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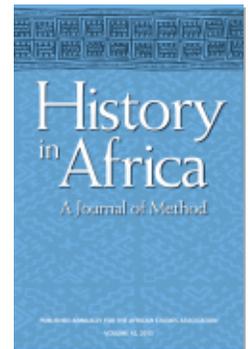
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## Southern Sudanese Narratives of Displacement, and the Ambiguity of “Voice”

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# Southern Sudanese Narratives of Displacement, and the Ambiguity of “Voice”

Nicki Kindersley

**Abstract:** Refugee life stories have developed as a popular medium for attempting to portray southern Sudanese wartime experience. These narratives of war and exile have been told, edited and published in what has become an explanatory industry in refugee work worldwide. The development of this economy of life stories from the early 1980s, however, has encouraged the propagation of standardized displaced “life stories” as a discrete narrative genre. This article traces the formulation of this distinctive style of historical explanation and argues that this genre, while claiming emancipatory agency and “voice” for marginalized people, has instead become a narrative trap.

**Résumé:** Les récits de vie de réfugiés se sont développés comme un moyen populaire pour raconter l’expérience du sud Soudan en tant de guerre. Ces histoires de guerre et d’exil ont été dites, modifiées et publiées devenant ainsi une véritable industrie pour le travail d’explication des réfugiés à travers le monde. Le développement de cette économie de récits depuis le début des années 1980, a cependant encouragé la propagation et standardisation de “récits de vie” de populations déplacées en créant un genre littéraire à part entière. Cet article retrace l’histoire de la formulation de ce style distinct d’explication historique et suggère que ce genre littéraire, malgré sa prétention à donner un pouvoir et une “parole” émancipateurs à ses auteurs marginalisés, est devenu en fait un piège narratif.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Authors writing about violence, displacement and death in Sudan since the beginning of the civil wars in the mid-1960s have struggled with what Hammond calls a “gap of understanding” – the apparent impossibility of accurately representing the violence and population movements occurring on “a scale that overwhelms the imagination.”<sup>2</sup> Media, aid, and academic work have struggled for decades with clearly articulating events in Sudan beyond a massive ahistorical and apolitical numbers game, “a miserable ‘sea of humanity’.”<sup>3</sup> The production of personal “stories” of displaced people evolved as one way of attempting to make large-scale crises comprehensible and translatable, emerging in the late 1970s as part of a broader idea of humanitarian action and “bearing witness” to suffering, and later becoming part of international projects for democratic advocacy, human rights, and a search for subaltern “agency” in aid programming.<sup>4</sup>

There are very few studies of these “oral history” projects’ evolving claims to truth.<sup>5</sup> Most discussion of this form of explanation has focused on who is represented and who speaks “for” whom, as Jackson notes. This essay takes up Jackson’s challenge to question the basis of this particular method of “giving voice,” and its claim to a legitimation of policy or evidence.<sup>6</sup> This article examines the emergence of this “life stories” economy and language

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my PhD supervisor, Justin Willis, for his advice on this article. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees of this journal for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this paper. The paper was originally submitted to Durham University as an MA dissertation, and as such I am grateful to the anonymous external examiner for their comments, as well as the guidance of Christopher Vaughan, Zoe Cormack, Rob Doherty, and Cherry Leonardi on previous drafts. This work draws on research conducted at Durham University in 2011–2012, as well as interviews conducted in July 2011 in Juba, South Sudan. I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council for their support of this work.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 57; *Washington Post*, “Sudan’s Cruel War,” 24 September 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11–3 (1996), 377–404, 377.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Fassin, “The Humanitarian Politics of Testimony: Subjectification through Trauma in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23–3 (2008), 531–558, 536, 555.

<sup>5</sup> Charles L. Briggs, “Mediating Infanticide: Theorizing Relations between Narrative and Violence,” *Cultural Anthropology* 22–3 (2007), 315–356; Roger M. Keesing, “Kwaio Women Speak: The Micropolitics of Autobiography in a Solomon Island Society,” *American Anthropologist* 87–1 (1985), 27–39.

<sup>6</sup> Cecile Jackson, “Speech, Gender and Power: Beyond Testimony,” *Development and Change* 43–5 (2012), 999–1023, 1000–1001.

in its boom period from the mid-1970s onwards. In Sudan, the advent of access to refugee camps, the growth of war journalism, and the demands of justifying humanitarian programming encouraged a standard format for “telling” about wartime refugee experience, and involved the collaborative editorial efforts of everyone involved.

