REVIEW ARTICLE

Reading and Representing African Refugees in New York

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Tracy Kidder, *Strength in What Remains* (London: Profile Books, 2010). ISBN 978-1-86197-857-8.
Jonny Steinberg, *Little Liberia, An African Odyssey in New York* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2011). ISBN: 978-1-86842-382-8.

Tracy Kidder and Jonny Steinberg have constructed evocative biographies of African refugees' dislocation, journeys and struggles to settle in the USA. These books are reviewed through the lens of how South African readers might read these books given local imaginings of African refugees. The article describes how African refugee experiences are portrayed in both books and it critiques their representation of trauma and memory; and how each 'author' approached their relationships with the 'authored'. Kidder tended to be the ventriloquist for the Burundian refugee's life story and while offering useful narrative analysis, his conclusions have a redemptive tone. In contrast, Steinberg shares his draft manuscript with two Liberian protagonists, which produces complex encounters between author and authored. Steinberg's analysis of how the past Liberian civil war is mirrored in present conflicts within and amongst refugees in Little Liberia leads to a more complex account of refugee lives and of how memory and history intertwine.

With an optimistic three-year mandate, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) was set up in post-World War II Europe in 1950. The UNCHR still exists and in 2010 it estimated that there are 43 million uprooted people worldwide consisting of 15.6 million internally displaced, 10.4 million refugees and various other displaced persons.[1] The UNCHR also provides ample statistical evidence that contrary to First World perceptions, the vast majority of refugees do not enter Europe or the USA but neighbouring states.[2] There are an estimated maximum of 2 million refugees in South Africa of who a maximum 1.5 million are from Zimbabwe.[3] But what of the human suffering behind the numbers? What does it feel like to be displaced from your home, by civil war and/or genocide? How does one bear the material and psychological legacies of a violent past while adapting to a foreign country where your presence is unwelcome?

1 *UNCHR Global Trends Report* (2010), 1-25, www.unhcr.org/4dfa11499.html, accessed 23/11/2011.
2 *UNCHR Global Trends Report*, 6.
3 Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, 'Protecting Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants in South Africa during 2010' report, Johannesburg, April 2011, 74-75. www.cormsa.org.za/research/cormsa-reports/ accessed 16/1/2012.

These questions are at the centre of Tracy Kidder's *Strength in What Remains* about a Burundian refugee named Deo, and Jonny Steinberg's *Little Liberia* about the Liberians, Jacob Massaquoi and Rufus Arkoi. Both books provide histories of African refugees who settled in New York and will interest researchers working on refugee studies, or historians of West Africa or the Great Lakes region. I found the writing compelling and their biographical approaches fascinating. Both books contain stories of extreme violence which are sensitively handled. But these books are not without flaws. In particular, the dynamic between the author and the authored concerned me. This raises a central question. What are the ethico-political implications of recording, writing and disseminating refugee life histories across the globe to-day?

Do refugees appear as strangers inside our symbolic 'homes'? They do not belong with us and they do not belong in our stories and histories. In the post-apartheid context, refugees tend to disrupt how South Africans imagine themselves as insiders in relation to local communities and to the nation. Moreover, given high unemployment rates, refugees are also perceived to be an added threat to competition over jobs, houses and livelihoods. But that response is based on a conception of the economy as 'a fixed cake' with much less to be shared, because of those strangers within. The presence and plight of refugees in our midst also calls into question the belief in authentic citizenship determining exclusive access to state resources and patronage.[4] A lethal mixture of these insider-outsider perceptions fuels xenophobia and has had violent consequences for refugees in South Africa.

Steinberg is a South African author but the books under review are not about South Africa. Yet while I read these books, mental links were repeatedly evoked of African refugees in South Africa. I have no doubt that the publishers' hope that such associations will be made and that this will help sell these books to a local market. However, I am intellectually sceptical about simple comparisons. It was more useful to read these books in their own right while being aware of my location and how South African readers might read them. I am also concerned that choosing to review these books together has the risk of reinforcing the stereotype of 'violent and expulsive Africa' versus 'safe and welcoming USA'.

Both the *Strength in that Remains* and *Little Liberia* are driven by testimonies of passage from Africa to the USA. The mythical conception of a refugee's passage is of a sudden, painful departure from their homes to arrive at a single destination to settle. In fact, for most refugees, passage usually involves many destinations, stops and modes of transport. Many failed attempts at finding safety. Also, the passage after displacement due to war and genocide until reaching relative security is frequently circuitous and pock-marked with further violence. The duration of the passage in many cases continues for several years and at an emotional level a sense of safety might never be achieved. Both books provide evocative evidence of the extreme stress involved in displacement, journeys and the rebuilding of lives in a foreign country.

