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## **GLOBAL MIGRATION PERSPECTIVES**

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**Studying refugees and asylum seekers:  
notes on the politics of knowledge**

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## **Global Commission on International Migration**

In his report on the 'Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change', UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified migration as a priority issue for the international community.

Wishing to provide the framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to migration issues, and acting on the encouragement of the UN Secretary-General, Sweden and Switzerland, together with the governments of Brazil, Morocco, and the Philippines, decided to establish a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM). Many additional countries subsequently supported this initiative and an open-ended Core Group of Governments established itself to support and follow the work of the Commission.

The Global Commission on International Migration was launched by the United Nations Secretary-General and a number of governments on December 9, 2003 in Geneva. It is comprised of 19 Commissioners.

The mandate of the Commission is to place the issue of international migration on the global policy agenda, to analyze gaps in current approaches to migration, to examine the inter-linkages between migration and other global issues, and to present appropriate recommendations to the Secretary-General and other stakeholders.

The research paper series 'Global Migration Perspectives' is published by the GCIM Secretariat, and is intended to contribute to the current discourse on issues related to international migration. The opinions expressed in these papers are strictly those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Commission or its Secretariat. The series is edited by Dr Jeff Crisp and Dr Khalid Koser and managed by Nina Allen.

Potential contributors to this series of research papers are invited to contact the GCIM Secretariat. Guidelines for authors can be found on the GCIM website.

## Introduction

Probably more than other (sub)disciplines of the social or political sciences, refugee studies has from the start enjoyed a relatively widespread and explicit political engagement on the part of a great number of its academic practitioners. Many a 'refugee researcher' appears motivated by his or her political or moral principles, and aims at a critical evaluation of the controversial representations and/or dubious policies that are at the heart of today's refugee regime. In a recent article Elisabeth Colson writes that:

when anthropologists in the 1980s began to try to bring together findings from work on forced migration...they did so thinking research could affect policy and make uprooting and readjustment less traumatic (2003: 12).

Indeed, the Refugee Studies Centres at both Oxford and York University have, from their inception, been engaged with advocacy and policy issues and so are, today, other research centres around the globe. This political engagement also comes across in many publication titles. There is Harrell-Bond's *Imposing Aid*, and many more: *Labelling refugees* (Zetter), *'What the eye refuses to see'* (Kibreab), *Refugees and the creation of famine* (De Waal), *Global apartheid* (Richmond), *The plight of the larger half* (Oloka-Onyango), *Dining with the devil* (Schrijvers), *The myth of dependency* (Kibreab), and recently *Rights in Exile* (Verdirame & Harrell-Bond). While this politically engaged scholarship is exemplary and something that refugee studies as a field can be proud of, what strikes me is that it does not seem to go 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 anthropology and the social sciences more generally. The tables of content of the entire *Journal of Refugee Studies* reveal only one article with this reflection: Chimni's *The geopolitics of refugee studies* (1998).

What some researchers have touched on are the ethical and methodological issues that complicate the practice of research. Dilemmas I was confronted with during my research in Kampala were: How can I interview people in such a way that I avoid replicating the damaging experiences of the police or military interviews that they went through? Is there ever a reason to say 'no' when questions for material or financial assistance come from people in life-threatening circumstances? To what extent does the survey I want to undertake jeopardise the security of the people whose lives I want to study?

In my view, however, these issues are preceded by more fundamental ones. In the politically charged field which refugee studies incontestably is, no researcher can afford to side-step the thorny epistemological issues that accompany every search for knowledge - what can be known, who can know, how do we convey our knowledge? - nor ultimately the political questions that come with these - for whom and why do we want to know? While I like to think that I had sensed the importance of these questions before starting my research in Uganda, it was during my years in Kampala that I came to realise their true weight. The politically charged context in which the creation, production and dissemination of knowledge about forced migrants takes place extends from the actual research locale to the academic and public milieux of writing and representation.

I spent two-and-a-half years in Uganda, working with young men who fled war, insecurity and the absence of future prospects in southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. They had ended up living in Kampala and could thus be labelled 'urban refugees'. When I started the research in early 1998, the literature on urban refugees was even more scarce than it is today, and I decided on an exploratory study of 'how young people live their lives as refugees in Kampala'. I was to look at why they come to Kampala, and how they manage to secure the basic needs of food, shelter, medical care and legal protection. I primarily wanted to focus on their non-material or emotional well-being and survival, and my central question was: 'In what ways do the perceptions and realities of insecurity in the lives of young refugees in Kampala affect their identities, personal development and future?' The central themes that I focus on in my thesis are those of wartime violence and its relation to identity/self. In this article I will discuss some aspects of the 'politics of knowledge' as encountered by myself 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<sup>th</sup> July 1999. 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.

