Return to exile: Critical continuities of displacement following refugee resettlement to a third country
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Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Australia and Uganda between 2012 and 2014, I highlight the phenomenon of refugees who have received third country resettlement but continue to engage in periodic return travel to the country of their previous exile, where they were first granted refugee status. I explore the factors that motivate refugees to return to the country of their previous exile, and I show that third country resettlement does not necessarily remove resettled refugees from the 'refugee cycle.' The need to critically re-examine third country resettlement as a durable solution to refugee displacement from a social perspective is explored.

The UNHCR considers resettlement to a third country to be a 'durable solution' for the 'refugee cycle' of displacement, due to the legal protections and permanent residency status it confers (UNHCR 2006:129). In UNHCR and broader humanitarian discourse, displacement is primarily viewed as a condition of dislocation from the state of origin and its territory (Malkki 1992, 1995). Forced migrants thus become part of the 'refugee cycle' upon fleeing their country of origin, a situation considered to be resolved when forced migrants are given state protection through repatriation, reintegration, or resettlement (UNHCR 2006:129). Yet, for refugees who have the opportunity to be resettled, the experience of displacement is not so neatly resolved through this process of establishing a legal relationship with a new state (Koser and Black 1999:16-17). Many resettled refugees remain involved in the 'refugee cycle' through their ongoing role in material, social, and emotional networks of support for kin who remain in settings of exile. Subsequently, refugees resettled in a third country often continue to be interwoven within enduring continuities of displacement, which cannot be simply reduced to territorial or legal logics.

Regular, return visits to the country of prior exile, where they lived as legal refugees before resettlement, is one practice through which resettled refugees experience such continuities of displacement. As part of my doctoral research with Central African refugees resettled in Australia, I accompanied an informant on one such journey to Uganda in order to explore the motivations that underlie this phenomenon. In doing so, I witnessed the role of return travel in maintaining a network of material, social, and emotional support for refugees that ties together settings of third country resettlement and protracted exile. As notes from my fieldwork suggest, such social and emotional dimensions of displacement for refugees are not automatically resolved through third country resettlement.

Fieldnotes from an airport departure terminal (1)
I await the arrival of Nyomanda, my research informant and travel companion, at Kingsford Smith International Airport in Sydney, Australia. I see her emerge from amongst the bustle of

other passengers in a skirt that is brightly patterned in the national colours of her homeland, the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is accompanied by an entourage of companions to bid her farewell before the journey. Nyomanda and I are travelling to Uganda, the country where she spent seven years in exile prior to her resettlement to Australia six years ago. We will live together in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, for a few months. This will be the third time that Nyomanda has made this journey back to Uganda since her resettlement to Australia.

Because third country resettlement is available to few refugees, it is difficult at first to understand why Nyomanda would make return visits periodically to a country from which she agreed to be resettled in order, she believes, to ensure protection for herself and her immediate family. When I ask about her reasons for returning, Nyomanda simply says that she returns to Uganda to 'visit family' who remain there in exile.

Return travel as a network of transnational support
The social and economic role of return travel is an unexplored area within the broad body of literature that examines refugee resettlement as a transnational phenomenon (Lindley 2013; Horst 2008; Ali-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001). As I observed, however, return travel is not an infrequent practice. Whilst conducting fieldwork in Australia with refugees resettled from countries in Central Africa, I witnessed resettled refugees planning and executing trips back to their previous country of exile on multiple occasions. From my observations, I came to understand that these return journeys are not undertaken lightly. Due to the costs of flights, resettled refugees who return to their previous country of exile do so for lengthy periods, usually months at a time. These refugees usually travel alone and leave other immediate family behind in Australia. Whilst the traveller is overseas, their families in Australia are often left without a central form of income for extended periods of time. Most of the refugees whom I witnessed participating in return travel contributed to their family income in Australia through either welfare payments or paid employment, both of which are suspended whilst the traveller is overseas. Despite the financial difficulties that return travel involves, these refugees consider the visits to be a priority. It was whilst I was still in Australia, at Kingsford Smith International airport in Sydney, that I first began to understand the specific motivations for refugees embarking on return travel.

