a ‘mother’. As such, whilst I do not intend to represent the concept of motherhood and the term ‘mother’ as a universalised in this thesis, I dispense of the quotation marks that express this critical use of these terms from this point.
In the car on the drive home, I ask Camille if she really did have her first child at fourteen. She nods.

After a moment, she tells me, ‘He died. He died in the camp.’ I tell her I am sorry. She shrugs. She explains that the child became sick because she did not have a lot of milk, and the water in the camp was not ‘good’ for children. She took the infant to the hospital in the camp after he became ill, but even with treatment the child did not survive.

Camille does not look at me as she tells this story. Instead, she stares out the front windscreen.

‘It is a very hard life there, in the camp,’ she says. ‘To look after your children there, it is not easy.’

The death of her child further intensified the everyday violence of the refugee camp for Camille (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992). Already familiar with routine disempowerment through experiences of sexual violation, the death of her infant child in the camp intensified such extreme violence as an unexceptional fact of existence within the refugee camp setting;

X. CONTINUITY THROUGH RESETTLEMENT

The women’s experiences of exodus, forced migration, and protracted exile are punctuated by instances of acute violence and circumstances of routinised violence. Within the context of these hardships, refugees can mythologise resettlement as a space of ultimate refuge (Jacobsen 2005:55). As one participant, Jeanette, told me, prior to resettlement, Australia is perceived as a place where refugees can ‘make a life.’ In the vignette below, Jeanette’s characterising of resettlement in Australia in comparison to life as a refugee in Africa alludes to a broader cosmological dialectic of blockage and flow. The symbolisms of poisoning and regeneration in the vignette below further emphasise dialectic:

May 20th, 2013 – Jeanette’s house in a regional Australian city

Jeanette and I are sitting on her patio, watching her children play in the yard after they have returned home from school. Her husband does not join us, but occasionally wanders in and out of the house, greeting us and chatting intermittently. With her gaze fixed on the children, Jeanette tells me that resettlement in Australia has made her children ‘well again.’

32 This idiom of ‘make a life’ was also referred to in Chapter One, but in reference to another informant. The idiom was a common phrase in the vernacular of the Central African women, used to refer to a sense of existential viability.
33 Acts of poisoning as perceived and experienced by the Central African women in this research are examined in detail in Chapter Six.
‘Were they sick in Africa?’ I ask her.

‘We were all sick in Africa,’ she replies. ‘People, I don’t know who, had poisoned us in the camp. One day, I was cooking dinner, inside the house, and I fed my children with that food. But that night, my youngest got sick, vomiting, headache . . . Then the next, then the next . . . All of us. We could not eat, we could not sleep. The poison was there. It could not be fixed. The poison was stuck in us.’

‘What did you do?’ I ask her. ‘How did you fix it?’

‘Georgina,’ Jeanette replies, shaking her head. ‘Poison is very hard. We were sick. No treatment worked. Only when we got to Australia did the poison leave us. My children became well again.’

‘Was it medicine in Australia?’ I ask her. She shakes her head again.

‘No,’ she says. ‘It is not the kind that can be treat with medicine. It is because, in Australia, you can make a life.’

In this account of a poison experience as told by Jeanette, a broader narrative of migration to Australia as encompassing potential for regeneration and continuity is concurrently expressed. Jeanette’s reference to poisoning recalls the cosmology of blockage and flow that is documented by Taylor (1988, 1992) in his work pertaining to illness experiences in Rwanda. Describing how people in Rwanda attribute illness episodes to specific acts of being poisoned, Taylor (1988) situates poison beliefs as facets of a cosmology in which perceptions and practices of wellbeing are oriented through implicit understandings of blockage and flow. Within that perspective, the capacity to experience existential continuity is characterised through perceived symbolisms of corporeal flow. In particular, the fluids consumed and expelled by the body through digestive and reproductive systems come to be understood as the means through which obstructions caused by poison are healed and mediated. In contrast, experiences of illness are expressed through symbols of obstruction to these systems of reproduction and digestion. In Jeanette’s account, a similar cosmological system of beliefs is expressed. Jeanette describes how the experience of being poisoned produces effects of obstruction. In preventing the ability to eat and sleep, poisoning is, therefore, a threat to the regenerative flow and continuity of existence. In being ‘stuck’ within the sufferer, poisoning is experienced and expressed as an obstruction. For Jeanette and other Central African refugees, poisoning is an experience of cosmological discontinuity.
Through mediating poison as an obstruction to wellbeing, a concurrent oscillation between continuity and discontinuity—of blockage and flow—is in contestation. This cosmology of blockage and flow, as articulated through the poison narrative, situates resettlement in Australia as a site of regenerative potentiality. The hardships of physical, social, and political insecurity encompassed within experiences of forced migration are imagined to be solved automatically through resettlement. Due to such assumptions that refugees can attach to Australia, in which it is perceived to be a country of social and economic opportunity (Jacobsen 2005:55), resettlement is positioned in contrast to the hardships of forced migration as a chance to experience refuge and regeneration.

XI. CONCLUSION

‘To leave this, is to suffer,’ Nyomanda told me, in our conversation about the necessity of enduring hardship prior to being resettled to a third country. Like other Central African refugee woman I conducted fieldwork with, Nyomanda was able to endure the hardships of exodus, forced migration, and protracted exile because she positioned such struggles within a cosmological lens, in which existence is perceived as a cycle of regenerative potentiality. And so, refugees like Nyomanda are able to naturalise experiences of exceptional hardship as part of a broader cosmological narrative.

In this chapter, it is the ways in which processes of forced migration can lead to ruptures of cosmological logics that a sense of displacement emerges in the experiences of Central African women. The acts of violence that forced them to flee their homes and which manifest in settings of exile are described by them not as arbitrary forms of hardship, but as forces that threaten the very continuity of their filial lineage and existential continuity. Their sense of displacement is not, therefore, reducible to socio-spatial mobilities and politico-legal ambiguities. Rather, their displacement orients as the rupturing of cosmological continuities, and is subsequently existential in scope. In Chapter Five that follows, I describe how this existential sense of displacement is not simplistically resolved upon resettlement to a third country but can endure in the experiences of Central African women resettled in Australia; and how this displacement is expressed and embodied, particularly, through their relatedness to cultivating gardens.
During fieldwork, I spent a significant amount of time with the Central African women in their gardens, or in their kitchens assisting to prepare dishes from plant foods; primarily, tending to leaves from the cassava plant or sweet potato. The attention to cultivating gardens and consuming plant foods that I witnessed within the everyday lives of the women in both Australia and Uganda represents an ecological symbolism of a more widely encompassing cosmology of regeneration. As I show below, the ‘periodicities of nature’ (Kaspin 1996:564), as formalised through the cultivation of plants and the routine consumption of plant foods, manifest a cosmological sense of existence for the Central African women as an ever-emergent cycle of continuity. Conversely, the failure to cultivate plants and inability to access particular kinds of plant foods represents a rupture within these logics.

Within many ethnographic contexts in the Central African region, the organisation of daily life according to a cosmological dialectic of blockage and flow is widely documented (e.g. Taylor 1988, 1990, 1992; Kaspin 1996; Devisch 2012). Working in Rwanda and examining situations of illness and health (1988, 1990), economies (1992) and the 1994 genocide (1999), Taylor describes how life is organised and understood through logics of blockage and flow. Throughout these contexts, the ideal state of existence for Rwandan people is that which allows mobility, progression, and continuity rather than stagnation. This cosmological dialectic is not only pertinent to the Rwandan context, however. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Devisch (1993:73) emphasises, similarly, how the Yaka perceive an ordering, or, as he describes it, an interweaving, with the world through which the regenerative potentialities of existence correspond to what is described as a ‘vital flow.’ Work by Kaspin (1996), in the context of Malawi, also shows how the cyclical basis of agricultural practices amongst the Chewa informs their cosmological logics. The Chewa subsequently live everyday life according to principles of cyclical continuity that complement the seasonal ecologies on which their food crops depend.

Earlier ethnographic research similarly notes the particular relation of regenerative potentiality to the constituting of Central African worldviews. For example, Richards’ (1956) work with the Bemba tribe of Zambia in the 1930s depicts the Chisungu initiation ritual for young women as a process through which existential purpose is tacitly communicated to young women. Richards (1956:27) emphasises that:
Wives are responsible for food, for the birth and rearing of children . . . The storing of food and its distribution to her household is one of the woman’s most responsible obligations, since on its success depends the building of a large family unit, and ultimately a village.

Bemba women emerge in Richards’ (1956) account as integral actors within a complex nexus of social regeneration and biological reproduction. Whilst it is evident that the procreation of children is paramount to female purpose in the Bemba context, Richards’ (1956) work also places clear emphasis on the distribution of food as a central activity through which both social expansion and physical sustenance is affirmed. Food is, subsequently, a substance that concurrently symbolises and reproduces this regenerative cosmology.

Amongst the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner (1967) similarly notes that nurturing is the central theme that characterises both daily life and ritual occasions for women. Again, an overarching existential imperative of regeneration is expressed in two distinct, yet mutually informing, experiences. Turner (1967) depicts the provisioning of food as one role through which women are responsible for the regenerating of life, and their responsibility to bear and rear children representative of another. To demonstrate these mutually informing obligations that situate women as vectors of regenerative potentiality, he describes how, in the Nkang’a initiation ritual for young women among the Ndembu, a significant activity requires each girl and each woman present to ingest a small amount of food that is lifted and tasted from the same spoon. Turner (1967:24) writes:

Informants say that the spoon represents the novice herself in her role of married woman, while the food stands for her reproductive power and her role as cultivator and cook.

Through these observations, Turner (1967) identifies three arenas in which Ndembu women contribute to a regenerative imperative in their everyday lives. Women are expected to: reproduce children in order to augment their familial lineage; prepare and cook food to sustain and assure the survival of the expanding family; and cultivate the plant foods that are their source of physical sustenance. The sense of existential purpose that characterises female existence in the Ndembu context is implicitly oriented through logics of aiming always to regenerate life.

This corpus of work suggests that cosmologies of regeneration manifest broadly within ethnographic contexts in the Central African region due to comparable cultural landscapes. Indeed, a focus on fertility, reproduction, and regeneration has been a historical focus of
anthropological work, and is still widely recognised as significant in recent research in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, broadly (Moore 1999). In the specific context of Central Africa, Apter (2012) has conducted research in a culturally and ethnically diverse refugee camp with refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo. He describes how, within such settings of asylum in which a research cohort cannot be distinctly categorised according to shared ethnic and cultural background, collectively understood cosmological principles of regenerative flow nonetheless manifest. In Apter’s (2012) work, it is recognised that whilst local specificities of culture are significant to particularised facets of cosmology, within settings of exile in which multiple refugees from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds are brought together, there emerges a kind of pan-Central African cosmology of regeneration that is grounded in comparative facets of cultural, social, and historicised experience. Subsequently, although cosmologies are particularised in localised contexts based on regional or ethnic background (Devisch 2012:107), principles of cosmology can share collectivised facets across social groups in the Central Africa region. These cosmologies persist as orienting logics within Central African conflicts and experiences of refugee exodus and exile in the region, as both Malkki (1995a) and Taylor (1999) have shown, and as elaborated below.34

Within the accounts of remembered conflict in Burundi that are outlined by Malkki (1995a), the forms of violence documented draw on symbols of obstruction and blockage. The refugees in Malkki’s (1995a:92-93) research describe with attentive detail how acts of violence during conflicts in Burundi targeted parts of the body directly associated with flows of motility; like, specifically, the reproductive and digestive systems. The atrocities documented draw out in their extremity central themes that, when taken together, emphasise that the violences enacted in Burundi were not irrational, but manifested from distinct cosmological logics of blockage and flow. Malkki (1995a:92-93) writes:

There were certain body parts on which mutilation and destruction converged; and these body parts were also the points of thematic convergence in the narrative . . . Women’s bodies were said to have been destroyed largely through the vagina and the uterus. When the women captured were pregnant, the violence seems invariably to have focused on the womb and specifically on the link between mother and child . . . The disemboweling of pregnant Hutu women was interpreted as an effort to destroy the procreative capability, the ‘new life’, of the Hutu people. In several accounts, the unborn child or embryo was referred to, simply, as ‘the future’. . . How one dies is important here, as it is elsewhere in the world. And again, forcing a woman to eat the flesh of her own “flesh and blood,” of her child, is imposing, not only cannibalism, but autophagy in the literal sense of devouring oneself. It represents a complete

34 The broad contexts of the cosmological logics that are described in Malkki (1995a) and Taylor’s (1999) work were outlined in detail in Chapter One and Chapter Four.
reversal of the ‘progress of nature’ in which the mother’s body nurtures, forms, and brings into
the world ‘new life.’

The violence that Malkki (1995a:92-93) describes invokes a cosmological symbolism in which
the absolute destruction of regenerative flow is emphasised. The focus of the violence on
pregnancy, sexual organs, and eating serves to specifically target the corporeal bases of
existence and survival; that is, processes of reproduction and physical sustenance necessary for
both the creation and perpetuation of life.

In describing the forms of violence operationalised during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, Taylor
(1999:101) similarly illustrates that the violence encompassed within the massacres of that
period was structured through cultural understandings:

Beneath the aspect of disorder there lay an eerie order to the violence of 1994 Rwanda. Many of
the actions followed a cultural patterning, a structured and structuring logic, as individual
Rwandans lashed out against a perceived internal other that threatened in their imaginations both
their personal integrity and the cosmic order of the state. It was overwhelmingly Tutsi who were
the sacrificial victims in what in many respects was a massive ritual of purification, a ritual
intended to purge the nation of ‘obstructing beings’ as the threat of obstruction was imagined
through a Rwandan ontology that situates the body politic in analogous relation to the individual
human body.

This typology of blockage and flow as interwoven within the violences of the Rwandan
genocide was a recurrent theme in interviews that Taylor (1999) conducted with survivors.
Drawing on his own experiences of escaping the massacre, Taylor (1999) describes how roads
and paths were appropriated through large roadblocks aiming to trap persons fleeing the
violence. Other motifs of obstruction manifested in the acts of violence during the genocide, as
described to Taylor (1999) by his Rwandan informants. To obstruct movement, the Achilles
tendons of victims were routinely severed to restrict the ability to walk. In some instances of
violence, men were castrated and women’s breasts cut off; thereby symbolically and physically
impeding flows of life-generating bodily fluids like semen and breast milk. Similar to Malkki
(1995a), Taylor (1999) also provides accounts in which violent acts within the acute genocide
period were levelled specifically at obstructing bodily mechanisms responsible for flows of
reproduction and digestion, such as acts of impaling the bodies of live victims from vagina or
anus, to mouth.

With the specificities of violent acts in the genocide regimes of both Burundi and Rwanda
refracted through cosmological logics of blockage and flow, it is evident from both Malkki
(1995a) and Taylor’s (1999) accounts that acts of violence in both contexts represent fundamental inversions of regenerative continuity. Both symbolically and viscerally, the violence enacted in both Burundi and Rwanda was often focused on the destruction of digestive and reproductive systems. The violence served, therefore, to symbolise the destruction of a regenerative flow of existence for victims and to prevent the endurance of their lineage. Specifically, however, this violence was directed at particular kinds of persons within each context, as determined through schemas of national identity in which civilians were dichotomised into ethnic categorisations of ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi.’ The logics of discontinuity, blockage, and obstruction that informed the types of violence enacted in Burundi and Rwanda were aimed specifically at reproducing a cosmology in which the perceptual order of the world could be defined and categorised by binary categories of national identity.

Cosmologies are not, however, necessarily predicated on structures of nationhood (Kapferer 2003:21). From a phenomenological perspective, cosmologies are those logics that form a culturally, socially, and temporally particularised lens through which lived experience is perceived as encompassing taken-for-granted logics about the ‘nature’ of existence. The constructed logics that shape a perceptual lens of cosmological ordering are not, therefore, mechanistically defined by the classificatory orders encapsulated within social institutions of nationhood or religion, but are characterised by the historicised specificities of a subject’s lived experience (Kapferer 2003:21).

For the women participating in this research, cosmological logics of blockage and flow did not emerge as distinctly predicated on schemas of national identity. Whilst not the primary focus of Malkki’s (1995a) and Taylor’s (1999) work, both scholars emphasise that the destruction of reproductive potential, and implied social relatedness through familial lineage, was an intentional aspect of the violence that characterised the conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi. This potential to biologically and socially reproduce existence forms the sense of ‘regenerative flow’ that the women in this research were preoccupied with recreating in their everyday lives. In Taylor’s (1988, 1992) research, ‘flow’ refers the patterns of social and physical continuity that parallel the metabolic continuity of human physiology as cyclic, and characterised by processes of imbibing and expelling, birth and death, sleep and wakefulness. For the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with, a cosmological imperative to contribute to regenerative ‘flow’ is similarly informed by physiological processes of metabolic continuity but is more broadly encompassing. It is the periodicities of ‘nature’—that is, the cycle of plant growth and decomposition, human birth and death, the transitions of food from raw to cooked—that underlie a cosmological sense of existence as unfolding according to a trajectory of regeneration. As I elaborate in this and other chapters, this cosmology of regenerative flow is
tacitly constituted for them in the rituals of daily life, such as cooking and preparing food, tending to gardens, and bearing and rearing children. For them, the cosmological dialectic of regenerative flow and blockage is oriented through practices that symbolically and physically represent the continuity of existence. Consequently, situations that obstruct these everyday rituals of continuity express a rupturing of the cosmological dialectic of ‘flow,’ and are experienced as a sense of existential displacement. As I describe in this chapter, the cultivating of plant foods is one such practice that has the potential to affirm or disrupt a sense of regenerative potential for Central African women in settings of refugee settlement.

I. CULTIVATING PLANT FOODS

*June 2nd, 2013 – Maria’s house in suburban Sydney*

Maria uses a large serving spoon from her kitchen to make three indents in the soil on which she is kneeling. It is the middle of the day, and we are alone at her house whilst her husband is at work and her children are at school. In each hole she has dug, Maria carefully places a cutting from a cassava plant, and then gently replaces the soil. After patting down firmly on the earth to ensure each cutting is secure, she then sits upright and brushes the excess soil from her hands onto her skirt.

Directing her gaze to where I am sitting beside her, Maria begins to discuss my future and to provide me with unsolicited advice. She does so with the unapologetic wisdom owed to her as a Congolese woman that is older than myself; and, as a mother that speaks to a woman who is, as yet, a childless neophyte. In Maria’s perspective, I am yet to manifest the extent of my existential purpose as predicated, in her understandings of the world, on the bearing, rearing, and caring for offspring. With a tone of concern, Maria reminds me that, for women, existence follows a pattern of expectations that I should embrace.

‘It is your time now,’ she says, ‘Stop worrying about what will happen. If you worry, then there will be nothing . . . Now is the time for you to get married, yourself. When you bring babies, you will make your mum very happy. Now, she is waiting.’

Maria turns away, trying unsuccessfully to hide her knowing chuckle. I offer her the same resigned excuses about completing my studies that she hears every time she broaches the same topic in our conversations, which is regularly. I visit Maria on an almost weekly basis, but the topic of my reproductive trajectory has not, yet, been exhausted. At least, not for her.

When she is finally finished with the cassava plant cuttings Maria stands up and goes to the outdoor tap to rinse the remaining soil from her hands. Flicking off the excess water, her
expression is unexpectedly sober when she turns to me again. Her attention has returned to the garden in which we are currently immersed.

‘In my country, in Congo, this plant would grow: hakuna shida!’ she remarks in Swahili first, then repeats in English, ‘No problem!’

‘And here, in Australia?’ I ask.

‘Here?’ she responds. ‘Here . . . no. It does not grow well, here.’

There is a moment of silence as we both turn our gaze to the three small cassava cuttings that have been planted carefully in the soil before us.

‘I have tried to grow these here, before.’ Maria continues. ‘Here, they are no good . . .’

Maria is referring to the cassava plant, which is a woody shrub with leaves that are consumed as a staple food source in geographic regions across Central Africa. Amongst the Central African women with whom I conduct fieldwork the plant holds social significance beyond its properties as a source of food. Within my numerous encounters with the women in their gardens and kitchens, I have observed how cultural meanings are attached to the preparation, taste, and distribution of the cooked leaves as a foodstuff that, evidently, encompasses cultural significance. Maria’s efforts to grow the plant within the temperate conditions of her suburban Australian backyard evidences the significance that the cassava plant holds for her.

Maria sighs, deeply. ‘Maybe this time, they will be okay,’ she says, turning her gaze toward the cassava plants.

‘They have not ever survived before?’ I ask. After the uncritical reference to ‘survival’ I immediately cringe. I had not meant to emphasise the plants’ struggle for existence in a way that could compel Maria reflect back on her own experiences of fleeing Congo and surviving in a refugee camp in Uganda. It is she, however, who emphasises the brutality of refugee existence as interwoven with her struggle to support the survival of the cassava plants in Australia. Apparently, it is the dimensions of her existential survival in Australia, rather than those encompassed in her experiences of forced migration and exile in Africa, that are evoked in contemplating the survival of the plants.

‘Every time they have died. Dead. Finish.’ she says. She throws her hands up in a display of exasperation. ‘Like everything in this country.’

Somewhat harshly, I feel, Maria points toward my stomach. ‘There,’ she says, ‘no life.’
She motions to the garden beds, where she spends so much of her time tending to plants. ‘There,’ she repeats, ‘no life.’

Exhaling, she moves toward me and places her freshly washed hands on my back, steering me inside.

‘Oh, it is hard here, that is all,’ she says as she does so. ‘The life in Australia is very different to Congo. Here, it is all about work, and school, and job, and medicine, and house. Blah, blah, blah. Every day. There is no life.’

Over the coming weeks, I visit Maria regularly to join her in tending to the garden. Together, we somewhat anxiously monitor the progress of her little cuttings, and hope that she will have success this time in rearing the plants.

This imperative to cultivate plant foods is one practice through which a sense of regenerative flow is animated, affirmed, and re-constituted for Maria, and other Central African women I conducted fieldwork with. Acts of gardening are an imperative of everyday life for these women, and form a ‘natural’ pattern of existence for them. This naturalised sense of existence expresses a broader cosmology of regeneration in which other activities that sustain and nurture continuity, such as cultivating plant foods and preparing, cooking, and distributing food, are similarly interwoven (Devisch 1993; Kaspin 1996).

In characterising these assumptions of continuity as a ‘cosmology of regeneration,’ it is necessary to consider what the concept of ‘cosmology’ implies in anthropological literatures, broadly. In theorising the concept of cosmology as the patterns that underlie implicit understandings of the world, Douglas (1973:11) asserts that there are no ‘natural’ symbols that encompass inherent and organic meaning. Instead, all facets of experience are imbued with meaning through the socially, culturally, and historically particularised lens of the subject that perceives them (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 2004). Meanings that emerge through lived experience express, according to Douglas (1973), culturally specific patterns of understanding. The body is the basis of how these logics are both constructed and animated in the unfolding of experience, because the body encompasses the sensory capacities through which all experience is perceived (Douglas 1973:93). As existence unfolds across a life-course, and experience subsequently accumulates, expectations of the dimensions and parameters of the world and experiences within it are cumulatively developed as self-evident principles of existence. These expectations are logics that attach meaning to the sensory capacities of lived bodily experience, to which Douglas (1973) applies the concept of ‘cosmology.’
This synchronous process of sensately engaging the world, whilst recognising meaning within it, is an instantaneous process unmediated, according to Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004), by conscious reflection. The culturally, socially, and temporally particularised cosmological logics that orient this process of understanding, living, and being in the world are, rather, obscured within the immediacy of lived experience. The logics that thus orient lived experience, as both a sensate bodily engagement with the world and socially particularised process within, are characterised by Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2004:53) as a perceptual lens, which encompasses those taken-for-granted expectations about the unfolding of lived experience. What Merleau-Ponty (2004) suggests is that there is no objective basis to the experience of continuity that capacitates subjects to live their everyday lives with a sense of familiarity and cohesion intact. Instead, this sense of continuity is an illusion oriented through a perceptual lens, through which facets of the world and lived experiences are given meaning. In Douglas’ (1973) terms, this perceptual lens is constructed from culturally and temporally particularised assumptions about the ‘nature’ of the world, and of existence within it. The cosmological logics of the Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork are specifically oriented through an imperative to contribute to a regenerative flow of existence; that is, to recreate social and biological continuity. Gardening and preparing food are practices that sustain and nurture existence; and, as evident in Maria’s experiences described above, are thus situated by Central African women through a cosmological lens as acts of regeneration.

The bitterness with which Maria speaks about the difficulties of cultivating cassava plants in Australia, her frustration at my lack of concern over my own reproduction, and her admission of there being ‘no life’ in Australia, attests, however, to the cumulative and precarious basis of such cosmological logics. As a perceptual lens through which the world is perceived, cosmological logics emerge here as temporally particularised. The self-evident logics that imbue meaning, coherence, and continuity within the emergence of existence are not static nor stable, but are subject to shifts and discontinuities as lived experience unfolds in ways that do not accord with naturalised cosmological logics. As Merleau-Ponty (2004:53-59) implies, a sense of existential continuity as mediated through a subject’s perceptual lens is only coherent so long as those logics that underlie it are reproduced as self-evident in the unfolding of contemporary existence. The illusion of these logics as self-evident can be disrupted if the parameters of contemporary life do not accord with those taken-for-granted expectations that form the perceptual lens through which experiences in the world are oriented. For Maria and other Central African women, cosmological logics of regenerative flow, through which their sense of existential continuity is constituted, can be disrupted and disoriented through their experiences of refugee settlement.
II. SETTLEMENT AND COSMOLOGY IN UGANDA

January 29th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

Sarah takes my arm and we walk the length of the courtyard in our housing compound in Kampala. We have done this most afternoons since I have come to stay. In a three-room apartment, she lives with her son, his wife, two nieces, and three grandchildren. None of the family have employment, although Sarah’s two nieces attend school. They rely on remittances from family members who have been resettled in other countries to survive. Life is difficult for them, but each afternoon Sarah and I talk about the mundanities of daily existence as we walk the compound’s length, remaining close to her grandchildren who often play nearby.

When we reach the spiked gate that is the threshold between our housing compound and the streets beyond, I expect that we will simply turn around and make our way back to the row of housing apartments. Instead, Sarah guides me through a small passageway between the central building and the perimeter fence that I have not entered before. As she leads me into this small passageway, Sarah explains her motivations for taking me here.

‘I want to show you my garden,’ she says.

The restricted space between the building and the perimeter allows only a one-meter wide gap between the apartments and the retaining wall, on top of which a fence is built. The building itself leans over this constricted walkway, so the sunlight does not reach where we stand. I am confused as to what Sarah means by her ‘garden.’ I cannot see any space for plants to grow.

Sarah stops our meander outside the back of her own apartment. The only surfaces I can see are the cement walls of the building, the stonework of the retaining wall opposite it, and the dirt path beneath our feet. Then, Sarah points to a space I did not notice: a small gap between the top of the wall and wire perimeter fence. There, I see the stunted growth of cassava plants and the tangled tendrils sweet potato vine (Figure 6).

Sarah retrieves a plastic chair and sets it against the wall. With a hand gesture, she encourages me to stand on it. From that position, I am able to see and touch the plants that Sarah refers to. I gently rub the leaves of the cassava plant between my fingertips, and from below me, I see Sarah smile. I get down from the chair. Sarah takes my place on top of it, and deftly picks a handful of sweet potato leaves. When she gets down, she holds them out on her palm to show them to me.

‘Matembela,’ she says. ‘That is the name we call this plant.’ Sarah takes hold of the chair with one hand, and deftly moves it back inside of her home. She gently shuts the back door. Still
holding the *matembela* leaves in one hand, she looks down at them, contemplating. I ask her why she grows the plants, here.

‘I have these plants here because if I did not have these leaves . . . myself and my children would die.’ She turns one of the leaves over, carefully, in her hand. ‘The soil is bad, and the growing is hard, but I still do it because there is the space to. I could not live here, and not do something. To leave it . . . no.’

‘If you didn’t tend this garden, do you think that you would have enough food to survive in Kampala?’ I ask her.

‘Maybe,’ Sarah replies, adding, ‘but wherever I live, I have a garden. Here, it has been the hardest. When I first came here, I thought there was no place that I would be able to grow plants. I was thinking that I would have to move away. But then I saw that there was just enough space, at the top there. So, I am here.’
Sarah’s efforts to grow plants cannot be sufficiently explained as a strategy to bolster her physical survival. The yield and quality of plant foods from her small garden are not adequate as an auxiliary source of nourishment. For Sarah, the purpose in tending this garden therefore transcends its role in providing a small, but supplementary nonetheless, source of food. Cultivating plant foods is, primarily, a way for her to experience continuity within insecure circumstances of refugee settlement. As she expresses, the act of cultivating a garden is a taken-for-granted aspect of her existence, to the point where she ‘could not live here, and not do something’ in terms of growing plants.

Recalling Maria’s similar imperative to grow plant foods in Australia, it can be considered that for the Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork—who almost all cultivated gardens—the tending of plant foods is a practice perceived by many of them as a ‘natural’ principle of existence. The cosmological basis from which cultivating gardens comes to be perceived as an axiomatic facet of existence is evident in the way that Sarah asserts that ‘wherever I live, I have a garden.’ The cultivating of gardens emerges here as a cosmological vector of regeneration, in that Central African women like Sarah experience tending to plants as an act of affirming existential continuity and the regenerative potentiality of existence. The significance of cultivating plant foods for Sarah and other Central African refugee women in Kampala is, however, not only characterised by these acts of gardening being oriented through a cosmological imperative. The cultivating of a garden also alludes to broader insecurities of Sarah’s everyday life as a refugee in Kampala.

Sarah’s everyday life in urban asylum is conditioned within a ‘moral economy’ of refugee settlement that operates in Uganda. The concept of a ‘moral economy’ is theorised in Fassin’s (2005, 2012) work in the context of asylum seekers in France. Fassin (2005, 2012) refers to the ways in which the granting of refugee status to persons that seek asylum in France is based on biomedical legitimacy. In those processes, persecution must be evidenced through the physicality of the body and the illnesses, diseases, and scars that mark it. Political and social persecution is delegitimised unless able to be evidenced through the suffering body. Referring more broadly to the ways in which forms of suffering are quantified and given value in societal structures (Fassin 2005, 2012:28), the humanitarian administrations that manage refugee residency permits in Uganda can be considered, then, as one arena in which the logics of a particularised ‘moral economy’ is constituted. For the women I conducted fieldwork with in Kampala, providing humanitarian support to refugees without considering how the political persecution that they continue to face in exile shapes their experience is, in that sense, an example of a ‘moral economy.’ Sarah’s experiences are an arena in which the effects of these logics are lived and imprinted on the body.
As explained in Chapter Four, whilst refugees in Uganda are, ostensibly, eligible for freedom to reside where they choose, legally registered refugees who live Kampala are not able to access humanitarian aid (Jacobsen 2006:276; Hovil 2007:601; Sharpe and Namusobya 2012). Refugees who live outside of the camps must be granted permission to do so by virtue of demonstrating a capacity to survive independently without humanitarian support. However, whilst refugees in urban asylum in Uganda have a legal right to seek employment and therefore support themselves, legal ambiguities surrounding this right mean that, most often, refugees in Kampala are left in a situation in which they are unable to access humanitarian assistance nor attain secure employment (Sharpe and Namusobya 2012:578). In this system of refugee settlement, it is assumed that if refugees are unable to survive in urban settings of asylum independently of humanitarian aid, then they will relocate to an enclosed settlement.

Such logics assume that the choice to reside in Kampala is made for refugees on the basis of how they assess their capacity to maintain their own livelihoods, and the health of their physical bodies, within these kinds of conditions. However, for the refugee women I met, the decision to reside in Kampala is shaped within broader and more complex social and political factors. Particularly, the women often feared that residing in a camp would make them vulnerable to being identified by persons who would seek to do them harm due to their political or ethnic background. In the more anonymous setting of Kampala, urban asylum is considered a more secure environment for settlement as a place to ‘hide’ from such dangers that can follow refugees beyond the conflicts of their origin country (Sandvik 2012:112). So, despite having reduced means to maintain a livelihood, refugee women often feel that they have no choice but to live in Kampala. The political factors that shape this decision are, however, not recognised in the refugee settlement structure in Uganda, which is organised on principles of economic and material hardship (Dryden-Peterson 2006). This privileging of the impoverished refugee body, rather than the politicised refugee subject, is what Fassin (2005:365) refers to as a ‘moral economy’; by which it is recognised that ‘the values and norms by which immigration and asylum are thought and acted on’ are not neutral, but serve political purpose (cf. Fassin 2012, 2005; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005).

For Sarah, residing in Kampala was not a ‘choice’ based on rationalised logics of securing a livelihood. Indeed, Sarah resides in Kampala despite economic insecurity. The reason she lives in Kampala and aims to avoid relocation to a designated refugee settlement relates to the persecution she experienced in Congo, and which prompted her to flee the country. In 2010, a military faction occupied her village in North Kivu. As part of this experience, her husband was tortured and then murdered, along with her oldest son. Sarah fled with her other two children to
Uganda. She has since received threatening anonymous phone messages. She fears that she could be easily located if she were to reside in a camp. So, Sarah lives in Kampala, frequently moving residences to avoid becoming the target of violence. She supports her family by combining irregular remittances from family members overseas with work as a laundress, which is low-paying and similarly erratic. Everyday life in these conditions is an exercise in hardship that stems from poor nutrition, impoverished living conditions, and a generalised sense of fear.

For Sarah, impoverishment in Kampala is an unavoidable side effect of an asylum structure in which the settlement of refugees is organised based on whether they are able to secure their own livelihoods. This is the context within which her ‘choice’ to reside in Kampala, and endure a lack of humanitarian support, was made. As such, the institutions that administrate refugee settlement in this context reproduce a moral economy of aid provision to refugees whereby legitimacy to receive support is qualified by economic hardship rather than political persecution. This perspective is supported by research conducted by Sandvik (2012), who conducted ethnographic work within the refugee assistance organisations in Uganda. Sandvik (2012:116, emphasis in original) describes how she witnessed staff undermine the credibility of political insecurity narratives by telling their clients that ‘if they really had security problems, they would not mind relocating to the settlements.’ As a result of this moral economy of refugee settlement, in which aid is provisioned on the premise that economic hardship can be contained within structures of refugee encampment, Sarah subsequently resides in Kampala in a state of enduring material insecurity; subjected to conditions of poor nutrition, uncertain living conditions, and with an ever-present threat of having to engage in high-risk survival strategies if her means of surviving become insufficient.

The exclusion of urban refugees from institutional strategies of livelihood support in Uganda is, as described by Sandvik (2012:114), a form of ‘secondary displacement.’Whilst the experience of ‘displacement’ cannot be mechanistically conceptualised as a direct outcome of specific forms of humanitarian governance, for women like Sarah, this constant material insecurity indeed emerges as a condition of everyday life through which a sense of displacement endures. However, within such circumstances of hardship, these women continue to persist with their gardening and cultivating of plant foods despite these not being a sufficient source of supplementary nutrition. As Sarah asserts in the vignette above: ‘Wherever I live, I have a

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35 When I asked Sarah if she could identify who the persons threatening her were, and why, she told me that she did not know the harassers personally. She suspected that the threats stemmed from members of the militia group that had caused her to flee Congo. This militia group had targeted Sarah and her husband because they were labelled, inaccurately, as sympathisers with another military faction. I never witnessed Sarah or any other woman be directly targeted by warring political factions in Uganda, but stories about the continuation of violence within settings of displacement were common. Most women I met described to me their anxiety about being ‘found’ or ‘targeted’ in Uganda.
This continued imperative to cultivate a garden is encompassed within a broader cosmological lens in which existence is characterised by, and constituted as purposeful through, activities that evidence a sense of ongoing regenerative potential. Within the experiences of Sarah and the other Central African women, the cultivation of plant foods in circumstances of refugee settlement is a practice through which to mediate a sense of insecurity. For them, tending to gardens is therapeutic in an existential sense, because witnessing the cyclic growth of plants accords to, and subsequently affirms, their cosmological understandings of the world in which continuity and regenerative flow are paramount.