This essay argues that the demands of producing a useful story of “refugee life” have created structural continuities and narrative tropes that made the “life story” a generic explanatory tool by the late 1990s. The production, format, and vocabulary of these personal narratives of suffering were not “pregiven [or] universal,” but evolved as a succinct way of presenting both the agency and the victimhood of the archetypal refugee in a simplified war without moral ambiguities.<sup>7</sup> This broad mutual aim meant that the personal histories were shaped, condensed and adulterated by ideas of what the public and personal experience of displacement in the war should be for both the narrators and the editors of the accounts. This narrative method grew into a popular economy over thirty years of conflict and displacement, providing concise explanations, potential financial or political benefits, democratic and emancipatory ideals, and horizons of expectation between storyteller and listener. The interactions of interviewers and narrators in these storytelling projects have produced an evolving but continuous pattern of narratives, where stories are trapped by the preconceptions and pre-knowledge of what is wanted or intended by the recording of these stories at the time, what displacement, fleeing, and exile should mean, what people should have experienced and how people should talk about their memories and feelings. As the production and consumption of these stories increased by the early 1990s, the narratives also developed an economical language and structure, compressing accounts into concise and apparently complete packages through repeated terminology and phrasing. Powerful conventionalities echo across accounts, over time and through authorial and editorial processes, creating self-perpetuating narrative boundaries. The clear continuities in ways of explaining and editing experience reflects Hammond’s conclusions on the repeated metaphors and methods used by Ethiopians to explain their similar experiences of war and flight: “even the most ‘original’ experience has to be represented through accepted rules of language and of narrative production.”<sup>8</sup>

By the 2000s, many donor and aid agencies, journalists, activists and academics were invested in this method of explanation, with entire books or sub-sections of reports composed of “life stories” as illustrative,

<sup>7</sup> Briggittine M. French, “The Semiotics of Collective Memories,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41–1 (2012), 337–353, 344.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87; Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 56–76.

explanatory and “victim-led” histories of the Sudanese civil war.<sup>9</sup> But while the search for these individual life stories is an attempt to give agency to the “experienced,” these accounts have been structured more by the underlying ideals and formats of the genre than the actual wartime experiences of their tellers. Rather than being explanations of survival and personal experiences, the collective negotiation of how to tell these stories was an attempt to establish the “truth” of being a “refugee” and representing a “life in war.”

This article contends that the concept of exile itself provides a “horizon of expectation” to the tellers and audience, who know what they should hear as an authentic representation of the refugee experience.<sup>10</sup> Actual experiences were revised and decontextualized by both the speakers and editors in this process, to conform to collective ideas of what constituted the specific, homogenized and narrativized role of being “a refugee.”<sup>11</sup> This editing ultimately subsumed the speakers’ specific subjectivities, while simultaneously claiming a moral and subaltern legitimacy for the narrative. This study questions the usefulness of these heavily structured, edited and generic individual oral histories in explaining past suffering and giving “agency” to the voiceless, and ultimately asks: do these stories actually produce very much information about lived experience, or do they demonstrate instead the aggressive rhetorical demands of being an “eyewitness” in exile?

### Migration and Migration Studies during the Sudanese Civil Wars

The majority of the Sudanese population have long-established experience of movement. Migration has shaped the formation of Sudan through trade, slavery, labor movements, religious expansions, immigrations from West Africa, cross-border communities and rapid urbanization.<sup>12</sup> Economic necessity and opportunity, displacement from dam building and mechanized

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance: Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women in Sudan: Politics and the Body in a Squatter Settlement* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Christina Bützer, *The Long Way Home: Contemplations of Southern Sudanese Refugees in Uganda* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007); John Rogge, *Relocation and Repatriation of Displaced Persons in Sudan: A Report to the Minister of Relief and Displaced Persons Affairs* (Khartoum: Government of Sudan/UNDP, 1990); Craig Waltzer (ed.), *Out of Exile: Narratives from the Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan* (New York: McSweeney’s Books, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Fassin, “The Humanitarian Politics,” 533; Briggs, “Mediating Infanticide,” 315.

<sup>12</sup> The literature on the history of Sudanese experiences of slavery, migration and conflict is too large to summarize here, but excellent synopses can be found in Ahmad Alawad Sikainga, *Slaves into Workers: Emancipation and Labor in Colonial Sudan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Sudan – Contested National Identities* (Bloomington IN/Oxford: Indiana University Press/James Currey, 1998).

agriculture, famine, insecurity and violence have produced vast migrant populations in surrounding countries, in Khartoum and northern towns: work on Sudanese communities must begin with the assumption of migration.<sup>13</sup> People have attempted to survive intense conflict in south and central Sudan by travel. Localized conflicts, factionalisms, and international interference and assistance have produced compound and complicated mass migrations since the beginnings of widespread violence in the early 1960s. Given that Sudanese families have relocated, sent children for education, have relatives abroad or in cities or follow seasonal grazing routes, terms like “displaced,” “return,” and “homecoming” are not straightforward.

The first civil war, brought to an end in 1972 by the Addis Ababa Agreement between the Nimeiri government and Joseph Lagu’s South Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), saw about a million people leave their homes, about 200,000 of whom crossed borders.<sup>14</sup> By 1975, most people had returned to the South; but the Agreement buckled in the early 1980s, and by 1983 the civil war had restarted. Resumed violence meant more mass Sudanese movement alongside many Ugandans, Eritreans, and Ethiopians, refugees from their own countries in the early 1980s.<sup>15</sup> The varying intensity and localized nature of the fighting meant initial displacement was generally not final. For example, war in Ethiopia in 1991 forced Sudanese Dinka and Nuer people from Itang camp in Ethiopia back to their “old homes” along the Sobat, where they found they had been displaced by other refugees to the area; many returned to Ethiopia in 1992.<sup>16</sup> Most people moved as the situation changed, maintaining property and

<sup>13</sup> Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7–1 (1992), 24–44; Terence O. Ranger, “Personal Reminiscence and the Experience of the People in East Central Africa,” *Oral History* 6–1 (1978), 45–78.

