

# Refugees in Cities: The Politics of Knowledge

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## **Abstract**

*Forced migration studies is a politically charged field of study. The phenomenon of forced migration challenges its researchers to tackle complex questions about the limits of gathering knowledge in the face of political interests and human suffering. However, explicit critical reflection on the politics of knowledge inherent in individual refugee research has been very scant. This article addresses some of the relevant issues, that is, questions of perspective and positionality, truth and representation.*

## **Résumé**

*Les études sur la migration forcée représentent un champ d'étude politiquement sensible. Le phénomène de migration forcée présente à ses chercheurs le défi de s'attaquer aux questions complexes concernant les limites du rassemblement de la connaissance face aux intérêts politiques et à la souffrance humaine. Cependant, la réflexion critique explicite sur la politique de la connaissance inhérente à la recherche sur les réfugiés individuels a été très peu abondante. Cet article traite de quelques problèmes pertinents, c'est-à-dire les questions de perspective et d'angle de vue, de vérité et de représentation.*

Perhaps more than other (sub)disciplines of the social and political sciences, forced migration studies enjoys a widely shared political engagement on the part of a great number of its academic practitioners. Many refugee researchers appear motivated by their political or moral principles. They aim at a critical evaluation of the controversial representations and dubious policies that define today's refugee regime, and endorse the notion that research into other people's suffering can only be justified if alleviating that suffering is an explicit objective.<sup>1</sup> While this exem-

plary politically engaged scholarship is something that refugee studies as a field can be proud of, what strikes me is that it barely goes hand-in-hand with an explicit critical reflection on the politics of knowledge and representation *inherent in individual research*. This is especially peculiar given that such issues have long been prominent in the social sciences and humanities. The workshop in Cairo that this Special Issue is based on brought out very clearly the host of ethical and methodological issues that complicate the practice of research in urban areas. Only three papers, though, addressed the thorny epistemological issues that accompany every search for knowledge—what can be known, who can know, how do we convey our knowledge?—and that acquire particular relevance in the politically charged context in which the creation, production, and dissemination of knowledge about forced migrants takes place.

I spent two and one-half years in Uganda (1998–2001), working with young men who fled war, insecurity, and the absence of future prospects in southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. They had ended up living in Kampala and were thus labelled “urban refugees.” When I first went to Uganda, the literature on urban refugees was much scarcer than it is today. I decided on an exploratory study, looking at why young refugees came to Kampala, and how they secured their basic needs of food, shelter, and medical care. My primary focus, though, was to be on these young men's non-material or emotional well-being; on how their experiences of war, flight, and exile affected their identities and ambitions. At an early stage in my research, I learned that a major preoccupation of the young refugees was with the question “Who am I?” Their existential query became the main focus of my study.

In this article I will discuss some aspects of the “politics of knowledge” as encountered by me throughout the research process as well as during the writing-up.

### ***Political Contexts and Political Narratives***

I was admitted to Nsambya Hospital on 11/07/99. At my own request, I was discharged on 16/07/99. An Ethiopian friend warned me that those who had attacked me could bribe nurses to effectively poison me when they administered injections to me. It was for this reason that I chose to be discharged.

While forced migration is a humanitarian issue, it is first of all a political one. The politics involved are not something abstract or external, but rather pervade people's daily lives. Refugees unwittingly find themselves in a political minefield, and at the same time contribute to its construction. For one thing this is manifested in the nature of people's relationships—with other refugees, with Ugandan citizens, and with government, humanitarian, and UN officials. The statement at the start of this section is taken from an account by an Ethiopian young man relating the details of an assault he suffered close to his home in a Kampala slum. It is just one out of numerous illustrations which show that suspicion and distrust invariably were people's daily companions. Notably, people would always be extremely evasive about what they were doing or where they were headed (an infectious attitude: I soon caught myself answering in terms of "Oh, I'm just going down the road"). So-called friends would share very little information about themselves and it often struck me how little people who lived together in one house or room knew about each other. I remember talking to a group of Congolese girls who all lived together in one house on the outskirts of town and discovering that they did not know who among them still had parents alive in Congo and who did not. Of course one could positively conclude that, among friends, privacy was the accepted and valued norm. To a certain extent I think it was as simple as that: people were aware of the pain, and painful secrets that each of them carried, and wanted to avoid making friends feel uncomfortable by asking too many questions. Yet the silence about private issues was also caused by fear and trauma. Many refugees adamantly questioned the actions and motives of others, and incessantly expressed their concern that "others" were after them, that is, after their lives. I came across several instances where people were attacked on the streets (by both known and unknown assailants), robbed in their houses, threatened by security agents, arbitrarily arrested and detained by the police or, in the case of defectors from the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), spotted in town by their former commanders. But the fear and distrust were not necessarily or for all related to Kampala's "objective" security situation. I think of what Carolyn Nordstrom writes about Mozambique: "Worlds are destroyed in war ... Not just worlds of home, family, community, and