III. SETTLEMENT AND COSMOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

June 27th, 2013 – Maria’s house in suburban Sydney

On a cool June afternoon I visit Maria. As I walk through her yard to approach the back door, I see that the cassava plants in her garden beds have died since my last visit. The shrivelled husks of the plants remain in the soil but the colour and vitality of each cutting has gone.

Maria is in the kitchen. I comment on the dead plants but she only shakes her head and turns away. Pulling out a large pot, she begins to fry off onion, garlic, and capsicum on the stove. She is cooking food for her family. And, indeed, her husband arrives home from work mid-way whilst we are cooking the meal. He stops in at the kitchen to greet me, and we talk together for a while before he takes a seat in the dining room to work on his computer and await the meal. Her children also return home from school, and noisily burst into the house and kitchen to greet their mother.

When we are eventually left alone in the kitchen, Maria and I stand in silence for a time, watching the food cook. Then, Maria turns to the freezer and pulls out a packet of food. Through the clear, cold plastic I see the distinctive lurid green of cut cassava leaves.

‘Is that for sombe?’ I ask Maria.

‘This,’ she says, ‘. . . this is cassava leaves.’

Maria tells me how she goes to markets in Sydney regularly to buy these packets of cassava leaves. Imported to Australia from the Pacific Islands, access to this source of frozen cassava leaves means that Maria and other Central African women can continue to cook sombe after their settlement, without needing the fresh leaves to do so.

Still, Maria sighs as she fills the sink beside her with hot water and submerges the packet within it, allowing them to soften and defrost slightly.
‘Does it taste the same?’ I ask her.

‘No,’ Maria says. ‘It never does. The food will never be like it was: the taste, the colour, the strength it gives. But it is our food, so we try to eat it, here, still.’

‘Does it make you miss Congo?’ I ask her.

Stirring the pot, Maria nods. ‘Sometimes, yes. The food there, in Africa, is very nice,’ she says, then adds, ‘but it is a problem for us. Not to have it here.’

The vapours from the cooking sombe rise around us, filling the kitchen with their distinctive smell as the leaves begin to break down. The lurid green of the leaves begins to darken. From the counter-top beside her, Maria takes a bottle of vegetable oil and adds a generous amount to the simmering pot.

‘Why is it a problem?’

‘For us,’ she says, ‘these leaves are our strong food. This is what we eat. This is what our mothers eat, and our children eat. This is our food. Cassava. Sombe. But here, everything is different. The food is wrong; coming from plastic. We have a hard life here. Needing to get a house, get a job, go and look for money. The children, they are very bad here, making bad friends and becoming naughty. We do not have this strong food.’

‘What do you mean by “strong” food?’

‘It is our food,’ Maria repeats. ‘It makes us grow, we become strong,’ she says, then adds. ‘And when we eat it, together, we become strong.’

We stop speaking for a moment as the simmering mixture in the pot begins to spit, and Maria rapidly turns the heat down. She calls out to her oldest daughter, who has emerged from her bedroom after changing out of her school clothes, to set out dining-ware on the table and prepare a jug of water and a bucket in which to wash our hands prior to the meal.

I then ask Maria, ‘Do you think the life here might different if the cassava would grow?’

Maria shrugs. ‘No,’ she says at first, as if automatically. Then, after a pause, ‘I don’t know. Maybe. This place is very hard. At least with the cassava there would be something. But it does not grow here. And so, now there is this.’ She uses her arm to indicate the now empty and sodden plastic packet. In silence, we stand together and watch the mixture simmer.
Cassava is a type of woody shrub that is grown in tropical regions, particularly in equatorial Africa, South America, and the Pacific Islands (Figure 7). Within Central African regions, the plant is a staple source of food for its fibrous roots and, particularly, the large, dark-green leaves. Broadly, Central African people eat these components of the plant in three primary ways. The fibrous tuber roots can be steamed and prepared as a starchy carbohydrate to accompany a sauce. These roots are also crushed into a fine powder that can be used to make forms of bread, pap, or porridge. Finally, the leaves of the plant themselves can be crushed into a paste, then cooked; a meal that is termed *sombe* in Swahili (Figure 8). However, Maria’s account above emphasises that *sombe* encompasses for Central African women a social and cultural value beyond its nutritional and practical attributes as a foodstuff.

Despite the difficulties in sourcing cassava leaves in Australia, each woman with whom I conducted fieldwork provided me with a meal of *sombe* at least once over the course of the fieldwork. Indeed, in around half of my encounters with Central African women, *sombe* was a central component of my first meal within a family home (Figure 9). A number of studies...
pertaining to migrant experience emphasise that food is utilised by migrants to maintain a sense of connection to their homeland (Stoller 1989; Bauer 2000:186; James 2004; Holtzman 2006; Larsen 2011:149). However, the significance that Central African women attach to cassava is not wholly explained by nostalgia. For these women, the cultivation, cooking, and consuming of cassava leaves have implications for the constituting of contemporary forms of relatedness. The cooking of cassava leaves emerges in their experiences as an axis of sociality (Strathern 1988; Bird-David 1992), through which modes of social and cultural regeneration are oriented. The cultivating and consumption of cassava generates, rejuvenates, and expresses relatedness.

When Maria describes cassava leaves as a ‘strong’ food, she is asserting that its consumption capacitates and affirms a regenerative flow of existence. With the consumption of this plant food encompassing both symbolic and material significance through the rejuvenation of both physical bodies and social relatedness, Maria perceives the cultivation and consumption of cassava leaves as an act of affirming the regenerative continuity of existence. This strength of regenerative continuity attached to cassava leaves is, however, threatened by the difficulty in successfully propagating the plant in Australia.

FIGURE 8: SOMBE BEING PREPARED IN KAMPLA, UGANDA

36 The concept of ‘sociality’ as employed specifically in the thesis, and as contextualised in theoretical paradigms in anthropology more broadly, is detailed in Chapter Six.
The cyclic continuity of cultivating plant foods, and particularly cassava, is hindered by the temperate Australian climate. The pre-packed and frozen alternatives to fresh cassava leaves have, according to the women, an inferior taste and lesser ‘strengthening’ effect. These perceptions, and their persistence in attempting to grow the plants, expresses that the inability to cultivate cassava plants is more than just a hindrance to these women. It is experienced as a sense of cosmological rupture, in which the regenerative potentiality of existence through which they organise their lives is itself undermined. Within her narratives of failing to cultivate the cassava plant, for example, Maria interweaves references to hardships of social dissonance that characterise her everyday life in Australia. For Maria and other Central African women, the inability to successfully propagate cassava, and to thereby draw on the strength of regenerative continuity attached to its cultivation and consumption, expresses and manifests broader insecurities about the lived experience of refugee settlement in Australia. Their inability to grow cassava parallels a perceived inability to regenerate forms of social connectedness in Australia.

The resettlement program administered to refugees by the Australian state is one of the most extensive systems of support to refugees offered in the world (Colic-Peisker 2009). For those refugees that are selected for resettlement in Australia, initial supports to ease the migration transition include the automatic provisioning of financial, medical, housing, educational, and general social welfare assistance. The resettlement program in Australia does, therefore, provide extensive orientation support for refugee settlers. The administering of such support is, however, nonetheless refracted through a politics of humanitarian governance as based on a distinct moral economy of theological-political logics.37 In providing assistance in situations of acute crisis, humanitarian organisations can unintentionally valorise physical suffering whilst obscuring the social, economic, and political dimensions of hardship and injustice; and, subsequently, humanitarian intervention can emerge as a process of ostensible ‘salvation’ (Fassin 2012:250). Such theological-political logics frame refugee resettlement in Australia, which operates to ‘save’ the physical livelihoods of refugees by relocating and resettling them within conditions of physical security; whilst failing to address the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts that shape their resettlement experiences (Colic-Peisker 2009; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). In this sense, the resettlement of refugees in Australia operates according to a

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37 In historicising and culturally situating the logics that underlie humanitarian intervention, Fassin (2012:250) suggests that: ‘With the entry of suffering into politics, we might say that salvation emanates not through the passion one endures, but through the compassion one feels’. These cultures of humanitarian intervention mean that assistance to the suffering is conditional on the ways in which those who hold the power to intervene construct and validate suffering. In embedding humanitarianism within such a prism of power, the recipient of humanitarian aid becomes located as a suffering victim in need of redemption, whilst the humanitarian intervener is located as the force of salvation. These are what Fassin (2012:250-251) refers to as ‘theological-political’ logics; that is, the coalescence of suffering with political systems grounded in a Christian paradigm of suffering-redemption that are then used as a platform to determine how to alleviate inequality and administer humanitarian support.
moral economy of humanitarian intervention that privileges the physical bodies of refugees, rather than their social, cultural, and political subjectivities.

FIGURE 9: A MEAL COOKED WITH FROZEN CASSAVA LEAVES, CENTRE, IS SERVED IN THE HOME OF A CENTRAL AFRICAN WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA. THE COLOUR AND FLAVOUR IS INFERIOR TO SOMBE COOKED FROM FRESHLY CRUSHED LEAVES, ACCORDING TO HER.

In overlooking the social and cultural complexities that condition experiences of refugee settlement, the program of resettlement support provided to refugees in Australia is administered through an implicitly neoliberal agenda. As emphasised by Stratton (2009) and others (Sidhu and Taylor 2007, 2009) the provisioning of ‘refuge’ in Australia is interwoven within a process of supporting resettled refugees to live self-sufficiently from government assistance through a focus on their capacity to secure independent livelihoods, rather than addressing the complexities of their social and cultural contexts (Stratton 2009). This means

38 For example, a significant number of refugees from a minority ethnic group in Congo have been resettled in the regional city in which a majority of this research was conducted. The newly resettled refugees were located to this
that the supports provided to resettling refugees are structured in a way that emphasises employability skills, particularly through a focus on education, language development, and job networking. Subsequently, the desired outcome of the refugee settlement program in Australia conflates the provisioning of ‘refuge’ to refugee settlers with their capacity to be self-reliant. As Colic-Peisker (2009:177) argues:

Host country governments usually see settlement success through a lens of economic rationality, and employment therefore remains the main measurable indicator . . . Western governments seem less interested in social indicators of settlement success (e.g. formation of social networks in the mainstream community) and the life satisfaction of immigrants and refugees.

For Central African women, however, the capacity to experience existential wellbeing within conditions of ostensible ‘refuge’ in Australia is not defined by economic independence. For them, a sense of existential wellbeing is platformed from a cosmology of regenerative flow, in which affirming and constituting social and familial continuity is central. As Maria’s frustration in the vignettes above suggests, this focus on individualism and self-reliance can be confronting for Central African women. As such, specific facets of supposed support provided through the settlement program in Australia manifest for Central African women as significant sources of existential discontinuity, despite being encompassed within a project of provisioning ostensible ‘refuge’ to them. These implicit expectations of settlement, in which refugees are required to participate in specific education, employment, and social services regimes, is a form of subjugation in which their own meaning systems are undervalued (c.f. Ong 2003). More insidiously, and as I emphasise further in Chapter Nine, these coercive aspects of resettlement are not neutrally nor mechanistically applied, but can operate as systems of governmentality in which refugees are required to meet these external expectations, or risk being reduced to objects of governance.

Whilst everyday life for refugees resettled in Australia unfolds within circumstances of relative physical safety and material security, the capacity to experience refuge within such conditions is not holistically defined by access to economic and material foundations that support livelihoods and physical survival. For these women, social and cultural dimensions of life are fundamental to their capacity to experience existential refuge (cf. Jackson 2013a:228). However, it is their own cosmological logics, as shaped through socio-cultural logics of social expansion and

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city because the government recognised that an existing population of ‘Congolese’ refugees resided there, and that this group would assist them to settle independently. The government workers did not consider that these newer ‘Congolese’ refugees have a cultural and ethnic background that is different to the established community. Tensions have since erupted in this city due to cultural, social, and political difference. In privileging a neoliberal agenda and reducing resettlement to a project of providing physical safety, this system of refugee settlement offered through the Australian government has unintentionally reproduced a setting of heightened anxiety for these resettled refugees.
collectivism, which are routinely misrecognised through structures of settlement support to refugees that prioritise contrasting logics of self-reliance and independent living (Stratton 2009; Fozdar and Tilbury 2014).

IV. BEYOND BIOLEGITIMACY

As a refugee in urban Uganda, Sarah is ineligible to access humanitarian assistance to support her to access food, shelter, and other basic necessities; and, subsequently, she lives a life of material uncertainty. In Australia, Maria is automatically provided with access to social welfare supports to access basic necessities; but the neoliberal cultures of the institutions through which such support is provided confront her expectations of individualism and self-reliance. Such forms of humanitarian governance are focused on capacitating refugees to be independent as, ostensibly, a means for them to experience agency and empowerment (Morand et al. 2012:5). In supposedly empowering refugees to be self-sufficient, however, the structures of humanitarian governance that operate in both Australia and Uganda subsequently embed refugees within moral economies of refugee settlement. These structures privilege economic livelihoods over the social, political, and cultural contexts through which the settlement experiences of refugees are oriented.

For Maria and Sarah, such moral economies of humanitarian assistance to refugees produce opposite outcomes to the goals of empowerment intended through them. The misrecognition of Sarah’s socio-political insecurity within these structures means that she must exist independently of humanitarian support in urban Uganda. Conversely, for Maria, having her social and cultural priorities treated as inconsequential within structures of refugee settlement in Australia has led to an increasing sense of dissonance. Despite the disparities of settlement context for Maria and Sarah, both women have become embedded within particular moral economies of settlement that condition their capacity to experience ‘refuge’ according to logics that privilege the agendas of the organisations that deliver settlement support, rather than the refugees who themselves experience it. For both women, however, such dimensions of enduring displacement that emerge within conditions of exile are expressed and understood as mediated by, or disruptions to, the capacity to cultivate plants. The growth of their gardens symbolises a regenerative potentiality that, in their perspectives, parallels the possibility of social expansion in their settlement contexts.
V. RESettlement and reGeneration

February 16th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

Like so many other refugee women I have encountered in Kampala, Sarah asks me to sponsor the migration of her and her family to Australia, after I return there from Uganda. Like every other time I am asked, I explain that refugee resettlement to Australia does not operate in this way. I emphasise that I have no power to influence the resettlement program.

‘Please . . . ’ Sarah says, quietly, ‘. . . just try. Try for us. We need a new life in Australia. The life here is killing us.’

For many refugees residing within settings of exile across continental Africa, resettlement to a third country like Australia is not simply coveted. It is mythologised (Jacobsen 2005:55). The hardships of material, social, and political insecurity encompassed within experiences of forced migration are imagined by many refugees within protracted conditions of exile to be solved automatically through processes of tertiary resettlement. For women like Sarah, this mythology of tertiary resettlement as an ultimate solution to the hardships of forced migration is interwoven within a cosmological logics of regenerative potentiality. For Sarah and other refugee women in Kampala, intercontinental resettlement to Australia is imagined as an absolute form of regeneration able to invigorate expansive possibilities of existence.

In contrast to this imaginary, the lived reality of refugee resettlement to Australia is multi-layered. For Central African women who are resettled, the opportunity to experience the expansive potentialities of permanent refuge in Australia remains conditioned by other forms of potential displacement, as Maria’s account below suggests:

May 14th, 2013 – Maria’s house in suburban Sydney

‘I thought, when we came here, that this would be a new life,’ Maria tells me as we sit on her veranda sipping tea. ‘But the life is different. It is not easy.’

39 The Central African women perceive and project expectations onto the experience of refugee settlement in the manner of a ‘social imaginary’ (Taylor 2004). As evidenced throughout the thesis, these women engage the potentialities of their resettlement through subjectivities that encompass gender- and culture-specific expectations of how life should and does unfold. Whilst in the scope of the thesis I am unable to address the ways that potentialities of the resettlement experience constitute for the women as a specific ‘social imaginary’, it can be considered nonetheless that in the characterising of an imaginary not as ‘a set of ideas: rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of society’, then the ways in which these women actively engage the lived potentialities of their worlds is through a social imaginary, in Taylor’s (2004) conceptualisation outlined above.
‘In what ways?’ I ask her. Maria explains that the pressure to provide economically for family, both here and abroad, drains the capacity to be content in Australia.

‘Pressure, pressure, always pressure,’ she says. There is a moment of silence, before she adds, ‘Sometimes I think it would be easier to stay in Africa. The life here is not good.’

Like Sarah, Maria also talks about resettlement in Australia by describing how it represents an opportunity for ‘new life’ to refugees. However, whilst Maria refers to this trope of tertiary refugee settlement as a means to experience a ‘new life,’ she is critical of this perspective. In her view, this sense of inherent security through resettlement is an illusion that does not reflect the reality of her daily life. For refugees like Sarah, however, third country resettlement is imagined as a linear process through which the insecurities of life as a refugee in Uganda can be resolved. Resettlement is imagined, for Sarah, in terms of the capacity for regenerative potentiality; yet the lived reality of resettlement, for Maria, is measured in terms of the ways in which her potential to regenerate life there is constrained. For both women, it is the regenerative capacity to expand, renew, and affirm continuity through which experiences of displacement, and the potential to experience ‘refuge,’ are oriented.

VI. CONCLUSION

The role of cosmology in mediating experiences of refugee settlement emerges in this chapter as critical to the ways in which the Central African women perceive and experience displacement. The ways in which such cosmologies of regeneration manifest in settings of refugee settlement remains underexplored, barring research conducted in Central African contexts of exodus, exile, and refugee settlement by Malkki (1995a) and Taylor (1999). In this chapter, I have expanded on their work to explore how cosmologies of regenerative flow manifest in the experiences of refugees in settings of resettlement. For the women I conducted fieldwork with, this cosmology of regeneration is oriented through practices that regenerate social and biological life.

In this chapter, I have examined how Central African women experience the cultivating of plant foods as one arena through which dimensions of cosmological continuity and discontinuity are expressed. I argue that this imperative to cultivate plant foods for the Central African women expresses cosmological logics of regenerative flow, because they perceive the growth of plants to parallel their ability to regenerate forms of social and biological life. As such, specificities of refugee settlement are expressed and mediated in the ways that the women talk about, and experience, their attempts to maintain gardens. In Chapter Six that follows, I extend on this analysis to explore how this cosmology of regeneration emerges through practices of preparing, cooking, and consuming food.
Programs of refugee settlement are not morally neutral or inherently benevolent, but can embed refugees within new and enduring forms of disempowerment. Experiences of refugee settlement cannot, however, be singularly reduced to dimensions of inequality. As I explored in Chapter Five, for the Central African women who participated in this research lived experiences of asylum and resettlement are oriented through a cosmological lens in which existence is perceived as an ever-emergent trajectory of regenerative flow, and whereby regeneration is experienced as the creation and reproduction of social and biological life. In this chapter, I examine how acts of sharing food, or—conversely—avoiding commensality, orient a sense of existential continuity for these women. In sharing meals, the Central African women are demonstrating and constituting relatedness to kin and social others. Subsequently, the ways in which the women share food, or choose to avoid commensality, express particularities of their experiences in refugee settlement.

Drawing on anthropological literature in which practices of eating and feeding are recognised as socialities that capacitate modes of relatedness (e.g. Strathern 2012), I show that it is through these acts that Central African women create, express, and experience a cosmology of regenerative flow as grounded in taken-for-granted expectations of reciprocity. Within settings of refugee settlement, however, this sense of reciprocity through which existential continuity is oriented for them can be undermined. In settings of resettlement in Australia, particularly, the social dimensions of refugees’ lived experiences are treated as peripheral within systems of settlement support, which aim instead to inculcate them as neoliberal subjects able to exist without financial assistance from the state (cf. Stratton 2009; Sidhu and Taylor 2009; Ong 2003). In contrast, the structure of refugee settlement in Uganda can force refugee women to live alongside unknown persons within a setting of heightened insecurity, leading to them to feel a sense of generalised anxiety. In the analysis presented in this chapter I describe how

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40 In the context of migrant workers in Asia, Ong (2006:211) describes how the non-government organisations that oversee the livelihoods of migrant workers ostensibly aim to ensure the welfare of their migrant subjects, but serve instead as a form of social technology that governs the migrant to fit in with emerging neoliberal frameworks. Resettled refugees are also confronted with an expectation, from the non-government institutions that are tasked with supporting their resettlement as well as other institutions with which they come into contact, that they will adhere to the societal norms of ‘development,’ which are bound up in individualism and, especially, economic independence (Stratton 2009; Sidhu and Taylor 2009; Ong 2003). These expectations shape the experiences of refugees resettled in Australia.
practices of commensality, as cosmological acts of regenerating social relatedness, express such specificities of displacement that emerge in settings of refugee settlement.

I. AN IMPERATIVE TO FEED VISITORS

September 25th, 2013 – Martha’s house in a regional Australian city

I try to explain to Martha that I ate a large meal for lunch only an hour before coming to visit her. I have arrived at her house in the middle of the day, whilst her husband and children are out attending school and work. My protests are purposefully ignored, and I am corralled into a seat at the table that dominates her dining room. It is an early stage in my data collection, and because I have only recently begun conducting fieldwork amongst resettled Central African women but have not yet established ongoing relationships with them, I am unfamiliar with the social expectations that are attached to visiting them. I have not yet come to understand that visiting a Central African woman’s household in Australia necessitates consuming a meal that they have prepared and cooked.

Despite my insistence that it is not necessary to provide me with a meal, Martha disappears through a door that leads to the kitchen after seating me at the dining room table. Ten minutes later, she emerges carrying a tray laden with food. She places before me two bowls that each contains a different type of stew, as well as a serving of rice. I am obligated to partake in the meal.

Martha sits at the table beside me, but does not eat. Talking constantly to me about a range of broad topics whilst I eat, Martha does not appear to experience her own abstention from the meal as awkward. Occasionally, when I pause to listen more intently or ease my full stomach, Martha interrupts her stream of conversation and berates me to ‘Eat, eat!’

Martha does not make the meal a demonstration of personal achievement. She does not ask me if I have enjoyed it, nor does she expect commentary on the food. The provisioning of food to me as a visitor to her home appears to be a taken-for-granted expectation that does not require particular attention.

After I finish the meal, Martha and I take the dishes to the kitchen. Whilst she sets about tidying the cooking area and washing dishes, we continue our casual conversation. Within a few minutes, however, there is a knock at Martha’s back door; then, we are joined in the kitchen by two of Martha’s friends, and a baby, who have come to visit her. Like Martha, these women have been resettled in Australia as refugees after experiencing forced migration from countries in Central Africa.
'Take a seat, take a seat,’ Martha insists to these new visitors. In the same way as she had with me earlier, Martha steers these women to the dining room and immediately ensures that they are made comfortable at the table. The baby toddles around us, and after Martha greets the child enthusiastically. Leaving the new visitors in the dining room, and following Martha back to the kitchen, I ask her, quietly, if she was expecting these guests.

Martha laughs, then says, loudly, ‘Oh Georgina! We are African! We don’t call our own friends to book an appointment. You just go.’ My obvious ignorance of such informal social protocols results in much laughter between Martha and her guests.

Although the visit from these guests is unexpected, Martha’s intention to provide a meal is an expectation taken-for-granted by all of these agents. Martha’s visitors are not perturbed when she leaves them alone almost immediately to go to the kitchen. Whilst there is no direct conversation between Martha and her two guests about the possibility of an impending meal, it is evident that all are aware of this expectation and that each accepts the requirement of feeding as a self-evident practice encompassed within the act of visiting the home of another.

In the kitchen, Martha’s attention is turned to the stovetop, where large pots of food leftover from previous bouts of cooking have been left. With the heat elements beneath them now switched on, the contents of these pots begin to bubble as warmth returns. I realise that the meal I previously consumed was also taken from these leftovers, rather than prepared fresh. Noticing my entrance, Martha pauses in her slow stirring of the warming food and smiles to greet me. I stand beside her to watch as she carefully stirs the contents of each pot. Whilst watching, I ask Martha when she cooked the food that she is reheating.

‘This?’ she asks, pointing to the pots of slowly warming food. I nod.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘I cooked these foods yesterday, in the afternoon.’

‘Who did you cook it for?’ I ask.

‘My husband,’ she responds first, then adds, ‘and my children, too.’ They usually return to the house at around 3pm in the afternoon, at which point Martha provides a meal for the family.

She points to one pot that contains fish that has been cooked in a tomato based sauce. ‘This is the one that my children like, so I am always cooking this one, for them. And rice, too. But for my husband, it is meat.’ She points to the other pot that she is warming, which contains a beef stew.

‘When he comes home this afternoon, I will cook again.’ she adds. ‘More meat, and fresh ugali [semolina]. That is his food. But for the children, more rice, I think.’
Martha does not store cooked food in the refrigerator. Instead, leftover food is contained within the pot from which it was cooked and kept on the cool stovetop until the next meal is required. With the possibility of visitors arriving at one’s home informally at any time, and the imperative to provide to visitors with a meal, the storing of food on the open stovetop is at once a practical, and symbolic, expression of the ever-readiness to feed others.

From this experience and others with Martha, I discern how she approaches the preparation, cooking, and distributing of food on an everyday basis. Martha primarily only prepares and cooks one large meal per day. This meal is distributed at a specific point when the family comes together in the afternoons, and then reheated throughout the following day for visitors. The particulates of this central meal are tailored specifically to the needs of her family members to whom Martha is, foremostly, feeding. This meal is prepared to accord with the preferences and particular tastes of Martha’s husband and children. Food that is leftover from this household meal remains in cooking pots on the stove, instantly ready to be reheated (Figure 10). Significantly, from the remains of this central meal is drawn the basis of subsequent meals that Martha prepares for visitors to her home.

When feeding visitors, Martha is not, then, simply provisioning material sustenance. The practice of offering a meal to guests is, for Martha and other Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork, a process of provisioning food to visitors in order to incorporate them, at least temporarily, within the family life of the household. In sharing with others beyond her immediate household food that has been prepared to reflect familial specificities, the act of ingesting food incorporates the visitor within an experience of kin relatedness.

It is not meanings attached to the substance of particular foods that invigorate socialities in the context of visitor and visited for Central African women. Instead, it is that the food which forms the basis of relatedness between women is taken from a central source of familial eating. Serving food that is sourced from the same pots as the family meal has been cooked serves to incorporate visitors, at least temporarily, into the kin nexus of the household through shared consubstantiality. This practice of feeding visitors from sources of a household meal is not due

41 In my encounters with the women I observed how social boundaries of exclusion and inclusion are negotiated through offering food to persons who enter the home. In being in the homes of women, I witnessed them receive other visitors, including: family members; close friends; acquaintances from church, education, sporting teams, or social groups; welfare workers from non-government organisations that are familiar within the refugee community; and government workers, particularly from the departments oversee child protection and community housing. I am unable in the scope of this thesis to document in detail the different ways that each of these types of visitors were approached by the women. However, it is significant to point out that I never witnessed the women feed, or offer food to, government officials particularly. Non-government welfare workers were routinely offered food when they visited women in their home, although they were allowed to refuse to eat. All others friends, family members, and social acquaintances were, in the majority of circumstances I witnessed, provided with a meal without being offered. The Central African women use the distribution of food to visitors in their homes to both create and express specific forms of relatedness and the potential for social connectedness, or conversely distance, within these relations.
simply to convenience for these Central African women. As the encounter with Martha demonstrates, Central African women insist on feeding guests from these sources of shared consubstantiality; even despite fervent protests that a meal is not required. The act of feeding signifies more than just the provision of nourishment. For these women, feeding visitors is an act of establishing relatedness through intercorporeality. Through eating from a source of food that has been cooked specifically for the household, the visitor is transformed from social other to be recognised, temporarily, as kin.

FIGURE 10: A POT OF FOOD SITS ON THE STOVETOP, READY TO BE REHEATED IF UNEXPECTED VISITORS ARRIVE
Commensality between visitor and visited is a distinct mode of sociality that invigorates connections and shifts in social relatedness. The term ‘sociality’ refers to those capacities for social relatedness between agents, which recognises that social, cultural, and temporal specificities condition such capacities to relate to and with others in the world (Strathern 1988, 2004; Bird-David 1994; Long and Moore 2012). Therefore recognising that configurations of relatedness are at once drawn from, and constitutive of, potentialities of connectedness to and with agents in the world (Strathern 1996:55, 2004; Long and Moore 2012:41), the practices of food sharing that I describe above emerge as acts of sociality through which transformative capacities of relatedness for these Central African women are evoked. Sharing food with guests from the remnants of a household meal encompasses a specific form of sociality through which visitors become temporarily encompassed within, and recognised as part of, a web of familial relatedness. Kinship, in this context, is temporal and continuously reconstituted through acts of sociality that are invigorated through practices of eating and feeding. This specific sense of sociality that emerges here implies that, for these Central African women, kin relatedness is indeterminate, fluid, and partial; and, for them, able to be established and oriented through acts of commensality.

II. REGENERATING KIN RELATEDNESS

For these Central African women, kin relatedness is a platform from which a sense of continuity is oriented and constituted. For them, kinship is not able to be reduced to family structures through which social dimensions of kin relatedness are centralised through heterosexual marriage and biological reproduction, which is the conventional assumption attached to perceptions of kinship in Euro-American contexts (Strathern 1992:3; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995:9). This is because kin relatedness is a social understanding that cannot be singularly conflated with affinal ties and biological similarity. Understandings of kinship encompass categories of relatedness that are constructed within particular social and cultural contexts (Schneider 1968; Strathern 1992). Perceptions of kinship are, therefore, embedded in cultural assumptions of familial relatedness that vary between social groups and across time. Within Central African ethnographic works, understandings of kinship that contrast to the dominant biological reductionist model of Euro-American familial relatedness have been documented, along with salient cultural differences in the experience of kinship across ethnic groups within the region (cf. Richards 1950; Turner 1967; Janzen 1978; MacGaffey 1983; Holy 1986). Works that document the specificities of kinship in Central African contexts broadly emphasise the fluidity of kin relatedness within the cultural and social settings in this region (Apter 2012:26-27).
A landmark study of kinship in Central Africa was produced by Richards (1950), in which she surveyed forms of kin relatedness across numerous tribes in the region. In this study of kinship, Richards (1950) documented specific forms of kin relatedness within these groups but also observed a broad overarching tendency toward recognition of both patrilineal and matrilineal modes of signifying familial descent, history, and relatedness: a phenomenon she termed the ‘matrilineal puzzle.’ The ‘matrilineal puzzle’ refers to the dilemma that evolves within Central African societies in which children borne of females within a family come under maternal responsibility; leading to a situation in which the mother’s brother of these children ostensibly holds primary control over these children, leaving ambiguous the role of the children’s biological father (Richards 1950). Produced from a structural-functionalist paradigm, however, Richards’ (1950) work recognises the complexity of kin relatedness across diverse Central African social groups but attempts to refract this dynamism through a comparative lens that serves to reduce forms of social relatedness to epistemologically static arenas of knowledge (Leach 1961:4). Since Richards’ (1950) problematisation of kinship in the Central African region, ethnographic works have, in particularly describing ritual life within these contexts, subsequently documented other specificities of kin relatedness as emergent within social contexts in this area (Turner 1967; Janzen 1978; MacGaffey 1983; Holy 1986). The breadth and complexity of kinship networks documented within these works collectively suggest that understandings of kin relatedness in Central Africa are dynamic, and not able to be reduced to static constellations of relatedness.

Recognising the dynamism of kinship as perceived and experienced by Central African peoples especially applies to understandings of kin relatedness that emerge within refugee contexts. Experiences of forced migration often collectivise Central African refugees based on socio-spatial settings and shared modes of social, legal, and political recognition. However, their cultural and social particularities of familial relatedness are specified within accumulated understandings of kinship from personal experiences. Kin relatedness, subsequently, becomes re-shaped within contemporary conditions of exodus, asylum, and resettlement.

Recent work by Apter (2012) draws attention to the complexity and dynamism of kin relatedness as a central axis through which Congolese refugees, particularly, experience and mediate exile. In working with Congolese persons in a Zambian refugee camp, Apter (2012) documents how re-constituting forms of kin relatedness is a means of mediating insecurity. According to Apter (2012), for Congolese refugees whose kinship lineage has been decimated by atrocities related to war, recourse to conventional models of kin relatedness is often unavailable. Yet, the forging of new axes of kin relatedness is especially important in refugee settlement as a pragmatic means to establish renewed connections to others that may enable
increased access to sources of social, material, and financial livelihoods. Apter (2012) suggests that this imperative to form new models of kin relatedness within the specificities of exile structures modes of kinship that are drawn from both accumulated understandings of familial relatedness, whilst conditioned to the particular social and cultural circumstances of refugee settlement.

For the women whose experiences are documented in this thesis, a similar perspective to that put forward by Apter (2012) can be drawn. An overarching characterisation of Central African kinship experiences and understandings as emergent from this research would be reductionist, and not reflect the complexities of these women’s lives. Any attempt to characterise these women’s kinship experiences, broadly, is necessarily complicated by their experiences as both particularised by personal historicities, and concurrently shaped within contemporary particularities of their settlement. Subsequently, whilst I observed commonalities of kin relatedness for the Central African women in conducting fieldwork for this research, these dimensions of shared understanding are dynamic, as Apter (2012) similarly recognises.

For these women, kin relatedness is fluid, dynamic, and constantly shifting according to particularised modes of sociality. In settings of refugee settlement in both Uganda and Australia, I witnessed contemporary modes of kinship being constituted, particularly, through practices of incorporating social others into and within the social frame of a ‘household’; a perspective of kin relatedness in Central Africa that has been similarly recognised in other ethnographic contexts (Devisch 1993:94; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). I observed that the constituting of kin relatedness through the incorporation, or exclusion, of others from a distinct ‘household’ in both Australia and Uganda draws on the same logics of consubstantiality through the use or avoidance of food sharing a means to symbolically include or exclude social others. For the Central African women, this process of constituting kin relatedness is fundamentally operationalised through commensality. That is, through the provisioning of cooked food to social others from one centralised familial meal. These particularised logics locate the preparing, cooking, and distributing of food in everyday life as socialities that capacitate the dynamic regeneration of kin relatedness in settings of refugee settlement.

In the vignette below, I document another encounter with Martha that illustrates this process of constituting kinship through notions and practices of commensality. After consuming a meal with another visitor to her home, Martha and I discuss how she uses kin terminology to refer to visitors who eat within the household:
May 11th, 2013 – Martha’s house in a regional Australian city

After Celine leaves, Martha and I take the dishes from the meal she has consumed and go to the kitchen to clean up from the cooking process. Whilst clearing up, Martha talks about Celine. She refers to Celine repeatedly as ‘my sister.’

‘Why is she your sister?’ I ask Martha.

‘Well,’ she begins, but there is a brief pause as she considers how to articulate what is apparently experienced by her as a self-evident logic of her relatedness to Celine.

‘Well,’ she continues, ‘she is my sister. She comes to my house, she eats our food, we care for each other’s children. When I go to her house, she gives me food, too, and cares for my children. That lady, she is my sister.’

‘The food you cook, is for your family, right?’ I ask Martha.

‘Yes,’ she replies. ‘I cook for my children. For my husband. They are my family. But this food, it is for all who come to my house. That is African, Georgine. That is family.’

The core platform from which kinship is experienced for Martha is her immediate familial household: comprising of her husband and the children that live with her. However, social others, like friends, become incorporated into the familial nexus of the household through habitualised practices of commensality.