From Burundi to New York

The enmeshed colonial and post-colonial histories of Burundi and Rwanda are grounded in the geo-politics of the Great Lakes region. I cannot detail these histories here but the literature is burgeoning and Mahmood Mamdani's book on Rwanda

4 Jonny Steinberg, 'South Africa's Xenophobic Eruption', Institute for Security Studies, Paper No. 169, November 2008, 1-13.

(brilliantly titled, *When Victims Become Killers*) is a solid starting point. While Hutu-Tutsi tensions pre-date the arrival of German and Belgian colonialists, Mamdani argues that it was under colonialism that these differences were turned into a form of racial difference supported by Hamitic myths and constructions of Hutus being the 'true' inhabitants of Burundi and Rwanda, and of Tutsi's being foreign invaders.[5] The separation of Burundi and Rwanda at independence in 1959 and the subsequent internal massacres repeatedly had ripple effects in each neighbouring state. For example, the 1972 Burundi genocide of Hutus by Tutsi soldiers, and the assassination of the first Hutu President, Ndadaye, in 1993 are bitter memories that were exploited in Rwanda by Hutu Power leaders during the civil war and the 1994 genocide.

Kidder narrates the life story of Deo from growing up in Burundi leading through to a detailed account of his experiences in 1993-1994. At the time of his displacement Deo is working as a medical intern at a hospital in Mutaho. But after an attack by a Hutu rebel group seeking reprisals for the death of the President, he decides to leave. Six months later the civil war further escalates in the wake of both the Burundian and Rwandan presidents being assassinated in Kigali on the evening of 6 April 1994. Deo crosses the Burundi border in late April and enters the Rwandan town of Murambi, but his timing is terrible. He had escaped from the Burundian civil war into the unfolding Rwandan genocide. On foot, he reaches the Murambi Technical College just as the killings begin there. He narrowly avoids being killed by *Interhamwe* militia near the college (which is to-day the site of a Murambi Genocide Memorial and Education Centre).[6] Deo then returns to Burundi and in May 1994 flies to New York on a UN refugee visa.

Not able to speak English and with no friends or family there, his survival is a tribute to his courage and skilful intelligence. He learns English by reading dictionaries in bookshops. His interactions with American families and entry into university provide examples of his tenacity to survive and also of the acts of kindness from locals willing to support this remarkable man and his medical studies at Columbia University. I have no doubt that the support he received from American families, and Kidder himself, are examples of genuine altruism. But is Kidder's portrayal, in subtle terms, playing into historical myths about the USA being warm and receptive to all migrants? In contrast, Steinberg's detailed exposition of intra-refugee conflict within *Little Liberia* dispels such romantic myths.

From Liberia to New York

Anglophone Liberia has since the nineteenth century been riddled with tensions between indigineous language groups and the Americo-Liberians and their descendants. Americo-Liberians dominated political power and the state until Sergeant Samuel Doe led a military coup in 1980. Three years later coup-makers from several ethnicities splintered and in 1989 the civil wars began. Many of those fleeing the violence under Charles Taylor ended up on Park Hill Avenue, Staten Island, New York, where to ask about a neighbour's past might be construed as a threat. The book traces

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5 Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001). See also René Lemarchand. 'The Burundian Genocide' in Samuel Totten, William Parsons, and Israel Charny, eds., *Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 321-38.

6 While reading Deo's eyewitness account of the slaughter at the Murambi College I was reminded of my visit there in April 2004, and of walking on the same hill-top where this occurred in April 1994. For more information about the memorial centre visit: www.museum.gov.rw/2_museums/murambi/genocide/, accessed 23 Nov. 2011.

the stories of Jacob Massaquoi, a social worker with political ambitions, and Rufus Arkoi who rebuilt his soccer club Roza, which once thrived in the Monrovia slums, among young Liberian exiles in Park Hill.

Steinberg's account of Arkoi and Massaquoi illustrates their determined industriousness to gain entry to the USA and to carve a niche for themselves. When these men arrive in New York, they read the place through the lens of USA-Liberia relations, and the history of Americo-Liberians as powerful elites in Monrovia. Massaquoi says that the scale of New York swept over him and he realised how the Americo-Liberians used Liberia as 'their pet project'. 'They schooled their children here, went to hospital here when they are sick. I lost all respect for Americo-Liberians, for all those years and leaving us in the dark' (127).