economy but *worlds of definition*, both personal and cultural."<sup>2</sup> For the young men, and especially for those who had just arrived in Kampala, things were no longer what they seemed: their memories of war, their insecurity, fear, and loneliness all fed a way of looking at things which from my Dutch point of view at times seemed hard to grasp, but which was in fact a normal response to so much existential confusion. Both the actual insecurity and the ever-tangible atmosphere of suspicion meant that for most people Kampala, their place of refuge, provided anything but the quiet and peaceful environment where they could get their breath back.

People were not only distrustful of other refugees or Ugandan neighbours, but also very outspokenly so of the UNHCR and the Ugandan government. As for the latter, both the Congolese and Sudanese refugees questioned the ability and willingness of the Ugandan government to protect them. Uganda's long-term involvement with the SPLA in southern Sudan, the very army that most of the Sudanese boys and young men in Kampala had fled or deserted, was a widely shared source of concern. Similarly, with the Ugandan army so heavily involved in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, many Congolese refugees articulated that they were "sleeping with the enemy." Yet on a daily level, more unsettling than the government of Uganda seemed to be people's contentious relationships with UNHCR and its implementing agency, InterAid. A great deal can be said about this relationship, from both parties' points of view, and it was a popular topic of conversation in Kampala. For most refugees, the way they were treated at the UNHCR and InterAid offices reflected a very negative, not to say deeply humiliating, experience. One young Ethiopian man, telling me about the school he had just joined, said:

I especially like my fine art. I'm improving my drawing. I'm not interested in graphics, I want to draw real life people, cartoons and colours. I need it to express myself. Some things you can't express in words. Like the situation at InterAid. But I can draw the police guard with his Kalashnikov.

The fact that people were time and again subjected to an environment of indifference and an attitude of disbelief fed on the atmosphere of suspicion that people were already living in. Disbelief by UNHCR officials was responded to with an even stronger suspicion, bordering on resentment, on the part of the refugees. People felt betrayed and several individuals suggested to me that they wanted to go and ceremonially return their "Protection Letter" to UNHCR because they refused to any longer carry what they regarded an empty promise.

As will happen in most offices around the world where refugees or immigrants are interviewed, in Kampala refugees are frequently accused of “telling the same story as everyone else,” or in short of “telling lies.” The issue at stake—the contestability of people’s accounts—can only be meaningfully considered when taking into account the context of the encounter between interviewer and interviewee. Firstly, since government or UN officials interviewing refugees in urban areas operate within an institutional context uneasy with and outspokenly discouraging of the very presence of urban refugees, the questions posed during interviews are often not quite objective or disinterested. Secondly, the person interviewed is often hampered by feelings of guilt, shame, or confusion, and the power structure of the interview situation does little to relieve this. Thirdly, neurological studies show that as a consequence of having experienced seriously traumatizing events people often cannot recall—let alone narrate—events in chronological sequence, cannot even recall certain episodes at all. Indeed, few interviewees voice objective, disinterested accounts. One would have to try really hard to think of a setting in which communication reflects a neutral exchange of words and gestures. Exile certainly does not provide such a setting. The stakes are high: in exile it is often hard to survive without a good story. Narratives become a precious possession with which to position oneself *vis-à-vis* fellow countrymen, a means of protection against nosy neighbours or the piercing questions during a police interview. Even though as researchers we need not be concerned with issues of credibility in the same way that those responsible for asylum procedures are, in the context of exile one cannot escape questions about the value or truthfulness of the knowledge one intends to gain. People’s minds are occupied with memories of wartime violence and with worries about their future. Personal relationships are volatile. For many refugees fear is part of daily life. This research context is politically charged not only in the way that we generally use the word “political,” but also in a way that every action by every individual—including the researcher—becomes imbued with political meaning. I believe it is hard to overestimate how intricately sensitive everything—every appearance, every comment, every visit—is in a situation such as that in Kampala. It is my task and challenge as a researcher to keep fine-tuning my awareness of this sensitiveness.