There is, however, another central facet of kin relatedness that emerges specifically for Central African women resettled in Australia, and which I observed in my encounters with Martha, specifically, as well as with other women. On one occasion, after receiving a phone call from relatives in Africa, Martha describes how her family relatedness spans connections both within and beyond Australia. In describing this expansive network of kin relatedness, Martha draws on idioms of eating and feeding to express her kinship responsibilities:

October 29th, 2013 – Martha’s house in a regional Australian city

‘Ah, Georgine,’ Martha says, sighing deeply. ‘Those children, there, my sister’s children, they are not happy.’

‘What has happened?’ I ask her.
‘Oh, it is the same. Always the same. Just tired of the life, tired of being the refugee. No money, no food.’ Another sigh. Then, she says, ‘I am sending my husband there, to Africa, to see them.’ Like other women I conducted fieldwork with, Martha and her husband have undertaken periodic return travels to Africa to visit kin who remain there.

‘He will look for them,’ she adds, ‘and make sure they have food. They are our family, our children. I am their mother. We will make sure they have food.’

For Martha and other Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork, the biological children that a woman has birthed and reared are a platform from which kin relatedness is experienced. Motherhood, for them, is a core basis of existential continuity that depends specifically on their capacity to bear and rear offspring. However, biological children do not exhaust the forms of mother relatedness that are experienced by these Central African women. Instead, biological offspring are a fundamental basis of what is a much broader, dynamic, and fluid understanding of kinship in which extended forms of relatedness are oriented and regenerated through practices of nurturing, sustaining, and caring for others. Commensality is one practice through which this broadly encompassing arena of motherhood is oriented.

Acts of eating and feeding emerge in the understandings of Martha and other Central African women as socialities that capacitate specific constellations of social relatedness. For them, practices of eating and feeding expand and invigorate kin relatedness, and are subsequently perceived as affirming a cosmology of regenerative flow in which social regeneration is, specifically, oriented through acts of reciprocity. Feeding others does not establish a linear form of social connection, but instead invokes reciprocity in which the provisioning of food to visitors embeds them within mutual expectations of kin relatedness.

The capacity to manifest such forms of social relatedness through acts of commensality is, however, directly affected by circumstances of refugee settlement. As a central sociality from which mutuality of kin relatedness stems, the ability to engage in commensality for Central African refugee women depends on their capacity to spare food and the lifestyle dynamics of the settings in which they live. The reciprocity that is evoked through socialities of commensality can be undermined for Central African women within their experiences of resettlement in Australia, as I describe below.

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42 The localised understandings of what it means to be a ‘mother’ for the Central African women are explored later in this chapter, and examined in depth in Chapter Eight.
III. RESETTLEMENT AND ISOLATION

The dynamics of social relatedness that emerge for refugee women resettled in Australia are shaped by the selection procedures of the resettlement program. Whilst refugees apply for resettlement to Australia through the UNHCR, representatives of the Australian state have screening processes to select refugees to be included in the humanitarian program that accord with specific criteria for suitability for inclusion (Agier 2008:94-95; DIAC 2011). Screening refugees prior to their successful acceptance into a tertiary resettlement program is as much a way for post-industrialised nations, such as Australia, to control the types of persons that make up their immigration intake as it is for them to obtain information about the health and demographics of refugee populations (cf. Fassin 2012:83; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005). These processes of screening enable immigration representatives from industrialised nations to select particular refugees based on implicit categories of personal attributes that are considered, within the culture of the receiving society, to be of particular worth.

Primarily, refugees are selected for resettlement to Australia if they are identified as being ‘at risk’ of acute harm in their contemporary circumstances of asylum (DIAC 2011:2). Once identified as requiring urgent resettlement, refugees are then subject to further screening prior to their relocation being formalised. Unlike in other contexts of seeking asylum (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005), the suffering body has little recognition as a basis of selection for resettlement to Australia. Instead, applicants for tertiary resettlement are required to pass medical examinations. The ostensible purpose of these medical checks is to treat refugees for illness prior to their resettlement. However, applicants who are suffering from chronic illness or disability are routinely deemed unsuitable for resettlement (Agier 2008:94-95). As well as medical assessments, refugees selected for resettlement are also subject to screening that evaluates education level, employment experience, and social attributes such as family composition (Colic-Peisker 2005:618-619; Agier 2008:94-95). Refugees are specifically selected for resettlement if the selection officers who represent the Australian state evaluate these attributes consider that certain characteristics of a refugee—or refugee family—will position them as likely to integrate within Australia society with increased adaptability. Those refugees with social characteristics considered to be amenable to, and supportive of, integration within Australian society are not only more likely to be selected for resettlement, but are also imagined through these screening processes to require less ongoing intervention from the Australian state to support their eventual resettlement (Colic-Peisker 2005).

Attributes that are considered to conduce refugees to better integrate into mainstream society, and therefore reduce the need for state support, are primarily concerned with minimising overt...
aspects of difference between refugee entrants and the broader Australian population (Agier 2008:94-95; Colic-Peisker 2005:618-619). This selective process of evaluation is based on what Colic-Peisker (2005:618) has termed ‘settlement potential.’ Migrating as a nuclear family comprising of mother, father, and biological children is not an explicit condition of resettlement to Australia. The fact that a significant proportion of participants in this research migrated to Australia in a nuclear family group suggests, however, that family composition is nonetheless a salient factor in assessing the suitability of refugees to resettle in Australia. Family size and composition appears to be one dynamic evaluated within the screening process with the potential to affect whether an application to be resettled in Australia is successful. The women who participated in this research had been resettled within collective family groups comprising of relationships between biological parents and children. Regardless, many of these women left behind members of their extended family in refugee camps who had, prior to resettling in Australia, been considered as part of their immediate household. The resettlement process encourages Central African refugees to structure their applications for tertiary resettlement within nuclear family compositions.

The impact of this strategy to increase the likelihood of resettlement to Australia is illustrated in the ethnographic vignette of Dela’s experiences, below. This vignette shows how Central African women can experience a heightened sense of isolation in resettlement that stems from them not having casual access to networks of relatedness beyond the nuclear family:

*August 3rd, 2013 – Dela’s house in a regional Australian city*

In the afternoon, before her three children return home from school, Dela and I are in her kitchen preparing a meal. As we are talking, Dela tells me that it is ‘hard’ to live in Australia.

‘Why do you think that?’ I ask. There is a pause as Dela considers her response.

‘Here,’ she says, ‘people have their family. Just my husband and children. My other family, my sisters and their children, they are not here. The life, here, it is not like Africa. There, everyday I have people coming to my house. Talking together. Eating food together. Here . . . it is hard.’

Comparing Dela’s sense of isolation to Martha’s experiences, described above, which detail an active social existence, evidences stark differences in the lived experiences of settlement for Central African women in Australia. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, Dela had been settled in Australia for two years, whilst Martha had been settled in Australia for six years. The length of residence in Australia, and accompanying familiarity with networks of social relatedness, appears to make a difference in how Central African women experience their
settlement. Despite these differences in experiencing resettlement in Australia, the accounts of both Martha and Dela express how they attain a sense of existential continuity through similarly understood cosmological logics. For both women, it is through acts of eating and feeding that social others become incorporated, at least temporarily, into a household sphere. As suggested in Dela’s account, such acts of informal visiting are routinised within these cosmological logics as a means of expressing continuity of social life by providing women with opportunities to feed and regenerate relatedness to others. Without such habituated forms of social regeneration, women like Dela experience a sense of isolation. For her, the regenerative flow of existence is felt as ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’ to mediate—that is, blocked—without recourse access to forms of relatedness beyond the nuclear family structure.

In a study of how instances of discrimination are experienced by African refugee settlers in Australia, Colic-Peisker (2009:177) argues that ‘Western governments seem less interested in social indicators of settlement success (e.g. formation of social networks in the mainstream community) and the life satisfaction of immigrants and refugees.’ Similarly, in examining how psychological intervention is perceived and experienced by African refugee settlers in Australia, Fozdar (2009:1338) shows that within these communities solutions to distress are often posited in terms of ‘social and cultural, rather than psychological, realms,’ thereby also emphasising the significance of social belonging as a platform of existential continuity for African refugees. In addition, as Fozdar and Hartley (2014) recognise that whilst resettled refugees are automatically able to access services and rights that are available to all citizens in Australia, these structures of resettlement do not, however, facilitate social belonging. Inclusion, they argue, is a peripheral or unimportant aspect of state responsibility to support resettled refugee welfare. Similarly, Colic-Peisker (2009:177) argues that programs of refugee settlement in Australia operate through a ‘lens of economic rationality’ in which the services made available to refugees focus on employability and financial independence rather than social belonging. What this body of research indicates is that the Australian state operates a program of resettlement in which refugees are selected, then migrated, to Australia based on constructed social indicators of ‘settlement potential’ (Colic-Peisker 2005:618); then expected to comply with constructed notions of social life in Australia predicated on ideals like the insulated nuclear family, which the Central African refugee women are not familiar with. These expectations are coercive, and—when operationalised through institutions of the state, particularly—can emerge as forms of subjugation for refugee women; in which their capacity to govern themselves to fit with a ‘normative’ model of citizenship shapes their civic belonging (Ong 2003).

As illustrated in Dela’s experiences, state operationalised systems of refugee settlement can directly undermine how the Central African women experience taken-for-granted notions of
social reciprocity. For these women, social reciprocity, as oriented through acts of eating and feeding with social others, is a self-evident cosmological imperative of everyday life. The Australian state does not, however, recognise the significance of social reciprocity to the lives of refugee settlers within its sphere. Rather, the state privileges a neoliberal agenda of individualism and insulated families (cf. Stratton 2009), which does not reciprocate the social values through which the Central African women experience existential continuity.

Resettlement in Australia can thus lead to a sense of discontinuity for refugee settlers because aspects of social, cultural, and ethnic belonging necessary for them to experience existential continuity are overlooked within, and peripheral to, government agendas of refugee settlement (Colic-Peisker 2005; Fozdar and Hartley 2014). In particular, the ways in which refugee women conceptualise and experience ‘family’ is a locus of contention, in which their own meaning systems are routinely misunderstood and undervalued by institutions of refugee resettlement. As discussed above, this social isolation originates within the procedures of selecting refugees for migration to Australia that are based on constructed notions of ‘settlement potential’ (Colic-Peisker 2005:618), in which nuclear family models appear to be more favourably perceived as indicative of integration success. Subsequently, although most of the women I worked with migrated to Australia in a nuclear family unit, they were unfamiliar with living without the presence of extended family closely. The regeneration and extension of kin relatedness to visitors is necessary for them to mediate their isolation from extended family.

The regenerating of social relatedness through such forms of commensality thereby constitutes and expresses a sense of existential continuity for the women, by affirming the expansive potentialities of their social nexus. From my experiences with Central African women residing as refugees in Uganda, a contrasting mode of affirming existential continuity emerged, which I outline below. Within both Australia and Uganda, however, similarly understood cosmological logics of sociality as facilitated through acts of commensality are the basis through which particularities of everyday life as a refugee in both resettlement and asylum are mediated.

43 The misrecognition of cosmological logics of reciprocity and social regeneration in government institutions is further discussed in Chapter Seven of the thesis through an analysis of an ethnographic vignette that documents the interaction of an informant with a government worker who oversees the delivery of welfare payments.
44 Neoliberal logics as premised on expectations of individualisation refract, misrecognise, and undermine the cosmological logics of the Central African women, which are conversely platformed from assumptions of collectivism; and, specifically, mother-child relatedness. The rupturing of cosmological logics through such neoliberal paradigms is described further in Chapter Nine, where I document how the Australian state privileges logics of individualisation when evaluating and assessing the parenting capacities of Central African women who are the subject of child protection interventions.
IV. AVOIDING COMMENSALITY

October 16th, 2013 – Elaine’s house in a regional Australian city

Sitting with Elaine, I ask how her brother and his family, who reside in a refugee camp in Africa, are doing. She tells me that her brother’s child is still sick. The teenage boy continues to suffer from a stomach problem.

Elaine shakes her head and then tells me, ‘It is the poison.’

Where before I have asked Elaine specific questions about how poisoning occurs, I now just shake my head and say, ‘It is very bad, the problem of poisoning in these camps.’

Elaine gazes at me for a moment, then laughs. ‘Mzungu,’ she says, using a Swahili word meaning ‘white people,’ ‘don’t believe in poison’. She tells me how officials in the camps refuse to believe that the problem is real, and so they just ignore it. I tell her that I think this is an unfair approach.

Laughing again, Elaine says, ‘Before you came to Africa, and saw how we live there, in the camps and outside, you would not have thought it was real.’ After a pause, I nod. Then, she adds, ‘But you, now, you have seen it, you have been there, you believe it.’

I tell her yes. I then say that I think it is unfair that other people do not care about the poisoning that occurs in the camp. I then ask her, ‘Do people, you know, Congolese people or other Africans, do they experience poisoning in Australia, or only in African countries?’

‘Only in Africa,’ she says.

‘Here, in Australia,’ she says, ‘people share food. For refugees in Africa we do not do that.’

I nod, and explain to her that prior to my experiences in Africa I had assumed, based on my experiences with Central African refugees resettled in Australia, that sharing food between families was a common practice. My experiences living amongst Central African refugees residing in Uganda showed me otherwise. Elaine nods.

‘In Congo, sharing was normal. When you visit someone, you would eat food there. It was the same, in Goma,’ she says, which is the large urban city on the border between Rwanda and Congo where she had lived prior to fleeing to Uganda. ‘In Goma,’ she continues, ‘when you visit someone, it was just like here, in Australia. You would eat food there. In the village too, you
would share food. But after the soldiers come, and you run, and you become a refugee, you stop. You do not eat food with other people. You cook your food, you eat inside, and you don’t eat food with other people, only family.’

For Elaine and other Central African women, poison is a substance that undermines the nourishing potentialities of food from life-sustaining to sickness-inducing. This perspective of poisoning recalls the cosmology of blockage and flow that is documented by Taylor (1988) in his work pertaining to illness experiences in Rwanda. Describing how people in Rwanda attribute illness episodes to specific acts of being poisoned, Taylor (1988) situates poison beliefs as facets of a cosmology in which perceptions and practices of wellbeing are oriented through implicit understandings of blockage and flow. Within that perspective, the capacity to experience existential continuity as interwoven with the corporeality of lived bodies is characterised through perceived symbols of metabolic flow. Conversely, experiences of illness are expressed through symbols of obstruction. Within the cosmological logics of regenerative flow through which the Central African women who participated in this research characterise lived experiences, poison inverts the potential for regeneration by positioning food as a force that immobilises. Poison ruptures the regenerative flow and reciprocal logics of commensality in conditions of exile in Uganda, as detailed below.

V. LESSONS FROM COOKING SOMBE

February 7th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

In the residential compound of housing apartments where I conduct fieldwork in Kampala I am today receiving a cooking lesson from Consolata. At present, Consolata and I are seated inside her kitchen. An enclosed rectangular room with concrete walls and no windows, the kitchen is not located inside Consolata’s primary dwelling but is a detached building beside it, accessible through a separate doorway that is kept padlocked when not in use (Figure 11).

Compact dimensions render the kitchen barely large enough to accommodate a clay stove and a modest supply of coal necessary to fuel it. Consolata and I perch haphazardly on top of empty over-turned oil tins, and we are seated so close together that our bent knees are almost touching. Our attention is singularly focused on the small clay stove in front of us, which Consolata is currently attempting to light. On my lap I nurse a large pot of sombe that we intend to cook.
When the coal finally begins to burn, smoke begins to waft from the clay stove. The smoke is subtle at first, but soon wafts of ash begin to clutch at our bodies and clothing, engulfing our nostrils. The enclosed space of the kitchen becomes a hazard as the smoke swells around us with little area to dissipate. Despite spluttering, Consolata only waves the excess smoke away from her face. She does not open the door to allow the smoke to dissipate more effectively.

The door to Consonlata’s kitchen opens out onto the communal courtyard, which is shared with residents from the other 11 housing apartments in this compound that similarly open out onto this shared space (Figure 12). With the primary entrance to every dwelling opening out onto this courtyard, each of the 12 housing apartments is thereby connected to this central space. Subsequently, whilst refusing to open the kitchen door means that the smoke from the stove remains thick within the enclosed room, it also means that it does not enter the courtyard. In ensuring that the smoke remains contained, Consolata is attempting to keep the current activity of cooking in the kitchen undetected from others that live in the housing compound, which would be evident if we were to open the door and allow the smoke to dissipate in the central courtyard. Consolata does not want to make it obvious to others that she is cooking food.
Seeking to explain why it is necessary to avoid the attention of others when cooking, Consolata explains to me that, ‘Here, there is a problem. Actually, when you are a refugee, there is this problem. People are trying to kill you. You must be careful.’

I ask Consolata why food, particularly, needs to be protected.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘there are many people around us, refugees like us, who have no food, here. If people know that we are here, cooking this food . . . it is easy to slip in a powder to a cooking pot. That is why we must be careful.’

‘What is the powder?’ I ask her.

‘Poison,’ she replies.

Consolata explains that poison is a material substance that is dangerous if ingested by humans, which has been ground into a powder. She can tell me very little about the properties of these powders or where they are sourced. She does explain to me, somewhat testily, that I cannot expect her to know such things because she, herself, does not poison others. I am told, however, that the addition of the powder to a cooking pot is done covertly and is never observed by the victims of a poison attack. Hence, the only way to securely avoid poisoning in such conditions of
omnipresent danger is to ensure that the cooking, preparation, and storage of food is constantly surveilled.

After a few minutes, the burning coal stops producing smoke and the enveloping haze dissipates. I settle the pot of sombe on the hot coals at the centre of the clay stove. Using a long wooden spoon, Consolata stirs the contents of the pot as the heat begins to emanate through the crushed leaves. We sit together in silence for a time as Consolata supervises the cooking. She offers me short snatches of advice for how to cook the sombe dish: stir often to prevent the leaves from sticking to the bottom of the pot, but not too often, otherwise the leaves will not effectively bind together; stir away from your body, to prevent hot splatters from burning you; when the colour of the leaves within the cooking pot begins to change, from dark vibrant green to the mellow, yellow-tinged hue after they are warmed, the plant has begun to effectively break down (Figure 13). I listen carefully and take notes in my field notebook, ignoring the splatters of hot sombe that occasionally spurt beyond the confines of the open pot.

FIGURE 13: FANNING THE CHARCOAL FOR THE SOMBE TO COOK
For Central African refugees in urban Kampala, food is a material source of survival that capacitates the regeneration of life. Subsequently, food is an especially vulnerable substance; but, in its susceptibility to corruption through poisoning, it is also a liability to the continuity of existence. This paradox attached to perceptions of eating and feeding underlies the practices of vigilant caution around food that I witnessed within this context of refugee settlement. Whilst eating is a necessity for survival, the fear of ingesting poison is so salient for these Central African refugees that pots of food are never left unattended, practices of cooking food are purposely obscured, and food is rarely shared outside of a person’s immediate household.

VI. THE LOGICS OF POISON BELIEFS

Poison beliefs within Central African ethnographic contexts are not confined to settings of refugee settlement. The women in this research explained to me that poison is a phenomenon that occurred within their villages and town residences prior to their forced migration as refugees. Yet, these women consider that the threat of poison is exacerbated in asylum. In seeking to understand how poison experiences are particularised in Ugandan contexts of asylum, I sought to specify the acts through identifying who perpetrators of poisoning were and how these processes manifested. Further encounters with Consolata illustrate how this line of inquiry never produced specific details of poison encounters, but instead came to focus on how refugee women describe beliefs about poison as interwoven with broader insecurities pertaining to their experiences of asylum:

February 17th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

Prior to residing in Kampala, Consolata lived for a year in a refugee settlement in rural Uganda. There, Consolata twice experienced the effects of poisoning. Prior to seeking asylum in Uganda, Consolata lived with her husband and children in Goma, a city in the state of North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Goma, Consolata’s husband held a prominent bureaucratic position. Consolata believes that her husband’s status led soldiers to attack her family’s home one night in late 2007. She fled with her children. Her husband is still missing.

Consolata sought asylum in Uganda. There, she and the children were recognised as refugees under the UNHCR criteria. With no means to access financial resources, to ensure the survival of

45 A significant number of the Central African women who participated in the research were familiar with understandings of poisoning. Some described stories of being poisoned themselves, or of others, such as family members, who had experienced poisoning. Despite poisoning therefore being a relatively commonplace understanding amongst the women, I was not able to ascertain in my encounters with them specific details about the aggressors of poison incidents. Part of the dialogue about poisoning is that, as potential victims of being poisoned, the women themselves could not then know the details of how and by whom it is administered apart from through food as a vector of vulnerability.
her family meant that Consolata had no option but to be settled in a designated refugee settlement where they could receive humanitarian aid. It was whilst living in the settlement that Consolata was confronted with poisoning as a distinct danger of being a refugee.

‘We became sick,’ she tells me, as we sit together in the afternoon, watching the sun go down. ‘Vomiting, every day. When we first came to the camp, we went to a big celebration at their church. There, we ate the food. The next day, we were very sick. Even now, eating is hard for us.’

The perpetrator of this act was never confirmed. Personal motivations were never ascertained. When I ask Consolata why this episode of poisoning occurred, her response is vague.

‘I don’t know why it happened,’ she shrugs. ‘That is the life, there, being a refugee. Things happen to you, and you cannot stop them.’ For Consolata, the potential to be poisoned is a self-evident risk encompassed within settings of refugee exile.

Consolata does not perceive poisoning as a deliberate act of intentional violence levelled at individuals. Instead, she understands poisoning as an expression of the acute disempowerment that is experienced by refugees forced to live in confined conditions of refugee settlement. Consolata perceives that, within a camp situation, refugee lives are subject to extraneous forces beyond their active input. Poisoning, in her understandings, is one facet through this lack of control manifests.

Without immediate access to the material means to relocate to Kampala, Consolata was resigned to one tense year in the refugee settlement in which she constantly feared poisoning. Consolata and her children eventually relocated to Kampala, where she established herself as a business operator selling fabric:

February 17th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

‘This work, it earns little money,’ she explains. ‘But, it is enough to get out of the camp. I have no help here, but it is okay. If I stayed in the settlement, the UN would stop helping me anyway. So, it is better that I am here, where I can do something to stay alive . . . In Kampala, there is less poison.’

Consolata’s relocation to Kampala is an attempt to re-affirm agency within a trajectory of forced migration experiences in which her capacity to exert active input are routinely constrained. Her perceptions of poisoning and practices of poison avoidance were not unique. I observed in Kampala that instances of commensality amongst the refugees I lived amongst were rare. Often,
however, families and children of refugees went without meals. Hunger, reduced nutrition, and depleted physical energy were routinised conditions within this setting of refugee settlement. Still, these Central African refugees did not share food. On multiple occasions, I directly questioned women in this setting about why food sharing was avoided amongst refugee families. The women explained to me that it was due to a fear of being poisoned.

VII. CONSERVING FOOD AND AVOIDING POISON

Experiences and understandings of poisoning for Central African refugees remains an underexplored focus in anthropological literature, with few exceptions (e.g. Sabuni 2007; Apter 2012:12-13). The recourse to poison beliefs to explain incidences of illness in settings of refugee exile has been described somewhat condescendingly by Sabuni (2007:1286) as a ‘tribal’ belief with little legitimacy beyond local understandings. For these Central African women, however, poison beliefs are a lived reality within conditions of insecurity. To reify and reduce their beliefs about poison to abstract and illogical symbols not anchored within a specific set of logics would be to situate these understandings from an ethnocentric standpoint (cf. Kapferer 2003).

For these Central African women, understandings of poisoning are conditioned by, but cannot be reduced to, precarious circumstances of asylum in Uganda. The system of settling refugees by default in camps, as elaborated in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, emerges for refugee women in Kampala as a source of insecurity because it means that access to food and other resources in Kampala must be achieved independently from humanitarian aid. As described in Chapter Five, women often choose not to reside in camps because they fear being targeted for violence with them. Women fear, particularly, that being in a camp heightens the risk of their being poisoned. Thus, choosing to reside in Kampala is an act of agency because, in doing so, the women believe that they are reducing the chance of being poisoned. However, this ‘choice’ to reside in Kampala can lead to precarious circumstances of food security, as urban refugees are not entitled to humanitarian assistance to access food (Sharpe and Namusobya 2012). As part of this insecurity, available food is often concentrated only with the domains of immediate

46 An example of how this kind of critical approach to systems of belief is utilised in ethnographic research emerges in Fassin’s (2007) study of HIV denial in post-apartheid South Africa. Rather than immediately assessing the validity of the various debates around HIV existence, Fassin (2007) shows that a perspective that first aims to recognise the logics that situate belief systems in the material conditions of everyday life, can then reveal the ways in which social groups embody the historicised violences. Fassin (2007) shows that, rather then dismiss the notion of HIV denial as an irrational and dangerous perspective, by seeking to explore what logics underpin beliefs of HIV denial the structural inequalities that have enabled this understanding to develop can thus be critically analysed. Drawing on a similarly critical perspective of poison beliefs, understandings of poison emerge here as grounded in a lived reality for the Central African women. They draw on logics of poison beliefs in relation to, and when mediating, the physical and social insecurities of their daily existence.
family. Refugees in Kampala, as I witnessed, did not frequently share food outside of their own household.

I made a point to ask the refugee women why they do not share food with other refugee households in Kampala. I saw food sharing as a potential strategy to combat collective issues of food insecurity. The women I talked to did not share this view. Instead, they referred to beliefs about poison to explain why food sharing is potentially dangerous. One woman told me that ‘we cannot share food here. If we do, we will be poisoned.’ Fear of being poisoned is one way in which the refugee women understand and justify a reluctance to engage in commensality with other households of refugees. In this way, available food is conserved within the domains of immediate family, and kin relatedness is concentrated within trusted circles of sociality.

Practices of food sharing emerged as a salient disparity between experiences of refugee settlement that I observed between Uganda and Australia. After conducting fieldwork in Australia, where practices of commensality are a normal aspect of daily existence, I naively expected that food sharing would be similarly unproblematic amongst refugees settled in Kampala. As detailed above, however, the converse phenomenon emerged. In Kampala, the refugee women I worked with tacitly avoided food sharing. This taboo on commensality for urban refugees in Kampala is conditioned by insecurities of refugee settlement and accords with understandings of poison avoidance, in which the potential for poisoning is perceived as a risk to corporeal continuity that must, subsequently, be actively avoided. In doing so, the scarce material resources necessary to survive in Kampala become conserved because, to avoid being poisoned, households do not share food.

In Australia, the bureaucratic structures through which resettlement is administered serves to isolate refugees within nuclear family households. The Central African women I conducted fieldwork with in Australia mediated isolation by engaging in practices of commensality to incorporate social others into their households, as indicative of kin relatedness. Conversely, in conditions of refugee settlement in Uganda, the absence of formal structures of humanitarian support to refugees is conducive to an environment in which access to material resources is scarce, and social insecurity is similarly fraught. The women I resided with in Kampala mediated this omnipresent sense of insecurity by concentrating kin relatedness within the household, as expressed through avoiding commensality.47 Whilst the experiences of resettlement and asylum described in this chapter are disparate, within both contexts it is humanitarian structures of refugee settlement that condition how cosmological logics of eating

47 I observed that a typical ‘household’ of kin in Kampala could not be characterised by a nuclear family structure, as it was primarily was for my interlocutors in Australia. In Kampala, I lived amongst refugee households comprising of diverse kin relations, including the inclusion of cousins, grandparents, in-laws, and siblings.
Acts of eating and feeding are socialities that capacitate Central African women to regenerate kin relatedness in conditions of refugee settlement in Uganda and Australia. In both settings, acts of commensality are oriented through a cosmology of regenerative flow in which reciprocal practices of preparing, cooking, and distributing food are a means for Central African women to experience continuity and active input within the unfolding of their existence in settings of refugee settlement. These practices of eating and feeding therefore express particularities of a cosmology of regeneration that I observed to be similarly perceived, understood, and practiced within the daily lives of Central African women across disparate circumstances of resettlement and asylum. In different settings, acts of sharing or conserving food serve to both create and preserve social relatedness and biological life. Practices of eating and feeding are subsequently interwoven within this cosmology of regeneration in which the ‘flow’ of existence is centred on the reproduction of social and biological existence.

For these women, this cosmology of regenerative flow is constituted from a fundamental condition of existing in the world, primarily, as a mother that has borne, reared, and cared for offspring. Whilst oriented through broader cosmological logics of regeneration, the practice of commensality is, as detailed above, concurrently refracted through this ontology of being a mother who is tasked with sustaining, nurturing, and regenerating both the corporeal and social existence of kin (cf. Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Moore 1999:24). Commensality and other acts of feeding are socialities through which this role of being a mother who is tasked with the nurturing, sustaining, and regenerating both biological life and social relatedness is oriented.

For these women, existential purpose as a person in the world is interwoven with a capacity to exist in the world as a mother. Motherhood, as a condition of personhood constituted through a demonstrated capacity to bear and rear children, is similarly recognised as salient in Central African contexts in a number of anthropological works (Devisch 1993; Moore 1999:21-24; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999). Their sense of ontological being is always experienced in relation to, and with, others; and particularly as platformed from the relatedness between mother and child. Moving beyond the conflation of persons and bodies as bounded entities, Vilaça (2005) illustrates that the process of being through lived bodies means that persons are chronically ‘unstable’ and in an ongoing state of re-constituting. The ontological experience of being a person, in this perspective, is unable to be totalised. It is through how bodies are embedded
within the material and social fabrics of their worlds that persons, as temporally particular beings, are constituted. The concept of being emerges in Vilaça’s (2005) work as the experience of possessing not only biological life but productive potentiality to be embedded in the world. The experiences of the women in this research support this view of ontological being as temporally particularised by partialities and potentialities of being in relation to, and with others. Commensality, and the ways in which the women feed others, is one way in which this sense of partial ontological being is lived and expressed through the productive potentialities of feeding others; as an act that, for them, constitutes and regenerates both physical nourishment and social relatedness.

This vitality of ontological being as a temporal and particularised sense of existence suggests that there are a multiplicity of ways through which to experience being in the world. Expanding on Vilaça’s (2005) contention of multiple ontologies as constituted from partialities to and with the world, Strathern (2012) illustrates that ontological being is not a neutral unfolding of existence in the world, but is conditioned, particularly, through the sense of agency encompassed within those partialities of lived experience. Strathern’s (2012) specific focus of analysis is the types of agency encapsulated in acts of eating and feeding in Melanesia, through which agents become embedded within specific ontologies of being. A specific example provided by Strathern (2012) refers to a wedding feast in Hagen, Papua New Guinea. In this example, the mother of the bride is provided with specific pieces of meat to eat that position her as a mother. However, by eating this meat the mother of the bride consumes this social role, and loses her ontological status as mother to the bride because she is consuming, and not contributing to, the life-course of the bride; previously understood in a social sense to be her daughter. To understand this process of reconstituting ontological being through socialities encompassed in acts of eating and feeding, Strathern (2012:9) explains:

One might ask what kind of subject the eater becomes, or what kind of perspective is created in the act. In Hagen, the question may be better put: what is being decomposed? The mother eats what has been fed by someone else. Someone else’s actions are there, so to speak, in place of her own previous acts of feeding and growing the daughter. For the relational operator in Hagen is social origin: entities become defined in terms of (relations with) who has given/received them and thus of their origins and destinations. The eating agent re-enacts what makes an agent into a person, as an object fed by others, to benign effect or otherwise. Food itself is the result of others’ feeding; hence eating in general exposes the eater to all the pleasures and hazards of relationships.

This ontology of being as a mother is not static or essentialised in Strathern’s (2012) analysis, but is capacitiated and constituted through acts of ingesting food. For the Central African women
with whom I conducted fieldwork, practices of both establishing and avoiding commensality are not simply socialities that serve to capacitate and refute axes of social relatedness. Practices of preparing, cooking, and distributing food were almost exclusively the agenda of women, and mothers specifically, within the field settings. As the primary agents tasked with a paramount responsibility to sustain the life of kin within a household, and to establish kin relatedness with those beyond it, acts of commensality as determined by Central African women position them, specifically, as mothers imbued with a responsibility to reproduce and regenerate networks of kinship (Moore 2009:21-24).

In the sense outlined by Strathern (2012), above, acts of feeding others are similarly experienced by Central African women as modes of ontological being. Through these temporally particularised ontologies capacitated through commensality, these women experience a sense of existing in the world as, specifically, a mother imbued with a responsibility to nourish, sustain, and regenerate kin relatedness. Within settings of refugee settlement, this axis of ontological being as a mother emerges for Central African women as a primary thread of continuity within otherwise precarious conditions of everyday life.

IX. CONCLUSION

Acts of eating and feeding are socialities that capacitate Central African women to materially and symbolically nourish, sustain, and regenerate kin relatedness. For these Central African women, the provisioning of food is implicated within the constituting of a reciprocal relatedness between agents who eat and agents who prepare, cook, and provide food. As a result of their experiences of forced migration, however, these women are embedded within relationships between state and humanitarian structures of refugee settlement in which such logics of reciprocity can become contested. For Central African women in Australia, state-operated systems of refugee settlement deny validity to the social and cultural dimensions of ontological experience for these women by refracting resettlement support through an agenda that privileges individualism and insular families (McMichael and Manderson 2004; Stratton 2009; Colic-Peisker 2009:177). For Central African women in Uganda, state-determined systems of providing humanitarian support to refugees means that those residing in urban areas are not able to access financial and material support, which can lead to conditions of acute food insecurity (Dryden-Peterson 2006). Such experiences of uncertainty in settings of refugee settlement are, as I have illustrated in this chapter, mediated through acts of avoiding or establishing commensality as a means to either extend, or concentrate, networks of kin relatedness.
In this chapter, acts of eating and feeding emerge as modes of agency that capacitate Central African women to experience continuity within otherwise precarious conditions of refugee settlement. This interweaving of ontological being and agency locates these practices of eating and feeding as partialities of existence that embed Central African women within a particular ontology of being as a mother; in which this sense of motherhood is interwoven with concurrent responsibilities of biologically reproducing children whilst sustaining, nurturing, and regenerating kin relatedness (cf. Devisch 1993:56; Moore 1999:21-24). It is to this experience of being as a mother that I turn to specifically in the next chapter.
Pregnancy, childbirth, and caring for offspring are acts of biological reproduction that symbolise cosmological continuity for Central African women in contexts of forced migration. As detailed in this chapter, the paramount focus of existence for the women does not directly pertain to the circumstances of their ‘displacement’ but, rather, concerns their capacity to exist as a mother within them. In this chapter, I examine how these women perceive the reproductive potential of female bodies as an axis of existential purpose. I focus primarily on describing the capacity for social recognition and expectations of responsibility that the role of existing as a mother implicates for them. I argue, subsequently, that these Central African women locate and experience a sense of existential continuity within settings of refugee settlement through their capacity to exist as a mother. Their sense of ‘refuge’ cannot be essentialised as an automatic product of being resettled. Rather, experiencing ‘refuge’ derives from an existential state of being as a mother, and the affective dimensions of care that are encompassed with it.