<sup>14</sup> M.A. Mohamed Salih, “Responding to Situations of Mass Voluntary Return: Past Experience in Sudan,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 164–170, 165, 168. For a discussion of the generation and unreliability of war deaths and displaced figures, see: Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars* (London: James Currey, 2011), 143fn.

<sup>15</sup> Tim Allen, “Repatriation to Northern Uganda: A View from Below” (paper presented at UNRISD Symposium on social and economic aspects of mass voluntary return of refugees from one African country to another, Harare, 12–14 March 1991), 6; Johnathan Bascom, “Reconstituting Households and Reconstructing Home Areas: The Case of Returning Eritreans,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 66–79, 71.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, “Increasing the Trauma of Return: An Assessment of the UN’s Emergency Response to the Evacuation of the Sudanese Refugee Camps in Ethiopia, 1991,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 171–181, 180–181.

crops in previously settled areas and often splitting families, inadvertently or tactically. The decisions and opportunities available to people were influenced strongly by the growing impact of emergency aid in the South and the political situation. Remigration began after the resurrection of negotiations in the late 1990s, and continued despite on-going violence; movement grew after the 2002 ceasefire and Machakos Protocol, before and after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, and during the 2010 elections and 2011 referendum. Most people staged their return journeys, often moving women, the elderly and young children to the south, usually following lengthy planning and visits, and leaving men and students abroad. Those who returned “home” made long stops of months or more, meeting relatives and reassessing their options in light of local aid, government funding and transport practicalities. Those without family in Khartoum – often widows – were in effect forced to return by the deteriorating political situation and the loss of their support network as supporting families left.<sup>17</sup> Many moved to peri-urban areas around small towns like Malakal and Aweil.

This period of migration from the 1980s coincided with the growth of refugee studies as an academic discipline and the rise of repatriation as a fashionable concept in international aid. While the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) called the 1990s the “decade of voluntary return,” many researchers began to challenge the terminology of “refugees,” “Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs),” “returnees,” and “stayees:” the “oversimplifications that may over-emphasize the importance of crossing boundaries or imply that it is done once.”<sup>18</sup> Despite this, the continuing emphasis on voluntary, assisted return since the 1990s has created a huge system of tracking and aiding “returnees” “home.” This repatriation engine began from around 2006, peaking in 2009–2010. People have been registered, logged and counted since 2007 from their departure points to their “final destination.”<sup>19</sup> The emphasis is on the “returnees” and their integration with the “stayee” community, even if most of the “stayees” are migrants

<sup>17</sup> MM, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) official (personal communication, 13 July 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Tim Allen, “Repatriation to Northern Uganda,” 40, 48. Also see: Gaim Kibreab, *Ready and Willing... But Still Waiting: Eritrean Refugees in Sudan and the Dilemmas of Return* (Uppsala: Life & Peace Institute, 1996), 3; Roger Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalisation,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20–2 (2007) 172–192; Johnathan Bascom, *Losing Place: Refugee Populations and Rural Transformations in East Africa* (Oxford: Berghan Books, 1998); Wendy James, “Uduk Resettlement: Dreams and Realities,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 182–202.

<sup>19</sup> CD, IOM official (personal communication, 7 July 2011). For information and maps detailing the “traced” migrant communities, see: IOM Sudan, <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/sudan>.

to the area or returnees themselves since 2004.<sup>20</sup> Despite awareness of the implicit generalizations involved, the “return” of millions of people since the late 1990s has been a key political and practical challenge.

### The Development of the “Life Stories” Economy

This long history of movement and suffering during conflicts in Sudan had, by the early 1990s, been overtaken by the huge (and generally unverifiable) numbers of people killed, missing or fleeing from the civil wars beginning in the early 1980s. The demand for articulation and explanation of the conflict and its human suffering grew from the late 1980s, based on the terrifying human costs of the southern Sudanese and Darfur famine in 1986–1989, the rise of international war journalism and photography, the development of “witness”-style humanitarian activism, the expansion of Sudanese refugee populations and accessible refugee camps – particularly Kakuma in Kenya – in the early 1990s, and, more latterly, the influence of the internet, growing interest in ideas of human rights, and large-scale aid campaigns.<sup>21</sup>

This article accordingly draws on a large body of documents and reports that commonly feature first person narratives aimed at illustrating everyday experience of the war, with specific newspaper-based examples in the early 1970s giving way to a plethora of texts, video and audio reporting by the early 1990s, and with increasing space given over to direct speech of Sudanese victims and survivors. These reports have been collected from news agencies’ catalogues, aid agency documentation, and academic articles or notes in archives: the common feature is the emplacing (and later naming) of individuals and the use of the first person in a significant amount of text – from three sentences in news articles in the 1970s, through to full books of chapters of “lives” by the 2010s.<sup>22</sup> The earliest examples, mostly from early generations of international photojournalists, include occasional and generic *vox populi* as illustrative or emotive quotations from actors in the conflicts, but by the 2000s, most political, humanitarian and news reports routinely featured “whole” life stories “from beginning to end.”<sup>23</sup> This is in keeping with the expansion of “witness” humanitarianism and a general search for the “voice” of the marginalized and dispossessed

<sup>20</sup> MM, IOM official (personal communication, 7 July 2011).