### **Questions of Truth and Ways of Knowing**

Refugee situations make for difficult research settings. Conducting research among refugees in towns and cities may be even more challenging than studying life in refugee camps. The situation in cities is less orderly and transparent, the

refugee population more diverse in terms of their backgrounds and specific concerns, and their legal status often undetermined. People with serious security concerns frequently decide to come to town because of the anonymity it offers—but to do research one needs to see people, to find them, to talk to them. Moreover, as researchers we want to know and understand the very histories that people may desire to forget or need to hide. What does all this imply for the knowledge we set out to gain and the understanding we hope to reach? During my years in Kampala I often felt I could not get much grip on the reality I was studying, not only because I was extraneous to the situation, but also because I was constantly confronted with its disparities and controversies, its silences, the hidden tales. The combination of my curiosity, empathy, and imagination were not sufficient to bring to light the twists and turns of the reality I was studying. I had discarded the concept of truth with a capital T before starting my research. Nevertheless the ambiguity I encountered, and the fact that truth in Kampala had so many faces, made me feel uncomfortable.

### *Whose Knowledge?*

Whose knowledge are researchers looking for and do they aim to represent? This question may seem superfluous. My automatic answer would be that I aimed to portray the lives of young, male refugees in the city of Kampala. But how do we go about our representations? To start with, researchers are no neutral observers, nor are research subjects neutral or passive informers.<sup>3</sup> To be able to answer the question “Whose knowledge?,” we first need to know “Who are we?.” The insight that the relationship between researcher and researched is essentially a power relationship was put on the agenda several decades ago by feminists and post-colonial scholars. Indeed, no one doing research among urban refugees, or any group of refugees for that matter, can possibly escape the inequalities and concomitant power differences that pervade the research field. In Uganda, I found this inequality most aptly summarized with the word “security.” The position from which I as a foreign researcher operated (visa in hand, research approved by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology, comfortable home, free to leave whenever I should wish to) could not have been in starker contrast with the situation of the majority of refugees who, in addition to a constant worry about food and shelter, went without a valid ID and thus lacked the minimum condition for being safe. This unequal situation raised questions about the responsibilities entailed in the everyday research encounters. I can write to UNHCR on this man’s behalf, but should I not rather accompany him on his afternoon mission to see a protection officer... but really, I’m so busy, shall I tell him to look for someone else this

time? And since back in Amsterdam: another e-mail, what shall I reply, do I *want* to reply? Do I go to Western Union today or do I have other priorities and shall I go tomorrow, or next week? It never ceases to feel uncomfortable that I can make these choices, and that they are always, to some extent, arbitrary. Most confusing is that the choices I make concern people of my age, whose histories and troubles I know, and some of whom I have come to know quite intimately.