Despite reproduction emerging as a fundamental symbolism of cosmological logics of regeneration for the women who participated in this study, the ways in which logics of reproduction and cosmology intersect in other contexts of refugee resettlement remains an underexplored focus in anthropological literature. Indeed, the experience of motherhood in contexts of refugee settlement and asylum, broadly, is still an emerging focus. Within this body of literature, Shandy (2008) documents how experiences of pregnancy, birth, and rearing children are politicised in settings of asylum in Ireland for African mothers due to contested notions of citizenship attached to newborn babies, suggesting that the birth of a child following forced migration is not a neutral process (cf. Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). Drawing on a study conducted with teenagers from a Sudanese refugee background in Australia, McMichael (2013) describes how pregnancies complicate the aspirations of young refugee women who otherwise planned to develop career and study aspirations prior to becoming a parent. McMichael (2013)
notes, however, that the young women who participated in her study had all planned to have children as part of their imagined futures. For most, the earlier than anticipated pregnancy was not an unwanted circumstance, but rather conceived of as a ‘natural’ progression of their lives. One participant in McMichael’s (2013:669) study states: ‘That’s how it is. We’re supposed to have kids.’ Despite recognising that motherhood is an assumed aspect of the life trajectories of these young women from a refugee background, the broader cosmological logics that situate this determinism is not specifically addressed. The conflation of womanhood with motherhood, and the potential that cosmological logics might underlie this determinism, remains underexplored in contexts of forced migration and refugee settlement.

As a point of contrast to those studies, and to expand on the body of literature that explores how motherhood is experienced in settings of refugee settlement, in this chapter I describe how cosmological logics orient the ways in which Central African refugee women interpret and experience acts of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing. I document how the Central African women perceive and exert agency through the experience of being a mother as a cosmologically oriented axis of existential purpose. In this chapter, I thus coalesce a focus cosmologies of regenerative flow in Central African social groups as expressed through idioms and experiences of bearing children, with a focus on how these reproductive imperatives manifest in conditions of refugee settlement.

I. AN IMPERATIVE TO BEAR CHILDREN

*September 20th, 2013 – Beatrice’s house in a regional Australian city*

Beatrice sits at the edge of an old armchair in the dining room with her stuck-out knees wrapped around a basket of clean washing. Surrounded by piles of neatly folded clothes that are differentiated according to the child to whom they belong, Beatrice adds to each pile as she folds items from the basket of clean washing in front of her. I sit across from her. As she continues with the laundry I talk with her to pass the time.

It is a Saturday, so Beatrice’s six children are playing outside in the garden. Her husband joins us intermittently, whilst he prepares to go out and visit friends. At one point he appears so comfortable in my presence that he steps out of the bathroom after showering in just a towel to talk with us, and we laugh at his gall. Apart from the occasional interruption from her husband or a child, Beatrice and I engage in a subdued conversation together in the dining room.

I was introduced to Beatrice 12 months ago by a mutual acquaintance from within the Central African community. After this initial meeting, I began to visit Beatrice regularly at home, and have since become embedded in the fabric of domestic life here as a routine visitor. Beatrice was
resettled in Australia seven years ago through the Humanitarian Program from a refugee camp in Uganda, where she had lived for eight years after fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo. Working firstly as a primary school teacher in Congo and then as a social worker in the refugee camp, Beatrice has a demonstrated ability to balance family responsibilities with work commitments. Since her resettlement in Australia with her husband and five children, Beatrice has given birth to another child, Mary.

Beatrice has also sought continuously over the past seven years in Australia to develop her own English language skills, with the eventual aim of attaining employment. We are planning, soon, on applying for jobs, and it is this topic that we are primarily discussing today. Beatrice has focused her search for employment in the caring industry. We are discussing what aged care centres are close to Beatrice’s home, when our conversation is interrupted by Beatrice’s youngest child entering the room.

‘Mama,’ Mary whines, as she flounces into the dining room on the verge of tears. The child tells her mother, in words that are breathless from their perceived urgency, that the biscuit she was going to eat has just been stolen by one of her brothers. Without ceasing her folding, Beatrice casually directs Mary to the kitchen, and says, ‘Go and get another one.’

As Beatrice’s hands move deftly between the layers of clothes she is folding, we begin once again to engage in conversation. However, Beatrice directs the topic of our discussion away from employment. As if prompted by the entrance of her youngest child, Beatrice begins to talk about children. Sighing, she tells me that her children have been increasingly pesterin

‘Everyday, Georgina, everyday, they are telling me: “Please, please Mama, it is time to bring another one!”’ Beatrice chuckles, but shakes her head in exasperation. She is referring to another pregnancy, and means that her children are putting overt pressure on her to bear another child.

‘Even Mary?’ I ask.

Beatrice looks at me pointedly with an expression of disdain. ‘Everyday,’ she says, ‘that one is coming to me and saying, “Mama please, I want a baby.”’

‘And your husband?’ I ask.

‘Especially him!’ she says, laughing. ‘He wants many children—as many as possible!’

‘Why?’ I ask her.
'For us,' she says, ‘children are power. We do not have a lot of, ah, things. Food, houses, cars. But we do have children. So many children make you very powerful. And my husband wants more!’ Still smiling, says, ‘He tells me that I am not trying, but I am! I really am. I tell him that it is God’s plan, not my plan, and that if He wants me to bring a baby I will.’

As our conversation continues it becomes apparent that the agitation Beatrice experiences is not a result of this familial pressure. Beatrice is not perturbed with having members of her family commenting on, and seeking to direct, her reproductive status. Instead, she is frustrated because she has been unable, at this point, to meet the expectations of such pressure.

‘Everyday those children come to me and say: “Mama, we want another one!”’ she repeats her sentiments, then smiles as she finishes folding a worn pair of pants that evidently belong to one of her boys. Still looking at the small pants, she then adds, in a tone of bemusement, ‘There are enough clothes here for another one; enough space, sure.’

‘Will you still look for a job, if you become pregnant?’ I ask her.

Beatrice’s expression shifts into a patient smile as she explains that such a question is, in her perspective, irrelevant.

‘A job can wait,’ she says. ‘It would be nice, sure, to work, but to have a baby? Well, that is not up to me. That is the plan of the world; it is not my plan. So if I bring a baby . . . I bring a baby!’

For Beatrice, bearing children is a not an explicit choice. Pregnancy and rearing children are axiomatic states of being for women that, accordingly, are of paramount priority in Beatrice’s everyday life. As such, her attempts to gain employment are secondary to child bearing.

Bearing children is a foundational platform of existential purpose for many of the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with, through which broader dynamics of lived experience are mediated. Experiences that invigorate an existential imperative are those acts that enable persons to feel that they are acting as subjects; which make them feel that they embody a purpose of existence in the world beyond their status as object within it (Jackson 2013c:17). For these women, the imperative to bear children encompasses a dimension of lived experience through which such a sense of existential purpose is oriented. This potential for reproduction coalesces a cosmological imperative to regenerate progeny with an intentional act to locate themselves within their intersubjective terrain as a mother. Existential purpose is, for these women, the capacity to bear and rear children.
This reproduction imperative emerges broadly within ethnographic work conducted in Central African contexts. For example, from fieldwork conducted in the 1930s amongst the Bemba, Richards (1956) describes the Chisungu initiation ritual as a process through which girls become socially recognised as women that are socially and physically mature to bear children. Similarly, in Devisch’s (1993:119) work amongst the Yaka, female purpose is defined by motherhood; in which women are understood to be the ‘giver of life’ who corporeally capacitate ‘life transmission.’ Documenting a preoccupation with infertility amongst women in the Cameroonian Grassfields, Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) shows that biological reproduction is a central axis through which female purpose is concurrently reproduced. Based on fieldwork in Angola, Silva (2009) describes how, through play and household duties, young girls are initiated into the expectation of motherhood from childhood. In that context, female infertility renders a woman unable to be incorporated within a family nexus and thereby locates infertile women as ‘witches’ who are void of social value.

Taken collectively, these works illustrate how, within Central African contexts, female purpose is often conditioned by the capacity to regenerate continuity of life through biological reproduction. Although the meanings attached to existing as a mother in these contexts are conditioned through historical, cultural, and social specificities, in each it is through the ability to bear children, particularly, that existential purpose and social recognition of personhood is capacitated. In addition, those ethnographic works depict a broad tendency in Central African social groups to interweave perceptions of child bearing within a cosmology of regenerative flow, in which biological reproduction is imbued with existential purpose because it is understood as an axis of regenerating ‘continuity of life’ (Devisch 1993:119).

For the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with, this imperative to bear children similarly orients through cosmological logics derived from an accumulation of cultural, social, and historical knowledge, but is concurrently conditioned within the particularities of everyday life in refugee settlement. It is through the acts of bearing and rearing children, as practices that regenerate the social and biological ‘flow’ of existence, through which these women perceive in the unfolding of their existence a sense of continuity. For them, the experience of being in a state of either ‘displacement’ or ‘refuge’ is conditioned by their ability to bear, rear, and care for offspring.

49 More broadly, Moore (1999) describes how cultural beliefs that emerge in ethnographic contexts across sub-Saharan Africa frequently conflate womanhood with motherhood.
II. BEING A ‘MOTHER’

Kinship is not a static schema of relatedness for Central African women that can be reduced to biological or affinity ties. As detailed in Chapter Six, Central African women in settings of refugee settlement expand and constrict kin relatedness in dynamic ways. As similarly emphasised there, however, the central platform from which familial and broader social relatedness is oriented for Central African women is through a mother-child dyad capacitated by biological reproduction.

For these Central African women, existing as a mother depends on an essential capacity to conceive and give birth to a child. Being a mother is, for Central African women and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, a fundamental category of social recognition (e.g. Moore 1999:24; Hollos and Larsen 2008; Silva 2009; Whitehouse and Hollos 2014). Ethnographic work conducted in other Central African contexts documents similar understandings of motherhood as a fundamental mode of female existence. From work conducted amongst the Sukuma in Tanzania, Allen (2001) illustrates, for example, that there is no direct terminology to refer to a woman’s fertility or reproductive potentiality. Instead, this state of potential fecundity is assumed within the notion of being female. In that context, a woman’s role within biological reproduction is expressed and imagined as a primordial state of being that is characterised within a taken-for-granted expectation of bearing children. Similarly, for the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with, womanhood is, often, conflated with motherhood.

Encompassed within their understandings of motherhood is also the taken-for-granted expectation that a woman—as a mother—subsequently cares for, nurtures, and sustains the lives of those within her immediate household, particularly; but is also responsible for regenerating relatedness with social others through broader kin networks. The ways in which Central African women resettled in Australia commonly maintain a sense of kin relatedness to family members who remain in Africa is one example of how this sense of existing as a mother manifests for them beyond the mother-offspring dyad:

*November 18th, 2012 – Nyomanda’s house in a regional Australian city*

Without knocking, I let myself into Nyomanda’s house through the back entrance. I call out to her as I make my way to the kitchen, which is where I usually find her in the mornings. I get no response. The kitchen is empty. I call out again. Eventually, I hear a distant response and Nyomanda emerges from her bedroom still clothed in pyjamas.

‘Oh,’ Nyomanda says. ‘I am sorry, I have been resting.’
Nyomanda shrugs off my attempts to apologise. She tells me that it is not normal for her to sleep so late, and explains that she is very tired.

‘It was the boy,’ she explains, ‘my boy. It was my boy in Africa. My sister’s son, Richard.’

Twelve months ago, Nyomanda’s sister, who had remained in the Democratic Republic of Congo despite the conflicts of the past two decades, died unexpectedly. She left behind thirteen surviving children. These children now come under Nyomanda’s care, despite her physical distance from them. In her words, she explains that: ‘I am their mother, now.’

On this morning, I become acutely aware that Nyomanda’s relatedness to these children as a mother is not defined by provisioning for them materially, but is oriented through a fundamental duty to provide to them emotional care.

Whilst his younger siblings have been fostered out to Nyomanda’s family members in refugee camps in Uganda, fourteen-year-old Richard has opted to remain in Congo. Richard lives in Goma city, in a room shared with other young men that are employed as apprentices in a garment making initiative.

‘What happened with your boy?’ I ask Nyomanda, as we sit together. ‘Is he okay?’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘Richard is fine, now. But he needed someone to talk to . . . even though it was 3am in the morning, here. I knew he had to talk with me. It is hard for him, there.’

‘What was happening with him?’ I ask her.

‘It is just the same, for him there. He is not alone; he lives with other men that he works with. But he feels like he is alone. It is very hard for him because he is young. And with those soldiers going into Goma, he feels worse. He tells me that every night, when the sun goes, there is no one outside. He goes into the house and hides. So when the sun went down last night, and he was worried; he needed me to talk to. He is very scared.’

At the time when this conversation with Nyomanda takes place, M23 militia had infiltrated the large city of Goma on the border of Congo and Rwanda. A BBC news article published online only two days after this conversation with Nyomanda emphasised the intense insecurity of the city at that time, titled with the headline: ‘Goma: M23 Rebels Capture DR Congo City.’

Being 14 years old, sharing a house with older workmates, and living without his immediate family

around him, the sense of insecurity in Richard’s daily life was further exacerbated by the military occupation of Goma and the ever-present potential for the eruption of violence.

‘I know it is bad there,’ Noyomanda says. ‘So, I called him, for someone to talk to. There is no one else for him there.’

Nyomanda is ‘mother’ to Richard and the other children of her deceased family in Africa despite them not being her biological offspring. This extension of existing as a mother beyond biological progeny is an unproblematic role for Nyomanda because the category of motherhood for Central African women encompasses a taken-for-granted expectation of caring, nurturing, and sustaining kin relatedness, broadly. However, she has been enabled to take on this social motherhood because she has previously borne biological offspring. For these women, to be socially recognised as a mother depends on a demonstrated ability to biologically reproduce children. Women who bear children are automatically perceived as embodying the broad characteristics of caring and nurturing that are encompassed within the category of being a mother.  

For Central African women like Nyomanda, existing as a mother is a specific ontology of being, in which female existence is characterised by an innate potentiality to bear children and contribute to the regenerative flow of ‘life transmission’ (Devisch 1993:119). An encounter with a government bureaucracy in Australia, described below, demonstrates how this ontology of being as a mother is more broadly experienced by Central African women whose accounts are encompassed in this thesis. The vignette emphasises how these women understand biological reproduction as a fundamental platform of ontological existence. However, it also shows how such expectations of being as a mother are not automatically reciprocated within settings of resettlement:

**May 29th, 2013 – Centrelink office in a regional Australian city**

At the Centrelink office, Sima and I have to wait 20 minutes to be called up to a desk to meet with a worker. Sima’s welfare payments have been terminated because she could not declare her income to the agency over a two-week period. Unable to access a computer to declare her income online and being busy with a sick child over that period, Sima was not able to attend the Centrelink office in order to provide her income details. Today, we are trying to rectify the

51 In Chapter Eight, I explore experiences of infertility for Central African women, and the meanings and assumptions encompassed in that category that contrast to the ‘mother’ role described here.

52 This sense of existing as a mother as a specific ontology of being for these Central African women is elaborated in detail in Chapter Eight.

53 ‘Centrelink’ is a federally operated branch of the Department of Human Services in Australia, which coordinates the provision of welfare assistance to citizens and permanent residents.
situation so that Sima can have her payments reinstated. Without the welfare money, she will be unable to afford the rent for the coming fortnight. This could potentially lead her to be evicted from her house. Being unable to pay the rent for that period will inevitably, however, lead to a bad tenancy ledger, so that in applying for future rental properties Sima will be constantly disadvantaged. Eventually, our number is called.

We are directed to two seats at a cubicle desk. Opposite us sits the Centrelink worker. I estimate she is in her forties. Like me, she too is ‘white.’ Her eyes are focused on the computer screen to the side of the desk throughout our encounter.

Sima explains the current dilemma. The worker nods, and then explains that the problem can be fixed. Sima turns to me with a smile that belies visible relief. Then, however, the worker adds that the processing period for the documents may take up to fourteen days, which means that another two weeks of her payment will be unavailable. Sima tells the worker that she requires the payments earlier; otherwise she will be unable to pay her rent. Again, the worker repeats that there is no way of negotiating the payment lapse.

Trying to reign in her increasing panic, Sima says, ‘You are a mother, yes?’ Her eyes flicker to the one photo pinned to the worker’s cubicle wall, which depicts two school age children.

‘That is not a concern,’ the worker replies.

‘Are you a mother?’ Sima repeats.

‘Well,’ the worker concedes, ‘Well, yes, I am.’

Sima’s gaze intensifies. ‘So,’ she says, firmly, ‘you cannot do this. You are a mother. I am a mother, too. I have children. I have to give them food. I have to keep the house . . . you are a mother.’

Sima says this as if there is some kind of implicit expectation encompassed within the act of bearing children. It seems that, for her, that being a mother directly corresponds to ensuring that the treatment of others is negotiated with care and nurture that would not deliberately allow the children of others to suffer.

The worker appears to be genuinely apologetic, saying, ‘I am very sorry. There is nothing I can do, from here.’

Sima interrupts. ‘But you are a mother,’ she repeats, emphasising the last word.
‘If you go back to the front counter you could use the phones and try to arrange an emergency payment in the meantime,’ the worker says: all business, once again. ‘I cannot do that from here. You will need to make the call. But it is late in the afternoon and the branch will shut in the next hour and it may take longer than that. You would benefit from coming back tomorrow to organise the payment.’

We leave, unable to solve Sima’s problem. Sima is upset about the impending financial crisis; but that is not the focus of her shock as we leave the Centrelink branch together. As we walk out the door, she turns to me and says, ‘These Australians are bad people. They pretend to be mothers, but they are not.’

Sima’s understanding of what it means to be a mother is directly undermined within this bureaucratic arena of civil governance in Australia. The vignette above shows that Sima understands being a mother as a distinct ontology of existence, in which the act of biologically reproducing a child intertwines a woman within a corresponding set of expectations to nurture, sustain, and regenerate care for kin and social others; even beyond the mother-child dyad that capacitates this distinct mode of social recognition. This ontology of being a mother is, subsequently, a basis of affective displacement that manifests for women like Sima from an existential level.

In government institutions in Australia, this relatedness between mother and child is not conceptualised as immutable; indeed, this ontology of motherhood as a fundamental basis of existence is, in the operations of such bureaucracies, supplanted by the authority of the state. As above, it is the expectations of care and nurturing that surround female purpose through being a mother for the Central African women that are undermined in Sima’s interaction with the government bureaucracy. For Sima and the other Central African women, being a mother is an intersubjective experience of relating to, and with, the world that is always in contestation; and which subsequently suspends them within a broader nexus of social implications, as I describe below.

III. ‘PREGNANT’ WITH POSSIBILITY: REPRODUCTION AND PERSONHOOD

For these Central African women, it is through existing in the world as a mother who has borne offspring that they are able to be recognised as persons encompassing of purpose and value within the social spheres in which they are embedded. The concept of ‘personhood’—or what it means to experience and be recognised as a distinguishable ‘person’ within an intersubjective context—is an analytical device that is utilised in anthropology to illustrate how humans
understand and experience differentiations between their sense of self and their relatedness to and with others (Pollock 1996:320). Whilst being used as a conceptual tool to capture particularities of social discernment, the notion of a ‘person’ is not a universally valid theoretical category to be applied uncritically across diverse ethnographic contexts, particularly where local concepts of sociality may not correlate to a distinguishable individual (Strathern 1988; Pollock 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Attempts to theorise socialities within a uniform categorisation of what it means to be a ‘person’ fail to consider that humans cannot be abstracted from the social relations within which their lives are suspended (Strathern 1988, 2004). Hence, the relevance of the concept of ‘personhood’ as predicated on the theoretical possibility of individual autonomy is inherently problematic. Uncritical applications of the concept to circumstances of social existence are not able to illustrate the localised ways in which socialities are oriented through the cultural and social specificities that characterise the dynamism of lived experiences.

The central condition upon which personhood is negotiated for the Central African women is the potential for social expansion that is encompassed within the fecundity of their bodies. Female fertility is a fundamental basis of social recognition in Central African contexts, premised on the capacity to be recognised as a ‘giver of life’ (Devisch 1993:119). Within African contexts broadly, the ‘successful maintenance of life’ as a cosmological imperative is dependent on, and underpinned by, the reproductive capacities of female bodies (Moore 1999:21). Recognising that reproduction manifests in numerous African contexts through cosmologically particularised lenses of understanding, Moore (1999:21) asserts that ‘the maternal body has the capacity, through pregnancy, to become two bodies, to produce the offspring that will guarantee bodily, social and cosmic continuity.’ Similarly, existing as a mother enables the Central African women to perceive themselves as a valued social person who contributes to a cosmological trajectory of social and filial continuity and regeneration.

The experience of biological reproduction is a process of social locating through which the Central African women perceive themselves as agents who invigorate social and biological continuity within contexts of forced migration. The sense of purpose necessary for them to exist as an intersubjectively recognised person is, subsequently, dependent on whether they are perceived as contributing to this broader passage of regeneration. What this means is that within this intersubjective context where cosmological logics of regenerating social and biological life are foundational, the capacity for Central African women to be recognised as a ‘person’ imbued with a sense of existential purpose is conditioned through their demonstrated ability to bear a child.
In regards to this fundamental importance that the Central African women place on pregnancy and childbearing for recognition of personhood, I witnessed how they perceive female bodies as vectors of maternal potentiality. My expanded encounter with Beatrice, recounted below, illustrates this taken-for-granted expectation that female bodies exist, inherently, to bear children:

*September 20th, 2013 – Beatrice’s house in a regional Australian city*

Beatrice changes the direction of our conversation by turning her attention to my own reproductive trajectory, rather than hers. Folding the clothes that remain before her with casual ease, she looks away from them for a moment to stare pointedly at my stomach. ‘And you?’ she says, ‘When will you be bringing a baby?’

I have become accustomed to the brazen scrutiny from the Central African women I meet regarding my own reproductive status. In the perspectives of my participants, it is taken-for-granted that, as a woman, I will at some point in my life become a mother. In their understandings of the world, bearing a child is not a personal choice but a cosmological imperative.

‘You know when,’ I reply to Beatrice. ‘I must finish my research first!’

Beatrice purses her lips. ‘That is in a long time. It is good to finish your studies, yes, but you should not wait too long.’

At this point, Beatrice and I are interrupted by the returned presence of Mary, who has evidently had a successful journey to the kitchen to seek food as she now carries a beloved biscuit in hand. Whilst eating her snack, the child moves to seat herself on the arm of Beatrice’s chair, almost knocking over precariously leaning piles of folded laundry as she does so. Beatrice hisses, and says, ‘Eh, be careful!’

Mary takes little notice of her mother’s warning and does not seem perturbed by the sharp tone. Instead, she leans into the arm of the chair, closer to her mother’s body, and continues to contentedly bite into her biscuit. Upon finishing, I watch Mary casually stretch out her small hand to place it on her mother’s stomach where she begins to absently rub Beatrice’s belly in a circular motion, massaging the exteriority of the womb.

Beatrice’s scowl shifts to a smile, and she says, in a tone of resignation, ‘I know, I know, my daughter . . . we are trying.’
Whilst the pressure that Beatrice’s children place on her to produce another child expresses a familial desire to extend the household, this routinised commentary on Beatrice’s reproductive trajectory also demonstrates a particularised perception of the maternal body. In this setting, female bodies within childbearing years are perceived as being embedded with an ever-potential capacity to reproduce. Even when not in a tangible or evident stage of child bearing or nurturance, in the understandings of these Central African women and their family members, the body of a woman is, both literally and figuratively, ‘pregnant’ with possibility.

The broad commentary from family members on Beatrice’s potential for pregnancy illustrates that the maternal body is a source of collective familial concern. The possibility of pregnancy is not perceived as an individual choice by these Central African women because, in their understandings, pregnancy is fundamentally a state of refracted ‘dividuality’ (Strathern 1988) between and across socialities. For them, bearing a child manifests implications that resonate throughout their broader social domains and is, as such, a concern collectivised within a familial nexus. Subsequently, even though the biological progression of a pregnancy is physically bounded within a female body, the ways in which these women experience pregnancy is as a partial being suspended through the social relations that the developing baby and the mother herself is implicated in.

Pregnancy, in which the female body becomes pluralised into the physical presence of two or more human lives, is a fundamental platform through which the broader ‘dividuality’ of personhood is understood and mediated for these Central African women. In analysing exchange relationships in Melanesia, Strathern (1988) utilises the concept of ‘dividuality’ to express how, within these operations of exchange, persons can only be understood through the ways in which they are known as relating to or with others. Persons, in the Melanesian setting described by Strathern (1988), do not correspond to the bounded individuality of physical bodies. In Strathern’s (1988) context, ‘dividuality’ refers to the social indexing that is necessary to locate a person within their intersubjective surroundings.

Strathern’s (1988) conceptualisation of ‘dividuality’ implies that personhood is not encompassed within, or defined by, the confines of individual bodies. Whilst within the specific context of Melanesia the notion that persons are understood intrinsically through their relatedness to others has since been well documented, Strathern (2004) also suggests that persons are comprised of ‘dividual’ partialities beyond this ethnographic setting. Indeed, Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) suggest that the notion of the autonomous individual is a Western construction that does not reflect how people come to experience their worlds through the social relations in which they are suspended. With personhood being a condition of human existence that stems from how
humans are recognised within their intersubjective settings, it is evident that persons are not totalised by either the experience of being composed of ‘dividualities’ or composed as a singular human individual bounded within the physical limits of corporeal flesh. Rather, ‘persons’ are beings that embody intersubjective experiences of being as refracted through, and constitutive of, matrices of relatedness.

The physical condition of pregnancy is a circumstance through which the social partiality of persons coalesces with the empirical potentialities of corporeal flesh. Subsequently, the social location of the Central African women as persons within their intersubjective terrains is necessarily dependent on them embodying relatedness to others through an experiential process of conceiving and bearing children. For the Central African women, the experience of pregnancy and bearing a child is perceived as necessary to achieve personhood. This process of reproduction locates a woman within her intersubjective surroundings as a ‘mother’ who has contributed to the cosmological of flow of regenerating social and biological life.

IV. THE INTERSUBJECTIVE PLATFORM OF BEING A ‘MOTHER’

The capacity to be recognised as a person for these Central African women depends, then, on a fundamental source of intersubjectivity oriented between women and their offspring through the embodied experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent provisioning of care for children. The paradigm of embodiment in anthropology, as discussed by, for example, Csordas (1994, 1999), recognises the body as the source from which all dimensions of existence are lived, sensed, and oriented. A lens of embodiment approaches the body as an indeterminate methodological field, and recognises the historicity, immediacy, and materiality through which the body, and subsequently all lived experiences, are oriented in the world (Csordas 1999). Although this description of the relation between world and body implicates a separation of the two concepts, the relation is one that is superimposed (Csordas 2008:111). Neither the body nor the world could exist independently of the other. Body and world constitute one fluid entity rather than two separate reference points. Intersubjective locating through acts of perception and practice are the means through which subjects come to be suspended through lived experience within particular axes of social relatedness (Jackson 2011:xiii). For Central African women, the pregnant body is one fundamental form of intersubjective locating that positions them in the world as both literally and figuratively embodying personhood, by physically evincing their existential purpose as contributing to a regenerative flow of existence.

The body, as the basis of all lived experience, is not totalised by the immediacy of its positioning within the temporal uniqueness of the present. Rather, the body is always understood in the intersubjective weave in which it is located within, perceived as, and
experienced through a set of corresponding social implications or outcomes. Intersubjectivity is, therefore, not simply the recognition of being in social and material co-presence with perceived ‘others,’ but is the potential for intercorporeal reality, or embodied being, with and to these ‘others’ (Csordas 2008:111-113). Beyond recognition of the capacity for social and material co-presence, the concept of intersubjectivity pertains to the social implications and potentialities of relatedness with others and the world as a vector of existential viability and purpose (Jackson 2011:69).

For the Central African women, this perspective of intersubjectivity as a basis of experiencing existential purpose is epitomised through the experience of pregnancy. Whilst corporeally developing relatedness to and with the developing child within their own body, the women are regenerating social relatedness to others within their intersubjective field. Mediating on extensive fieldwork conducted in Sierra Leone, Jackson (2011:182) refers to acts of reproduction, pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing as both metaphors and lived realities through which the existential viability capacitated through intersubjective relatedness manifests. In Jackson’s (2011:182) analysis, childbearing is theorised as a fundamental human condition of affirming descent and species survival. According to Jackson (2011:182), childbearing is a primordial mode of intersubjective relatedness. He writes:

> The fact remains that the labor of nursing a child through its earliest years, caring for a child through times of famine and illness, protecting a child form the pitfalls of a politically unstable world, and working hard for a hard-hearted or indifferent husband so that one’s child is blessed by its patrilineal ancestors amounts to greater hardship than the labor of giving birth. At the same time, the adage implies that while the bond between mother and child begins with birth, it is actually born of the intimate interactions and critical events that characterize primary intersubjectivity. In other words, it is the intense protolinguistic relationship between mother and infant, mediated by synchronous movement and affect attunement…and the rhythmic interchanges of motherese that create the ‘enlarged’ and ‘collaborative’ field of consciousness that we construe as a primary bond (Jackson 2011:82, emphasis in original).

Whilst the experience of ‘motherhood’ and meanings associated with raising a child differs between cultures and socio-economic contexts (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992; Walks and McPherson 2011), the process of engaging with and to another through human development typifies the function of intersubjective relatedness as a means of constituting existential viability. For these Central African women, the sense of existential viability capacitated through the experience of pregnancy pertains to the affirmation of their reproductive potentialities. For them, as I outline above, reproducing children is necessary to their being located in their social surroundings as, specifically, a mother imbued with responsibilities to sustain, nurture, and
regenerate both corporeal and social relatedness. In this sense, existential viability through the pregnant body is experienced as a means of positioning themselves as a person embedded within the continuity and regenerative flow of existence.

It is through the practical knowledge of their bodies as encompassing reproductive potentialities that Central African women experience a cosmologically oriented sense of continuity. In the immediate taking up of lived experience through the body, subjects draw on modes of practical knowledge to operationalise a perceived sense of confidence and efficacy in the unfolding of, and becoming with, their emergent lifeworlds. What this means is that it is through practical knowledge, or bodily practice, that experiencing subjects tacitly locate threads of perceived continuity and stability in the unfolding of their worlds. Such schemes of structured practice can ‘instil a whole cosmology’ (Bourdieu 1990:69) within an intersubjective terrain, through which culturally particularised frameworks of ontological continuity are operationalised through practical and bodily experience in the world (cf. Hage 2014). Pregnancy is, for the Central African women, one form of practical knowledge through which a ‘whole cosmology’ of regeneration is instantiated and affirmed (Bourdieu 1990:69).

For the Central African women, harnessing the permeability of their bodies as a means to evince a flow of regenerative continuity through pregnancy capacitates them to experience, even within broader indeterminacies of existence, a perceived sense of continuity. By enabling these women to feel that they are embedded within an ongoing trajectory of regenerative continuity, bearing a child in circumstances of resettlement thus capacitates these women to experience a sense of existential ‘refuge’ within settings of refugee settlement.

V. INDETERMINATE BODIES AND PRECARIOUS FUTURES

February 15th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

On this warm afternoon in Kampala, a woman knocks at the entrance to the compound gate and is directed to the apartment where I live. We both take a seat at the small set of plastic chairs and table inside my apartment, in an attempt to escape the heat outdoors. It is from here that we begin to discuss her life.

Her name, she tells me, is Nadine. She is a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She lives in Kampala with her husband, and their four children. From a bag at her side, she pulls out a pile of paperwork as thick as my hand. At the top of the pile there is a letter from the Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda declaring Nadine a recognised refugee under the UNHCR guidelines. To further validate the veracity of this claim she brings out a small purse and takes
from it a worn piece of card with an identity photo glued to the top, which documents her refugee status with the official stamp of the UNHCR.

From the top of the pile of her paperwork, she takes away the verification of her refugee status, and places it face down on the table. With our interaction directed by the paperwork that defines the legal and political dimensions of her existence, we speak little.

She takes up the next piece of paperwork from the pile, which is an ultrasound scan (Figure 14). Like many other Central African refugee women that I have interviewed in Kampala, Nadine now shows me scans of her womb and tells me that she is unable to bear children ‘here’.

In conditions of protracted exile the lives of refugees often become reduced to the paperwork that documents their existence in bureaucratic terms (Thomson 2012). For Nadine, this sense of legitimacy encompassed in the materiality of documentation within these bureaucratic logics is, significantly, not only utilised to legitimate the legal basis of her refugee status but is also drawn on in our encounter to evidence the veracity of her reduced fertility. That the issue of impaired reproduction takes the second priority of our encounter demonstrates to me that her contemporary inability to conceive and bear children is of paramount concern to Nadine.

Like Nadine, the majority of women that I encountered in Uganda expressed to me that the experience of forced migration has resulted in reduced fertility. For these women, the capacities
of their wombs express broader conditions of everyday life. Insecurities of asylum in Uganda are conditioned by the humanitarian mechanisms of settlement that I have described in previous chapters, in which those residing in Kampala are often unable to access aid. Everyday life in Kampala is, as a result, often characterised for refugees by struggles to access food, shelter, clean water, medical treatment, and trusting social networks. Such insecurities are inscribed for Central African women within the indeterminacies of their lived bodies as impaired reproductive capacity.

For Nadine, the experience of becoming a refugee is intimately interwoven with the reproductive capabilities of her body. Being recognised as a refugee and embodying a contemporary inability to birth a child are the two primary concerns of her existence that take antecedent priority in how she characterises her current circumstances. As the account below suggests, Nadine’s inability to conceive a child in Uganda is experienced by her as undermining a sense of existential viability. This insecurity manifests as an existential experience of displacement characterised by an inability to locate herself within a trajectory of regenerative continuity:

_February 15th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala_

Across from me at the plastic table, Nadine inhales deeply as she takes the ultrasound image the top of her pile of paperwork.

Nadine explains that she has borne four children already in the Democratic Republic of Congo prior to 2009, before she fled the country. Ongoing eruptions of politically motivated violence by warring militia groups in her local village in North Kivu forced her to leave Congo, along with her husband and their children. Having lived in Kampala since that time, life for Nadine here has been difficult. Plagued with almost continual abdominal pains after settling in Kampala, she has since been unable to carry a child to term. She has had two miscarriages since living in Uganda.

Nadine has lived as a refugee in Kampala for four years in conditions of material insecurity that have contributed to, but not determined, her sense of being displaced. Income for Nadine and her family comes from the meagre profits she makes selling paper necklaces on the sides of the road in the urban centre of Kampala and the inconsistent work that her husband picks up in the informal construction industry. Because of this material insecurity, the family of six live in a

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54 Experiences of insecurity within Kampala are documented in detail in Chapter Four and Chapter Six, and include reference to the state and humanitarian structures that condition the uncertainties that manifest in these circumstances. Other anthropological researchers document experiences of urban exile in Uganda in more detail than the scope of this thesis provides, including: Dryden-Peterson (2006); Lammers (2007); Sandvik (2012, 2011); and Clark-Kazak (2011).
one-room tin shack that has been built onto the larger home of the Ugandan pastor of a local church. Despite these uncertain conditions of everyday life, it is through the inability of her womb to reflect the regenerative capacity of the world through conceiving and bearing another child that Nadine’s sense of insecurity is viscerally confirmed. Her reduced fertility expresses, and manifests as, a salient sense of existential displacement.

Since experiencing two miscarriages and a subsequent absence of conception in Kampala, Nadine has attended medical appointments to try and assess whether there is a biological basis to her reduced fertility, with no result. Even if doctors were able identify the source of Nadine’s ongoing problems with conceiving and carrying a child to term, she would be unable to independently afford the necessary medical interventions to treat a fertility issue:

*February 15th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala*

Nadine passes the ultrasound scan to me. I gaze at it blankly, as unable to draw sense from it as Nadine evidently is. The silence is heavy between us.

‘What do you think is wrong?’ I ask, finally.

Nadine sighs, deeply, before responding.

‘It is the life, here,’ she says, then qualifies her statement by adding, ‘There is no life, here.’ She lays a hand pointedly on her stomach, at the area where her womb sits.

‘If there was life in this place, there would be life here, too.’ Nadine pats her hand to her stomach gently, but decisively. ‘But the life here is bad,’ she continues. ‘If I could bring a baby, here, then life would come to us, again. But . . . no baby. There is no life, here.’