There are also stories of the once-darling of the international community, Charles Taylor, portrayed as a 'street-hustler' who plundered state resources to maintain an army to stay in power. And when President Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson – the current favourite of the USA and the UN – visits *Little Liberia* she is heckled. Her prior support for Taylor (who is now on trial for crimes against humanity) still angers Liberian exiles in New York.[7] Arkoi and Massaquoi are central to the tragic mirroring of prior Liberian conflicts within this refugee community. Steinberg writes that,

> The conflict had two faces, one looking towards America, the other towards home. The anxiety about what was happening in both places erected the stage on which Arkoi and Massaquoi fought. With regard to home, Arkoi and Massaquoi were stand-in figures: people who could not be trusted to spend public money; people incapable of running power without cheating; people with terrible acts buried in their pasts. The uncertain future everyone feared for Liberia was condensed into the figures of Arkoi and Massaquoi. Both men had played these stand-in roles before. Arkoi had been overthrown in a soccer club in 1981. Massaquoi had organised a high-school coup in the late 1980s. In a sense what had happened on Park Hill Avenue grew naturally from both of their biographies (209-10).

It is difficult to decipher whether Steinberg's analysis is spot-on or over-reaching. It is thought-provoking and takes the reader beyond the comfort zone of 'the triumph over adversity' tale, which in contrast, Kidder's book does become. *Little Liberia* has a more complex structure as it bounces from biographical vignettes of each protagonist, between events in Liberia past – remembered and actual – to contemporary conflicts in New York. As difficult as it was to follow this structure, Steinberg should be praised for his creative break from the typical biographical method. These entertwining biographies indicate shifting conflicts within the *Little Liberia* community which has neither clear heroes nor villains. Both protagonists are deeply shaped by the civil war and it emerges late in the book that sections of the community accused Massaquoi of being a rebel soldier responsible for atrocities, even though there is no evidence to prove this. Steinberg has a gift for writing biographies that are respectful to the narrators while simultaneously revealing their vulnerabilities and flaws.

His image of America is far from cosy and he presents a rather grim sense of New York street realism. This again is in contrast to Kidder's portrayal of Deo's indi-

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7 Adekeye Adebajo, 'Sirleaf: Peace prize for a "warmonger"?', *Mail and Guardian*, 14 October 2011, 6.

vidualized struggles for survival and acceptance by American families which, while poignant, were cloistered and free of the re-ignition of conflicts amongst refugees. Steinberg's ending, filled with ongoing tensions and doubts, felt more apt to me, whereas Kidder's conclusion had a redemptive echo. It is as if Kidder is appealing to an eternal hope that supposedly transpires from the *Strength in what Remains*, whereas Steinberg's narrative framing of an *African Odyssey* holds the tensions of history *and* memory by tracking not just a single life but the inter-subjective tensions between two lives placed in relation to communities of the past and present. Crucially Steinberg also does not close off their ongoing inner and outer struggles with the pain of the past.

Death, Trauma and Memory

> 'Death' and 'Africa' are words which, unfortunately, seem often to be twinned together. In much Western media coverage, 'Africa' appears as a space of death: epidemic disease, famine, war and apparently 'irrational' violence …[8]

These stereotyped views of Africa conceal a fear of seeing, in any meaningful sense, both the human suffering and resilience of Africans across the continent. In this vein, these books are a laudable attempt to present how African refugees have seen the death of others, been hurt and traumatized, and have nevertheless survived and grown. But these are neither redemptive nor conventional oral histories but rather, as Lawrence Langer put it in relation to Holocaust testimonies, 'These life stories are really more like death stories'.[9] And through these life *and* death stories, how do survivors of wars make sense of the senseless? Deo says to Kidder:

> What kind of human being are you, if you can take a machete and kill your neighbour? … teachers killing their students, priests killing their parishioners. Who is left to trust, really? God? God the most powerful, who let everything happen? (183)

With these words Deo points to a central affect of trauma: the shattering of trust in others. But how do survivors and researchers frame 'trauma' in language when it is by definition outside of language? These questions dominate the field of trauma studies and take us to the limits of language and reason.[10] Yet to make sense of what happened in the past and its ongoing affects survivors attempt to make themselves believe that their pasts can be mastered. But to believe in complete mastery over such legacies is a fantasy. Wars and genocides shatter comforting fantasies. Rather, what remains are memories of violence that may be forgotten, erased or become more bearable, but the traumatic rupturing of trust of being in the world resists mastery and comprehension.