Refugees are people who flee persecution, war, insecurity and the lack of future prospects. Their political and human rights violated, they cross international borders to seek refuge. Whereas for those involved this is first and foremost an individual decision, and one that will cause changes in individual lives in terms of ambitions and opportunities, friendships and worldviews, if looked at more widely refugees are essentially a political phenomenon that concerns societies as a whole. It is political interests and antagonisms on local, regional and global levels, or abusive governmental mismanagement, which lie at the root of the circumstances that 'create' refugees.

On the receiving end too, no elaboration is needed: the issue of granting asylum is highly politicised. As for Africa, the politics involved in the institutionalisation of its refugee camps have long since been emphasised (Harrell-Bond 1986, 1992; Kibreab 1993). Today, the policies that aim at discouraging refugees from self-settling in towns and cities, and which thus compromise refugees' right to freedom of movement are often executed in close co-operation between national governments and UNHCR. As a result there is hardly any assistance, let alone efficient legal protection for refugees in urban areas. This is the general situation in Kampala (RLP 2002, 2005; Verdirame & Harrell-Bond 2005). Ironically, many of those who come to Kampala are labelled 'security cases', that is, people who cannot be given the protection they need in the refugee settlements (e.g., the SPLA defectors who arrived in Kampala in the late 1990s).

The presence of refugees is as much a political issue as a humanitarian one. It must be stressed that the politics involved are not 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. This is partly manifested in the nature of people's various relationships – with other refugees, with Ugandan citizens, and with government, humanitarian and UN officials. The matter-of-fact 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 of numerous illustrations which show that suspicion and distrust were invariably people's daily companions. Most 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 norm and highly valued. 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. Or as a young Congolese man put it: "We don't talk about it among ourselves, everybody knows it already."

Yet the silence about private issues was also caused by fear. Many people I met 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 SPLA defectors, 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. At times it was difficult for me to really grasp the whys and hows of people's deep-seated suspicions (and the gossip and rumours that came with them). But then 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 (1995: 147).

For the young men, and especially for those who had just arrived in Kampala, things were no longer what they seemed: memories of war, insecurity, fear and loneliness all fed a way of looking at things which, from my Dutch point of view, at times seemed rather pathological, but 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 a 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 I met in Kampala fled or deserted from, was a widely shared source of concern. That some of them had witnessed John Garang travel by Ugandan army helicopter, and visit the refugee settlements in northern Uganda, did not particularly increase their confidence in being safe. 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 indeed proved 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 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 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 carry what they regarded an empty promise any longer.

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 traumatising events people often cannot recall - let alone narrate - events in chronological sequence, even not 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 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

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 we need 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 research I often felt uneasy because I could not get a grip on the reality I was studying, being constantly confronted with its disparities and controversies, its silences, the hidden tales.

Truth in Kampala had so many faces, depending on whom one talked to, or even at what hour of the day. I often had the sensation that it was impossible to truly understand what was going on without being part and parcel of the situation myself and that the combination of my inquisitiveness, empathy and imagination was not enough to unravel the threads, to bring to light ‘what it is all about’. I have come to realise that, before trying to understand ‘what it is all about’ we may do well to try to gain a clearer picture of the context in which we work and of what is at stake during the research process – during the fieldwork as well as the writing.

#### *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 not neutral observers, nor are research subjects neutral or passive informers (Haraway 1991; Robben 1995; Schrijvers 1995). 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 by both feminists and postcolonial scholars. Indeed, no one doing research among refugees can possibly escape the power differences that pervade the research field. The relationship between researcher and researched on so many levels simply is non-egalitarian.

In Uganda, I found this inequality most aptly summarised with the word ‘security’. The position from which I as a foreigner operated (visa in hand, research approved by UNCT, comfortable home, free to leave whenever I should wish to) could not have been in starker contrast with the situation of many of the refugees who, in addition to a constant stress about food and shelter, did not even have an ID to prove who they were and thus lacked the minimum condition for being secure. This situation confronted me with many questions: I can write to UNHCR on this man’s behalf, but should I not rather accompany him on his afternoon waiting expedition 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 email, 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 actually make these choices, and that they will always be, 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 (Lammers 2005), but rather in terms of 'giving voice'. Unilaterally considering themselves 'powerful' vis-à-vis the people they studied, anthropologists from the West reasoned that their scholarly work entailed a specific responsibility: to 'make heard' the voices of those who lacked power, the people who were silenced. Soon, however, postcolonial scholars responded by characterising much of this work – including that of feminists - 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 (Said 1989; Spivak 1988; Trinh Min-ha 1989). They emphasised that we cannot see ourselves as 'innocent' individuals but that we are part of larger histories.