<sup>21</sup> For a regional exploration of this argument, see: Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women in Sudan*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> For example: Waltzer, *Out of Exile*.

<sup>23</sup> Dave Eggers and Valentino Achak Deng, “Foreword: The Amplification of Seldom-Heard Voices,” in: Craig Waltzer (ed.), *Out of Exile: Narratives from the Abducted and Displaced People of Sudan* (New York: McSweeney’s Books, 2009), 1–3.

in international aid work, which Keeping and Fassin date to the rise of activist organizations like *Médecins Sans Frontières* in the mid-1970s, and which arguably reached its zenith with the influential World Bank “Voices of the Poor” series from 2000 onwards.<sup>24</sup>

The expansion of these ideas had its own chronology in Sudan. In the 1970s, during the first Sudanese civil war, the refugee aid industry and its surrounding apparatus of international journalism and advocacy were undeveloped, and ideas of humanitarian campaigning were in their infancy. News reports after Nimeiri’s coup in 1969 and during negotiations leading to the peace agreement in 1972 only quote government spokespeople and General Joseph Lagu, the head of the southern Anyanya militias.<sup>25</sup> Most articles used descriptions – of southern “warriors,” huts, and living conditions, and accounts of wartime experience until the late 1980s, when conflict escalated – were paraphrased, in the third person and communal, as “old people” or “women,” for instance, and still incidental to mostly “issue”-led published pieces on slavery and massacres.<sup>26</sup> Detailed interviews from the mid-1970s were heavily influenced by political motives. Francis Deng’s interviews in 1975–1976 with Dinka chiefs, a prime example, mostly focused on discussions of the future of political leadership.<sup>27</sup> Deng’s interviews were an engineered exercise in partisan Dinka ethno-politics that managed to promote the chiefs as judicious if unrecognized leaders of the South.<sup>28</sup> The few individual stories recorded until the late 1980s were epigrammatic

<sup>24</sup> Keesing, “Kwaio Women Speak,” 27; Fassin, “The Humanitarian Politics of Testimony.”

<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Charles Mohr, “Poverty Threatens the New Peace,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1974; Marvine Howe, “Sudanese Refugees Return with Hope of Peace,” *New York Times*, 29 December 1970.

<sup>26</sup> Marcello Lado Jada, untitled group interview with people on the road to Yei, “The Four Enemies,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Poggrund (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), 125–138, 136; *The Daily Telegraph*, “Children of Three are Slaves in Sudan,” 17 February 1988, Stephenson Papers, Sudan Archives Durham, 796/9/90, <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/stevnrc.xml>.

<sup>27</sup> Chief Stephan Thongkol, quoted in: Sudan Archives Durham, 933/5/1–270, Francis Mading Deng, typescript draft book, “A Heritage of Survival. The Oral History of an African People in the Sudan, 1975–1976,” 166, <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/collinsr.xml>; Henry Tanner, “Town Where Sudan Uprising Began is Now a Way Station for Refugees,” *New York Times*, 9 December 1972; Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Benjamin Basieh, interviewed by Oliver C. Allison on tape recording, <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/allisono.xml#qxj-7449>.

<sup>28</sup> A criticism levelled at Deng in the reviews of the manuscript in Sudan Archives Durham, 933/5/237–241. Other anonymous and potentially self-titled “refugee leaders” are quoted by David B. Ottaway and Taene Asmare, “Civil War Breaks Out in Sudan, Refugees Say,” *Washington Post*, 29 July 1975.

and anonymous: “I was 13. I began to run (...) Then one dark night I slipped down to the Nile bank and ran away to Uganda. It was seven years before I saw Juba again. It is better now.”<sup>29</sup> The testimony sought out in the interwar years, untroubled by current conflict or the later demands of the aid and advocacy industries, was brief and openly politicized.

The resurgent civil wars in Sudan in the late 1980s, along with the horrific famine peaking in 1988 to 1989, happened alongside a massive expansion of the aid industry in the Horn of Africa, as well as supporting ideas of how to represent both the wars of the region and the resultant necessity of humanitarian work. This demanded clearer, more powerful tools for raising money, getting political attention, justifying interventions and demonstrating the effectiveness of relief projects. This period saw life experiences and stories of war used as illustrative case studies, a demonstration of principles outlined elsewhere, and proving “impact and need.” By the mid-1990s, most of these aid reports – such as UNHCR’s catalogue – used the growing language of human rights to emphasize the success of camp organization in giving refugees a “good life,” with people “grateful” for UNHCR’s work and “content for the moment.”<sup>30</sup> Other aid agencies such as Rädä Barnen, pro-democracy groups like the Panos Institute, and specific egalitarian schemes like The Listening Project, justified their work, demonstrated their understanding of and successes with their participants, and therefore claimed further funding, through the “case studies” – often third-person life stories – that illustrated their many reports through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>31</sup> An individual account often became – through linguistic pastiche – a synecdoche for broader experience: “like most Sudanese refugees ‘we arrived in Uganda on foot’.”<sup>32</sup> Accounts were therefore generally anonymous, for illustrative rather than ethical reasons: “these words (...) speak for all the women and children we met during our fact-finding mission.”<sup>33</sup> Until the mid-1990s to

<sup>29</sup> “A young southerner,” quoted by Mohr, “Poverty Threatens the New Peace.”