When articulating that there is ‘no life here’ within the everyday circumstances of living in Uganda as a refugee, Nadine is not referring to her corporeal existence. The capacity to experience ‘life’ as imbued with value and existential purpose is, for Nadine, premised on the reproductive potentialities of her body. This sense of existential purpose as encompassing the ability to exert agency is similarly characterised by Jackson (2011), in his description of wellbeing of as a capacity to experience existential fulfilment. Jackson (2011:60) asserts:

In understanding what it means to be well we must therefore take into account not only what we need as a bare minimum to survive but what we need for our lives to be worthwhile . . .
fulfilment does not lie solely in our freedom ‘to lead the kind of life [we have] reason to value’; it consists in our capacity to realize ourselves in relation to others.

Nadine is expressing an experience of refugee settlement in which a sense of ‘refuge’ cannot be conflated with access to material security, even if bolstered by it. Instead, a sense of feeling secure is oriented for Nadine at an existential level through the capacity of her body to reproduce children. As in Jackson’s (2011) theorisation, analysing Nadine’s sense of security whilst existing as a refugee in Uganda cannot be reduced to the materialities of her existence. Instead, her capacity to experience a sense of security is encompassed within, and conditioned through, the intersubjective dimensions of her everyday life. Hence, her experiences illustrate that existential continuity and ‘refuge’ in circumstances of resettlement is not determined by an ability to access physical safety. Continuity for the Central African women is conditioned by how they perceive themselves through cosmological logics as able to be embedded, as a mother, within a locus of regenerative flow. Subsequently, Nadine experiences this reduced fertility as a fundamental sense of existential displacement.

VI. COSMIC VITALITY AND CONTINUITY OF ‘LIFE’

If reduced fertility manifests as a primordial sense of displacement for Central African women, then the indeterminacy of the female body as an ever-potential vector of reproduction manifests, concurrently, as a potential source of continuity. Hence, despite expressing that there is ‘no life’ in Uganda as a result of her contemporary struggle to conceive a child, Nadine is not defined by, or singularly reduced to, the sense of existential discontinuity that ensues from her experiences of reduced fertility. She aims, still, to pursue falling pregnant:

*February 15th, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala*

Toward the end of our conversation, Nadine leans over the table and stares directly at the picture of the ultrasound in front of us.

‘I will keep trying,’ she says. ‘I will keep trying to have a baby here. I will.’

In Nadine’s understandings, a sense of continuity and ‘refuge’ can be attained even within conditions of ostensible displacement through conceiving and bearing a child to term. Nadine continues trying to fall pregnant as a means of mediating her contemporary insecurity in Uganda. In Nadine’s perspective, the body is an indeterminate source of regenerative potentiality through which to locate a sense of existential continuity. Through the potential
fecundity of female bodies, refugees like Nadine are able to locate a thread of agency within otherwise impoverished circumstances of asylum.

Within other explorations of refugee experience, however, the ways in which refugees like Nadine perceive potential to exert agency and seek existential continuity in conditions of settlement is subsumed by a tendency to focus on the facets of refugee lives that are impoverished, controlled, and undermined in settings of exile (Marlowe 2010). For example, Agier (2002:318, emphasis in original) has described structures of refugee encampment across Africa as a ‘formula,’ and the production of refugees within them as ‘a new category of world population, that of displaced persons and refugees.’ He then describes refugees who, like Nadine, self-settle outside of this ‘formula’ of refugee encampment as doing so because ‘they prefer to take their chance in illegality and the informal economy rather than be enclosed in camps’ (Agier 2002:320). Agier (2002) reproduces the logics of a moral economy of settlement as defined by economic rationalism, by assuming that these are also the logics that refugees themselves draw on when deciding to reside in a camp settlement or an urban setting of exile.

As I have outlined in Chapter Six, however, the reasons that motivated the refugee women I came to know in Kampala to settle outside of camps cannot be reduced to economic insecurity. For them, ‘life’ is perceived and experienced as more then a struggle for biological survival; it is a struggle to engage and contribute to the regenerative potentialities of existence.

In describing how refugees are reduced to objects of defined by biological existence through structures of humanitarian intervention in camps, Agier (2002) draws on Agamben’s (1998) conceptualisation of the ‘refugee’ as the typified figure of ‘bare life.’ In Agamben’s (1998) terms, refugees lack full life, bios; that is, a sense of social presence and political recognition in the world. Reduced to zoe, or ‘bare life,’ refugees are positioned in Agamben’s (1998) analysis as reduced to the mere fact of being alive. Summarising Agamben (1998), Fassin (2005:367) asserts that in this conceptualisation:

The refugees thus occupy a central place in our moral economy because they reveal the persistence of bare life in contemporary societies: deprived from their human rights by a lack of citizenship they can only claim to stay alive.

For Fassin (2005:367), this conceptualisation of the ‘refugee’ as a figure reduced to ‘bare life’ is problematic because ethnographic analysis consistently shows how refugee subjects exert agency, and experience social presence, within those contexts of ostensibly totalistic disempowerment. Agamben (2004:20) himself qualifies his analysis of the ‘refugee’ as ‘bare life’ by emphasising that it is the category of the ‘refugee’ as defined by statelessness that
exemplifies the ‘pure human’ condition of zoe; of being without political recognition. In Agier’s (2002, 2008, 2011) work, however, it is the lived experiences of refugees that this category of ‘bare life’ is applied. Agier (2002) appears to overlook the nuances of refugee agency within settings of forced migration, by instead focusing primarily on how refugees can be considered to exemplify Agamben’s (1998) conceptualisation of ‘bare life’ through the ways in which they are objectified through humanitarian intervention.55

In Agier’s (2002) account it could be considered that refugee lives are reduced to the ongoing attempt to maintain biological survival within conditions encompassing totalistic forms of biopower, in which urban refugees live impoverished and precarious lives purely to avoid the regimes of control operationalised by humanitarian organisations in refugee camps.56 However, Nadine’s experiences contradict this reading of Agier’s (2002) work. Despite the material insecurities that characterise Nadine’s existence as a refugee in Kampala, it is through her lived body that she locates a potential source of purpose and agency. Nadine does not experience life through her body as simply an objectified vector of survival whose precarity in circumstances of impoverishment forms the primary imperative of her being. Instead, within such insecure circumstances, it is her continued intent to conceive and bear a child that expresses how insecurities of displacement encompass a fundamentally existential dimension of experience that is historicised, and culturally particularised.

The experiences of refugees cannot be reduced to such categorisations of biological survival; as if refugees themselves are totalistically controlled peoples, absented of historicised logics, and unable to exert agency (cf. Malkki 2002; Fassin 2012:152). Nadine does not experience her sense of ‘no life’ as simply referring to bare existence characterised only by an ongoing imperative to affirm physical survival. Instead, she perceives ‘life’ to be a trajectory of cosmological vitality through which she has the potential to be embedded within various practices of regeneration that renew, rejuvenate, and reproduce social and material dimensions of existence. Conversely, her sense of ‘no life’ expresses the constraint of her body in disallowing her to contribute to this regenerative flow of existence through bearing and rearing another child.

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55 Fassin (2012:152) provides further detail in analysing the ways in which Agier (2002, 2008, 2011) reproduces aspects of Agamben’s (1998) argument about ‘bare life’. In addition, Malkki (2002) provides extended commentary on the Agier (2002) piece, and particularly on the ways that it generalises refugees as categorical figures and theorises camps as emblematic structures. Malkki (2002) suggests that Agier’s (2002) work overlooks the historicisation of refugees and camps as emergent within specific contexts, and also neglects to consider that categorisations between these ‘figures’ and the civil societies in which they are situated is not as clearly defined as Agier (2002) suggests.

56 Agier (2002, 2008, 2011) draws on the concept of ‘biopower’ with reference to Foucault. In a Foucauldian sense, biopower refers to the technologies of power administered by states to control populations at a level of their biological existence (Foucault 2008).
Nadine’s experiences demonstrate that whilst an existential sense of displacement for refugees is structured through the conditions of their resettlement, such a sense of dislocated being is not determined wholly by material, structural, and political insecurities that emerge in settings of refugee settlement. In her account, the precarity of everyday life in refugee settlement orients through the reduced capacity for her to experience motherhood. Her experiences illustrate one example of how displacement emerges as an existential condition for Central African women, in which the capacity to experience continuity is oriented through particularised cosmological logics. Concurrently, it is through this indeterminate potentiality of her body to conceive and bear children that Nadine paradoxically seeks to mediate this sense of displacement, and subsequently locate within a sense of existential continuity.

Actively seeking out a cosmological thread of continuity through the plasticity and porosity of fertile bodies, a paramount imperative for Central African women within settings of refugee settlement is to purposefully bear a child. For Nadine in particular, such intentions are, however, undermined by the reproductive capacities of her body in which her contemporaneous attempts to bear a child to term have been unsuccessful. What emerges in Nadine’s account, and within the experiences of other Central African women such as those of Beatrice’s outlined in the vignette below, is that a cosmology of regeneration—in which a ‘flow’ of existence depends on the reproduction of social and biological life—informs active attempts to invigorate and affirm a sense of existential continuity within settings of refugee settlement:

November 2nd, 2013 – Beatrice’s house in a regional Australian city

Over pots of simmering food on the top of her stove, Beatrice talks to me about child bearing. She explains, in a hushed voice, that one of her good friends, another refugee woman also from Congo, has recently begun to look physically pregnant. For Beatrice and the other Central African women with whom I conducted fieldwork, pregnancies are not announced overtly but are demonstrated through the corporeality of broadening bodies.

In Beatrice’s understandings, and those of other Central African woman, paying attention to a pregnancy is taboo. Direct reference to a pregnancy is a way of inviting attention to the process, and thereby providing pathways through which misfortune can befall a reproductive trajectory. Although maternity is a state in which women are actively engaged in regenerating familial lineage, pregnancy is, concurrently, a liminal period through which the unfolding of a woman’s life, in conjunction with her unborn child, is susceptible to hazards that block this potentiality of regeneration. The concept of liminality derives from Van Gennep’s (2013 [1908]) theory of
social rites of passage being intimately linked to biological stages of human development. Pregnancy and reproduction are theorised by Van Gennep (2013:3 [1908]), and in anthropological literature more broadly (e.g. Raphael 1975; Shandy 2008), as corresponding with the *limen* period, or the liminal period, in which a person’s status is in transition and not able to be concretely defined. Pregnancy, in which a child is not yet born to confirm the mother’s status, is one such example of a liminal period. Being within the liminal is, however, marked by indeterminacy, ambiguity, and perceived danger. Hence, the perspectives of the Central African women, in placing taboos on pregnant women in order to protect their pregnancies, corresponds to this notion of pregnancy being a liminal period. With pregnancy being experienced as an inherently indeterminate state, a veil of purposeful social ignorance is employed to protect pregnant women from direct attention. It is only through the birth of a physically healthy infant that the presence of a newly generated life can be overtly acknowledged, and celebrated.

Birth, then, is a significant event that not only manifests the corporeal presence of a child, but which evidences as well the successful outcome of a long period of overt indeterminacy in which a pregnant woman has been the vector of a regenerative potentiality, and at a concurrent risk of regenerative blockage. The birth of a healthy infant affirms the regenerative flow of the world by signifying that the potential risk of reproductive obstruction has been overcome. Birth is, then, experienced by the women as an embodied process through which a cosmological sense of continuity and vitality that characterises purposeful existence manifests, as Beatrice’s comments, below, attest:

*November 2nd, 2013 – Beatrice’s house in a regional Australian city*

I change the topic of conversation so that Beatrice does not dwell specifically on the suspected pregnancy of her friend. I make an offhand comment about the burgeoning number of Central African women that have given or appear due to give birth in the next few months, and Beatrice smiles and directs her attention to a pot of simmering food in front of her, stirring it gently.

After another long stretch of silence, Beatrice turns to me and explains that this is to be expected.

‘That is our way, Georgine,’ she says, ‘We do not stop trying, like Australians, after one or two. We continue. And being here, in Australia, it is good to bring another one.’ This is a practice I have observed on multiple occasions, in which newly arrived Central African women that resettle in Australia within a family group with their husbands will conceive and bear a child as soon as possible following their intercontinental migration. The majority of women that I
conducted fieldwork with had given birth to child within two years of resettling in Australia, even those women of an ambiguous childbearing age who had already borne up to ten children.

‘Why do women want to give birth when they come to Australia?’ I ask Beatrice.

Stirring the pot of food again, Beatrice shrugs.

‘The life is good, here,’ she responds.

VII. CONCLUSION

The capacity to bear, birth, and rear children enables Central African women to perceive in their lived experiences a perceptual thread of continuity. As I have shown in this chapter, existing in the world as a mother is, for the Central African women who participated in this research, simultaneously an experience of social locating through which their existence as a person imbued with existential purpose is evinced, as well as an experience that is dependent on their capacity to biologically conceive and bear children. Experiencing a sense of continuity for these Central African refugee women is, then, fundamentally an existential experience that is oriented through the reproductive potentialities of their female bodies.

Subsequently, I have shown here that the capacity to experience a sense of continuity within settings of refugee settlement cannot be reduced to dimensions of socio-spatial mobilities and ambiguities of politico-legal status. Instead, it is through cosmological logics of reproduction through which a sense of continuity is constituted for these Central African women. For them, the maternal body is perceived as a fundamental platform of existential purpose, viability, and continuity. Experiences of insecurity in conditions of refugee settlement can be transcended, therefore, through experiences of motherhood, and the affective experience of caring for others that being a mother entails for them. To emphasise the cosmological significance that this sense of being as a mother encompasses for Central African women, I turn in Chapter Eight to experiences of childlessness, reduced fertility, and contraception use. There, I illustrate how motherhood emerges for these women as a distinct ontology of being through which diverse forms of insecurity are, subsequently, mediated and experienced.
In order to recognise the significance that existing as a mother encompasses for the Central African women who participated in this research, it is necessary to explore how they perceive and experience reduced fertility. In this chapter, I examine how infertility represents an inversion of the women’s cosmological logics, and, thus, concurrently expresses and emphasises the significance of motherhood in their understandings (cf. Devisch 1993:122). Here, I describe how such assumptions of cosmological regeneration relate to broader conceptualisations of ontological being. With existential viability capacitated and sustained for the Central African women through an imperative to exist as a mother, it is this tension—and the experience of having motherhood threatened—that I explore in this chapter. Having the capacity to exist as a mother threatened by reduced fertility emerges as a basis of enduring existential displacement for the women, with affective dimensions that are not reducible to the social, political, and geographic ruptures of their forced migration.

I. CONTINGENCIES OF EXISTENTIAL PURPOSE

December 6th, 2013 – the maternity ward of a regional hospital in Australia

Weaving my way through fluorescent corridors, I make my way to the maternity ward of the hospital. From the reception desk, I am directed to a birthing suite down another hall. Despite being in a setting directly surrounded by experiences of birth, the atmosphere is subdued. The only source of noise comes from my shoes clapping against the floor tiles and the hushed voices of midwives who pass me in the corridor. I find the suite I am looking for. I knock, gently, on the door before going inside.

Emmeline sits in a large chair beside the bed that she gave birth in. Apart from her new baby, who is sleeping in a plastic bassinet, Emmeline is alone. Her husband, she tells me, left minutes earlier to get their other children ready for the day, and to drive them to school. He had been at the hospital with her all night for the birth, whilst the other children had stay at home being minded by friends. After the long night, Emmeline greets me, smiling wanly. I offer my congratulations.

Sitting beside her, I coo at the infant. Emmeline tells me that his name is Robert. She encourages me to pick him up and hold him, so I do, whilst she sits beside me and fixes her make-up. Alongside the smell of new baby and hospital sterility, Emmeline’s perfume permeates the room. She is wearing a brightly coloured kitenge skirt with a matching blouse. Emmeline is preparing
herself for a day of greeting visitors. It is hard to reconcile her polished appearance with the notion that she gave birth only hours ago.

Still cradling Robert in the crook of an elbow, I awkwardly pass to Emmeline a bag that contains gifts. It is only practical items like clothes and food for Emmeline’s other six children, but she thanks me. She chuckles, then says to me in a conspiratorial tone, ‘I feel good, but I think it will be good to stay here for some time. The hospital is nice. I don’t have to cook, or wash. I am on holidays!’

Although she laughs, Emmeline’s tone is brittle. At once, her exhaustion is apparent. Softly, she confides to me her concerns.

‘This one, maybe, is the last,’ she says. ‘I am not sure. I am tired; so tired. I thought that six was a good number. When we came here, to Australia, we had five. I needed to bring a baby in Australia. That is the life here, where you can do that. It was good to be here, and bring a baby.’ She pauses as she takes Robert from my arms. She moves aside the top of her blouse to put him to her breast, then continues.

‘But this one,’ she looks down at Robert, and smiles, ‘he was a surprise. I thought that since I had come here and had a baby that would be the end. Finish. But he is here. I think that it would be good to stop. But that is not for me . . . that is not for me to plan.’

I nod, and she continues.

‘I could try, maybe, the contra . . . contracept?’

‘Contraception,’ I prompt.

‘Yes, contraception. But I do not think so. I do not think that is for me.’ Her voice softens. ‘For me,’ she continues, ‘I don’t know . . . I don’t think that is good in my body . . . no. So we will have to wait…maybe.’

‘Is there anything you are going to do now, that you have had this seventh baby?’ I ask her.

‘I will just have to wait and see,’ she says. ‘I do not know what will happen, but at least we are here, and the children are safe. That is all I need.’

This reference to a sense of feeling ‘safe’ captures a personal reflection on how Emmeline’s perception of existential purpose has shifted since resettling in Australia. In explaining that she ‘needed to bring a baby’ Emmeline describes how her contemporary sense of security in
Australia is expressed and affirmed concurrently through her ability to have children. This interwoven sense of physical and existential security expresses those cosmological logics of regeneration that I have developed throughout previous chapters, in which I observed how Central African women in both Uganda and Australia are driven by a cosmological imperative to contribute to a perceived ‘flow’ of existence that is characterised by the regeneration of social and biological life. However, the ambivalence that Emmeline experiences after the birth of her seventh child shows that these logics of regenerative flow are not a static and totality conditioning force within the lives of Central African refugee women. The particularities that are evoked through Emmeline’s experience show that it is not possible to objectify the beliefs and behaviours of these women to a static framework of shared culture, as based on a collectively understood imperative to procreate.

A ‘preoccupation with fertility and reproduction’ (Moore 1999:24) has been recognised across numerous Central African contexts in anthropological literature (e.g. Devisch 1993; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Silva 2008; Apter 2012). However, such a purported fixation is not a distinct ‘culture’ that can be applied to persons in Central Africa. Because collectivised understandings emerge alongside particularities within social settings, the tensions that arise between specificities and generalities of experience subsequently demonstrate that broad similarities amongst peoples cannot ‘fully account for actual experiences’ (Abu-Lughod 2008:xii). A cosmological imperative to bear children is a pervasive logic within the lives of these women. It is, however, a tendency toward the world that does not totalise the specificities of their experiences.

Emmeline’s ambivalence toward bearing more children suggests that whilst she continues to recognise the salience of a cosmological imperative to reproduce children, this tendency toward lived experience is conditioned, for her, by a multiplicity of alternate ontological vectors through which to seek and experience existential viability. Her knowledge of, and openness to using, contraception with the intent to deliberately prevent another pregnancy illustrates that Emmeline does not experience an imperative to procreate as an absolute conditioning force of existential purpose.57 A later encounter with Emmeline shows how contrasting modes of

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57 The use of the term ‘procreate’ does not imply a specifically religious application. The majority of the women I conducted fieldwork with identified with fundamentalist or Catholic branches of Christianity. Whilst these backgrounds also suggest a procreation imperative through religious logics, the desire to reproduce children cannot be reduced to a religious imperative for these women. The desire to bear and rear multiple children was rarely critically reflected on by them, or related specifically to an intention to fulfil a religious duty. Rather, the women characterised procreation as a taken-for-granted aspect of personhood required for them to feel socially accepted and purposeful within their daily lives. Often, the specificities of their reproductive trajectory—that is, the amount of children they would conceive and the gender of children—was described by the women as being a result of ‘God’s plan.’ Ultimately, however the imperative to conceive and bear children was not reducible to their Christian religion.
experiencing existential purpose reflect the diverse spectrum of insecurities and opportunities that arise within conditions of refugee settlement for these Central African women:

*December 28th, 2013 – Emmeline’s house in a regional Australian city*

In a small bedroom in Emmeline’s house, I sit at the edge of a large bed. On top of the covers, Robert is laid out on the bed next me. He is three weeks old.

Emmeline stands in front of a mirror and adjusts the wig she has placed over her tightly braided hair. Whilst I have been watching over Robert, she has had time to prepare herself for the day. It is not Robert who demands the most attention, however, but Emmeline’s other young children. At two and four years old, they are too young to attend school during the day.

As Emmeline makes the final adjustments to her appearance, her four-year-old daughter bursts into the room and slams the door against the wall. Excitedly, the child begins to talk loudly but Emmeline intervenes, scolding her daughter for being noisy when Robert is sleeping. The damage is done, however, and Robert begins to whimper. I scoop him into my arms and comfort him whilst Emmeline marches her daughter out of the room.

After returning, Emmeline sits down defeatedly on the bed beside me.

‘It is a hard job, to be mum,’ she says. Emmeline gazes down at Robert, and exhales deeply.

‘Do you . . . have you heard of the strip?’ she says, ‘The . . . uh . . . thing, that they put in your arm, here?’ She indicates the top of her arm, near the shoulder.

‘You mean the rod?’ I ask, and Emmeline nods. She is referring to a form of contraception available in Australia called the implanon or, colloquially, the ‘rod’.

‘The rod,’ she says, ‘that one. I know some of the young girls have it, and that is not good,’ she shakes her head. ‘Married women do not need it either, but for me . . . ’ She shrugs.

‘Do many of the African women here use contraception?’ I ask her.

‘Here?’ she says, and I nod.

‘Yes,’ she adds, ‘Many, many. It is not easy to have many children, and look for work and go to school. So to do, that you go to family planning. In Australia, for you,’ she looks at me pointedly, ‘it is normal. And it is hard for us to be here, and to bring many, many babies, and be around Australian people that have one, maybe two . . . It is different.’
‘Do women use contraception in Africa?’ I ask her.58

‘Yes,’ she nods firmly. ‘There is family planning. But it is hard. You have to be careful when you go, and who you talk to. So, in Africa, women get family planning; but it is harder. Here, it is normal.’

‘Does your husband agree that you should get contraception, now that you have seven children?’ I ask Emmeline. I rarely meet Emmeline’s husband when I go to their home. Her husband is employed in two different jobs that both comprise shift work. During the rare moments when he is at home at the same time as I visit, he is usually asleep.

‘Yes, he does,’ Emmeline says. ‘He understands. He loves all the children, but he thinks that seven is enough. We both thought six was enough!’ She laughs softly, to prevent Robert from waking.

‘When you are married, you need to bring babies,’ she says, articulating this as if, in her perspective, it is a self-evident fact. ‘And if you do not, your husband . . . he does not have to stay with you. You are not married if you do not have children. His family, they will not allow him to be with a lady that does not bring babies.’

I nod, then we both gaze down at Robert who has again begun to stir.

‘But, here, for us . . . ’ Emmeline continues, ‘we have seven, now. That is many. There could be more . . . But we will see. We do not need more, now.’

The concept of existential purpose pertains to how people perceive themselves as having a valuable functioning within the context of their relatedness to and with others (Jackson 2011:61). A sense of existential purpose is not, however, an aspiration that is achieved once, and then remains constant throughout a person’s existence. Jackson (2011:xi) suggests that a sense of existential fulfilment is only ever a temporal feeling of satisfaction that emerges in comparison to more broadly pervasive feelings of existential discontent. The realisation of

58 Many of the Central African women explained to me that whilst there is an imperative to bear numerous children in their cultural understandings, there are also an established practice of spacing births. It was unusual for women to conceive another child within a two-year period after giving birth. This is a broadly established practice in many sub-Saharan African contexts that serves to preserve breast milk as a primary source of sustenance for infants until they reach at least the age of 18 months, but often up to two or three years (Rose-Hunt 1988, 1999:244). The women who participated in the research explained that the primary method of ensuring the spacing of births is to abstain from sexual intercourse following the birth of a child, until the couple is ready to conceive again. To the Central African women, there is also a moral dimension to the deliberate spacing of births. Some women referred to the use of relatively normative use of contraception amongst women in Australia, and the lack of established parameters on birth spacing, as evidence of Australian women’s ‘lack of control’ and relaxed moralities in terms of sexual behaviours.
existential purpose is, in Jackson’s (2011:xi) perspective, conditioned in relation to being otherwise ‘haunted by a sense of insufficiency and loss.’ This context of normative discontent occurs, according to Jackson (2011), because a sense of value, purpose, and existential viability is not a static state, but requires ongoing affirmation through the temporal contingencies of social relatedness. As the vignette above shows, Emmeline experiences a sense of purpose as capacitated through, though not statically defined by, her recognised position as a mother. Due to the temporal nature of existential purpose as lived within a contingent and dynamic intersubjective context, Emmeline now seeks existential fulfilment through the broader potentialities of purpose that are available to her within contemporary circumstances of settlement in Australia.

II. CONTEXTUALISING THE ‘CHOICE’ TO PREVENT PREGNANCY

Emmeline’s desire for existential fulfilment beyond a reproductive imperative is only conceived of as a potential possibility for her because, prior to deciding to use contraception, she had already borne multiple children. Thus, her decision to use contraception refutes cosmological logics of regeneration at a surface level; but still emphasises a cosmological imperative to reproduce because it is only through demonstrating these logics by bearing multiple children previously that Emmeline can feel comfortable enough to transcend them. Emmeline has already achieved existential purpose through the reproductive capacity of her body. She is now able to expand the locus of her existential security because of that experience.

Implied within this example is the notion that shifts in existential viability are grounded in ‘the absence of social harmony, the failure of a person to do his or her duty’ (Jackson 2011:60). The basis of ‘social harmony’ from which shifts in existential viability are oriented is, in the experiences of the Central African women, the capacity to bear and rear multiple children. Having already fulfilled that ‘duty’ by birthing and raising seven children, Emmeline is in a social position where she can expand her sense of existential continuity to arenas beyond a trajectory of further procreation.

As examined below, Central African women who experience reduced fertility do not have a similar capacity to contest this collective cosmology centred on an imperative to procreate. Because experiences of refugee settlement for these Central African women are oriented and expressed through the capacity to conceive and bear a child, when this capacity is restricted through conception difficulties, the surrounding social nexus in which the infertile woman is suspended begins to unravel. For Regina and Rachael, whose experiences are outlined below, it
is through the experience of reduced fertility that they are confronted with an acute sense of existential discontinuity. For them, a sense of dislocation, discontinuity, and displacement cannot be reduced to the broader facets of socio-spatial mobility and politico-legal insecurity that have structured, and which continue to structure, their lives as refugees. Their experiences of displacement, as developed in this chapter, manifest at an existential level; and are embodied specifically through the reproductive capacities of their lived bodies.

III. ‘Eating for Free’

*July 24th, 2013 – A Pentecostal Church in a regional Australian city*

Every second Sunday after the general church service, the Central African section of this Pentecostal church hosts an adjunct service in Swahili. Although I have attended the service on two occasions previously, I am still getting familiarised with the local Central African community of refugees in this region. Introduced into this church community by Rachael, a research participant, I have since been making new acquaintances with other Central African women. Fortuitously, as I am the only *muzungu* that attends these Swahili-specific services, my presence in the rows of those being ministered is novel enough to warrant attention and evoke conversation.

On this particular Sunday I am late, so I seat myself quietly in the back rows of the congregation. I enter mid-way through a gospel reading that has been incorporated into the rest breaks of a worship song that is played by the Central African church band on keyboard, electric guitar, and drums. The reading and interspersed music are protracted across a fifteen minute period.

A break is called, and the energy in the room briefly abates. I see that my participant, Rachael, is seated a few aisles in front of me. Before I can go to her to say hello, however, another woman comes to sit beside me. Her name is Kala. We have been introduced on a previous occasion. She greets me, and asks me about my presence at the service. We talk for some minutes, and I explain to her that I found out about the Swahili services from Rachael. After mentioning Rachael’s name, Kala’s smile falters. I ask her if she knows Rachael.

‘Yes,’ Kala replies quickly. ‘She is a nice girl.’

I note the use of the term ‘girl’ to describe Rachael, who is married and aged in her late twenties. Kala then tries to explain her reticence to associate herself with Rachael in an overtly personal way.
‘You see her—Rachael—there?’ she asks, with a softer tone of voice. She indicates to where Rachael is sitting some rows ahead of us. I nod.

‘Well, who is she sitting with?’ The question is rhetorical. Not waiting for my response, she answers the question herself.

‘No one,’ she says. ‘She is alone.’

No one sits beside Rachael. Whereas other Central African women attending the service are surrounded by their brood of children, around Rachael there are none. She is yet to bear them.

‘She has no babies,’ Kala says, emphasising this noticeable absence of children around Rachael. Her voice grows even softer, as she continues. ‘For us,’ she says, ‘when we see a lady like that, we say she is “eating for free.”’

‘What do you mean, “eating for free?”’ I ask her.

‘Well, she is married, but she has brought no babies . . . She is getting food and taking from her husband, but not giving back to him.’

The microphone is taken up again, and the loudly projected voice of the Congolese pastor obstructs our conversation. Kala squeezes my hand briefly, then gets up to return to her own seat in the next aisle. I turn my gaze to the front again, where Rachael is clearly within my vision. She is, I observe, still sitting alone.

Impaired fertility is a circumstance that unsettles the logics of a cosmology of regeneration. The status of motherhood is a primordial symbol of social, filial, and biological regeneration. Other practices through which Central African women affirm this cosmology of regenerative flow include, as I detail in Chapter Six, acts of preparing, cooking, and distributing food. As I describe there, practices of feeding position women as mothers who have a responsibility to nurture, sustain, and regenerate the physical continuity of their household members, and the forms of social relatedness within and to it. What emerges in the ethnographic vignette above is the notion that, for Central African women, such acts of eating and feeding are also idioms drawn on to explain experiences of intersubjective relatedness beyond the materiality of consuming food.

In the vignette above we see speculations about Rachael’s fertility being expressed by other Central African women through the idiom that she is ‘eating for free.’ Positioning Rachael as
‘eating for free’ implies that she is not contributing to the flow of existence through ‘feeding’ a cosmologically conceptualised trajectory of social and biological regeneration through bearing children. To be alternatively positioned as a contributor, or ‘feeder’, within such cosmological logics of regenerative flow is dependent on having social recognition as a mother.

IV. ‘I EAT ONLY FOR MYSELF NOW’

Another instance of reduced fertility that I witnessed during my fieldwork led another of my participants, Regina, to attempt to remove herself from social relations with other Central African refugees resettled in Australia, including her immediate kin such as her mother, father, and siblings. Being unable to conceive a child served as an impetus for Regina to abruptly and intentionally attempt to sever relatedness with all of the other Central African persons she knew. This was a very emotionally distressing experience for her, as the account below attests. Regardless, Regina deems it necessary to remove herself from social relations with other Central African people due to the inability of an infertile woman to be recognised and respected within those social circles. Regina explains the reasons for attempting to erase relationships with other Central African people by making reference to the ways in which their relatedness is mediated through the reciprocity implied within acts of eating and feeding:

*May 29th, 2013 – Regina’s house in Sydney*

Regina and I sit beside each other on separate lounge chairs in her living room. I have not met with Regina since she relocated to this house in an outer suburb of Sydney two months ago, having lived for five years previously in a regional Australian city some distance away. Today we are discussing why she undertook this relocation. She lives alone since separating with her husband.

‘A wife must provide for her husband,’ Regina says, factually. ‘Food, but especially children. That is her job.’

Still factually, Regina adds, ‘Me? I could not do that. I had a problem, and I could not bring children.’ I realise that my expression in response to this admission must be overly sympathetic, because Regina nods, sadly. The atmosphere in the small living area of her studio apartment is bleak, as she continues.

‘So I had to leave. That is what I had to do.’
‘Everyone? Do you still talk with your family?’ I ask her, knowing that even if her husband abandoned her due to a fertility issue, Regina had previously lived with, and had close relationships to, her mother, father, and siblings.

‘Oh,’ she says, sadly. ‘Well, now I talk with them sometimes. But only sometimes. And I have to live apart. At first, I did not want anyone to know where I was. I just left, like that, because I did not want them to know me at all, since this has happened. But they kept trying to find me, so now I talk with them sometimes, and let them know I am okay. But I do not go to them too often . . . I do not eat with them, any more. I stay here. I eat only for myself, now.’

I wonder if Regina has been any attempt to situate herself within another community beyond the Central African community. Others in the Australian populace may not perceive her childlessness as an irreconcilable flaw. When I ask, Regina nods eagerly and tells me that she has developed many friendships with ‘white’ women, like myself, who accept her in spite of her ‘problem.’

‘It is good here. If this had happened to me in Burundi, I would be dead. The village, what they do is they make you go to the outside, away from the houses. You have to live by yourself in the bush. You are a witch. You cannot drink water from the same place, even. You cannot ever eat together. But here, I have some friends, and that is good . . . but it is so hard. It is too hard. I feel this depression because of what has happened to me.’

I ask her if, one day, she would like to make relationships within the Central African community again.

She is unable to respond. Tears well up in her eyes. Before the emotion can overwhelm her, Regina looks away and then says, without eye contact, that she needs to prepare herself for work. As a means of responding to my questions, she just shrugs, unable to reconcile her own desire for acceptance and recognition from the Central African community with her inability, in their logics, to do so.

In describing how her inability to conceive a child has resulted in subsequent alienation from family and friends, Regina interweaves frequent references to eating and feeding to explain the reasons why social relations, in her cultural logics, should be severed for women who are suspected to be infertile. The social ostracising of a childless woman is expressed through constraints on with whom, and where, such a woman is socially accepted to eat. In addition, the expectation that a woman will bear a child within a conjugal union is interwoven in Regina’s account with a reciprocal expectation that a woman will provide her husband with food. These interwoven references to food and infertility illustrate how Regina experiences her childlessness within this cultural context as a fundamental form of existential displacement. Infertility
represents a rupture in the cosmological flow of Regina’s existence. The sense of displacement that ensues from this rupture resonates throughout the intersubjective fabric of Regina’s existence; to be expressed not only through her childless body, but to manifest as well through limitations on the ways in which she is accepted to participate in acts of eating and feeding.

As she describes in the vignette above, whilst Regina attempts to locate a renewed sense of emplacement with ‘white’ persons who are not a part of the Central African community in Australia, she still yearns for social recognition within her nexus of kin and friend relations that share her Central African background. Although living in Australia provides Regina with other ways to source and experience existential viability apart from having children, it is evident that a cosmological imperative and cultural expectation to bear and rear children, remain salient. As experienced by Regina, and as understood by the other Central African women, childlessness is a vector of displacement that orients at an existential level. For women who experience reduced fertility, the capacity to sense purpose, fulfilment, and active input within the unfolding of their lives is itself made precarious.