In my work, for example, the complexities of a young, white, female, European, middle-class researcher doing research among young, black, male, African, mostly poor refugees could be a case in point. Feminist researchers re-examined their emancipatory projects and concluded that 'making heard the voices of the marginalized' or 'seeing from below' were indeed not self-evident or easy strategies (Grant 1993; Schrijvers 1995). Furthermore, it was 'discovered', the research subjects have 'a voice of their own'. The focus of the power discourse by self-aware anthropologists then shifted, it seems to me, from an emphasis on *dos* to an emphasis on *don'ts*: from the responsibility to use one's power to admonitions not to abuse it, that is, not to violate the dignity (read: authenticity?) of these 'new' voices.

The admonitions that researchers should be careful not to violate the dignity of research subjects at times slightly irritate me: as if they are passive victims who allow themselves to be played around with. As if 'we' have all the negotiation power on our side. I do not believe this to be the case. Ultimately, people decide what to tell, how to tell it and what to hide or be quiet about. Lorraine Nencel 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 (2001: 112).

And 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 are indeed 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 there were things that worked to connect 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 in our twenties and shared questions about life, relationships, the world's and our own futures. We set up and continue to run the art centre Yolé!Africa together - the most powerful factor in connecting us: we shared a vision and goal<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, other realities placed us far apart. I think primarily of their experiences of wartime violence and poverty as opposed to my, in that respect, 'uneventful' life. Clearly that which set us apart was a direct manifestation of the politico-historical context in which my research took place. Yet I stress that the wars that disrupted these young people's lives are not something 'exotic' happening 'out there'. Nordstrom & Robben write: "We want to divest people of the notion that violence is separate from the larger social and cultural dynamics that shape our lives" (1995: 9). My life as a white, European researcher is shaped by violent processes in a way not fundamentally different from those of people who have been forcibly uprooted in the Great Lakes region: we share a violent world history, we share a violent present. As Nordstrom writes, "The whole concept of local wars, whether central or peripheral, is largely a fiction" (1997: 5).

What is crucially different, however, is the way in which history and present affect us, the repercussions that global actions and discourses have on our personal lives. It is an uncomfortable but nevertheless crucial observation that I cannot study the daily violence that people of my age are faced with in Central Africa as a phenomenon disconnected from who I am. It demands of me that I critically examine my own 'roots' and 'identities' and 'histories' while I study theirs.

However, although 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<sup>2</sup>. And as such I often wonder to what extent my research and writing are shaped and coloured by me, Ellen. I know it comes close to blasphemy in science to say so, but I still think it is true: what I as a researcher see or do not see about people's lives and identities considerably depends on trivialities like my own state of mind. Some days I am deeply convinced that these young men in Kampala are without exception incredible achievers. Rummaging through the images in my mind on other days though, I see only chaos. People pushed into so many directions. War that cut them loose from their backgrounds and dropped them in places they had hardly heard about before - Kampala, Nakivale refugee settlement, Houston Texas, Oslo. And how can I truly know what they see?

Looking from the outside I see chaos, but looking from within they may see change, as there has always been 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),

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.yoleafrica.org](http://www.yoleafrica.org) and [www.stichting-ijayo.nl](http://www.stichting-ijayo.nl).

<sup>2</sup> Compare what Henrietta Moore (1994: 115) writes about the ambiguity in the relationship between anthropology and its subject matter. She sees this as a multi-dimensional figure involving the relationship of domination and exploitation between coloniser and colonised; that between the individual anthropologist and the people she studies; and as a third dimension the relationship between the many selves of each individual self.

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. Needless to say this has been very true for the discipline of anthropology (Asad 1973; Kloos 1987; Said 1989), and needless to say this is currently true for the field of refugee studies.