<sup>30</sup> Wendy Rappoport, “Uganda Shows It Cares – Refugee Voices from Exile,” *UNHCR Refugees Magazine* 107, 1 March 1997, accessible through <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66cf084.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Rädä Barnen Report, “The Unaccompanied Minors of Southern Sudan,” November 1994, accessible through Forced Migration Online, [http://repository.forcedmigration.org/show\\_metadata.jsp?pid=fmo:3203](http://repository.forcedmigration.org/show_metadata.jsp?pid=fmo:3203); Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrud (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988); Dayna Brown and Kathryn Mansfield, “Listening to the Experiences of the Long-Term Displaced,” *Forced Migration Review* 33 (2009), 15–17.

<sup>32</sup> Moses Taban, quoted in Rappoport, “Uganda Shows It Cares.”

<sup>33</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 947/10/24–27, draft report of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Kenya/Somalia/Sudan delegation, March 1993, <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/collinsr.xml>.

the late 1990s, “life experiences” remained separate chapters and case studies in aid reports, books and articles.<sup>34</sup>

The explicit idea that these case studies should give “agency” to their speaker came into its own in the late 1990s to mid-2000s.<sup>35</sup> The growth of human rights discourse and then programming in the late 1990s, increasing international journalism focusing on African development and violent conflict, aid practitioner interests in psychosocial support for refugees and research on trauma, the further expansions of refugee camp access and the mass international resettlement of Sudanese refugees in the 1990s (which in itself depended on witness statements), all contributed to a growing demand for marginalized and victimized populations to “speak for themselves.”<sup>36</sup> Increasing competition in international journalism encouraged a broader demand for more detailed stories of the extreme human trauma in Sudan, which increasingly emphasized experiences of violence. While more stories were recorded with women, they were heavily sexualized, and often centred on graphic descriptions of rape.<sup>37</sup> Although apparently representing “normal” experience, exceptional accounts dominated – such as “the extraordinary story of the unaccompanied minors,” who were emerging as “lost boys” in the international press, aid work, and refugee programmes.<sup>38</sup> Aid campaigns and development fundraising became more emotive from the late 1990s, demanding a personal engagement and empathy that justified the work and hopefully raised more money from jaded donors: “We should all remember when reading refugee testimonies, this could be me.”<sup>39</sup> The growing awareness by the late 1980s that there was very little recorded personal experience of the war encouraged

<sup>34</sup> For examples of this, see: Sudan Archives Durham, draft report of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Kenya/Somalia/Sudan delegation, March 1993; Sudan Archives Durham, 940/2/1–12, draft paper c. 1990 by Sharon Hutchinson, “War Through the Eyes of the Dispossessed: Three Stories of Survival,” <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/collinsr.xml>; Sudan Archives Durham, 942/2/29–32, report by Wendy James, “Managing Food Aid: Returnees’ Strategies for Allocating Relief – ‘Refugee Participation Network’ 13 (1992),” <http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ead/sad/collinsr.xml#rocx-26>, among many other reports, particularly in umbrella Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) documents from 1989–1996, accessible through: Sudan Open Archive, <http://sudanarchive.net>.

<sup>35</sup> Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 392.

<sup>36</sup> Amna E. Badri and Intisar I. Abdel Sadig, *Sudan: Between Peace and War: Internally Displaced Women in Khartoum and South and West Kordofan* (Nairobi, UNIFEM, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Badri and Sadig, *Between Peace and War*.

<sup>38</sup> See Rādda Barnen’s work, detailed in “Unaccompanied Minors,” 4, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Foreword,” in: Nora Eltahawy, Brooke Comer and Amani Elshimi (eds.), *Voices in Refugee: Stories from Sudanese Refugees in Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009) xi–xvi, xi.

attempts to get “some of the people affected by this protracted and brutal conflict speak for themselves,” although this direct speech still needed to be “coadjuted [sic] by the evidence of those who have worked alongside them over the years in the effort to alleviate their condition.”<sup>40</sup>