So during Deo's studies at Columbia University, academic rationality jars with the imagery in his memories. A lecturer distinguishes humans from animals. 'Animals kill for food. They act on instinct.' Deo cannot accept this because, 'He had known

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8 Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughn, 'Death and Dying in the History of Africa since 1800', *Journal of African History*, 49 (2008), 9.
9 Lawrence Langer, *Pre-empting the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 70.
10 See Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 2001).

cows and he had known militiamen, and for rationality, he thought he'd take cows any day' (184). It is ironic that cows were the unit of measurement used by Belgian colonialists to determine ethnicity. If you owned more than ten cattle the designation was Tutsi and less than ten, Hutu. Colonial obsessions with measurement, boundaries and bureaucracy turned Hutu-Tutsi distinctions into a toxic difference magnified during socio-economic crises. How did Deo cope with memories of violence? He speaks through Kidder.

> He still had bouts of insomnia and dreams that involved immobility and appalling quantities of blood. But the most obvious effect of his ordeal – or what I took to be an effect – was the ungovernable quality of his memories. [And later] … he was, possessing his memories. He was not possessed by them for the moment (179).

At times these memories of violence have the risk of overwhelming the survivor, but it is possible through remembering, speaking and emotionally re-connecting with others for 'ungovernable' memories to become more bearable. In a similar vein, Steinberg gives descriptions of how Massaquoi and Arkoi are living with flashbacks of violence. These are repeatedly triggered by events in New York which undermines their capacity to study, work and form relationships. Then in a different example, Steinberg describes how Massaquoi and a friend,

> made their way through the bloodiest day of the civil war, through innumerable checkpoints, at each of which they had to dissemble and pose as people they were not. And yet neither seems to remember a single detail of the journey … When I press him to remember the journey, he describes it from what seems to me a vantage point of an eyewitness, as if he is watching himself … from some distance away, perhaps from height (116).

The dangerous journey is outlined, but Massaquoi cannot place himself in the story. Perhaps he is holding back from Steinberg? But it is more likely that for Massaquoi to narrate the historical details would involve being exposed to potentially terrifying emotions. At times in relation to specific memories, survivors display a need to forget or avoid parts of their past, which researchers must respect. While survivors can dodge the pesky questions of researchers and others, what cannot be avoided are the mnemonic triggers in their current lives. For example, the drug-fuelled gang violence of New York plagues the *Little Liberia* community. Arkoi says,

> The African-Americans were in for a shock …They see African refugees arrive, washed-up from a civil war and the American kids think exploitation. They think we can walk over them … but the Liberian kids are *soldiers*. They have been shooting automatic weapons. They are fresh from the battlefield. They are too hardened for the local kids. They start getting a *reputation* (28)

The local youths are portrayed as weak in comparison to the battle-hardened 'soldiers' from Liberia. This New York is thus a physical and mental battle-zone of another kind. Steinberg traces how Massaquoi and Arkoi fight to re-build their own

lives and that of the Liberian exile community. Readers are given an evocative sense of their inner and outer worlds. However, in both books, we are taken to the limits of memory *and* history. Kidder wisely argues:

> A lot of Western thought and psychological advice assumes that it is healthy to flush out and dissect one's memories, and maybe this is true. And yet for all that, I began to have a simultaneous and opposite feeling: there was such a thing as too much remembering, and that too much of it could suffocate a person, and indeed a culture (248).

This is not to dismiss the importance of oral, written and other testimonial representations but rather to understand that the emotional legacies of violence compel survivors to learn when to remember and engage the past (or not), and when to focus on the present and future. In these efforts, Deo, Massaquoi and Arkoi all deserve considerable praise. And for researchers involved in studies of violence and trauma, we also need to learn how and when to work through the limits of reason *and* what is emotionally bearable to us.

Between Authored and Author

Testimonial practices located within the relationship between researched and researcher, authored and author are central to these books. It has also become common practice in oral history to analyze what is said, how it is said and what is not said, in the context of the power-knowledge relations between interviewee and interviewer.[11] However, to strive for a situation where these relationships might be perfectly 'equal' is a futile fantasy that many researchers harbour. Rather the on-going challenge is to reflect on how these power-knowledge relationships frame research, analysis and writing and how these practices can be approached ethically.