Anthropologists who have reflected on the “power issue” have done so not so much in terms of the dilemmas of giving financial or material assistance,<sup>4</sup> but rather in terms of “giving voice.” Unilaterally considering themselves “powerful” *vis-à-vis* the people they studied, anthropologists from the West reasoned their scholarly work entailed a specific responsibility: to “make heard” the voices of those who lacked power, the people who were silenced. Soon, however, post-colonial scholars responded by characterizing much of, also feminist, work as reflecting the arrogance of white scholars: “giving a voice” to “Third World” citizens in fact meant appropriating these people’s voices for their own (scholarly) purposes.<sup>5</sup> They emphasized that we cannot see ourselves as “innocent” individuals but that we are part of larger histories. In my case this view would pointed to the complexities of a young, white, female, European, middle-class researcher doing research among young, black, male, African, mostly poor refugees. Feminist researchers re-examined their emancipatory projects and concluded that “making heard the voices of the marginalized” or “seeing from below” were indeed no self-evident or easy strategies.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it was “discovered,” the research subjects have “a voice of their own.”

The issues of voice and giving voice are pertinent political matters and the way in which some anthropologists deal with these calls for a critical note. I thought Amina Mama, founding editor of *Feminist Africa*, summed it up poignantly: “Giving a voice is not the issue, it is deafness that is the model: who can afford to be deaf?”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, anthropologists still too often make it sound as if “they”—their informants—are passive victims, while “we” have all negotiation power on our side. I do not believe this to be so. Ultimately, people decide what to tell, how to tell it, what to hide, or when to be quiet. I ally with Nencil who, reflecting on her research among prostitutes in Lima, writes:

A good anthropologist always tries to protect the group participating in her project... However, because the research group is envisioned as vulnerable, it is often assumed they find it difficult to protect themselves, overlooking the fact that most vulnerable people are continuously protecting themselves and usually more experienced in this area than the anthropologist.<sup>8</sup>

She concludes: “Why does the projection of power relations in the field reflect a nearly binary opposition between the powerful and the powerless instead of as in other areas departing from a notion of difference and the multipositioned subject?” There indeed appears to be a conceptual difficulty: not to equate the fact that people’s rights are being violated and their living conditions appalling with the perception of these people as helpless individuals. Refugees are especially affected by this discourse of powerlessness, and it is often overlooked that power springs from many sources: power that comes with wealth or status, physical power, creative power, the power of personality, intellectual power, the power (or ability) to have rewarding relationships with others, to love and be loved. In discussions concerning fieldwork relationships it is usually only the power of wealth and status that is taken into account.

There are different levels on which I can look at the relationships between the young men in Kampala and myself, and I can distinguish between things that I as an individual share with the young men of my study and things that actually set us apart. This provides a more differentiated starting point from which to address the questions posed: what are the positions from which we know and understand? (Or: Can I as a foreign researcher become an insider in Kampala’s urban refugee milieu or will I always remain outside? And if I remain an outsider, can I come to know anything at all?) In Kampala several things connected the young men and me. Like me, many of them were (former) students, ascribing great value and finding great pleasure in getting on with our talents and interests. We were all in our twenties and shared questions about friendship and love, politics and justice, the world’s future and ours. The fact that we approached these questions coming from different backgrounds and experiences made this the more interesting. We set up (and continue to run) the art centre Yolé!Africa together—the most powerful factor in connecting us: we shared a vision. Lastly, none of us were at home and we shared some of our feelings of being a foreigner. At the same time, their experiences of war, poverty, and insecurity as opposed to my “uneventful” life, in that respect, placed us far apart. However, the wars that disrupted these young people’s lives are not something “exotic” happening “out there.” As a white European woman I am part of the same violent world history and present situation as individuals who have been forcibly uprooted in the Great Lakes region. I cannot study the recurrent violence that people of my age are faced with in Central Africa as a phenomenon disconnected from who I am: I must examine my own “roots” and “identities” and “histories” while I study theirs.

