

Tensions of Repatriation in the Great Lakes

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The dominant perception of people, place and culture constructs refugees as matter out of place. At best they are uprooted, unhappy and without any political subjectivity. At worst they threaten the national order of things. Repatriation has therefore for decades been the favourite solution for international agencies and African host states alike. In the Great Lakes region this has resulted in the creation of massive refugee camps where hundreds of thousands of refugees are kept in a kind of liminality – kept healthy and alive but expected not to participate in politics – waiting for the day they can/must return. This paper explores the ways in which the return process is staged by international agencies and juxtaposes it with the lived experiences of those involved. I argue that the refugee camps function as a means to install a new kind of democratic citizenship in the refugees – based on participation but void of politics, history and violence – and that repatriation programmes are meant as a prolongation of this project, reinserting the returnees into society as new citizens. In other words, it is not simply a question of returning to something old, as has been critiqued in much of the literature on repatriation. On the contrary, there is a sense – among the international relief and aid community and among the new state elites – that societies that have experienced large scale violence, need to start afresh and not return to the old ways. Using Rwanda and Burundi as cases, I explore how various groups of returnees are positioned by different actors, and how different government and international programmes attempt to create them as citizens. Meanwhile, refugee camps are highly politicized places and refugees have quite particular reasons to return that rarely correspond with the international agencies' concept of 'hapless victims, waiting for the first chance to return as soon as their country is safe.' Theoretically, the paper explores firstly, how the biopolitics of creating innocent victims out of refugees clashes with the hyper-political realities of refugee camps. Secondly, it explores repatriation programmes as 'points of transition' where the home state and international agencies compete and/or collaborate to transform potentially dangerous 'bare life' into citizens of the 'new era'. Finally, it shows how also this project is mired with tensions and fault-lines, as returnees have quite different agendas.