For the first two-thirds of *Strength in What Remains,* Deo's narrative is filtered through Kidder's words. While the book is written with empathy, Kidder the author is a ventriloquist for Deo's oral history. But then in the last third of the book Kidder reflects on their relationship. This diminished my concerns, but I remain sceptical about the backstage dynamic to their oral storyteller-writer relationship, and Kidder's paradoxically sensitive but dominating voice.

Moreover, to elicit refugees' life *and* death stories evokes shifts that traverse the private/public binary. What is narrated to the researcher might reflect the survivor's inner-subjective struggles as much as being a publicly performed story which is tailored as a means to social and material survival. Massaquoi tells Steinberg:

> In this country you need a story … It's how the place works. Look at Obama. Man has a story. He came to office on the force of a story he told about himself. And it's not just Obama, it's everyone. This is America. You need a brand to walk through doors. *Kennedy*. A lot of work has gone into that name (220).

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11 There is a considerable literature on these issues. See especially the seminal texts by Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990) and Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

Playing the narcissistic game of branding is explicit and Steinberg is nevertheless honest about his relationship with both men. Massaquoi objects after reading a draft of the book. He says, 'Sometimes we were speaking with the recorder on. That was for the book. Other times you came around and hung out, and I told you stuff' (261). Steinberg accedes to some of Massaquoi's editing demands. Sharing his authority to some degree was admirable, as was his disclosure of Massaquoi's displeasure. There is also a link here with insights from Arkoi who Steinberg interprets as follows:

> Now, he was saying not only that one comes to America to learn self-sufficiency, but to show America, and by this he surely means white America, that one is self-sufficient. Where the mask ends and the face begins is not certain. One is always performing, even in the most private corridors of one's soul (186).

This leads me to wonder: How much of what Arkoi and Massaquoi have told Steinberg is manufactured? We might never know, but it is clear is that both refugees have learnt to play particular roles to survive in the racialized, brand-obsessed United States. Steinberg is sufficiently street-wise to know there is no untainted truth in the author-authored dialogue and he is suggesting that readers should keep an open and empathic mind when reading.

Conclusion

Stories of survival are the staple diet of biographers and oral historians. There is a sharp tension here. Are we 'memory entrepreneurs'?[12] Are we politically compelled to continue disseminating peoples' stories to make a difference in the face of a globalised 'culture of indifference'?[13] Neither the author nor authored can control where and how these stories will be received by different publics and simply presenting stories of refugee suffering as self-evident is insufficient. Oral historians need to be critically savvy about 'the politics of story-telling'[14] across transnational contexts in order to be effective in dismantling stereotypes without resorting to essentialist views of Africa as a place of death or redemption.

Moreover, these books demonstrate the importance for oral historians and biographers to be self-reflexive about their histories, identities and motives for doing the research projects they do, and how their interventions shape researcher-researched dialogues. This self-reflexive approach is not only productive but ethically indispensable. International oral history literature on reflexivity and how research dialogues frame memories, stories and related texts is growing[15] but this is rarely the case within South African historiography. As Steinberg's work reveals, self-reflexive research is neither navel-gazing nor diminishing critical academic enquiry. In fact, it creates more ways to produce intellectually nuanced and insightful analyses of memory *and* history.

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12 Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Struggles for Memory* (London: Social Science Research Council, 2003).

13 Fuyuki Kurasawa, 'A Message in a Bottle: Bearing Witness as a Mode of Ethico-Political Practice', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26, 1 (2009), 92-111.

14 Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002).

15 For example see, Valerie Yow, '"Do I Like Them Too Much?" Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *The Oral History Review*, 24, 1 (1997), 55-79.

Finally, have historians tended to ignore doing research about African refugees who entered South Africa since 1994? Is it perhaps that refugee studies are considered as too 'contemporary' for South African historians? Yet 'Contemporary History' as a specific historiography is thriving in many post-conflict societies-in-transition, especially across Latin America. I rather think that further research about and with African refugees and migrants have the potential to develop trans-national histories of Cape Town that will challenge Cape histories as being seen as exceptional or unhinged from the rest of the continent.[16]

16 Many thanks, to Andrew Banks and Lance van Sittert for their constructive comments. Thanks also to Jonny Steinberg for reading a draft version of this article and correcting my empirical errors.