However, though we all take up semi-fixed positions in this politico-historical field, all of us are also individuals with our own personal histories and idiosyncrasies. And since it is anything but easy to see from another person's perspective, my research findings are to a large extent shaped and coloured by me. What I as a researcher see or do not see about people's lives or identities depends considerably on my personal experiences and outlook on life or even my state of mind. Some days I am convinced that the young men in Kampala are without exception incredible achievers. On other days, rummaging through the images in my mind, I see the chaos of people thrust in many directions. War cut them loose from their backgrounds and dropped them in places they had hardly heard about—Kampala, Nakivale refugee settlement, Houston, Perth, Winnipeg. But how can I truly know what *they* see? Observing their lives from the outside I see chaos, but they, within, may see change. And which of the two would they prefer to share with me? In other words, my research experience in Kampala reconfirmed my opinion that the role of the researcher as central in the construction of ethnographic knowledge remains underestimated. It is the researcher *as a person* (identities, prejudices, soft spots, character, and interests), raised in a certain intellectual and political tradition, and in interaction with other persons, who shapes the research project as well as its outcome. Academics are interested in the genealogy of theories and concepts, yet I would argue that a genealogy of why and how a research project came into being is similarly interesting and relevant. We need to reflect on the position of our research projects (and the knowledge produced by it) *vis-à-vis* the larger context of both current and historical scientific and political discourses. Knowledge is never sought or used just for its own sake but always linked to more or less explicit political goals. This has been very true for the discipline of anthropology,<sup>9</sup> and this is currently true for the field of forced migration studies. I believe that all refugee researchers should be trained to constantly retain a critical stance towards themselves and their research, and that they should keep asking themselves—and make explicit in their writing—the questions: Why do I do my research? What is the knowledge I want to gain? For what purpose? For what audience? And along with this we must confront the fact that what we as researchers will ultimately get at is not objective, disinterested knowledge, but a collection of political, partial truths.

*Ways of knowing and telling*

No Madonna and Child could touch  
Her tenderness for a son

She soon would have to forget...  
The air was heavy with odors of diarrhoea,  
Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs  
And dried up bottoms waddling in labored steps  
Behind blown bellies. Other mothers there  
Had long ceased to care, but not this one:  
She held a ghost-smile between her teeth,  
And in her eyes the memory  
Of a mother's pride... She had bathed him  
And rubbed him down with bare palms.  
She took from their bundle of possessions  
A broken comb and combed  
The rust-colored hair left on his skull  
And then—humming in her eyes—began to part it.  
In their former life this was perhaps  
A little daily act of no consequence  
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it  
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave.

This poem by Chinua Achebe is called "A Mother in a Refugee Camp." On first reading it evoked the material images of refugee camps, with bare-bottomed crying babies and all. Reading it twice, I felt the mother come alive. And now as I read it again, I feel it captures Life. Does this poem perhaps convey more meaning and truthfulness than extended academic analysis would? My years in Uganda brought home to me more strongly than ever before the blatant inequalities in the world we live in. Global acts of exclusion and injustice are connected to the superficial and ahistorical images people have of themselves and of others. As an anthropologist I am in the business of building up images of other people. How do I portray the young men in Kampala, these individuals who have been forced to leave behind all that was dear to them, who are frustrated, angry, and hurt, but are also looking towards the future? What words do I use to capture their experiences? I came to doubt that I could write this book in the reductionist language of science *only*. If my work is about the lives (tragedies, celebrations, labours, deaths, dreams, songs, flights, nights, fights...) of real people (young, black, exiled, talented, hopeless, hopeful, hungry, proud, confused, determined...) interacting with a living anthropologist (young, white, educated, curious, bewildered, trustful...) how can I write truthfully in a language that asks me to divorce my rational from my emotional capacities?

Research among refugees means research with people who are traumatized, people who bear the marks of violence, have witnessed or been actively involved in it, or both. Many of the young men in my research had not long before I met them spent their days and nights at the front lines in southern Sudan. The epistemological dilemmas