However, I have come across very few authors who explicitly write about the relationship between knowledge, politics and power during the process of doing fieldwork. I believe that all anthropologists 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*. Reading it the first time, it triggered in me the material images of refugee camps, with bare-bottomed crying babies and all. Reading it twice, the mother came alive. And now as I read it again, I feel it captures Life. Does this poem maybe convey more meaning, truth if you like, than all our clever academic analyses? Though I was not particularly naïve nor untravelled before going to Uganda, my years in Kampala did unsettle my world view and brought home to me stronger than ever before the blatant inequalities in the world we live in. One thing I came to realise is

that the ongoing repetition of acts of exclusion and injustice the world over must be connected to - or ultimately caused by - the superficial and ahistorical images people have of themselves and of others. And I realised that this has everything to do with me: as an anthropologist I have chosen to be in the business of creating images, images of others. My task and challenge are to represent truthfully the experiences of the people I have met. But 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 also looking towards the future? One very simple question: as victims or as survivors? Of course they are both, but what words do I use to capture the deep meaning of those two labels? I sometimes think I need different ways of telling.

Of course, the issue is not how to embellish our texts with poems. It is more than that: I have come to wonder whether the language of science is able to do justice to, and capture the complexity and depth of, the experiences of people who fled from violence and live in exile. I have come to doubt that I can write my PhD thesis in the reductionist language of science only.

If my work is about the lives (read: tragedies, celebrations, labours, deaths, dreams, songs, flights, nights, fights...) of real people (read: young, black, exiled, talented, hopeless, hopeful, hungry, proud, confused, determined...) interacting with a living anthropologist (read: young, white, educated, curious, bewildered, believing...) how can I write in a language that asks me to divorce my rational from my emotional capacities? How can my writing be truthful if I am allowed to be creative only in my rational analyses, but not in the way I convey what I have come to know (and not know) engaging my intuitive, emotional, sensory, spiritual and imaginative antennae?

Research among refugees means research with people who are traumatised, 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 frontlines 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? (1995: 245). The issue at stake I think 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, "pain defies language" (1985: 5). This is not only because the physical sensations felt defy words, but also because those inhabiting the 'pain-full world' speak their own language (Jackson 1994).

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 (Greenhalgh 2001; Good et al. 1994). Or, as Scarry puts it, "To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt" (1985: 7) - a statement that in many ways 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? I believe that our understanding of social and psychological processes is directly related to our personal experiences, which are both cognitive and emotional. For example, 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.

While in academia we are taught to confine ourselves to rational analysis of the spoken or written word, I know for a fact that a lot of the knowledge I gained during my three years in Kampala was not through my rational or analytic capacities. Essential to my learning about the fear and despair of some of the young men in my study was not just their telling me how and why and when they were scared, but looking into their eyes and physically feeling something of the strong emotions they carried when sitting next to them or shaking hands. 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 try to understand it by mentally placing myself in their world and then searching myself for my passion, my uncertainties, and my beliefs.

In the same way I can only understand something of the choice made by a fifteen-year-old boy to go and fight at the frontlines in southern Sudan if I try to feel what the feelings of dead-end, despair or revenge would stir up in me. And thus I believe that, as much as the skill of reasoning one 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" (1988: 117; my translation).

My research aims at understanding the ways in which young people who have lived through violence make sense of their world. I believe it would be beside the point to only try to interpret rationally their processes of 'making meaning', processes that so obviously involve reflection on an emotional, sensory and spiritual level on top of careful thinking. And thus 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. Several scholars have searched for and tried out new ways of conveying knowledge. In the field of feminist scholarship, enlarging on criticism on objectivity, alternatives of subjective/ relational/ embodied/ experiential knowledge have been put forward, (e.g. Haraway 1991; Harding 1986; Grant 1993) and a few scholars have paid more or less explicit attention to issues of emotion, empathy, intuition, sensation, and spirituality in both research and writing (Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1993, 1996; Collins 1990; Ghorashi 2001; Nencel 2001; Schrijvers 1990, 1996). In my search for alternative ways of knowing and conveying knowledge, like some of the authors mentioned, I tend to move towards the direction of exploring the boundaries between science and art, searching for connections and openings between the two, in order to discover the different language I envisage - "critical, engaged, exciting and true-to-life" (Lammers 2002). I hasten to add that I do not take this as a light discussion. When I immerse myself in my research data and the gut-wrenching narratives I collected, I must ask myself: will an approach that tries to bring together science and art run the risk of romanticising violence, or

making it poetic? That is anything but what I aspire to. It is not about embellishing our texts. On the contrary, my questions are inspired by a strong wish to represent as truthfully as possible the experiences of young people in exile, a challenge that should be taken very seriously considering that we work and write in a climate of disbelief and pernicious prejudices about others – refugees, Africans – prejudices that prove to be stubbornly long-lasting.