The often economic and operational imperatives behind this growing search for “voices” were mitigated by the explicit focus on advocacy and “grass roots” representation. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, aid organizations, journalists and human rights bodies began to emphasize the importance of including an “authentic voice,” in an attempt to “[learn] from analyses and judgements of local people’s reflections,” which demonstrated the interviewer’s democratic ideals and closeness to the communities they engaged with.<sup>41</sup> The rise of the role of “advocate” in this period assumed that “speaking out” would rectify inequalities, with “testimony as evidence.”<sup>42</sup> The UNHCR magazine edition *Refugee Voices from Exile* in 1997 was one of the first reports to focus entirely on “life stories” presented as history, testimony and programming justification. The long history of anthropological literature on southern Sudan, and the continuing characterization of southern Sudanese people as fundamentally ethnically grouped at best (and as “animist tribespeople” at worst), encouraged a strain of humanising long-form life stories, often focused on the extreme experiences of the child refugee “lost boys,” many of whom co-wrote their experiences in the 2000s from the USA.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, though, this focus on first-person narration also attempted to

<sup>40</sup> Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 384; Jon Tinker, “Introduction: The Floods and the War,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrund (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), i–iii, i; Olusegun Obasanjo, “Preface,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrund (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), 1–3, 2.

<sup>41</sup> Brown and Mansfield, “Listening to the Experiences,” 15.

<sup>42</sup> Jackson, “Speech, Gender and Power,” 1000.

<sup>43</sup> Some examples include: Mator Adol Mawien, *Survival of the Fittest and How the Lost Boy Survived It All* (Bloomington IN: WestBow Press, 2012); Jeff Burlingame, *The Lost Boys of Sudan* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2011); Agok Manyang, *The Phoenix of South Sudan: A Lost Boy’s Journey to a New World* (Bloomington IN: iUniverse, 2012); Majok Marier and Estelle Ford-Williamson, *Seed of South Sudan: Memoir of a “Lost Boy” Refugee* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014); Lopez Lomong, *Running for My Life: One Lost Boy’s Journey from the Killing Fields of Sudan to the Olympic Games* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2012); John Bul Dau, *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* (Des Moines IA: National Geographic Books, 2010); Abraham Nhial and DiAnn Mills, *Lost Boy No More: A True Story of Survival and Salvation* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004); Makur Abiar and Guy-Luce Fenelon, *King Deng, The Original Lost Boy of Sudan* (Suwanee GA: Faith Books and More, 2010); Joseph Akol Makeer, *From Africa to America: The Journey of a Lost Boy of Sudan* (Mustang OA: Tate Publishing, 2008).

delete the ethnographic intermediary from the text; Waltzer's huge compilation of life stories is a good example.<sup>44</sup>

A concomitant strand of academia reinforced this approach to voice and advocacy in the 1990s and 2000s. Many historians since the late 1980s have "argued that voices should be heard," in a reasonable attempt at providing authenticity and rebalancing the potentially extractive and remote nature of some historical work, and personal testimonies "at least reveal something more of the human face of this war."<sup>45</sup> Michael Frisch said that oral history could restructure intellectual authority, "[negotiating] the politics of the production of knowledge" by giving the power to determine historicity and epistemology to the informant; influenced by feminist anthropology and literature, other studies of "displaced" people have focused on "translating their victimisation into activism."<sup>46</sup> Abusharaf's last chapter in her 2009 book on displaced women in Khartoum is made up almost entirely of quoted life stories as explanatory evidence.<sup>47</sup> Academic and practitioner ideas of this narrative format overlapped most strongly as part of the 2000s focus on peace, truth and reconciliation commissions, which continues today: "The organized collection of survivor and witness narratives has constituted an integral part of transitional justice efforts in recent decades, and testimonies are generally taken to be evidence of and an instrument for a victim-centred approach."<sup>48</sup> By the late 2000s, the international campaign focusing on refugee returns, and the rise of practical "returns management" among UN agencies and donor communities, coincided with discussion of the return of internally and internationally displaced southern Sudanese refugees after the 2005 CPA.<sup>49</sup> By the 2000s, many accounts had become a complete narrative of personal experience of the war and exile, from the beginning of their

<sup>44</sup> Waltzer, *Out of Exile*.

<sup>45</sup> Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (London: University of California Press, 2000), 49; Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 5; Hutchinson, "War Through the Eyes of the Dispossessed."

<sup>46</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: Suny Press, 1990); Megan Vaughan, "Reported Speech and Other Kinds of Testimony," in: Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 53–77, 65; Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*; Bützer, *The Long Way Home*.

<sup>48</sup> Angela Impey, "The Poetics of Transitional Justice in Dinka Songs in South Sudan," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* 33 (2014), 57–77, 62–63; French, "The Semiotics of Collective Memories."