implied in the processes of knowledge creation in general—what can we know, who are the knowers, what is truth?—become highly pertinent when writing about a life-and-death subject, which wartime violence is. Robben, researching the historical reconstruction of the 1970s political violence in Argentina, wonders after interviewing key figures of the military junta: how can we establish intersubjective understanding with a person who has violated the very humanity we are trying to understand? The same question, Feldman responds, can be asked about those who have been subjected to the extremities of violence: how can they be understood and depicted if they dwell on the other side of the border of conventional or known bodily sensory and moral experience?<sup>10</sup> The issue at stake is a dual one. On the one hand, even though pain and suffering are among the universal features of the human condition, for people who have gone through extreme experiences of loss and violence these are often difficult to communicate. Elaine Scarry, in her seminal study about pain and the difficulties of effectively conveying its subjective quality, concludes that “pain defies language.”<sup>11</sup> This is not only because the physical sensations felt defy words, but also because those inhabiting the “pain-full world” speak their own language.<sup>12</sup> This explains why—as several studies in medical anthropology show—chronic pain patients unable to communicate what they feel often deeply suffer from not being taken seriously: it is the contestability of the pain’s existence as a direct consequence of the lack of any intersubjective measurement of it.<sup>13</sup> Or as Scarry puts it: “To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt”—a statement that resonates with the culture of disbelief that so often surrounds refugees’ suffering.

This brings me to the other side of the issue: can we, as listeners, understand what people are saying when they talk about grief, loss, pain, and fear? Understanding other people’s social and mental processes is directly related to one’s personal experiences, both cognitive and emotional. For instance, if I did not know fear, would I be able to learn about or understand it? And related to this is the question of *how* we come to understand. A great deal of the knowledge and understanding I gained during my three years in Kampala was not through my rational or analytic capacities, but by being alert to non-verbal modes of communication. Essential to my learning about the fear and despair of the young men was not just their telling me how and why and when they were scared, but looking into their eyes and, when sitting next to them or shaking hands, physically feeling something of the strong emotions they carried. In other words, I do not believe that I can grasp the situation of the young men in Kampala if I try to do so purely

rationally: their way of surviving is often literally beyond my comprehension. I can only comprehend something about the lives of the young refugees by mentally placing myself in their world and then searching myself for my passion, my uncertainties, and my beliefs. I can only grasp something of the choice made by a fifteen-year-old boy to go and fight at the front lines in southern Sudan if I try to imagine what the feelings of dead-end, despair, revenge, or youthful idealism would stir up in me. As the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues, in her *Upheavals of Thought*, emotions are not animal energies or impulses, but “essential elements of human intelligence.”<sup>14</sup> Emotions are highly discriminating responses to what is of value and importance. As much as the skill of reasoning one thus needs empathy and an awareness and understanding of one’s own inner motives in order to be able to get to know anything at all. As Peter Kloos wrote twenty-five years ago: “apart from pen and paper, ‘sympathy and compassion’ are still the most important tools for studying other societies.”<sup>15</sup>

My research aimed at understanding the ways in which young people who had lived through violence made sense of their world. If knowing and understanding are dependent on both rationality and feeling/intuition/imagination, it stands to reason that these different ways of knowing are also to be used in the conveyance of anthropological knowledge. In the field of feminist scholarship alternatives of subjective, embodied, and experiential knowledge have been put forward and several scholars have paid attention to issues of emotion, sensation, intuition, creativity, and spirituality in both research and writing.<sup>16</sup> In my search for alternative ways of conveying knowledge, I wondered whether artistic devices would help me bring across the emotion, imagination, and intuition that I saw as an inherent part of my research process and outcome. I wished to explore the boundary between science and art in order to discover the different language I envisaged—“critical, engaged, exciting and true-to-life.”<sup>17</sup> I do not take the above discussion lightly. I agree with the editors of *After Writing Culture* that “styles of ethnographic writing go beyond the question of personal preference, training or skill and instead provide us with a means of connecting our epistemological standpoints with our mode of representation.”<sup>18</sup>

As an anthropologist I must keep in mind *why* I would experiment with writing styles. Much of postmodern writing is couched in veiled language, abstract jargon, and too-long sentences. I do not see whom that serves: expressing the complex qualities of people’s lives does not require complex styles of writing. Furthermore, when immersing myself in my research data and the gut-wrenching narratives I collected, I ask myself: will an approach that brings

together science and art run the risk of romanticizing violence, or making it poetic? That, of course, is not what I aim at. The purpose of my experimentation would be to come to a better conveyance of “the real world”—and ultimately to making a difference in that real world. Ideally, I would learn to be witness, scholar, advocate, and artist all at the same time.