V. AN ONTOLOGY OF ‘FEEDING’

The notion of ‘eating for free’ is an idiom utilised by the Central African women to emphasise the cosmological significance of female infertility. The idiom implies that instances of childlessness are an inversion of broader cosmological logics of regeneration, in which women are positioned as nurturers and contributors to the regenerative flow of existence through acts of bearing and rearing children. In the two circumstances of reduced fertility that I witnessed in Australia, both women had sought biomedical assistance to conceive a child. Both husbands and wives had been subjected to testing, but in each case it was the women who were the source of conception difficulties. Being a painful topic, these women did not recount to me the details of the medical basis of their reduced fertility or the options that had been pursued. However, in each case it was the female body, and not the male body, of their partners that came to be problematised; both within their intersubjective social networks, and within the biological dimensions of the infertility experience.59

Within the experiences of both Regina and Rachael, their bodies came to be positioned as a vector of a purposeless, and indeed counterproductive, ontology. Their childlessness came to be perceived as a selfish act of consuming of, rather contributing to, a regenerative flow of existence that is predicated on the reproduction of social relatedness and biological life through

59 Whilst I witnessed the male partners of both Rachael and Regina receive pity from others in the Central African community, they did not, from what I observed, become subject to the same level of social ostracisation as their female partners did.
procreation. In situations of childlessness within Central African contexts, infertility is perceived as a subversion of a procreation imperative, and ultimately as an inversion of those cosmological logics of regeneration through which a sense of purpose in everyday life is oriented. They are ‘eating for free’ rather than feeding the regenerative flow existence.

The use of eating idioms to characterise infertility is a practice that is similarly documented in other research in Central African ethnographic contexts. For example, in documenting how a metaphor of ‘plundered kitchens’ and ‘empty wombs’ connects female obligations of providing food and children as unified sources of sustaining life, Feldman-Savelsberg (1999) articulates how extraneous conditions of insecurity come to be embodied amongst women in the Cameroon grasslands through reproductive idioms. In comparison, Devisch (1993) documents how, amongst the Yaka people of Congo, ways of preparing, cooking, and eating symbolically mirror practices of reproducing children and maintaining pregnancy, with the protectedness and boundedness of both domains subsequently implicating each to the success of both sustaining familial life and reproducing familial lineage. In the experiences of reduced fertility amongst the Central African women who participated in this research, it is similarly evident that the cosmological significance of childlessness resonates insecurity across the social contexts of their lives, broadly. For them, reduced fertility is perceived as a circumstance that undermines a cosmological synchronism of everyday domains of family life, as similar to the reciprocal cosmologies of domestic life described by Devisch (1993) and Feldman-Savelsberg (1999). Women who do not bear children are perceived as agents that consume the sustainable properties of life; but who do not contribute to the cosmological synchronism of such processes by bearing children.

Writing in regards to a Melanesian ethnographic context, Strathern (2012) documents a similar example in which existence is characterised as an ontological dialectic of consumption and rejuvenation. In analysing the concept of ontology, Strathern (2012) suggests that as well as conceiving modes of existing as ways of having or being in the world, the practice of ‘eating’ can itself also be considered an ontology of being. Strathern (2012:1-2) draws on fieldwork conducted amongst Hagen peoples in Papua New Guinea, and also other anthropological perspectives from Amazonian contexts (e.g. Vilaça 2005), to illustrate how the act of eating can itself be embedded as an ontology of being within everyday life, writing that:

What difference would it make to our apprehension of relations if the activity for (in place of) describing states of being were Eating? . . . Across Amazonia (the act of) eating is a fundamental classificatory or logical operator. And there are countless instances of the verb being deployed in ways outsiders often take as metaphorical, as is true in Melanesia. These instances do not simply
concern rules about eating food, though such rules are part of it; ‘eating’ is applied to actions that from an English-speaking perspective do not involve taking in food in any immediate sense. The English concept of consuming might be more apt, except that eating summons the bodily nature of the activity.

For the Central African women who participated in this research, the act of eating similarly encompasses meaning beyond the process of physically imbibing nourishment. For them, the idiom of ‘eating for free’ refers to a physical process of ingesting food that one has not earned or contributed to. ‘Eating for free’ therefore references a culturally specific ontology of being through ‘feeding’ that is experienced as fundamental to purposeful existence.

Whilst Strathern (2012) focuses on ‘eating’ as an ontological state, implied within her analysis is the complementary notion that ‘feeding’ can be similarly experienced as a contrasting mode of ontological being. For these women, ‘feeding’ is a state of regenerating the flow of existence through sustaining, nurturing, and reproducing social and corporeal facets of existence. Instances of infertility are perceived and experienced by these women as being through a state of ‘eating’; that is, freely ingesting and consuming of the world without reciprocal re-locating of regenerative properties through acts of reproduction. Without tempering this state of being through ‘eating’ with complementary modes of being through ‘feeding,’ childless women come to be perceived within their intersubjective surroundings as not fully participating within the expectations of a cosmology of regeneration.60

60 The ontology of ‘eating’ and ‘feeding’ outlined by Strathern (2012) implies a reciprocal relatedness between eater and feeder. However, the onus of regenerating this relatedness is particularly attached to the provider of food, rather than recipient. In the notion of ‘eating for free’ as expressed by the Central African women, within the context of a marriage between husband and wife the onus of regenerating relatedness is placed primarily onto women who are tasked with nurturing and protecting the reproduction process, that is nonetheless initiated by their husbands. ‘Eating for free’ thus implies a relationship of power between husbands and wives in this ethnographic context. I am not able to detail the intricacies of this power relationship in the thesis for a number of practical reasons, which nonetheless encompass significant implications in terms of how this relation of power is expressed and may develop. Firstly, despite spending significant periods of time with the women in their homes, I rarely witnessed the women sharing space with their husbands. If a woman’s husband was at home whilst I was there, they primarily occupied space in the bedroom, sleeping; or sat in the formal living areas watching television. In my presence, the women did not usually share these activities with their husbands. Primarily, however, men were not present at the home whilst I conducted fieldwork with the women. The women’s husbands were frequently absent, either: studying; working; attending appointments; and visiting friends. The only time I would observe men specifically returning to the home was in the later afternoon for a meal, and also late in the evenings for sleep and spending time with their family. I observed that women’s husbands had a fluidity of movement between the public and private space that was not so easily, or readily, taken on by wives. However, the women utilised the absence of their husbands in the home and the differentiation of gendered space to occupy the domestic arena and to locate themselves within it as a locus of female-specific power. The ontology of ‘eating’ and ‘feeding’ thus plays out, for the women, through gendered power structures. As ‘eaters’, husbands return to the home to be ‘served’ food, sleep, and have sexual activity with their wives, whilst as ‘feeders’ the wives provide these things to their husbands but still maintain the powerful role of nurturing the space within which these reciprocal relations unfold. The intersection of this ontology through the materiality of spatial boundaries and gendered social structures is not able to be explored in detail in this thesis.
This ontological sense of existing as a ‘feeder’ for Central African women encompasses an intersection of ontology and cosmology. For them, existing as a mother is a fundamental role through which to experience ontological being as a ‘feeder’ who contributes to the regeneration of social and material existence. Within other Central African ethnographic contexts, this cosmological basis of a specific sense of ontological being through reproduction has been similarly recognised. In his work amongst the Yaka of Congo, Devisch (1993) shows that biological reproduction forms a logic of relating to the world for the Yaka beyond arenas of sexuality. Relatedness to others and practices of everyday life such as domestic tasks and tending gardens for Yaka people are described by Devisch (1993) as being experienced through an ontological axis of reproductive potentiality. In more recent work, Devisch (2012) shows how Congolese peoples experience the world as a complex fabric of regenerative potential. For the Congolese in Devisch’s (2012) research, specific ontologies of being are oriented through embodied relatedness between humans, things, fauna, flora, and intraworldly forces. Moving beyond the notion of reproductive potentialities as ‘preoccupations’ within Central African regions, as this reproductive imperative is described by Moore (1999:24), Devisch’s (1993, 2012) perspective implies that attention to procreation expresses a corporeal interweaving of cosmic forces and human materiality as a coalesced ontological trajectory of regenerative potentiality.

Drawing on this sense of reproductive capacity as an ontology of ‘feeding’ through which cosmology and ontological being intersect, I argue that the imperative to bear and rear children is not a mechanistic and fixed facet of a homogenous Central African ‘culture.’ Instead, this cosmology of regenerative flow is experienced as a processual, temporal, and dynamic axis of purposeful ontological being. The women locate a sense of existential purpose specifically through existing as a mother, because it is through acts of reproduction that the women are intersubjectively positioned as an agent contributing to a cosmological flow of regeneration. For the Central African women, existence is an intertwined dialectic of ontological being as both ‘feeder’ and ‘eater.’ To temper the individualistic basis of the ‘eating’ ontology, and to affirm the reciprocal basis of this dual ontological imperative, requires, however, that the women contribute to the regenerative potentiality of the world by existing within it as a mother.

VI. SHifting Ontologies AND Existential Discontinuity

The notion of ‘eating’ and ‘feeding’ as distinct but complementary ontologies through which Central African women experience being implies that there are a multiplicity of ways through which to experience ontological being. To recognise the depth of existential displacement that emerges in tensions between these dual modes of ontological being for Central African women
who are experiencing childlessness, it is necessary to characterise what is meant by the concept of ‘ontology’ as referring to how people experience being in the world.

Broadly speaking, the notion of ‘ontology’ refers to ‘a fundamental set of understandings about how the world is: what kinds of beings, processes, and qualities could potentially exist and how these relate to each other’ (Harris and Robb 2012:668). What has been described as the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology pertains to the ways in which contemporary disciplinary debates focus on unsettling the notion of ontology as a state of universal being; a condition of existence unique to each culture or individual that is able to be compared in a relativist sense; or, the platform of a fundamental state of alterity in which being, worlds, and lived realities are temporal, indeterminate, and incommensurable in terms of categorical frameworks (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2009; Venkatesan 2010). Debates within this arena centre on the problematic of whether anthropologists recognise or refute the notion of ‘a stable an universal “nature” viewed through various “cultural” perspectives’ (Heywood 2012).

Above, I describe how Central African women perceive and experience childlessness as a basis of existential displacement that stems from ruptures in an ontological dialectic between ‘eating’ and ‘feeding.’ In the context of the thesis, then, this tension of conceptualising ontology pertains to whether I conceive of these Central African women as being through motherhood as a primordial and universal reality of human reproduction, from which their own cultural perceptions then stem; or, whether I conceive of their experiences of being through motherhood as a uniquely constituted ontology unable to be categorised within an overarching meta-ontology of human existence, such as pertaining to a fundamentally shared human experience of biological reproduction. Subsequently, it is the body, and particularly the female body and its reproductive capacity, that is the central point of contention when analysing how the Central African women constitute and experience their ontological being. That is, is the body as experienced through and perceived by the Central African women able to be conceived of as a universalised biological platform of ontological existence? Or, are the bodies of the Central African women, by virtue of being experienced through unique intersubjective trajectories, therefore constitutive of uniquely embodied ontologies of being?

In terms of a theoretical paradigm of embodiment, all human experience orients through the lived body as that locus of materiality through which being in the world is capacitated (Harris and Robb 2012). This fundamental presence of the body in the orienting of lived experience cannot, however, be conflated, within an embodiment paradigm, with the notion of the body as a universal platform of human existence. For example, Harris and Robb (2012:676) recognise that the body is a fundamental locus of existence, but suggest that ‘because the body is always a
source of experience and something that is conceptualized in a specific way, there are different ontologies of the body.’ What they mean is that it is through the contingent social-material contexts in which bodies and existence are experienced that multiple ontologies of being through the body are ‘always already’ a potential within human lived experiences (Harris and Robb 2012:676). It is because of the body, as a socially, temporally, and historically dynamic locus of being, that existence is ‘always ontologically multimodal’ (Harris and Robb 2012:676).

Accordingly, I argue that, for the Central African women, bodily experiences are always contextualised within an ontological modality that is indexed according to the temporal, social, and cultural particularities of their specific intersubjective location. I have conceptualised two of these modalities as ways of being through ‘eating’ and ‘feeding.’ There are, however, an infinite number of potential ontologies through which Central African women experience the world within the contingent locus of their lived bodies. These ontologies of being, as I observed them, evince the multimodality of existence through lived bodies but do not suggest that these represent a universalised or normative framework for them through which their sense of being can be refracted in anthropological analysis. Whilst cosmological logics of regeneration, as similarly understood by the Central African women, are the platform from which such a sense of existing as either ‘eating’ or ‘feeding’ are oriented, experiencing the unfolding of life through these ontologies is only ever a tendency within a broader multiplicity of ontological potentialities.

VII. A SENSE OF PURPOSELESS BEING

It is through this potential for ontological existence to be experienced in a multiplicity of ways that the existential discontinuity of infertility for the Central African women can be analysed as itself constituting a possible vector of ontological being. The potential for this sense of discontinuity and diminished existential purpose to itself, however, form a basis of ontological existence requires problematisation. This is a topic that has been theorised by Bourdieu (2000:222), who conceptualises unemployment as an experience of being suspended from an ‘illusion’ of vital purpose. Unemployment detaches a person from the temporal and institutional structures that organise their habitus, according to Bourdieu (2000). The concept of habitus refers to ‘a durable, transposable system of definitions acquired initially by the young child in the home as a result of the conscious and unconscious practices of her/his family’ (Bourdieu 1992:134) and which persists as ‘the habitus—embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product’ (Bourdieu 1990:56). In Bourdieu’s (2000:222) analysis of unemployment, the person is
detached from such expectations of vital function that are structured within the societal frameworks of their habitus, to leave the unemployed persons with:

[T]he free time that is left to them as dead time, purposeless and meaningless. If time seems to be annihilated, this is because employment is the support, if not the source, of most interests, expectations, demands, hopes and investments in the present (Bourdieu 2000:222).

It is possible, according to this analysis of unemployment by Bourdieu (2000:222), to be ‘dispossessed of the vital illusion of having a function or a mission, of having to be or do something.’ Whereas the basis of this experience of purposelessness is, in Bourdieu’s (2000) analysis, the condition of unemployment, the state of childlessness for the women who participated in this research can be similarly considered within that vein. For them, it is the presence of their offspring that is the source of their ‘interests, expectations, demands, hopes and investments in the present’ (Bourdieu 2000:222). Without children, the Central African women embody a present that is similarly void of a sense of existential purpose.

However, in Bourdieu’s (2000) theorisation, a sense of ‘nothingness’ is not a possible basis of ontological being. A sense of purposelessness is, in Bourdieu’s (2000) approach, always an illusion because habitus continues to propel existence within a purposeful and informed trajectory, regardless. Hage (2014), however, argues that the condition of reduced agency and absence of existential purpose can itself be a state of being, based on the idea that the body has an ontological capacity to exist and be oriented in the world whilst concurrently accompanied by a sense of subjective detachment to and from this process. If we consider Merleau-Ponty’s (2004) contention that all dimensions of experience are illusory, in the sense that the experiencing subject engages with their surrounding environs through the process of perception, then it can be considered that some states of existence can feel to an experiencing subject as more- or less-able to form a base sense of security, whilst they are still existing in a state of ontological being. This speaks to the inherent indeterminacy of the perceptual basis of ontological continuity (Merleau-Ponty 2004).

Extending on a conceptualisation of the body as a contingent platform of ontological orientation, Hage (2014) asserts that existential purpose is similarly contingent. At the centre of Hage’s (2014) analysis of ontology as able to be suspended from vectors of purpose is Bourdieu’s (1990, 1992) concept of habitus. It is the politicised struggles that structure the constituting of habitus in particularised ways, and from which societal hierarchies are reproduced and expressed, that are central to Hage’s (2014) analysis. The concept of ‘habitus’ is, in Hage’s (2014) reading of the term, not simply referring to the notion that existence is a
process of constant re-positioning between differently dispositioned people. Instead, it can be considered that the different habitus of these subjects also encompasses a distinct, and politicised, reality. Therefore, the subjectivity of lived experience as oriented through habitus is not absented from politicised structuring, in Hage’s (2014) reading of Bourdieu. To Hage (2014:153), at the basis of Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of habitus (1977) is recognition of ‘social realities as “real constructions.”’ This opens up the possibility that, whilst a person’s sense of existence is subjectively oriented, this subjectivity can thus be conditioned through the constructed realities of politicised struggles in which their existence unfolds. Subsequently, and as Hage (2014) suggests, it is possible that impoverished existential viability is itself a potential mode of ontological being, because if existential continuity is only ever illusory, then corporeal and embodied existence persists even when this process is oriented through subjectivities of uncertainty and discontinuity.

Expanding on Bourdieu’s (2000) conceptualisation of purposelessness, and in theorising this interplay between ontological being and existential purpose, Hage is problematising the notion that ‘to be deprived of purpose and orientation is to simply be deprived of raisons d’etre, to be deprived of being’ (2014:155). The argument that emerges in Hage’s (2014) perspective is that existential purpose is a set of contingent logics embedded within similarly contingent ontologies. Whilst ontologies of being shift across multimodalities, the sense of existential purpose encompassed within these modes of being can also be ruptured through them. Thereby, ontological being can itself be experienced as a sense of discontinuity through the ways that existential purpose is oriented, affirmed, and ruptured through the indeterminate passage of ontological existence.

VIII. THE BARE KITCHEN

Circumstances of childlessness are experienced as ruptures within the fabric of existential purpose through which Central African women locate a sense of continuity. A reduced capacity to conceive, bear, and nurture children is, in the understandings of these woman, a fundamental platform which experiences of displacement, as an existential condition, are oriented. The experience of ‘displacement’ for refugee subjects cannot, then, be mechanistically reduced to socio-spatial mobilities and politico-legal ambiguities that are encompassed in processes of forced migration. For these Central African women, it is when cosmological imperatives to reproduce children and sustain the existence of offspring are imperilled that existential continuity is experienced as precarious. As Rachael’s experiences, below, illustrate, ‘displacement’ is an existential condition oriented through the body. Particularly, it is through this ontological disjuncture in being unable to exist as a mother that Rachael experiences an
acute sense of discontinuity, and which is intimately interwoven through her reduced bodily
capacity to regenerate human life:

August 29th, 2013 – Rachael’s house in a regional Australian city

A month after the church meeting, I visit Rachael at her home. It is three months since the last
time that I have been to her apartment. I am shocked by the changes there when Rachael opens
the door and welcomes me inside.

When I step into the living and kitchen area of Rachael’s apartment, I am at first disconcerted by
the surroundings but cannot isolate why. It takes me a couple of seconds to realise that there is
no furniture in the room apart from an ancient refrigerator. The kitchen area is similarly bare.
Her husband is at work, so we are alone.

‘What happened?’ I ask Rachael as I indicate with my arm the bereft living space.

‘Oh,’ she waves her hand, dismissively, ‘The things here, they were old. So I took them out to
the rubbish. I am waiting to get new ones, but the old ones, they had had to go.’

Bereft of a table, we sit on mismatched dining chairs facing across from each other.

‘But why not wait until you had the new furniture before you took out the old things?’ I ask her.

Rachael shrugs, then says, ‘They were just old. It is okay, we are fine. Other things will come.
We needed to get rid of the old.’

‘Nothing made you do it, though? You just decided?’ I probe.

‘Yes,’ Rachael responds. She does not elaborate further.

She does, however, offer me a meal. As she sets about warming food on the stove, Rachael tells
me that she is sorry she cannot offer me a cool drink. The refrigerator is broken, and has been for
some weeks. Rachael and her husband are not able to afford a replacement, currently.

Returning with steaming bowls of warmed food, Rachael laments the current economic and
material hardships that she and her husband are facing. They are working hard to save money to
rectify the poverty they are now living in, but she hopes to stop soon.

‘Why will you stop?’ I ask her. ‘It sounds like things are very hard.’
‘Yes,’ she nods, agreeing. ‘But soon I will bring a baby. I will.’ Rachael almost mouths this last sentence, as if repeating a mantra.

Eschewing taboos on directly inquiring after a pregnancy, I ask Rachael if she is pregnant now. There is a long pause before she responds.

‘No . . . ’ she says, ‘Not . . . not now. But I will be, soon. We are trying.’ She does not add what she has told me on previous occasions; that she and her husband have been trying to conceive a child continuously over the past four years.

Rachael takes my hand and leads me to a bedroom down a hallway. She opens the door. The small room contains a single bed and other oddments that designate it as a spare room.

‘This . . . ’ she says, ‘this is for my baby. This is the baby’s room.’ Despite its apparent lack of current use, this room appears to be the most heavily furnished in Rachael’s apartment.

We go back to the living room. Rachael again busies herself in a kitchen that is bereft of furniture and other implements, with a refrigerator that does not function as it should. After being in the furnished space of the ‘baby’s’ room, the bareness of Rachael’s kitchen seems, to me, to be especially stark (Figure 15).
Through the constraints of her physical body, Rachael has not yet been able to overcome the paradox of being a married woman with no children. The ambiguities of her social location are conditioned by a cosmological expectation that women bear and rear children. It is through the reproductive capacities of female bodies that existential continuity and ontological security is mediated for Central African women. As oriented through the indeterminancies of embodied being, however, such ontologies can become dislocated. Even though existing through a body thus orients ontological being within an intersubjective fabric of life, there is, according to Hage (2014:155) no guarantee that a subject thus ‘encounters the world purposefully.’ It is through the conception, bearing, and caring for offspring that the lives of Central African women are imbued with a sense of purpose and existential viability. For them, children are the source of their continuing investment in the unfolding of the present. Bereft of a child, Rachael’s sense of purposeful existence is subsequently displaced.

Rachael’s capacity to be recognised as a person in her social landscape is undermined because her childless condition inverts cosmological logics of regenerative flow, in which she is expected and required to bear offspring in order to contribute to the social, biological, and filial reproduction of life. Her sense of existential purpose is so intimately intertwined with this desire to bear a child that the more protracted her condition of childlessness remains, the more bereft her life becomes of purpose beyond this aim. Rachael persists as an embodied being in the world, but the continuity of her existence is fundamentally shifted through this experience of childlessness. With her ontological capacity to exist as a mother increasingly threatened, Rachael subsequently experiences her contemporary childlessness as a sense of ontological insecurity.

IX. DIMENSIONS OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

Reduced fertility is, for these Central African women, a circumstance of bodily stasis. The un-reproductive body symbolises a direct refutation of their cosmological understandings of the world as unfolding according to a trajectory of regeneration. As such, the experience of childlessness dislocates an ontological potential to exist as a mother. The sense of discontinuity that emerges within this inversion of cosmological logics can be conceptualised as a mode of ontological insecurity for childless Central African women. Ontological security is defined by ‘autonomy of bodily control within predictable routines’ (Giddens 1984:50). The experience of childlessness for Central African women disrupts this sense of continuity, because in their perspectives secure parameters of female existence necessitate the bearing of offspring.
The capacity to experience ontological security is based on a perceptual sense of continuity that the structures through which social and corporeal existence is mediated are, and will, continue to manifest in predictable ways (Giddens 1984:50). When conflict, instability, and disempowerment are structured into daily life, experiences of having this perceptual sense of continuity disrupted become routinised, thereby structuring a persistent ontology of insecurity within the lives of persons in such circumstances. In anthropological research, processes of forced migration that often encompass violence, conflict, uncertainty, and geographic mobility are often conflated with an assumption that these experiences automatically position refugees within a condition of ontological insecurity. For example, James (2011:363) asserts that:

ONTLOGICAL INSECURITY FREQUENTLY RESULTS IN THE FLIGHT OF TRAUMATIZED REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS IN SEARCH OF SAFETY . . . FOR SOME OF THESE PERSONS, ASYLUM WOULD BE FOUND IN A REFUGEE CAMP. FOR OTHERS, SANCTUARY COULD BE ATTAINED IN WHAT ONE MIGHT CALL A ‘SECURE STATE,’ A NATION IN WHICH HUMAN AND CIVIL RIGHTS ARE RECOGNIZED, AND IN WHICH THE ROUTINES AND STRUCTURES OF DAILY LIFE ARE PERCEIVED AS MORE PREDICTABLE.

When examining how refugees themselves experience forced migration, it is evident, however, that shifts in ontological security are not so easily reducible to the socio-political instabilities encompassed in their experiences of exodus and refugee settlement. In contrast to what James (2011) suggests, the historicity of refugee experiences represents a source of ongoing insecurity within ostensibly ‘secure’ terrains of refuge (Malkki 1995a; Jackson 2013b:103). The loss of autonomy encompassed within experiences of refugee flight persists in settings of refugee settlement. Focusing on how refugees narrate their past experiences of exodus within settings of refugee settlement, Jackson (2013b:102-103) shows that such narration processes are a means through which refugees attempt to re-locate a sense of chronology and succession of life that has been disrupted by forced migration. Within ostensibly secure terrains of ‘refuge,’ this ontological discontinuity is not mechanistically re-wielded simply because material, social, and political conditions of life are physically safe. Ontologies of secure existence in settings of ostensible ‘refuge’ cannot be reduced to the forms of material security that they have access to there. It is through the reproductive capacities of their lived bodies that Central African women come to experience ontological security because, for them, the capacity to bear and rear children is perceived as a fundamental platform from which existential continuity is oriented.

X. CONCLUSION

What the accounts above suggest is that assumptions of ontological insecurity as inherently attached to processes of forced migration do not take into account the multiplicities and specificities of ontological existence. For Central African women, ontological insecurity does
not just pertain to their existence as characterised by one way of being that then comes to be shattered by the socio-spatial mobilities of refugee experience. When referring to the concept of ontology, analyses of ontological security necessarily need to take into account the particularities of ontological existence rather than assume what constitutes, for research subjects, a source of rupture. As Jackson (2011:61) asserts, it is problematic to take ‘straightened circumstances and material poverty as signs of an impoverished humanity.’ As Jackson (2011:61) elaborates, ‘it is how one bears the burden of life that matters, how one endures the situation in which one finds oneself thrown.’

For the Central African women who participated in this study, experiences of routine instability are not themselves constitutive of ontological insecurity. For them, ontological insecurity as manifesting a sense of ‘displacement’ is an existential condition. It is in the ways that such routines of instability, violence, and insecurity impact on the capacity for them to perceive themselves as contributing to the regenerative flow of existence that their sense of displacement stems. Subsequently, the ontological insecurity that emerges from childlessness manifests a sense of displacement that is existential in scope. It is not possible to simplistically reduce such experiences to the socio-political insecurities encompassed in their status as refugees.

Circumstances of childlessness as interpreted and experienced by the Central African women emerge in this chapter as an affective basis of existential displacement. Within conditions of refugee settlement, it is the capacity to exist as a mother, as embedded within an ontological trajectory of ‘feeding’ and contributing to the regenerative flow of existence, which orients a sense of existential continuity. Conversely, instances of reduced fertility and childlessness make this expectation of female purpose through motherhood precarious. Reduced fertility shifts how these women experience ontological being as cosmologically grounded in a fundamental status of existing as a mother. Childlessness, for them, results in an acute sense of existential displacement that eclipses other dislocations of their forced migration.

In the accounts of childlessness outlined above, it is the reproductive capacities of physical bodies that constrain Central African women from experiencing an ontology of being as a mother. In the chapter that follows, I turn to an examination of circumstances in which experiences of childlessness are enforced on Central African women through child protection interventions administered through institutions of the Australian state. The capacity to bear offspring and experience familial relatedness is not, for these women, constituted in a vacuum; but is conditioned by, and for some determined through, mechanisms of governance draw on by the Australian state to manage its population; and, particularly, those positioned as cultural ‘Others’ within it.
There are circumstances in which Central African women experience the rupturing of their ontology of being as a mother not through reduced fertility but as a result of intervention from the Australian government, whereby children who are evaluated as being at risk of significant harm are placed under the guardianship of the state. It is to these experiences of forced child removal, and the affective dimensions of existential displacement that they encompass, to which I now turn. Both the potentiality and lived reality of forced child removal encompasses a salient source of existential displacement for Central African women within a setting of ostensible ‘refuge.’ Indeed, as I elaborate below, for women who are subjected to interventions of forced child removal, this enforced severing of maternal relatedness results in an affective experience of existing as physically alive, but existentially ‘dead.’

In this chapter I document the experiences of two Congolese women, Sophia and Lina. Both of these women were resettled in Australia with their families after previously living in refugee camps in Africa. Since their resettlement, both have had their children forcibly removed from their parental care by the child protection agency in Australia and their parental guardianship severed through ensuing legal mandates. Within their experiences described below, interventions of forced child removal emerge as an acute source of displacement deriving from the evaluations of particular workers within the child protection system who, in assessing parental behaviours, can subsequently position the ways in which African refugee women practice motherhood as inherently ‘Other’ to, and therefore threatening of, an imaginary of acceptable parenting standards in Australia. The neutralising of these evaluative procedures as stemming from the supposedly objective logics of child protection workers means that the removal of children from families of African refugee settlers is depicted as ‘natural, necessary, and legitimate, rather than coercive and destructive’ (Kline 1992:375). For Sophia, Lina, and other Central African women, the potentiality and lived reality of forced child removal is a basis of ontological rupture, in which the cosmological logics of existing as a mother are made precarious; and, for some, irrevocably displaced.

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61 The Central African women are positioned as inherently ‘Other’ to the mainstream population by virtue of their being visibly different to the dominant ‘white’ populace. This extends on the analysis of Hage (1998:133), who describes how black- or brown-skinned peoples become positioned as ‘Third World-Looking Migrants’ who are situated within Australia’s civil populace as persons who, by virtue of their assumed difference, are in need of heightened surveillance and increased governance.
I. A PARADOX OF PROTECTION

January 31st, 2013 – Housing compound in Kampala

I sit on the steps outside my apartment in Kampala with Elena and Pulani. We are surrounded by buckets, and clothes in various states of being washed. Both in their late teens and unmarried, Elena and Pulani are intensely curious about life in Australia. As I dip my hands into the sudsy water to scrub and wring my clothes, I try to provide them with a portrayal of resettlement in Australia that depicts the ways that the refugees I know there experience it. At one point, the discussion turns to having children in Australia. I say, offhandedly, ‘You do realise the Australian government can take a mother’s children away?’

Both Elena and Pulani turn to each other, then laugh in response. They continue washing unconcernedly.

‘No, seriously,’ I continue. ‘The government in Australia has a right to take children away from their parents if they think the parent is not doing a good job.’

Still, Elena and Pulani do not believe me. ‘You are joking,’ Elena says, slapping my leg with a wet hand.

‘They could not do that,’ Pulani adds. ‘When you are a parent, you are a parent. No.’

‘Well they do, seriously,’ I continue. ‘They take some children, and put them with other families. It happens.’ I say.

‘But Africans are good.’ Elena says. ‘We are good parents.’

‘Yes,’ I respond. ‘But the government decides that. I know some women, from Congo, who have had their babies taken away in Australia.’

Finally, both Elena and Pulani look at me with serious expressions, grasping the gravity of what I am explaining. Still, they seem unable to accept the idea of forced child removal as a reality. The notion that a government would forcibly intervene in the parenting of children is incomprehensible to them.

‘No, that is not good,’ Elena says. ‘That could not happen.’

The idea of forcibly separating a mother from her child is not simply aberrant to Central African women. As the encounter with Elena and Pulani above suggests, for many Central African
women this practice is incomprehensible. That is, until they are resettled in Australia and confronted with the reality of forced child removal as an ever-present potentiality.

This inability to conceive of a circumstance in which relatedness between a mother and child is purposely severed by the state emphasises that these Central African women experience an ontology of being a mother as a fundamental and taken-for-granted organising principle of daily life. Subsequently, the fracturing of the mother-child dyad acutely undermines the cosmological logics of regeneration that organise, and imbue purpose within, the lived experiences of Central African women in settings of refugee settlement. Acts of separating women from their children emerge in the imaginaries and lived realities of these women as experiences of exceptional violence.

Within other Central African ethnographic contexts, this relatedness through the mother-child dyad has been documented as a powerful symbol of continuity of descent. In characterising the forms of violence that have emerged in Central African conflicts, both Malkki (1995a) and Taylor (1999) illustrate that violent acts have been frequently intended to both symbolically and directly sever the relatedness between mother and offspring. Malkki (1995a:92-93), for example, describes how, during the Burundian conflicts, acts of intentionally disembowelling pregnant women and forcing women to consume the bodies of dead children were intended to symbolise and instantiate the active destruction of mother-child relatedness. Pregnant women were also made targets in the Rwandan genocide of 1994 (Taylor 1999). In those contexts, acts of severing relatedness between mother and offspring encompassed direct and acute dimensions of physical violence.

Interventions of forced child removal that are operationalised through the child protection system in Australia do not utilise such methods of physical violence to sever maternal relatedness. However, in directly obstructing the parental responsibilities of specific Central African women from their children, and leading others to live in a persistent state of fear related to this potentiality in their own lives, child protection mandates from the Australian state reproduce a form of violence that also results in destroying the relatedness encompassed in the mother-child dyad. Whilst not perpetrated through physical acts of harm, the enforced separation of Central African women from their children, as is emphasised in accounts below, emerges for them as an experience of exceptional violence. For some women, this can be an experience that eclipses the various forms of structural and physical violence that characterised the prior hardships of their forced migration and refugee exile.
II. AN ENDURING LEGACY

Whilst the interventions of forced child removal emerge below as instances of exceptional violence, these experiences are not themselves exceptional within the broader mechanisms of governance that are imposed on refugees, migrants, and those persons positioned within Anglo-Australian dominated political structures as cultural ‘Others’ (Hage 1998). Despite a lack of familiarity with the historical specificities of Australian contexts of forced child removal, resettled Central African refugee women are nonetheless aware of, and sensitive to, the legacy of how concepts of ‘protection’ have historically been utilised by the Australian state as a mode of controlling communities perceived as ‘Other.’ The vignette below demonstrates this:

May 15th, 2013 – M1 motorway from Sydney

In the back seat of the van, I listen to Miriam update her friend, Louise, on recent occurrences in the lives of their friends within the Central African refugee diaspora. It is after midnight, and we are driving back from Sydney airport having picked up Louise after she arrived on an international flight. The gossiping between the two women continues for some time, but I am abruptly involved in the conversation when Miriam turns to me and says, ‘Tell her that it is true. That family, you know who I mean, their children were taken by the government.’

I confirm that the story is, indeed, true. Upon hearing that a mother from the Central African community in Australia, has ‘lost’ their children, Louise stares out the window in silent disbelief. Miriam, however, turns to me and says, ‘Isn’t this what the government did with the Aboriginal people? Didn’t they get all of their children taken away?’

‘Not all,’ I say, ‘... but many.’

‘Why do they do it?’ Miriam continues. Her tone is angry. ‘This is a bad government. They hate black families. Australia is a very, very bad place.’

Miriam’s reference to systemic practices of forced child removal as experienced by Aboriginal families in Australia is significant. As these women have ascertained, the Australian state has a historical legacy of forcibly removing children from their families as a means of instituting Anglo-Australian cultural dominance over minority groups within the civil populace. From 1914 to 1970, the Commonwealth government of Australia and its state and territory counterparts operationalised policies of systematically removing Aboriginal children of ‘mixed-racial’ descent from Aboriginal families and forcibly resettling these children within Anglo-Australian care environments (Probyn 2003:62). Incomplete records mean that the exact number of Aboriginal children affected by these policies remains unknown, but estimates from a
government-commissioned report into the removal practices suggests that between 1 in 3 and 1 in 10 Aboriginal children were forcibly removed their families during the period of 1910 to 1970 (Commonwealth of Australia 1997). This means that hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal children are estimated to have experienced systematic child removal as perpetrated by the Australian state.

The explicit aim of these policies was ‘to convert the half-caste into a white citizen’ as directly stated by Cecil Cook in 1937 whilst he was acting in the government position of Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory of Australia (Probyn 2003:64; Krieken 2004). The use of the term ‘Protector’ in Cook’s title reflects the overarching discourse of benevolence used by the Australian government of the time to justify these systemic regimes of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families. In practice, this ostensibly benevolent discourse of protecting children obscured that these removal practices were singularly justified in government policy due to assumptions of cultural inferiority attached to Aboriginal descent. These procedures of involuntary removal were condoned in that period as necessary, at least by Anglo-Australian actors within parliamentary arenas, because of arguments that it was in the ‘best interests’ of Aboriginal children of ‘mixed-racial’ descent to be raised within Anglo-Australian cultural contexts (Probyn 2003:60). As such, the forced removal of Aboriginal children through policies with an overtly genocidal aim of eventually eliminating Aboriginality from the Australia populace came to be construed as a form of benevolence (Krieken 2004; Bartrop 2001). The Australian government ostensibly worked to ‘protect’ Aboriginal children from harm. ‘Harm,’ however, was conceptualised in their logics as children being immersed within their family of Aboriginal relatives (Krieken 2004; Bartrop 2001).

