

Staying Out of Place – The Dialectics of Being and Becoming an Exceptional Space

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Taking its point of departure in an ethnographic exploration of Burundian refugees in camps in Tanzania as well as living clandestinely in Nairobi, this paper argues that while refugees engage in mobile livelihoods and transnational practices, they also experience a radical disruption in their lives due to displacement. We need in other words, to keep in mind that displacement is not simply business as usual for those affected and that displacement has strong existential implications for those involved. Furthermore, I argue that we must transgress the displacement-emplacement dichotomy by viewing disruption not simply as a traumatic experience that must be overcome but as a strategy in itself. Killing time in a refugee camp or hiding on the outskirts of a big city is to live in a non-place (Augé), in liminality (van Gennep) or the exception (Agamben). However, as much as this is a parenthesis in time – strung out between a long lost past and an unknown future – it is also a space of opportunities and new beginnings (Schrijvers et al), in particular for certain groups (youth, women, etc). In other words, disruption and displacement can produce a powerful position, a position which in refugee camps is highly politicized and needs ‘policing’ by the political elite (Turner 2010). In this paper, I explore how individuals and groups maneuver in the exceptional space, making most use of it as a disruptive non-space. I explore the complex relationship between ‘being’ in Nairobi and the camp and ‘becoming’ someone in the future. On the one hand, they engage in mobile livelihoods while on the other they attempt to avoid becoming too involved as they prefer to prepare their future by remaining liminal in the present. In other words, the paper argues that displacement creates a sense of disruption that those who are affected by it, simultaneously attempt to overcome in order to inhabit the new space in which they live while also remaining in – and maintaining – a non-space; a space that is not to be inhabited but is there for the future alone. Finally, it argues that this tension is highly contentious and that different groups among the refugees struggle to define the space. Creating and maintaining a non-space is a powerful tool through which to govern and control those who have been displaced.