<sup>49</sup> A good summary of this period's refugee programming can be found in: Desirée Nilsson, *Internally Displaced, Refugees and Returnees from and in the Sudan: A Review* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000).

suffering to their current situation and a hoped-for end, with life stories published in their apparent entirety.<sup>50</sup>

The proliferation of this “life story” format by the 2000s, and its usefulness for a broad range of motives and interests, makes it hard to pinpoint key texts or moments in the evolution of this genre in Sudan. The huge number of reports now based around an individual personal narrative give a sense of the determinism of this economy; for instance, the IOM currently devote a complete subsection of their website to “migrant stories.”<sup>51</sup> “Letting Africans speak for themselves became first a methodology and then a major publishing enterprise” for everyone involved.<sup>52</sup>

### Speaking Out: Common Ideals and Assumptions in the Creation of the “Life Stories” Genre

From this perspective, the growth of this literature seems to be dependent on an external pathology of imagined agency for victimized refugees through reporting heavily edited direct speech. These “voices” “represent another kind of fantasy of authenticity, our access to the ‘real thing’.”<sup>53</sup> However, the interviewees themselves have also taken up this discourse and format. The intention to bring “the voices of southern Sudanese IDPs to larger audiences,” “to the attention of sentient humanity,” was echoed by the southern Sudanese narrators;<sup>54</sup> this common ideal underpins the expansion and standardization of this methodology and format. While it is hard to see the dynamics of agency in the micro-politics of each account in this study, this section will focus on the interests and benefits of this form of explanation to those “speaking out.”

Many interviewees were recorded as enthusiastic about the nebulous idea of voices being “heard,” and showing traumatized refugees as “fully human,” against what is seen by all parties as a “conspiracy of silence.”<sup>55</sup> “Please tell our story to those outside, in America and elsewhere in the West,” Coker was told in her study of refugees in Cairo, “in Palestine, one person dies and everybody hears about it, but thousands of southern

<sup>50</sup> Key examples of whole books of stories include Waltzer, *Out of Exile*, Nora Eltahawy, Brooke Comer and Amani Elshimi (eds.), *Voices in Refuge: Stories from Sudanese Refugees in Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009); Bützer, *The Long Way Home*.

<sup>51</sup> See: <http://www.iom.int/cms/fs> (accessed 31 January 2015).

<sup>52</sup> White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Megan Vaughan, “Reported Speech,” 65.

<sup>54</sup> Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 10; Obasanjo, “Preface,” 2.

<sup>55</sup> Eggers and Deng, “Foreword,” 2; Dominic Mohamed, Anyanya representative at Congress of Racial Equality, quoted in: *New York Times*, “Sudanese Says Major Powers Black Out News of Nation’s War,” 9 October 1971.

Sudanese die and nobody pays attention.”<sup>56</sup> A group of young men recently returned to Juba from Khartoum told me that they would generally only tell their “life stories” to “the people who may be able to go to the public and say all this, (...) who will be able to tell somebody (...) [and] who would be able to rally, to say it out.”<sup>57</sup> When Abusharaf asked one of her interviewees about anonymity, she “replied unequivocally: ‘I don’t want my name changed. I don’t want to be unknown. You can keep my name as it is. What if someone reads the story and decides to help me out of this misery?’”<sup>58</sup> For both collectors and narrators, this combination of restitution and therapy was very nebulous, something that could generally resolve the war and create change without explaining exactly how: “when something bad is thought out, you have to reform,” and “if their awareness is raised, I personally feel that it is we, the Southern women, who jointly can pursue the peace process to its end.”<sup>59</sup> “The memory of individual actors in the trauma is solicited in order to cure the entire society:” simultaneously democratic, emancipatory, and potentially useful emotionally and financially, the production of these life stories appeared to be an efficient economy for all involved.<sup>60</sup>

As well as these more nebulous ideas of emancipatory international action, this paraphrasing of a life story was also useful to Sudanese narrators for reasons less relevant to the international agencies and journalists who recorded them. Personal stories were instrumentalized as declarations of historical authority, an assertion of a right to speak for the past as an “author.”<sup>61</sup> This authority – and the legitimacy and social clout potentially gained by publishing a life history – backed the assertions and demands made within the story, which often included attempts to “support and legitimate their claims to resources and land.”<sup>62</sup> A personal history allowed an individual to justify “running away” from the war and defend themselves from accusations of defection or desertion, or from the common charge levelled at the refugees and IDPs by some “stayees” from the 1980s that they had had a better life in exile, with more opportunities for education, employment and access to aid, than those who had

<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth M. Coker, “‘Travelling Pains:’ Embodied Metaphors of Suffering among Southern Sudanese Refugees in Cairo,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 28 (2004), 15–39, 35.

<sup>57</sup> Returned Khartoum resident, personal communication, Souk Libya, Godele, Juba, 13 July 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 5, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Cecilia Andrea Apaya, quoted in Badri and Sadig, *Between Peace and War*, 40.

<sup>60</sup> Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, “Introduction: Contested Pasts,” in: Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), 1–21, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts*, 130.

endured and fought in the “national struggle.” By editing a life history for potential public consumption and permanent publishing, the storytellers were part of a broader Sudanese debate on wartime experience, and how personal experiences should be remembered. Life stories were a presentation of a practical, revised national history; the Sudanese narrators edited, rephrased and resituated their own histories in a broader historical narrative. As noted by Reid and Conrad in their studies of oral histories of the Eritrean war and independence, debating what is important and deserves inclusion in a history is a means of arguing over contemporary and past politics, moral lessons, and current personal and communal truths and priorities.<sup>63</sup> Understanding this historical project demands a flexible understanding of the nature of historical truth and recognition of a broad ontological debate played out through oral history.<sup>64</sup> A historical narrative must prove its truth through debate and repetition: “it is not that truth is fluid, but that it has to be established by continually listening to and evaluating new evidence.”<sup>65</sup> In debating what is remembered, what is forgotten and whether events are “narrated correctly,” it is not necessarily historical accuracy that underpins the truth or power of a recounted history.<sup>66</sup> What constituted “true” refugee experience in the war was partly negotiated through telling life stories of forced exile; storytelling provided opportunities for recognition of suffering and a chance to present a personal version of the national history. Telling and re-telling a refugee “life story” developed as one method of participating in wider national debates. This is most visible and dramatic in the production of national histories of the “struggle,” and challenges to these histories through “setting the record straight.”<sup>67</sup>