In contemporary political and popular arenas in Australia, the systematic removal of Aboriginal children as it occurred in the 20th century is almost universally abhorred. These practices are frequently depicted as a ‘dark chapter’ in the nation’s history and thereby relegated to a dissociable past (Probyn 2003:61). Regardless, this systematic apparatus of removing children from familial care due primarily to assumptions attached to cultural difference has an enduring legacy within contemporary Australian society, as the experiences of Lina and Sophia, whose accounts are documented further below, attest.

III. ‘PROTECT’ THE CHILDREN

Whilst in previous eras the racialisation of Aboriginal Australians was explicit within government policy, contemporary arenas of governance perpetuate such legacies but do so through covert means. Subsequently, being born within a family of Aboriginal cultural descent
is no longer justification enough to remove a child in contemporary policies of child protection in Australia; yet, assumptions of difference attached to Aboriginal families continue to index them as vulnerable to child protection interventions. Within the contemporary child protection system in Australia, the ostensibly benevolent mandate of ensuring child welfare continues to be justified on the basis of ‘protection.’ The emotive imagery of protecting children serves, however, to obscure the forms of violence that continue to be perpetuated through these systems.

In this ‘protection’ discourse, the ‘child’ is invoked as a symbol of bare humanity: an innocent, vulnerable, and ever-potential victim that requires state protection (Valentine 1996; Malkki 2010). By being framed as a system of protecting innocent children, the inequalities that can be crystallised through these institutions are positioned as beyond critical unsettling (Fassin 2012:244-246). As aiming to ‘protect’ ostensibly innocent, suffering, and abused children, the child protection system is depicted as inherently benevolent. However, as Malkki (2010:61) suggests, such representations of ‘childlike innocence is a way of making recipients of humanitarian assistance a tabula rasa, innocent of politics and history,’ through which the constructed logics of institutional interventions, and the contradictions they may encompass, can be uncritically legitimated. Invoking implicit representations of the suffering child in need of ‘protection’ is a way for systems of child protection to perpetuate forms of racialisation and cultural bias that can underlie the institutional logics of forced child removal interventions (Kline 1992; Walter, Taylor, and Habibis 2011; Scherz 2011), and yet remain beyond critique.

When conducting fieldwork for this research, I came to witness how forms of violence are reproduced through such systems of child protection through my immersion in the lives of women who had experienced forced child removal interventions. I did not set out to directly explore this phenomenon, but when conducting fieldwork I incidentally, and not insignificantly, encountered multiple women who had directly experienced the removal of their children through the child protection system. From a cohort of 35 Central African women resettled in Australia, three had directly experienced the removal of their children. The remaining women each had an acute awareness of, and fear pertaining to, child protection interventions. The terror

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62 For Aboriginal children, specifically, the repercussions of these procedures endure beyond the period in which direct removal of Aboriginal children was systematised in Australia between 1910 to 1970. For example, in 2009 Aboriginal children in Australia were seven times more likely to be living in a foster care environment than non-Aboriginal children (Tilbury 2009). According to Tilbury (2009), this over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system in its contemporary form stems from the enduring affects of cultural degradation as a result of forced child removal policies throughout the 20th century. Such patterns of inequality, Tilbury (2009) argues, are likely to be perpetuated whilst ever governments neglect to address basic platforms of Indigenous self-determination necessary to the functioning practice of family life. Rather than continue to problematise Aboriginal families as themselves necessitating the basis of such interventions, Walter, Taylor, and Habibis (2011) argue, in contrast, that the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection arenas is due to a continuing legacy of Anglo-Australian cultural bias within systems of child welfare.
induced by the potentiality for child removal prompted multiple Central African families I knew to remove themselves from particular regions in Australia where they perceived child removal practices to be systemic. I traced the development of this unconventional diaspora as it spread, conducting fieldwork with transient refugee families as they moved between regional towns, urban cities, and, eventually, Australian territorial states.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF FORCED CHILD REMOVAL INTERVENTIONS IN AUSTRALIA

The overarching aim of child protection services across Australia is to protect children from behaviours constitutive of harm. However, assumptions of difference attached to Central African women make them particularly vulnerable to such interventions, as I elaborate below (cf. Briggs 2012). Workers in the child protection system do not always enter ‘ethnicity,’ ‘cultural background,’ or ‘country of origin’ when compiling data about the families they work with, so it is difficult to directly ascertain the number of Central African families affected by forced child removal. Estimates suggest, however, that resettled refugees who originate from African countries are disproportionately involved in child protection interventions (Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2009; Sawrikar 2009:9), despite representing a marginal section of the overall population in Australia (Settlement and Multicultural Affairs [SMA] 2014). The estimation that African refugee families are more likely to be involved in such interventions suggests that these processes are not as indiscriminate as implied by the supposedly objectified procedures they follow.

Although the statutory mandate to protect the welfare of children in Australia is the responsibility of individual state and territory governments rather than a federated system, child protection is, broadly, a national project. Particularities of each state- and territory-level system are eclipsed by commonalities in purpose and structure that manifest nation-wide (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW] 2014:2). Firstly, child protection apparatuses across Australia are similarly tasked with receiving and assessing reports of suspected child abuse. Once a report has been issued in regards to a particular child, workers from the child protection agency investigate the notification and determine whether the allegation poses a risk of significant harm to a child. If a child is determined to be at immediate risk, workers remove

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63 In critically exploring how the child protection system in Australia can operate to govern and disempower Central African women, I am not suggesting that the system as a whole is unnecessary or flawed. Rather, with reference to two specific case studies based on in-depth ethnographic immersion, I am describing here how these systems can, and in these cases have, reproduced forms of inequality that particularly relate to cultural difference. This is not to undermine the lived reality of abuse and neglect for the majority of children who are identified as being at ‘risk’ through systems of child protection; nor am I suggesting that institutionalised forms of protecting children and providing safe and secure foster homes for abused children is an unnecessary mandate.
them into temporary foster care arrangements. From there, a ‘care plan’ is developed over a period of months in which workers evaluate the familial environment. Child protection workers aim through this period of assessment to determine whether removed children should be restored to their familial home, or alternately, be placed in the permanent guardianship of the state in allocated foster-care arrangements.

The final decision to determine whether removed children are returned to the care of their parents is made by a magistrate in a court setting. The recommendations of child protection workers regarding whether to restore or sever familial guardianship are, however, highly influential to this final decision. Within this complex process of determining the safest environment for a child to live, child protection workers are embedded as a significant locus of power in eventually determining the best means of ensuring child protection (Rose 1989:176). As such, whilst procedures of addressing child protection in Australia are ostensibly indiscriminate, the use of child protection workers as instruments through which these processes are operationalised necessarily means that the supposed neutrality of child protection is often at the discretion of individual workers within it (Scherz 2011).

Examining publications commissioned by the Australian government provides insight into the context of routinised cultural bias from which decisions about forced child removal are made. One publication commissioned by the child protection agency in the state of New South Wales [NSW], titled ‘Culturally Appropriate Service Provision for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Children and Families in the New South Wales (NSW) Child Protection System’ (Sawrikar 20009) asserts that the purported over-representation of families from a refugee background within the child protection system is likely due to them having characteristics that are conducive to family dysfunction. According to the report, these characteristics include ‘lower average levels of education and income, coming from larger families, and [having] a high proportion of community members . . . from a country affected by conflict’ (Sawrikar 2009:19). Another report aiming to guide child protection practice, titled ‘Cultural Diversity and Child Protection: A Review of the Australian Research on the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and Refugee Children and Families’ asserts: ‘ . . . it seems that parenting style is a key issue for refugee families of African background’ (Kaur 2012:13). This claim is drawn from an assertion that newly arrived African refugee parents are ‘authoritarian in their role and attempts to control their children, based on the traditional collectivist values’ (Kaur 2012:13). Because families from an African background may encompass difference to the mainstream Anglo-Australian population, it can, within these institutional cultures, be automatically and unfairly assumed that they are therefore inherently dysfunctional. Such publications are an example of how assumptions of dysfunction are
attached to families of African refugee settlers in Australia; thereby demonstrating how these families come to be a priori construed as ‘social problems’ in government discourse (Christie 2010:201; Young 2008:105).

It is important to consider that the governing function of the child welfare system operates according to a locus of normativity, in which numerous forms of so-called diversity and difference, along lines of gender identification, sexuality, cultural difference, poverty, and socio-economic marginalisation, can serve to make women and families subjects of intervention. The vulnerability of women from an African refugee background represents only one vector of marginalisation within this broader continuum of surveillance and control. Aihwa Ong’s (2003) characterisation of contemporary social work as an instrument of ‘whiteness’ draws out these complexities. Ong (2003: 72) describes how contemporary forms of whiteness in the United States and other Western countries derive from historical differentiations between black slavery and white wage labour. She describes how forms of class exploitation were historically distinguished along racial lines, whereby white labour was characterised as embodying a capitalist discipline and black labour embodied an intrinsic lack of control that thereby required intensive intervention. Even within these modes of classed whiteness, patriarchy and heteronormativity were treated as given; rendering female independence and counter-hegemonic sexualities to be inherently deviant.

Applying this analysis to contemporary forms of social work, Ong (1996: 744, 2003) describes how logics of whiteness that are reproduced in contemporary social service institutions seek to shape the subject of intervention, and particularly the female refugee subject, into a kind of citizen who embodies characteristics of middle-class neoliberal individualism, discipline, and self-reliance. The racialised logics of whiteness that are fostered within institutions of social work, including the child welfare system, cannot be extricated from these similarly embedded assumptions of middle-class heteronormativity. Hence, the intensified forms of institutionalised surveillance and control that are perceived and experienced by the African women who participated in my research cannot be reduced entirely to their racialisation through the child welfare system, but also stems from broader assumptions of class and gendered deviance that the system attaches to them. As undertaken in this chapter, analysing how institutions administer social welfare services to refugees in resettlement provides an opportunity to consider the role of the state in conditioning particular kinds of family life.
V. POWER AND VULNERABILITY

Sovereignty over the care of children has historically been a site of contestation between the reach and limits of state responsibility and familial guardianship over children. Within Euro-American regions prior to the 19th century, childhood experience was primarily conceptualised as an arena of domestic concern. As such, the protection of children was positioned as the responsibility of paternal authority, with little state intervention (Fassin 2013:120). However, the rise of philanthropic institutions and the professionalisation of social work as a discipline in the 19th and 20th centuries led to new categories of child welfare in which the state came to be positioned as penultimate protector, thereby eclipsing the authority of familial guardianship (Rose 1989; Fassin 2013:109). Within this tension between public interest and family autonomy, the state emerges as a political structure that works to transform individuals into specific kinds of civil subjects (Fassin 2009:54). What both Rose (1989) and Fassin (2013) imply is that systems of protecting child welfare, such as the child protection system in Australia, are not inherently neutral (Kline 1992; Scherz 2011). Instead, child welfare is an arena of state intervention through which a locus of civil governance is subsequently produced.

The assumed vulnerability of children and the figure of the ‘suffering child’ are constructions that, whilst most often applied to cases of extreme neglect and risk of harm, nonetheless serve as discursive structures to legitimate interventions by the state into intimate family arenas (Rose 1989). Despite benevolent intentions, the protection of children through systems of child protection in Australia is not a neutral process with a singular aim to affirm child welfare. Rather, this perceived imperative of governments to protect childhood as a period of vulnerability stems from the broader investment of the state into the moral inculcation of the future populace (Rose 1989). This re-positioning of family arenas to become a locus of state intervention is not an arbitrary process, but represents recognition of ‘the family’ as a ‘social mechanism for producing and regulating the subjective capacities of future citizens’ (Rose 1989:151). As such, whilst the foremost purpose of state administered forms of child ‘protection’ in Australia is to ensure the welfare of children, such interventions also act as mechanisms of governance through which to oversee the development of the future populace and to condition the cultural, social, and political attributes of those persons whom it encompasses.

The rhetoric of vulnerability that underpins the Australian state’s authority to intervene into domestic arenas in order to ‘protect’ the welfare of children is not neutral. The positioning of child protection interventions as an absolute form of benevolence beyond critical analysis obscures how culturally constructed categories of acceptable and unacceptable forms of parental
care subsequently produce mechanisms of governance in which ‘inequality and social marginalisation are sedimented’ (Briggs 2012:283). The ways in which government institutions aim to ‘protect’ children in Australia can subsequently work to reproduce forms of displacement is evidenced in the account of Lina’s experiences with the child protection system, described below.

VI. A PERMANENT SEVERING OF PARENTAL GUARDIANSHIP: LINA’S STORY

Lina was resettled to Australia in 2007, in a regional Australian city located one-hour south of Sydney. Prior to her resettlement to Australia, she had fled violence in Congo, and then lived for ten years in a Kenyan refugee camp. Accompanied by her husband and children, Lina was resettled through the Humanitarian Program from an existence of protracted exile in Kenya to a setting of permanent refuge in Australia. In Australia, however, Lina has been confronted with acute trauma that eclipses the ordeals of forced migration and refugee encampment that she previously endured.

In 2011 Lina’s six children were forcibly removed from her care as a result of an intervention from the Australian state. Lina rarely speaks of the domestic violence she experienced throughout her second marriage, both within the refugee settlement in Kenya and following migration to Australia. It was, however, her husband’s actions of physical abuse that initiated the child protection intervention through which Lina eventually lost the legal guardianship of her children.

These events occurred after neighbours from the block of apartments in which Lina lived notified the government-operated child protection service of physical abuse being perpetrated in the home. Child protection workers followed up the notification by interviewing the older children at their school. In these encounters, the children disclosed that their father did physically harm them. Identifying the violence as a source of significant harm, the agency determined that the children be immediately removed from parental care to be placed in temporary foster arrangements. Lina’s attempts to physically maintain contact with her children and obstruct them from being taken away were restrained by police. Without an opportunity to
hug her children goodbye, Lina watched them get driven away. ‘I lost my mind,’ she says, in reference to the hysterical physical and emotional collapse she experienced directly following these procedures. Witnessing the intensity of her distress, ambulance officers forcibly interred Lina to the care of a mental health facility. She was released two days later to discover that her husband had abandoned the home, and moved away from the region. A formal separation between Lina and her husband was initiated. She was left to negotiate the child protection bureaucracy as a single parent.

The child protection agency immediately initiated an investigation into the domestic environment provided by Lina. This was the first stage in developing a care plan to determine whether to recommend to the court that the children be restored to her parental care, or placed in foster care under the permanent guardianship of the state. The departure of Lina’s husband meant that his alleged acts of physical abuse were no longer relevant to child protection worker’s concerns for the welfare of her children. However, the evaluative processes of developing a care plan resulted in an intensification of surveillance on the behaviours of Lina, herself; and the potential that these could pose to the children a risk of significant harm if in her care.

The arena from which child protection workers sourced their evaluations of Lina’s parenting behaviours was the supervised visitations with her children that, at that time, occurred on a weekly basis. These visitations transpired in a sterile room in the child protection office. Each week, the room of the visit was congested not only with Lina and the six children, but also with an interpreter and two child protection workers. The workers were present during the visits in order to obtrusively take notes based on their observations of Lina’s interactions with the children. The interpreter was present to translate to the child protection workers any words Lina spoke in a language other than English that they could not understand. This field of intensified power relations, in which the routinisded surveillance of Lina served inherently to disempower her, was considered by workers to be a space in which she could effectively demonstrate her parental capacities and from which an accurate evaluation of her skills as a mother could be drawn.

Observations and commentaries documented by child protection workers during these visitations, and compiled for consideration in later court procedures, specifically isolated a number of Lina’s demonstrated parenting behaviours as indicative of risk of ‘harm’ to children. When asked by child protection workers during the visitations whether she wanted to ‘play’ with the children, I witnessed Lina shake her head and focus instead on the youngest child, her baby, who had been removed from her care whilst she was still breastfeeding. Ignoring the
cultural particularities through which relations of attachment and play are constituted between parents and offspring (Young 2008), workers documented this behaviour as potentially conducive to harm because Lina did not display overt forms of ‘attachment’ to her older children, and did not demonstrate an effective ‘play’ relationship to them. I asked Lina, at a later point, whether she thought it was important to ‘play’ with her older children. Lina responded, ignorant of the supposed ‘risk’ inherent in her response: ‘They are okay. They have each other. They do not need to play with me.’ Obvious cultural differences frame the logics of parental care between Lina and the child protection workers. However, authority of knowledge in this arena is concentrated solely within the supposed ‘expertise’ of the workers. Lina was, subsequently, assessed as lacking effective ‘attachment’ to her children.

That Lina allowed the older children to engage in what were termed by workers to be ‘parentified’ behaviours with younger siblings—primarily feeding, holding them, or changing their nappies—was also documented as a potential basis of harm for the children, and potential evidence of their neglect. Yet, like other refugees who migrate to Australia from Africa, Lina’s practices and understandings of parenting stem from collectivist principles (Renzaho and Vignjevic 2011). Despite vast local variations of parental care in sub-Saharan African contexts (e.g. Goody 1982; Gottlieb 2000; Johnson 2000), the women I worked with exhibited shared values around parenting based on collectivist models of care. For them, childcare is distributed amongst all members of a family and is not wholly designated to the mother. As noted in other research that examines parental care practices amongst resettled African refugees in Australia (Renzaho and Vignjevic 2011), these values often translate into expectations that older children supervise and care for younger children.

When considered within her cultural logics, Lina’s parental behaviours were entirely consistent with normative practices of caregiving for African parents. Regardless, workers in the child protection system measured her parenting behaviours against a supposedly objectified schema of risk of significant harm based on the idea that child development can be compartmentalised into universalised categories of ‘normal.’ In this particular case, the fact that Lina’s caregiving practices diverged from what the workers deemed ‘normal’ served to label these behaviours as conducive to potential ‘harm’ to children; and, thereby, equivalent to parental failure.

Compiling these observations into a care plan for the court, child protection workers recommended that the children not be returned to Lina’s parental care. In the court proceedings that followed, it was subsequently determined that the children remain in foster care under the guardianship of the state until each reach the age of 18.
The children now reside under the guardianship of the state in foster homes with Anglo-Australian families. Siblings are separated from each other. The baby of the family was removed from Lina’s care at the age of 12 months, and has not had the opportunity to be immersed within an environment in which learning her mother’s first language is possible. The other children have mostly lost their capacity to speak their first language. They no longer have regular contact with their mother.

VII. PROBLEMATISING AFRICAN CAREGIVING

Once encapsulated within the gaze of the child protection system, Lina, her family, and by association other families of African refugee settlers, become a locus of anxiety. Subjected to increasing surveillance and attracting interventions from increasing numbers of ‘experts,’ the problematised family—and in this case, specifically, the problematised ‘African’ family—are a positioned as a domain in need of governance and control so that ‘problem’ behaviours can be resolved (Rose 1989:175). In the case of Lina, the ultimate, and only, solution to her problematisation was, within the logics of workers within the child protection system, to forcibly sever her parental guardianship.

Lina’s experiences illustrate how the framing of worker evaluations in the child protection system as objective, can obscure unilateral relations of dominance. In describing how the raising of children within family arenas has become a site of state intervention to oversee the moral inculcation of specific kinds of citizens, Rose (1989:175) refers to the tyranny of the ‘care order.’ In Rose’s (1989:175) analysis, the care order is the unified product of evaluations and recommendations of social workers that pertain to a particular family or child in cases of child protection intervention. Despite being touted as the product of an objective process of evaluation, the care order in Rose’s (1989) analysis is a mechanism through which regimes of power are operationalised. Similarly, in the case of Lina’s experiences with the child protection system in Australia, the partial evaluations of her parental behaviours by child protection workers was legitimated by them as ‘objective,’ despite being evidently underlain by cultural bias. In positioning Lina’s parenting behaviours as incompatible with an ostensibly objective schema of appropriate parenting methods, workers implicitly—and unfairly—reproduced an imaginary of Anglo-Australian familial life as the uniform standard upon which caregiving behaviours in child protection interventions are evaluated.

The process through which these partial evaluations of Lina’s parental capacity by child protection workers came to be construed as objective and legitimate shows how assumptions of cultural difference, as inherently threatening, are deeply embedded in the supposedly neutral
logics and operations of child protection interventions in Australia. In state-operated systems of child protection across Australia, methods of evaluating familial care environments within child welfare interventions are based on a loosely characterised schema of ‘accepted parenting practices in Australia’ (Kaur 2012:6). Primarily, this schema is defined at the discretion of workers within this system, themselves. Subsequently:

These decisions are susceptible to the criticism that they legitimize cultural bias by allowing decision-makers (who are generally members of the dominant culture) to impose family values that may be inconsistent with those of a minority group (White 2005:30).

In response to the potential problematics of worker subjectivity, procedures have been implemented in the child protection system to reduce the influence of worker bias. Child protection evaluations by workers are now complemented by a diagnostic computer program, in which parenting behaviours are assessed according to apparently objectified notions of ‘harm’ through a technological tool that is designed to transcend the subjectivities of human discretion. Nonetheless, whether through computer programs or human evaluations, assessments of what behaviours constitute to children a risk of harm are mediated through culturally particular assumptions about family life and are not objective categorisations (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004:2; White 2005). Subsequently, the notion that social behaviours encompassed within the practice of family life can be evaluated according to objectified notions of risk locates refugee families in Australia—whose parenting practices are assumed to, and often do, differentiate from ‘standards’ of parenting that stem from Anglo-Australian norms—as inherently, and unfairly, vulnerable to child protection interventions.

Examining in greater depth the observations taken by child protection workers in evaluating Lina’s parenting practices illuminates how Lina, and potentially other families of African refugees in Australia, can come to be inculcated within a Foucauldian knowledge/power nexus of unilateral dominance through interventions of forced child removal. In Foucault’s view, the populace represents to governing institutions a body of uncertain subjects that require intentional management through subjectively constituted principles of control (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:189). To regulate populations, governing institutions operate forms of ‘biopower’ that aim to control, discipline, and render the body of individual subjects and, eventually, broader populations, governable (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:196; Foucault 2008; Fassin 2009). Constructed notions of ‘normalised’ knowledge are the locus through which such broad regimes of governance are instituted at a population level.

Knowledges of what is ‘normal’ are necessary for populations to be rendered governable. Or, as
Foucault (1977:296) asserts, ‘the normalization of the power of normalization’ is at the centre of producing and administering forms of biopower. Notions of what behaviours and practices are ‘normal’ are presented in contemporary societies as rationalised, scientific, and, therefore, objective ‘truths’, despite these knowledges stemming from particular historical developments and cultural understandings (Foucault 1980; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:203). Yet, the development of a ‘normalisation’ technology in contemporary societies has meant that ‘as disciplinary technology undermined and advanced beyond its mask of neutrality, it imposed its own standard of normalization as the only acceptable one’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:193).

This means that the constructed basis of truth knowledges, and the power relations that they encompass, are masked within contemporary institutions through assumptions about the neutral basis of ‘normal’ behaviours. In the child protection system in Australia, the power relations that underlie child welfare interventions are thus obscured by a ‘normalising’ discourse that frames the knowledges and logics of the workers as the standard and singularly correct lens through which to evaluate family life.

Through this locus of power and knowledge, the behaviours of particular individuals, and also of specific social groups within a population, become ‘problematised’ within welfare institutions by being associated with practices that deviate from these constructed norms (Rose 1989). In Lina’s encounters with the child protection agency described above, workers observed that she did not ‘play’ with her older children and that she allowed the children to provide care to their younger siblings. These behaviours are consistent with the logics of a communal cultural context in which the care of children is not the individual responsibility of maternal guardians, but is a responsibility automatically distributed amongst the broader social nexus of relations in which the child is embedded, including siblings (Evans 1993; Lewig, Arney, and Salveron 2009). Conventional Euro-American models of parental care and attachment, as premised on neoliberal and individualised modes of parenting (Connell 2009), are not compatible within this framework. Neither is inherently correct or incorrect: the differences encompassed within and across these parenting styles reflect differences in cultural context. Within the gaze of the child protection system, however, it is Lina’s collectivist style of parenting that is evaluated as potentially harmful and constitutive of risk. In Lina’s experiences, the locus of power embedded in the normalisation of such ‘truth’ knowledges is fully realised. Against a ‘normalised’ standard of parenting that is grounded in an Anglo-Australian imaginary of family life, the ‘differences’ encompassed in Lina’s caregiving are rendered unacceptably deviant and requiring governance. The problematisation of Lina’s parental care practices within her encounters with the child protection apparatus demonstrates that:
Once the hold of bio-power is secure, what we get is not a true conflict of interpretations about the ultimate worth or meaning of efficiency, productivity, or normalization, but rather what might be called a conflict of implementations (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:196).

Due to child protection workers attaching notions of perceived difference to Lina’s practices of parental care, she came to be immediately positioned within a unilateral regime of dominance in which there was never an intention from the child protection agency to recognise, or opportunity for her to demonstrate, the potential validity of her own knowledges of parenting. Instead, Lina was immediately problematised by virtue of her assumed difference.

Since these events, and as outlined further in sections below, Lina has stopped attending contact visitations with her children and has given up any attempt to contest the court decision. She tells me, in an expression of the utter disempowerment she experiences within this system of child protection and her acute awareness that her understandings may never be recognised as valid within it, that:

*February 11th, 2014 – Lina’s house in a regional Australian city*

There is no point. I tried. I did everything the community services asked me to. Parenting courses: one, two of them. I stopped drinking any alcohol, not even one beer. I took blood tests to prove it. I did everything they asked and still I do not have my children. Whatever I do, I will not get my children back. The Australian government has stolen my children.

**VIII. COMMANDING COMPLIANCE: SOPHIA’S STORY**

As emphasised in the account of Lina’s experiences, the mandate of protecting children in Australia can serve to render Central African women inherently vulnerable to forced child removal interventions. As discussed above, the right to speak and be heard within these interventions is held to be the exclusive domain of the ‘expert’ (Rose 1989:175). Below, I recount the experiences of Sophia, another woman I conducted fieldwork with who also, in her terms, had her children ‘stolen’ by the Australian government. Sophia’s experiences illuminate specific technologies of disempowerment that are used to silence refugee women who become embedded within child protection interventions.

Prior to being resettled in Australia with her four children in 2008, Sophia resided in a refugee camp in Uganda after fleeing the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sophia’s children were removed from her care following an allegation that she had attempted to use an implement to
physically discipline a child.

The task of investigating the allegation and evaluating the safety of the domestic environment provided by Sophia was the primary focus of child protection workers following the removal of her children into care. Child protection workers presented Sophia with a set of behavioural changes that she would need to evidence to them before they would consider recommending the reinstatement of her parental rights. Primarily, Sophia was directed to evidence an understanding of physical abuse as harmful to children, and demonstrate a capacity to institute alternate forms of non-physical discipline within her parenting practices.

These mandates were based on a presumption that Sophia did perpetrate physical violence toward her children, despite Sophia repeatedly attempting to explain inconsistencies in the basis of the allegations. The subsequent disjuncture between the child protection workers assumptions of guilt and Sophia’s continual denial became the basis of contention from which the final determination to sever Sophia’s parental rights was drawn. Rather than recognise the concerns presented by Sophia, workers from the child protection agency continually directed her to attend parenting classes in order to learn more affective strategies to discipline children. These kinds assumptions and accusations about her inherently ‘dangerous’ parenting came to repeatedly characterise Sophia’s encounters with the child protection agency. Subsequently, she eventually disassociated from the bureaucracy and refused to attend meetings, acknowledge contact from workers, and engage with any further directives for behaviour change. She had already attended two separate parenting programs recommended for her by the agency. The excerpt from fieldnotes below describes how Sophia experienced these modes of routine disempowerment:

*March 12th, 2013 – Sophia’s house in a regional Australian city*

Prior to the final court date to determine whether Sophia’s children will be restored to her care, I visit her at home to see how she is feeling. Together, we discuss the impending court procedure. Sophia uses our encounter as an opportunity to outlay not only her extreme anxiety pertaining to the potential outcome of the legal contention over her children’s welfare, but also her acute sense of frustration that stems from how she has been treated within the child protection system.

Sophia explains how child protection workers continue to assume that she physically harmed her children, despite them having little evidence to substantiate the claim. She recalls one encounter with the specific case manager assigned, as it were, to ‘manage’ her children’s case. This case manager commanded that Sophia admit to the alleged abuse.

‘He stood, there, next to the table,’ she says. ‘He pointed at my face and said, “You did it, just
say it, just say”. But I couldn’t say it! How could I say that I did those things? It was very hard for me.’

Sophia emphasises that this refusal to recognise her perspective has been constant throughout her experiences which the child protection agency. She recalls an early meeting with workers from the agency that occurred almost immediately after the children were removed. At that meeting, the workers provided Sophia with a set of guidelines for behaviour change that would need to be demonstrated by her prior to them being able to seriously consider recommending to the court that the children be restored to her care. Sophia describes her treatment in this meeting, and the implications bound up in the guidelines set by the child protection works, as intensely humiliating.

‘They told me that I had hit the children and that I could not do that. I said to them, “How do you know I did this?” They said the children had told them. But the children did not say that. The boys, they were so young, how could they know something like that? It does not make sense. But they did not believe me. I told them, “If I hit the children they would be in hospital; they would die if I did that thing.” But still, they said that I had to learn how to treat children properly. But I am a mother? Do they not understand that?’

Whilst we do not verbalise our concern that the court procedure may not rule in Sophia’s favour, we are both nonetheless anxious about the outcome.

In her encounters with the child protection system in Australia, Sophia was forced into a double bind in which she had no opportunity to emerge as a ‘good’ parent. Admitting the allegations of violence would have formally situated Sophia as a perpetrator of physical abuse toward children. However, the converse option of denying the allegations eventually led Sophia to be labelled as ‘non-compliant.’

Sophia’s attempt to invoke agency, and to resist the allegations made against her, led child protection workers to label her as ‘non-compliant’ to the process of regaining parental guardianship over her children. These workers interpreted Sophia’s continual denial of the allegations of violence against her as indicating that she was ‘lacking insight’ into, and understandings of, the reasons that led the children to be placed into care. She was also assessed as possessing neither the capacity, nor motivation, to address these concerns. Sophia’s attempts to exert agency within her interactions with the child protection system were the actions that also led her to be classified by workers as hostile to the primary aim of the agency to protect the welfare of her children. Based on these evaluations, the court determined that Sophia’s four children should remain in foster care under the guardianship of the state until each turns 18 years old.
Within her encounters with the child protection agency, Sophia had no avenue to emphasise the strengths of her parenting capacities and her capability to be a ‘good’ mother. This is because the implicit criterion of acceptable parental behaviour demanded by workers in the system required her, firstly, to submit to subjugation. Labels like ‘non-compliant’ work to position subjects like Sophia as inherently problematic by silencing the contextual factors that condition and complicate social experience (Fassin 2007:267). Such categorisations problematise parents themselves as an intrinsic source of harm to children stemming from personal deficiency. This lack of contextualisation emerges in Sophia’s account as a routine dimension of child protection interventions, which enables the perspectives of workers to be framed as ‘objective’ through the implication that social and culture context is peripheral to their evaluations of parenting behaviours (Rose 1989:175).

The labelling of Sophia as ‘non-compliant’ by child protection workers served to sediment a process of marginalisation that had been initiated within the earliest encounters of this intervention. The use of language in state bureaucracies is crucial to the constituting and maintenance of power regimes through them (Shore and Wright 1997). In particular, the framing of government policy and procedures through terminology that is depicted as neutral and objective is a way to ignore the cultural, social, and historical contexts that underlie interactions between state and populace (Hastrup 2003; Sidhu and Taylor 2007). The use of discursive structures to silence Sophia and Lina, particularly, is evident through the ways that terms like ‘risk,’ ‘harm,’ and ‘protection’ are applied to their parenting practices as objective categories by child protection workers, without consideration of the subjectivities that frame how these concepts are perceived and understood. With the perspectives of child protection workers being presented as authoritative, the lived reality of Sophia’s own parental experiences were routinely ignored through her encounters with the agency. Eventually, this process of systemic marginalisation culminated in the application of a discursive category of ‘non-compliant’ to Sophia, herself; through which her attempts to exert agency and express her own understandings whilst encountering the child protection system were definitively delegitimised in their evaluation procedures.

Within the child protection system, authority over notions of political, social, and cultural legitimacy is concentrated within domains of Anglo-Australian control (Walter, Taylor, and Habibis 2011). The strategic application of language to silence context emerges here as one way in which the child protection agency maintains an appearance of commitment to protecting the welfare of Australia’s children, whilst obscuring the mechanisms of an implicit power regime that delegitimises the contextual specificities that shape experiences of family life. The
cosmological logics through which lived experiences are oriented and contextualised for Central
African women are not only disrupted through these procedures in the child protection system
that silence cultural and social specificity, but are directly refuted as a result of such
interventions. The effect of such routine modes of silencing and disempowerment is that the
relatedness between mother and child—which is perceived by the Central African women as a
self-evident fact of female existence—is forcibly severed. In systems of child protection in
Australia, the relation between mother and child is not, unlike in the cosmological logics of the
Central African women, similarly perceived as immutable.

IX. THE RUPTURING OF COSMOLOGICAL LOGICS

A meeting with workers from the child protection system that I attended with Sophia
emphasised how the self-evident relatedness between mother and child, as a platform of her
sense of existential purpose, came to systematically deconstructed through her encounters with
the bureaucracy. In the operations of the child protection system, the relatedness between
mother and child is not treated as immutable:

August 24th, 2013 – office at a local NGO in a regional Australian city

Sophia holds a toothpick in one hand. She nervously picks at her cuticles on the other hand with
the toothpick, and is unable to meet the eyes of the workers that sit opposite her. Today, Sophia
has been called to a meeting to ascertain her availability to have visitation meetings with her
children. According to the court orders made three months ago, when the magistrate determined
that the children should not be restored to her care, these visitations are to occur once per month
for two hours and will, to begin with, be supervised. Workers funded by the state have been
appointed as case managers to oversee the foster care experience of Sophia’s children, and they
are also responsible for organising visitation meetings. They sit across from Sophia with a
printed out calendar, and ask her to circle dates on it that would be suitable for her availabilities
to see the children.

Sophia is confused by the process. The workers are asking her to pick out dates over a 12-month
period. She tells me, later, that the idea of organising meetings with her children in this way is
extremely offensive to her, like booking an appointment with your own offspring. The concept is
foreign to her. The workers try to explain what they are asking, again.

‘We would like to organise dates for visitation now . . .’ the woman opposite Sophia says, ‘. . .
because it means that all of us will be able to set them up well in advance and never miss any.’
She gives what appears to be a sympathetic nod in Sophia’s direction, then adds, ‘It is very
important that you are able to maintain a relationship with your children. We do not want you to lose your relationship with them.’

There is a moment of silence following this spiel. Then, Sophia stands up abruptly from her chair and directs an uncharacteristically forceful outburst at the workers across the table.

‘I am a mother,’ she says, firstly. ‘Those children grew here,’ she says with her hand over her belly, ‘in my stomach.’

The workers stare at Sophia, uncomprehending.

‘They are my children,’ Sophia continues. ‘They grew inside me. They will always know me. I will always know them. We are always connected.’ Following this, Sophia turns and leaves the room.