Fieldnotes from an airport departure terminal (2)

Nyomanda strides toward me at the departures terminal of the airport, followed by her entourage of farewell companions. It is then that I observe the amount of luggage that they are carrying: four large suitcases. A quick glance at my own piece of luggage—a duffel backpack—alerts me to the fact that we will exceed the airline's limit of baggage assigned to each passenger. Nyomanda seems unconcerned, however, and meets me with an enveloping embrace. I quietly ask Nyomanda if all of the luggage is coming with us to Uganda. 'Of course,' she says. We make our way to the check-in desk of our airline.

Nyomanda's luggage weighs in at 120kg, approximately three times the weight of baggage allocated to each passenger. There follows a quick re-evaluation of the luggage, as Nyomanda shifts clothing, toiletries, and shoes across the four suitcases. Nyomanda's companions approach. Together, they begin determining which of the items are to be taken to Uganda. Suitcases are opened, and clothes and other items are sorted quickly across seats and the tiled airport floor. The tension mounts as the deadline to check in approaches, and small arguments break out over which items should stay and which should remain.

I observe that only one suitcase, the smallest, contains Nyomanda's personal items. Two other suitcases consist entirely of children's clothes, and the third is packed full of shoes in children's sizes. I notice that Nyomanda has carefully written a name on the sole of each shoe.

I ask her, despite the rush, why she has done this. Hurriedly rummaging through clothes and deciding 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. I must provide for all of them, you see?'

The social context of the 'refugee cycle'
It was only after we arrived in Uganda and established ourselves in a house in Kampala that I realised the extent to which Nyomanda's return travel is defined by family expectations of support. In Kampala, we lived intermittently with members of Nyomanda's family who journeyed to visit us and seek support from her. Although legally recognised as refugees in Uganda, Nyomanda's relatives live in precarious conditions. Uganda administers aid to refugees through a self-reliance strategy that incrementally reduces the amount of support provided according to the length of their residence in a settlement (UNHCR 2006:136). The aim of this model of humanitarian assistance is to encourage refugees to participate in subsistence agriculture in order to support their own livelihoods. However, this strategy can exacerbate material insecurity for refugees, particularly for those who have little prior experience in agricultural practice (Hovil 2007). Like other resettled refugees, Nyomanda seeks to address the ongoing risk of impoverishment to her relatives through return travel, fulfilling her enduring responsibility to provide material support to relatives in exile.

However, resettled refugees can also mitigate economic insecurity for their kin in exile through remittances and other strategies (see Lindley 2013; Horst 2008; Jacobsen 2005). Why then did my informants choose to physically travel back to visit family in a country of prior exile, despite significant financial costs? The practice of return travel, as I was to witness, allows resettled refugees to reconstitute and reaffirm social and emotional connections to kin through physical presence. In Kampala, we also lived with Nyomanda's thirteen nieces and nephews who otherwise reside, parentless, in a refugee settlement in rural Uganda. As orphans, these children rely on their relationship with Nyomanda not only as a source of economic support, but also as a fundamental basis for their emotional wellbeing. Evidently, the physical presence made possible through return travel also reinvigorates emotional and social dimensions of kinship that continue to remain important during third country resettlement.

Third country resettlement: a 'durable solution'?
Resettlement to a third country is conceptualised by the UNHCR as a 'durable solution' for the 'refugee cycle' by virtue of the legal protections that it provides (UNHCR 2006:129). This way of framing refugee resettlement risks depicting forced migration as a purely individual experience, according to a territorial logic in which displacement is determined by whether a refugee has access to state-based forms of protection (Malkki 1992, 1995). However, for the Central African refugees with whom I conducted research, an individual's displacement is an inherently social experience involving the material livelihoods and emotional wellbeing of whole families.

For these refugees, third country resettlement was a continuation of social relations extending across continents, rather than a straightforward 'solution' that ended the experience of

displacement. Whilst protected from the immediate socio-economic insecurities of exile, refugees that are resettled in a third country remain heavily involved in the broader social contexts of the 'refugee cycle' and the economic and social insecurity that their non-resettled dependents face. When developing and operationalising 'durable solutions' for displacement, the social context of refugee experiences must be taken into account, and critical continuities of displacement in settings of resettlement should be considered.

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