### **Concluding Remarks on Representation**

This article discussed some of the dilemmas of gaining knowledge in the politically charged field of forced migration studies. In a world still full of prejudice, the issue of conveying this knowledge is just as tricky. Refugees pre-eminently are stereotyped and subjected to discrimination. Not only have people in the West generally interiorized a national consciousness which makes them consider it normal that there are foreigners, “people who do not have the same rights as we do,”<sup>19</sup> fantasies about what these foreigners are like also abound. Much of this imagination must be placed in the historical discourses on Africa and Africans, in the field of both fiction and academic writing.<sup>20</sup> Much of it, ultimately, must be placed in the long-standing histories of racism.<sup>21</sup>

Public and political discourses shape and rationalize the actions of individuals, organizations, and governments. And thus, while the researchers at the Cairo workshop shared the incredulity expressed by one of the participants as to how it is possible that refugee policies continue to ignore a population movement trend—*i.e.* urbanization—which has been going on for so long, this *is* the very context within which we write. At the same time, this situation poses challenges that researchers can capitalize on. I believe that the study of individuals who seek refuge in the towns and cities of various African countries (or in Europe or America for that matter) can be of great value in counteracting at least some of the reductionist images that exist of refugees. The young men I met in Kampala shared the experience of being forcibly uprooted, but otherwise constituted a remarkably diverse crowd of individuals. There were men and women, of different nationalities and walks of life, illiterates and university graduates, artists, farmers and journalists, mental patients, orphans and widows, Muslims and Seventh Day Adventists, former SPLA commanders, child soldiers, introverts and streetwise kids. In general, a high proportion of the refugees in urban areas are risk-takers and entrepreneurs—a potent illustration of what is implied when we speak of “agents of change.” Bringing this to the fore requires a focus on the individual, which has not been anthropologists’ *forte*.<sup>22</sup> I have always felt that this was a shortcoming, which was reconfirmed in Kampala. Not only was it evident that the young men had

many different ways of interpreting and responding to the events that had befallen them, I also observed that the human desire *to be seen to* respond, think, and act differently strongly prevailed among the refugees. I saw this as an antidote to what most humanitarian and political practices and discourses do: confirm their essential sameness. A focus on the individual will bring to the fore a notion of diversity that goes beyond differences in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, or educational background. It will illuminate refugees not as mere icons of our time but as *individuals*—individuals who fight to be granted their right to a secure, fulfilling, and dignified life.

Yet this approach has its own challenges. If researchers argue that urban refugees form an extremely mixed group of people, this may be taken to show that people seek refuge in towns and cities for diverse reasons and that not all of them have fled persecution or imminent danger *per se*. While to any well-informed person this should neither be an unexpected nor an alarming revelation, the question is how to convey facts like these without confirming the existing prejudices. The message needs to be gotten across that reality is complex and complicated, but that this is no reason to propagate a relativist, disinterested stance. Conflicting stories, interpretations, and views are at the heart of all accounts of war and flight, but for researchers born and bred in the tradition of Western science this is often difficult to deal with. Nevertheless, truths *are* partial, and generalizations that make other people seem more coherent—which in the case of refugees may in some ways be a good thing—at the same time make them more self-contained, which in turn fixes boundaries between “us” and a different “other.”<sup>23</sup> As Foucault argued, the problem of generalizations is that they form part of and constitute a language of power, and thus we must be wary of them. The tension that remains poses a serious challenge to researchers in the field of forced migration studies. In Donna Haraway’s words, the dilemma is “how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognising our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real world?’”<sup>24</sup> In forced migration studies neutral research is no option. And thus, paradoxically, the political character of refugee research on the one hand requires that we analyze the partiality of our knowledge and truths, while on the other hand the national and global politics that force people into exile indeed call for a “no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a real world,” or, as Wole Soyinka puts it, require that we “enthron[e], once and for all, the desirable goals of Truth.”<sup>25</sup>

## Notes

1. David Turton, "Migrants and Refugees," in *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight, and Homecoming in Northeast Africa*, ed. T. Allen (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1996).
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