In implying that the relatedness between mothers and children can be severed, the operations of the child protection system in Australia directly undermine the cosmological logics of Central African women in which motherhood is often perceived as an immutable ontology of existence. For Sophia, this continual refutation of her social location as a mother within her encounters with child protection workers displaces the self-evident cosmological logics of regeneration through which she locates a sense of existential continuity. For Sophia, displacement emerges as an existential condition determined upon how she is able to experience ontological being as a mother in this setting of refugee settlement.

In the child protection system in Australia, it is the state that is positioned as ultimate protector of child welfare. Threats and lived realities of forced children removal thereby render an ontology of being as a mother precarious for Central African women; and, for those who directly experience involuntary separation from their children, this sense of ontological being can be irrevocably ruptured. Within the operations of the child protection system in Australia, the logics of state intervention are reproduced as neutral and benevolent, whilst the logics of Central African women who become embedded within it are, consequentially, delegitimised. Such assumptions of the neutrality of the child protection system and the Australian state’s mandate to protect children as an inherently benevolent process are at the centre of how experiences of displacement are produced for Central African refugee women within this arena.
X. DIMENSIONS OF EXISTENTIAL DISPLACEMENT

Over the past months, Sophia has been mediating the fallout from the court determination that severed her guardianship over the children. As a result, Sophia’s children now live with white Australian carers. Since the possibility of having the children restored to her care was refuted through the court, Sophia has stopped tending her garden:

November 1st, 2013 – Sophia’s house in a regional Australian city

Sophia is busied in a bedroom upstairs, packing the belongings of her now absent children into thick garbage bags. I hear the crinkle of the plastic as she unceremoniously shoves her children’s clothes and toys into the bags, ready for us to drop off as donations to a local charity (Figure 16). From where I sit on the lounge downstairs, I have a direct view of her garden.

When I first began visiting Sophia some months ago, the garden had been meticulously maintained. The unproductive grass patch at the back of her government-subsidised housing unit had, then, been transformed under her attention into a large garden bed. Filled with the maize plants, sweet potato vines, and everywhere the trailing tendrils of bean creepers, the garden had
been a source of pride for Sophia. Now, the bean and sweet potato vines are withered away. The maize plants have been cut down from the roots. Sophia no longer cares for the garden.

Having dragged the garbage bags down to the bottom floor of her unit, Sophia comes to join me in the garden. We stand together surveying the plants laid out before us, to waste (Figure 17). Without saying a word, Sophia turns to go inside. I follow her. Today, we have cleaned and organised the children’s old rooms and cleared them of the children’s belongings. In six garbage bags, we have contained the last remnants of the children’s immediate presence in Sophia’s home and life (Figures 18). Like the garden, the regenerative flow of Sophia’s existence has, since the displacement of her sense of being as a mother, been reduced to waste.

![Figure 17: Sophia's garden, once filled with plant foods, is now overgrown and laid to waste](image)

As I witnessed over the course of conducting fieldwork for this research, interventions of forced child removal manifest as an experience of existential displacement for Central African women. As Sophia’s experiences show, the severing of parental care by the state represents an inversion of cosmological logics in which existential continuity is experienced, for them, through their capacity to exist as a mother. With this cosmological imperative to exist as a mother representing a self-evident organising principle of lived experience, broadly, the violence of forced child removal is, for Central African women, accordingly levelled at the practices of their daily lives through which purpose, meaning, and continuity is broadly oriented.

Subsequently, acts of separating Central African women from their children extend to
dimensions beyond the immediate care of offspring, as Sophia’s experiences emphasise. In Chapter Five, I outlined how Central African women engage in practices of cultivating plant foods as a routine facet of everyday life through which to affirm a sense of continuity. Considering the cultivating of a garden as an act of reconstituting existential continuity, the neglect of Sophia’s garden, described above, is an expression of the displacement that now dominates her existence (Figure 18). Unable to exist in the world as a mother, this axis of regenerative potentiality that previously imbued purpose within her daily life more broadly has, as well, been fundamentally displaced.

Following the forced removal of her children into care, Sophia experiences her daily life through a lens of existential displacement. The cosmological logics that organise and give purpose to the unfolding of her existence have not simply been made precarious; but have been ruptured by the actions of the Australian state.

FIGURE 18: THE CHILDREN’S POSSESSIONS ARE LEFT BESIDE A CHARITY BIN
XI. ONTOLOGICAL RUPTURES

The administering of child ‘protection’ is, in the experiences of both Sophia and Lina, a mechanism of disempowerment which renders them subject to forms of governance that are levelled at their most intimate practices of everyday life; that is, through their existence as a mother. I return now to the experiences of Lina to show the paradoxical logics that are produced through such forms of child protection intervention. Despite having endured forced migration from Congo and protracted exile in Kenya, it is within the ostensible settings of ‘refuge’ as a resettled refugee in Australia that Lina is confronted with her most devastating experience of violence. As emphasised in the ethnographic account below, Lina’s sense of ontological being as a mother has been irrevocably ruptured whilst in Australia:

March 29th, 2013 – Lina’s house in a regional Australian city

‘I am dead, now,’ Lina tells me; not for the first time. On the coffee table in front of us is a tattered photo album turned to a photograph depicting a newborn baby wrapped in a hospital blanket. This image of her youngest child as a baby evokes such sentiments from Lina, who sobs as she describes the dimensions of her contemporary trauma.

‘Three months . . . three months, since I have seen him. My boy. He is walking very well now, talking too. But not in Swahili. Just English.’

Since the removal, Lina has kept the photo album with her at all times. When I first began visiting Lina 12 months ago, the album was a distinct blue colour. Now, it is blotted with non-descript brown patches and edged with dirt. The borders of the display leaves are tattered in many places. Lina never leaves her house with ensuring the album is in her bag.

Lina slowly pores through the album, weaving throughout this process the various stories behind each of the photographs. This is a ritual that we re-enact every time that I visit. Finally, she comes to another photo of her youngest child. Lina pauses in her methodical storytelling. Between heaving breaths, she reflects on how, as a refugee in Africa, she was able to protect her children within circumstances of conflict and extreme violence. Yet, in Australia, it has been determined by government agents that she is incapable of protecting her children from harm within circumstances of relative safety. This paradox is incomprehensible to Lina. Each time that we meet, she emphasises such contradictions with the same devastation by recalling the story of her violent exodus from Congo.

‘In Congo, the soldiers came to my village at night. I tried to hide in my home, but people were running everywhere and I knew I could not be safe that way. I had only been married a year, and Jon [her oldest child] was still a very small baby. My husband…he had left in the night to find
some information about what was happening, and he never came back. I had to run, you see? So I left the house with Jon tied strapped across my chest. But the soldiers, they began shooting at me and other people as we ran across the fields.'

Lina lifts her foot to her lap. She touches the center of her left foot where a twisted scar about the size of a coin has puckered the skin. She points to the old wound as she explains how it occurred.

‘They shot me, and somehow the bullet hit me, here. I fell. I was bleeding a lot, so I wiped that blood across my body and lay there, in that field. For hours, I lay that way. Jon was still tied across my chest, and I had to lay there, face down. He was only a small baby, and he was crying. I used my body to hide his screams. I pretended to be dead so we could survive.’

Lina turns to me and says, ‘When they told me I would be going to Australia, I thought: This is good! My children will have a life . . . But here, they [child protection officers] took all of my children . . . They came at night and took them out of their beds. I didn’t get to hug them; I didn’t know what was happening. And my smallest baby, he was still on the breast. They took them, even though I protected them in Africa. I kept them safe. I wish I could take them back there, to Africa. Or I wish we had all died there, and not come here. I am dead, now.’

During another visit to Lina’s home, she explains to me that, despite living through violence in Congo, exile as a refugee in Kenya, and domestic abuse perpetrated by her second husband, it is from her encounters with the child protection agency in Australia that her most acute experiences of trauma stem. Leading me to her bedside drawer, Lina shows me where she keeps prescription medication for anxiety and insomnia, and says:

*July 9th, 2013 – Lina’s house in a regional Australian city*

How can I sleep when I do not know where my children are? Who are they with? What are they doing, now? I do not know. I cannot sleep, not knowing. Before I came here, the life was very hard for me. But always, I had my children. Since I am here, there is nothing for me.

Through her encounters with the child protection agency in Australia, Lina has been systematically reduced to an object within her own existence. Without an ability to experience her existence through an ontological trajectory of being as a mother, Lina is unable to locate a thread of existential continuity within the unfolding of her lived experiences. Now, she exists as a ‘dead’ being without recourse to the children through which she experiences existential purpose. Paradoxically, the supposed refuge offered to her through settlement in Australia subsequently emerges for her as encompassing the most exceptional source of trauma she has ever experienced. In comparison to the violence she has endured through her encounters with
the child protection apparatus in Australia, her previous experiences of violence, exile, and forced migration are rendered unexceptional.

XII. BEING ‘DEAD’

February 12th, 2014 – the Pacific Highway on NSW’s eastern coastline

I am driving to a small coastal town in NSW to visit Lina. Since the initial removal of her children and the subsequent court proceedings that legislated the severance of her parental guardianship, Lina became homeless and has moved from the city in which those events occurred. She now lives a transient existence in a tent, seeking working opportunities to pick fruit along Australia’s eastern coastline and residing in local caravan parks along the way.

The terrain grows increasingly tropical as my drive along the coastline lengthens. After six hours of driving from Sydney along the meandering eastern coast of NSW, the geography has shifted from temperate to tropical. The hills beyond the highway are now marked by long stretches of banana plantations punctuated with smaller tracts of undeveloped greenery. I am reminded of being in Uganda, where aspects of the physical setting resembled this terrain. Despite the idyllic setting that surrounds me, however, my stomach is in knots. I know, already, that I am driving toward an unfolding nightmare.

I arrive at the town and drive to the campsite. I find Lina sitting beneath the awning of a tent, awaiting my arrival (Figure 19). She tells me, later, that this is the third tent she has bought in two weeks. Strong winds and tropical thunderstorms have destroyed the past two, and gathering clouds on the horizon suggest that this tent may not last the night.

After having the children removed from her care Lina had to adjust to living in a large property, alone, within a neighbourhood of predominantly Anglo-Australian residents unsympathetic to her position as a refugee settler. Ongoing hostility from neighbours culminated with an incident of thievery that no one in the vicinity of the overcrowded housing estate claims to know anything about. While Lina was away for a night, assailants broke into her house to smash windows, destroy furniture, and steal electronic equipment. After this incident, Lina was incapacitated by fear. She refused to return to the home for fear of the violence that could be perpetrated on her if such assailants were to break in whilst she was present. The state-operated housing authority from which she received public housing deemed Lina’s attitude to these events as an overreaction. Subsequently, Lina was determined to be voluntarily vacating her public housing property. As such, the department claimed that they had no responsibility to provide Lina with alternative housing options or assist her to seek housing elsewhere.
Lina became homeless. Now, her everyday life is reduced to the terrains of a tent in the caravan park of regional towns along the coast, where she seeks casual work picking fruit.

The tent has no electricity, so we spend the evening cooking vegetables over a camp stove and playing the Arabic board game, *mancala*, under the light of an oil lamp. A heavy downpour of tropical rain disrupts us, threatening to flood the tent. Lina and I spend some time moving her small number of possessions into higher places and mopping up water from the plastic sheeting at the bottom of the tent. Finally, we are able to return to sitting on the floor of the tent, which is now only slightly damp. In the dim light, Lina settles into a comfortable position but does not speak, for a time. Eventually, she turns to me.

Eyes filled with unshed tears, she says: ‘Georgina, in the refugee camp, I lived in a tent.’ There is a pause, then Lina continues. ‘Here, in Australia, I am back in a tent.’

I am unable to assemble a sentence to respond to such sentiments. Few words can provide comfort in such a circumstance.

‘There, in that tent in the refugee camp, life was hard.’ Lina rubs her back and sides, as she says, ‘But, there I had my children. Here,’ she indicates her stomach. ‘And here,’ she says, pointing to her back.

‘In Australia,’ she continues, ‘I am back in the tent. But here, I have no children. None. Australia has killed me.’

Another silence, before Lina tells me, not for the first time, the extent of the trauma she has experienced since her resettlement in Australia.

‘Georgina,’ she says. ‘I am dead.’

Lina’s sense of existential purpose derives from ongoing relatedness to, and caring for, kin, broadly; and offspring, particularly. This sense of being ‘dead’ that Lina ascribes to herself does not, therefore, pertain to her biological presence. For Lina, the absence of mother-children relatedness is oriented at an existential level of embodied experience. Lina is unable to reconcile the lived reality of forced child removal that contemporaneously characterises her everyday life, with her culturally mediated expectations of female existence as defined by relatedness to offspring through motherhood. Being ‘dead,’ for Lina, expresses her inability to exist in the world and live everyday life as, specifically, a mother.
XIII. CONCLUSION

State operated mechanisms of child protection in Australia are not neutral or benevolent institutions of ensuring child welfare, even if that is their overt intent. The positioning of children as subjects of state governance is considered by Foucault (1991, 2008:2) to be a crucial mechanism through which states reproduce relations of dominance within a civil populace. Extending on this supposition, Rose (1989:175) claims that state interventions into family arenas to police the welfare of children are direct attempts to immerse the populace into routines of governmentality, so that state interference within domestic life becomes perceived as normal and necessary. Mechanisms that implicate the behaviours of groups and individuals as constitutive of the broader welfare of the state are regimes of governmentality, in which political structures cultivate the premise that citizens shape the stability of states so as to inculcate particular forms of behaviour within the civil populace that are most suited to state interests (Fassin 2009:45). The child protection apparatus in Australia is one mechanism through which this process of conditioning citizens to be compliant with the broader interests of the state is routinised as necessary through the benevolent imagery of ‘protecting’ children. Because state responsibility to police child welfare in Australia is discursively constructed through emotive categorisations of objectified ‘harm,’ regimes of subjugation interwoven within these interventions come to be obscured by subsequent renderings of the state as benevolent protector of children (Roberts 2002, 2008; Scherz 2011). As illustrated in the accounts above, the child protection system in Australia is one apparatus through which such assumptions
attached to refugee experience manifest as a mechanism of enduring governmentality within terrains of supposed ‘refuge’ and permanent resettlement.

The child protection apparatus in Australia ostensibly aims to protect the welfare of children as a necessary form of state benevolence. However, the administering of such protection serves to reproduce the cultural dominance of Anglo-Australian ideals as uniform norms upon which diverse lived realities come to be standardised against. It is through the legitimating of protection for children through categories of ‘harm’ constructed as neutral and objective that refugee settlers, who are positioned as cultural ‘Others’ due to assumptions attached to refugee experience, come to be indexed as potentially dangerous. This imperative to govern the cultural landscape of the Australian populace is not an arbitrary continuation of past attempts to affirm the dominance of an idealised imaginary of Anglo-Australian culture, but is an axis of cultural governance within a broader project of inculcating citizens to conform to particular social, cultural, and political expectations of civil life.

The potentiality and lived reality of forced child removal as it emerges in the settlement experiences of Central African refugee women encompasses for them a source of ontological rupture through which their capacity to exist as a mother is made precarious. Being the ontological axis through which these women experience existential continuity, having the relatedness between mother and child severed through interventions of force child removal is an acute form of displacement that can eclipse the violences encompassed in their prior experiences of forced migration and protracted exile. These experiences of involuntary child removal are not neutral, as the accounts above demonstrate. The forced removal of children from Central African mothers in settings of resettlement in Australia can be based on assumptions of their parenting as inherently threatening to constructed ideals of civil life in Australia that is determined, mandated, and policed by agents of the state. As such, mechanisms of forced child removal emerge here as axes of subjugation through which Central African women endure ongoing experiences of displacement within settings of ostensible ‘refuge.’

The experiences of Central African women within the child protection system, as documented in this chapter, problematise the notion that experiences of ‘displacement’ and ‘refuge’ can be diametrically categorised into distinct arenas based on socio-spatial, citizenship, and other politico-legal categories. For these Central African refugee women, lived experiences of displacement emerge across diverse and disparate settings of refugee settlement through those dimensions of life in which the capacity for them to exist as a mother is threatened, made precarious, and, for some, irrevocably ruptured.
The first time I witnessed a refugee woman refer to herself as ‘dead’ was a pivotal moment during the fieldwork for this research. The admission did not shatter any preconception that I had of Australian settings of resettlement being particularly inclusive, nor was it an isolated account of the hardships encountered in Australia for Central African women which I had heard and witnessed on multiple occasions previously. But the finality and utter devastation implied in the process of witnessing a refugee woman refer to herself as ‘dead’ served to concretise the magnitude of potential violence, trauma, and insecurity that can emerge and endure within settings of refugee resettlement. For this woman, the notion of being ‘dead’ is not simply a metaphor to articulate an experience of displacement. Being ‘dead’ has become a lived social reality of having to exist in the world whilst being void of a concurrent sense of existential purpose.

The notion that refugees can be reduced to ‘dead’ beings who are void of existential purpose within settings of ostensible ‘refuge’ is an extreme example of the ways that experiences of displacement emerge and endure beyond sites of acute forced migration. Witnessing a participant refer to herself in this way subsequently crystallised for me that processes of resettlement encapsulate their own forms of displacement. This example was not, however, the only instance in which I witnessed a research participant be subjected to enduring forms of displacement. The Central African refugee women all had prior experiences of exodus, forced migration, and protracted exile in often precarious, violent, and traumatic circumstances, to which the stories in Chapter Four of the thesis attest. Yet, despite having lived through such historicities of acute displacement, many of the women characterised their experiences of resettlement in Australia as encompassing dimensions of displacement that parallel, and eclipse, the experiences of insecurity that conditioned their lives prior to resettlement. I heard multiple women refer to Australia as a place of ‘no life.’

When considered in the context of cosmological logics of regenerative flow that inform how the Central African women interpret and experience refugee settlement, the idiom of ‘no life’ encompasses a culturally particular gravity. Throughout the thesis, I have described and analysed how the Central African women characterise existence as a flow of regenerative potentiality. This assumption of worldly existence unfolding according to logics of regenerative potentiality is the platform of a culturally particularised, but not static or reductive, cosmology.
Drawing on the cyclical and rejuvenative properties of worldly existence—as evidenced in processes of biological reproduction, the growth of plants, and the imbibing of food as a source of growth, nourishment, and sustenance—this cosmology of regeneration locates the unfolding of lived experiences within a broader trajectory of regenerative flow (cf. Taylor 1988, 1990, 1992; Devisch 1993; Kaspin 1996). For the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with, characterising resettlement in Australia as bearing ‘no life’ expresses, subsequently, how aspects of refugee settlement constrain their capacity to experience, and contribute to, the regenerative potentialities of existence.

Throughout the thesis, I have described how Central African refugee women in Australia and urban Uganda can be confronted with hardships that stem from the ways that their protection and settlement as refugees is structured through humanitarian and state apparatuses. However, as I have argued, even within such conditions of insecurity Central African women affirm threads of cosmological continuity through engaging in practices that they perceive as evidencing the regenerative potential of existence, such as: cultivating gardens; preparing, cooking, and consuming food; and bearing and rearing children. Most significantly, the ability to exist as a mother is experienced by the women as a fundamental platform from which this flow of regenerative potentiality, and ensuing sense of existential continuity, is mediated and manifest. Conversely, being unable to exist as a mother is a form of displacement that irrevocably ruptures how these women establish and affirm a sense of continuity through conceiving of, and perceiving within, the unfolding of existence a trajectory of regenerative potential. In the words of my participant, Lina, whose maternal relatedness to her children was abruptly severed at the mandate of the Australian government, the inability to exist as a mother leads to a situation in which it is possible for Central African women to be physically alive, but existentially ‘dead.’

What it means for the women to be ‘displaced’ has emerged in previous chapters as a sense of existential discontinuity. The existential dimensions of their displacement, as documented and developed throughout the thesis, refers to circumstances in which these women experience the cosmological logics through which they embody this sense of existence becoming precarious, undermined, and disrupted from encounters with the structures that condition their lived realities. For them, displacement is not a mechanistic product of the socio-spatial mobilities and politico-legal dislocations that are encompassed in processes of forced migration; but is, rather, an existential and embodied condition.

In arguing that displacement is an existential condition, this thesis represents a significant departure from much of the corpus of anthropological work with refugees, which draws on the
concept of displacement as an analytical tool to characterise the social, political, and geographic
shifts encompassed in processes of forced migration. Whilst the tendency for anthropological
work to uncritically apply the concept of displacement to the experiences of refugees and forced
migrants is similarly problematised by Sui (2007), Sørenson (1997), and Malkki (1992, 1995b),
the existential dimensions of displacement remain an underexplored focus in anthropological
literature. Moreover, although the concept of the ‘refugee’ has formed the basis of much critical
inquiry in the field of refugee studies (Zetter 1991, 2007; Harrell-Bond and Voutira 1992;
Malkki 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Bakewell 2008; Betts 2009), the notion of ‘displacement,’
which is intimately interwoven with the ‘refugee’ category, is yet to be similarly unsettled.

The concept of ‘displacement’ was directly problematised in the work of Malkki (1992:31-33,
1995b:515) almost two decades ago. Yet, the concept continues to be uncritically applied in
anthropological research as a category of assumed validity that is applicable to all refugees and
forced migrants (Sui 2007). However, Malkki (1992:33) argued that:

It is striking how often the abundant literature claiming refugees as its object of study locates
‘the problem’ not in the political conditions or processes that produce massive territorial
displacements of people, but, rather, within the bodies and minds (and even souls) of people
categorized as refugees. . . . The point here is obviously not to deny that displacement can be a
shattering experience. It is rather this: our sedentarist assumptions about attachment to place lead
us to define displacement not as a fact about sociopolitical context, but rather as an inner,
pathological condition of the displaced.

The conventional analytical narrative of displacement in scholarly research and political
discourse depends, according to Malkki (1992), on the imaged solidity of spatial and national
points of departure. Ironically, it is the significant destabilisation of such spatial and political
boundaries that often leads to the production of refugee migration flows in the first place.
Nonetheless, it is the perceived ambiguities of the political, legal, and social status of the
‘refugee’ figure become positioned as the primary ‘problem’ within studies of forced migration,
rather than the misrecognitions and contestations of the fluid and constructed basis of
nationhood itself. As Sørenson (1997:145) argues, on the basis of ethnographic work conducted
with forced migrants in Sri Lanka:

Existence as a displaced person is thus conceptualized as a kind of social non-being. . . . The
narrative of displacement—like the Western narrative of fiction—requires that the displaced
person leave the liminal borderland and enter a new space (defined as such by its orderliness), so
as to develop a new identity.
Both Malkki (1992:31-33, 1995b:515) and Sørenson (1997) problematise displacement as a category mechanistically applied to refugees by virtue of the geographic, political, and social dislocations assumed to be encompassed in experiences of forced migration. Subsequently, both researchers suggest that refugees, and the processes that produce flows of forced migrants, need to be considered and analysed on their own terms and in accordance with their own logics. In their analyses, displacement does not constitute a self-evident category that automatically reproduces territorialised logics, but is an experiential condition that needs to be detached from the assumed politico-legal and socio-spatial disjunctures of forced migration.

Nonetheless, the tendency to conflate the concept of displacement with shifts of geographic place and politico-legal status remains an enduring assumption in refugee studies; and within studies of migration more broadly. According to Sui (2007:331) the concept of displacement as invoked in ethnographic work requires revisiting and critical re-situation in contemporary anthropological research. In researching how a rural-urban divide is experienced in China, Sui (2007) suggests that the concept of displacement has broader currency beyond the conventional forced migration narrative. To recognise the subjectivities that are encompassed within displacement as a lived experience, Sui (2007) argues that the concept must be approached critically within ethnographic work instead of being conflated exclusively with enforced mobilities across and between geographic spaces. Evidently, this tendency to conflate ‘displacement’ with shifts in territorialisation continues to be primarily taken up as a self-evident assumption in anthropological literature, despite being problematised in the earlier works of Malkki (1992:31-33, 1995b:515) and Sørenson (1997).

Anthropological work that equates displacement to shifts in geographic mobility and politico-legal status fails to recognise that the subjective sense of being displaced is not a mechanistic product of these processes. In terms of ethnographic work with refugees, anthropologists are positioned in a way to explore and locate these subjective bases of displacement. In conducting ethnographic research, anthropologists are able to witness how a dynamic sense of being displaced emerges not only from the direct experience of forced migration, but also within encounters between refugees and the humanitarian infrastructures through which their survival in exile is conditioned (Daniel 2002:277). However, the concept of displacement as a lived experience, rather than an abstract category, continues to be an overlooked focus in much anthropological work with refugees. Yet, the uncritical reproduction of categories in scholarly and public discourse does not mean that these classificatory systems are absolute, or beyond critical analysis (Fassin 2012:244-246).
This thesis contributes to the broader body of anthropological literature a renewed focus on the critical conceptualisation of displacement as a lived experience. The particular addition I make to this critical unsettling of ‘displacement’ is an innovative approach to exploring experiences of being displaced for refugees as not reducible to socio-geographic shifts and insecurities of politico-legal status, but as grounded in the rupturing of cosmological logics that imbue their existence with a sense of continuity. Anthropological work has broadly documented how a cosmology of regenerative flow, oriented distinctively through idioms and understandings of reproduction and motherhood, is salient across different ethnographic contexts in Central Africa (Taylor 1988, 1990, 1992; Devisch 1993; Kaspin 1996; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Silva 2009). Given that widespread political unrest has led to significant flows of forced migration from the region, it is surprising that cosmological logics of regeneration are a neglected focus in the substantial corpus of literature that documents how refugees from Central Africa experience displacement, except for the particular contributions of Malkki (1995a), Taylor (1999), and Apter (2012). The thesis, therefore, contributes to this corpus of literature by exploring how the experiences of Central African refugee women are oriented through cosmological logics. Further, it extends on those prior explorations of cosmology in studies of refugee experience by demonstrating how cosmological logics persist as organising factors in the daily lives of Central African refugees that are resettled beyond the African continent, and contributing to the emerging paradigm of exploring refugee experience as a transnational phenomenon that unfolds both across and between continental borders (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; Horst 2007, 2008; Shandy 2007; Lindley 2009, 2010). Indeed, I argue that cosmological logics of regeneration form the existential platform from which experiences of both ‘refuge’ and ‘displacement’ in and across diverse contexts of refugee settlement are oriented. This critical unsettling of displacement contributes to the literature an innovative approach to the study of refugee experience, which encompasses attention to the embodied basis of lived experience as the existential platform from which ontologies of being for refugee subjects are oriented, affirmed, and disrupted.

In exploring the women’s experience of displacement as an existential condition of cosmological discontinuity, I have subsequently problematised the notion of displacement as an objectified category of experience. Throughout the thesis, experiences of displacement endure for Central African women within and across settings of refugee settlement in both Uganda and Australia. However, for each of the women, their sense of being displaced is oriented through a concurrent process of having the cosmological logics that manifest existential continuity disrupted and made precarious in settings of refugee settlement. Implied within this analysis is a subsequent unsettling of the refugee resettlement process itself. If refugees remain subjected to forces of displacement within settings of permanent resettlement like Australia, what is the
purpose and outcome of tertiary resettlement to a third country?

The lives of these women have unfolded within structures of humanitarian support that do not account for the experience of displacement as an often enduring force that can itself be embedded within forms of humanitarian intervention for refugees (cf. Fassin 2005, 2012; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, 2007). Within global humanitarian discourse, circumstances of exile are identified as being either sites of ‘refuge’ or settings of protracted ‘displacement.’ For example, the UNHCR (2015b) asserts that the ultimate goal of their interventions is to:

[H]elp find durable solutions that will allow [refugees] to rebuild their lives in dignity and peace. There are three solutions open to refugees where UNHCR can help: voluntary repatriation; local integration; or resettlement to a third country in situations where it is impossible for a person to go back home or remain in the host country.

This provisioning of security to refugees in UNHCR rhetoric is conflated with a ‘classically humanitarian rationale’ in which it is accepted as an a priori logic that physically relocating refugees to circumstances of permanent resettlement subsequently delivers them from circumstances of ‘displacement’ (Souter 2014:171). Based on the UNHCR rhetoric of ‘durable solutions,’ programs of intercontinental refugee resettlement to a third country are similarly positioned as inherently benevolent in intention. Processes of tertiary resettlement, the provisioning of permanent residency to refugees through third country migration, and the settlement of refugees within those settings is positioned in such humanitarian rhetoric as a politically neutral process (Souter 2014:172). Within these three ‘durable solutions’ to refugee ‘displacement,’ however, it is not the needs and experiences of the refugees themselves that guide what are considered to be the best outcomes for their ‘displacement.’ Rather, the solutions to displacement that are put forward by the UNHCR aim to re-locate refugees within a recognisable nation-state framework, either as citizens in their origin country; or identified as permanent residents within the host nation of asylum or country of tertiary resettlement. Their ‘displacement’ is conflated with being deterritorialised; as being positioned externally to a nation-state system of identification.

A sense of ‘refuge’ for resettled refugees in Australia cannot be reduced to a simplistic process of resolving their ‘displacement’ through reterritorialisation (Malkki 1992, 1995b). Conversely, ‘displacement’ needs to be approached as an existential condition; not as a mechanistic product of forced migration. This argument directly contests the popular understanding of ‘displacement’ in humanitarian, political, and public discourse as an automatic outcome of deterritorialisation, socio-spatial shifts, and ambiguities of politico-legal status. Subsequently, it
is necessary to locate the significance of the thesis within the broader paradigms and logics of humanitarian intervention that structure how the refugee women experience resettlement. As I have shown throughout the thesis, the Central African women experience resettlement within broader forces of objectification, marginalisation, and disempowerment, which can both emerge within and derive from this system of humanitarian intervention that is based on the objectified notion of ‘displacement’ as a categorical status of deterritorialisation.

In accordance with humanitarian logics in which ‘refuge’ and ‘displacement’ can be distinguished by the ability of a refugee to access an ostensible ‘durable solution,’ the experiences of refugees in Uganda should emerge as a contrasting case in point to the experiences of refugees resettled in Australia. Refugees that are resettled in Australia are granted permanent residency, and are thereby provisioned with a form of recognised state identification. In contrast, refugees in Uganda are not formally recognised as civilians within the Ugandan state. For the majority of Central African refugees living in Uganda, the three ‘durable solutions’ set out by the UNHCR are not available. Instead, refugees there are granted the protection of the Ugandan state, but are not formally allowed to integrate in the nation nor able to return to their country of origin for fear of enduring persecution. Opportunities for third-country resettlement are extremely limited. In the above logics of ‘durable solutions’ that guide the UNHCR and broader state and humanitarian apparatuses of refugee support, this means that resettlement to Australia is categorised a priori as a site of ‘refuge’ whilst Uganda is a site of ‘displacement.’

The enduring and emerging continuities of displacement that manifest for the Central African women I conducted fieldwork with in both Uganda and Australia implicate, however, that there is no distinct existential differentiation for them between living within a setting of ‘refuge’ and living within a setting of protracted ‘displacement.’ If we take seriously the refugee women’s sense of ‘displacement’ as oriented at an existential level of disrupted cosmological logics, then we can consider that whilst resettlement might provide refugees with political, legal, and material security, their sense of displacement as an existential condition can, nonetheless, endure within such arenas of ‘durable solutions.’ ‘Refuge’ does, accordingly, not replace ‘displacement.’ Rather, ‘refuge’ and ‘displacement’ are existential and embodied experiences that form part of the women’s individual forced migration journeys. The experiences of the Central African women that I have documented throughout the thesis contest the possibility of such concrete distinctions between settings of ‘refuge’ and ‘displacement.’

This is not to suggest that processes of tertiary resettlement are not beneficial to the refugees who experience them. The ability to live in physical safety with legal recognition of permanent
residency is a significant platform of wellbeing in everyday life for resettled refugees. However, if resettlement is to be taken seriously as a ‘solution’ to protracted displacement, the social and cultural subjectivities of displacement as an existential, as well as legal and structural, condition need to be similarly recognised.

I have illustrated here how forms of humanitarian intervention that condition the lives of refugees—from the ‘self-reliance strategy’ that organises refugee settlement in Uganda, to the exclusionary aspects of selecting refugees for resettlement to Australia, and the system of child protection in Australia that aim to ensure the welfare of children—can conceal forms of violence that are obscured in political and scholarly rhetoric by assumptions of benevolence. Being ethnographically grounded in the lives of the refugee women themselves, the analysis of these systems that emerges in this thesis illustrates how their lives are conditioned through numerous and intersecting logics of humanitarian intervention that are unable to be reduced to a singular aim of beneficence. Instead, within the systems through which refugee settlement is organised, the women become enmeshed within forms of: cultural dominance, in which neoliberal values of independence and self-sufficiency are privileged; objectification, in which assumptions of refugee experience are attached to their lives; and structural violence, in which they are made the ultimate casualties of internal contradictions of bureaucratic indifference, through which the provision ‘protection’—to both refugees and, specifically, their children—is administered without attention to cultural and social specificity. For this research, exploring the lives of the Central African women was paramount, rather than examining the experiences of actors within the institutions of humanitarian intervention and social welfare organisations that structure refugee settlement. Future research should consider concurrently exploring the understandings, motivations, and internal tensions through which agents within these state and humanitarian apparatuses administer refugee settlement support.

As within other arenas of humanitarian intervention (cf. Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Ticktin 2006; Fassin 2005, 2012; Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, 2007), systems of providing protection and resettlement to refugees are not inherently neutral. Rather, they are arenas through which experiences of displacement can endure and emerge for refugees and yet be masked through presumptions of ‘assumed benevolence’ (Fassin 2012:246). This thesis problematises the assumed benevolence of refugee resettlement and contributes to this broader body of literature on critical humanitarianism by theorising how ‘displacement’ endures and emerges within such systems of protection through the ways in which Central African women experience their cosmological logics of regeneration, within which their sense of existential continuity is oriented, be made precarious in these systems. The thesis thereby represents an extension to previous work in this field of critical humanitarianism and refugee experience by demonstrating
how attention to the subjectivities of existential and embodied experiences for refugees does not, then, obscure an analysis of the humanitarian structures that shape refugee lives. Rather, attention to refugee subjectivities through a lens of ethnographic specificity shows the impact of humanitarian interventions for refugees as levelled at the most intimate arenas of their everyday lives; such as, specifically for the Central African women whose experiences I have described in this thesis, the relatedness between mother and child.

The longitudinal impacts of the enduring and emergent forms of displacement that confront these Central African women in Australia, particularly, are yet to be seen. As such, their ongoing experiences of resettlement represent a field of inquiry for future ethnographic research with the potential to illuminate further dimensions, assumptions, and contradictions of humanitarian systems as related to refugee experience. In addition, the women’s enduring experiences of displacement in this site of ostensible ‘refuge’ imply that this critical unsettling of refugee settlement to a third country could be applied to other settings of resettlement beyond Australia. Exploring how particularities of refugee settlement systems produce distinct experiences of enduring displacement for resettled refugees can provide a comparative lens through which to analyse, critique, and re-imagine the system of refugee resettlement as it contemporaneously operates at a global humanitarian scale.

Ultimately, the experiences of the Central African women presented here imply that the humanitarian ideal of providing refugees with a haven of ‘refuge’ through resettlement is complicated by enduring and emergent forms of existential ‘displacement.’ Processes of refugee resettlement continue to be treated in both humanitarian discourse and academic research as systems of assumed benevolence. Within the logics of some refugee women, however, and as I have developed throughout the thesis, resettlement is unable to be reduced to an experience of ‘refuge.’ Rather, in documenting the particularities of the Central African women’s lives across diverse ethnographic contexts, I have described how resettlement can foster enduring, and produce new, forms of existential displacement. For some of the women, these experiences of displacement make life as a refugee in Africa—or even death—preferable to life as a resettled refugee in Australia. If such experiences can emerge within a setting of ostensible ‘refuge’ for refugees, it is necessary for future anthropological work to critically evaluate these systems of resettlement rather than assume that they are inherently benevolent.
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