### **Concluding remarks on representation**

In this article I have discussed some of the dilemmas of gaining knowledge in the politically charged field of refugee studies. One reason that I believe that a critical reflection on research and writing is required is our responsibility towards the audience for whom we write. I have had insecurities about my research and my writing, about how I look upon my readers: can I credit them with sufficient insight to interpret my texts? As Lila Abu-Lughod asks, does this make sense for anthropologists working in a world still full of prejudice against those about whom they write? (see also Caplan 2003). That stereotypes and prejudices about refugees proliferate in public and political discourse hardly needs elaboration. Refugees are ‘others’: they are strangers, foreigners, outsiders. Not only have people in the West generally interiorised a specific national consciousness which makes it seem normal that there are foreigners, that is, “people who do not have the same rights as we do” (Kristeva 1991), fantasies about what these foreigners are like also abound.

Much of this imagination must be placed in the wider historical discourses on Africa and Africans, in the field of both fiction and academic writing (Achebe 2000). While refugees in public discourse are often portrayed as if they were essentially either vulnerable victims or cunning crooks (Horst 2003), urban refugees have received an especially strong version of the latter. A 1995 UNHCR Discussion Paper stated that:

Urban refugees and asylum seekers tend to include a wide variety of people, some, but by no means all, of whom have genuine refugee claims. They include opportunistic and dynamic individuals as well as those who have failed to survive as part of the normal migration (or refugee) flow – the mal-adjusted, the social outcasts, etc. – a factor which can make status determination particularly difficult. Furthermore, since such movement is often stimulated, at least partially, by a desire to improve their economic potential, urban refugees and asylum seekers tend to share a culture of expectation, which, if not satisfied, often leads to frustration and violence.

Fortunately the phrasing in the most recent Guiding Principles by the UNHCR (EPAU) has considerably changed and it has been advised that the term ‘irregular movers’ be discarded because of its pejorative overtones. Still, public and political discourses continue to shape and rationalise the actions of individuals, organisations and governments. The context within which we write is that refugee policies continue to largely ignore a long-established population movement trend: urbanisation. At the same time, this situation poses challenges on which researchers can capitalise. 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 of refugees that exist.

The young people 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 Seven Days Adventists, SPLA commanders, former child soldiers, introverts and street-wise 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 the forte of anthropologists. In anthropology, meaning is seen to reside primarily in collective, social practices, and consequently anthropologists have tended to ignore questions about the individual (Cohen 1994; Karp & Masolo 2000).

I have always felt that this was a shortcoming. If we want to understand other cultures, other ways of thinking and being and acting, we cannot do without an understanding of individuals: their actions, motives, fears, desires and interpretations. My research again brought this truism home to me, if only through the observation that the young men in Kampala showed so many different ways of experiencing, responding to, and understanding the events that befell them and with which they engaged.

More crucial, I believe, is that for most refugees the human desire to be seen to respond/think/experience differently is remarkably strong: an antidote for what most social and political forces do, that is, work to 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. What is at stake is the awareness that people have and speak from different identities. Acknowledgement that ‘a refugee’ may at the same time be a mother, daughter or son of, student, artist, job-searcher, ex-soldier, farmer, lover of, writer-to-be ... will help illuminate refugees as persons.

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 put 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; ambiguity makes us feel nervous, we live with the philosophical legacy of non-contradiction, reflected in our concept of truth.

For many of us, even in the ‘postmodern world’, it remains difficult to discard the concept of truth with a capital T (Kloos 1987). This does not only apply to academics; I sense that when I talk about my research to friends or family, most of them have a preference for ‘whole’, non-confusing, non-contradictory stories – that is to say, ‘true’ stories.

Yet truths are partial, and generalisations 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’ (Abu-Lughod 1993). As Foucault argued, the problem of generalisations is that they form part of and constitute a language of power, and thus we must be wary of them and more generally of

“unlocatable, and thus irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway 1991: 191). Yet there remains a tension here, which poses a serious challenge to researchers in the field of refugee 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’? (1991: 187).

In refugee studies neutral research is no option. And thus, paradoxically, the political character of refugee research on the one hand requires that we acknowledge 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 “enthroned, once and for all, the desirable goals of Truth” (1999: 12).

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