In these heavily edited, repeated and repetitive life stories, there is no neat divide between oral and written history. Everyone involved in the production and debate of these histories individually and collectively reads, re-reads and discusses accounts, informing their arguments with printed

<sup>63</sup> Richard Reid, “War and Remembrance: Orality, Literacy and Conflict in the Horn,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18–1 (2006), 89–103; Bettina Conrad, “Out of the ‘Memory Hole’: Alternative Narratives of the Eritrean Revolution in the Diaspora,” *Africa Spectrum* 41–2 (2006), 249–271.

<sup>64</sup> See: Hodgkin and Radstone, “Introduction: Contested Pasts.”

<sup>65</sup> White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 33.

<sup>66</sup> Conrad, “Out of the ‘Memory Hole,’” 26; as argued by Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen, “Introduction,” in: Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1–27, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Werbner, “Introduction: Beyond Oblivion: Confronting Memory Crisis,” in: Richard Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 1–17, 8; Reid, “War and Remembrance,” 89; Conrad, “Out of the ‘Memory Hole,’” 265.

work – including academic texts – and blurring the neat oral/written lines with videoing, recording, transcribing, translating and editing. The Swedish branch of Save the Children, Rädde Barnen, in a study of the effects of war trauma on children, provided its young interviewees with copies of their written stories; “the material will also serve as ‘memories’ of the boys and their experiences and if possible every child should in the future be supplied with a copy of his own record.”<sup>68</sup> Life stories have a complex authorship, and are extreme examples of the organized, edited and translated narratives produced by oral history. However, this broader tactical and political negotiation of personal histories in broader context is precisely what these “case studies” and later “voices/life stories” claim to be immune to, as personal, individual “truths” in the face of international silence and wartime politicking.

External agencies’ power to select their “representative” life storytellers, and to edit these stories away from the tellers, probably determined the details of this discourse. Those involved wanted to present the most powerful, useful story possible, and therefore interviewers and their assistants generally focused on the “refugees” who could tell this “truth” of exile most effectively and “authentically,” and who bought into the ideas of activism and representation through life stories. Many projects attempted to look for representative contrast in their storytellers; Hutchinson presented three stories of one unaccompanied boy, one woman in her fifties and one middle-aged male leader, and the United States Committee for Refugees (USCR) collection of stories included a range of people, including a widow, a disabled person, a Northerner and a priest.<sup>69</sup> However, the power dynamics of “representation” were more blurred in the negotiation of these “representatives.” Although the agencies and journalists who ultimately instigate, transcribe, edit and publish the stories have considerable control over the final product, the intermediaries – such as local journalists, students, teachers, interpreters and local aid workers – had significant power to choose the “right” spokespeople for the task, who were “typical,” or even just fit the general idea of who they *should* be speaking to. Similarly, people who wanted or were selected to be interviewees specifically presented themselves as “lost boys,” “returnees,” or leaders of “refugee communities,” and sometimes actively approached journalists to tell their story.<sup>70</sup> The practicalities of interviewing – where both journalists and NGOs were working to tight deadlines and often had few contacts in the local community – generally

<sup>68</sup> Rädde Barnen, “Unaccompanied Minors,” 53.

<sup>69</sup> Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 1; Jeff Dumtra, *Follow the Women and the Cows: Sudan: Personal Stories of Sudan’s Uprooted People* (Washington DC: US Committee for Refugees, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> For instance MOK, a self-declared “lost boy” (personal communication, Souk Libya, Godele, Juba, 13 July 2011).

meant that the same intermediaries, and therefore the same narrators, were often approached again and again for their story.<sup>71</sup>

This collaboration between interviewer and interviewee is particularly evident in negotiated discussions of traumatic feelings. While many narrators allude to or avoid emotional events in their stories, Roper observes that interviewers in oral histories also attempt to support the speaker through sympathy or moving the discussion towards the “memory of experiences that reveal their capacity to cope and change.”<sup>72</sup> Many reports avoided potentially violent or traumatic experiences, which sometimes reduced the narrative to bland meaninglessness. A southern Sudanese journalist interviewed a southern woman about her weeklong detention in Khartoum in 1988, but only explained: “the experience was bad for her.”<sup>73</sup> Participation in this storytelling economy was limited – by all those engaging in this editorial process – to people who could be relied on to endorse the underlying ideal of “speaking out” in international terms, and who could produce a useful account of an understandable, typical “refugee” victim in an unjust war; through the processes of selection and negotiation for interviews, the people who finally got to speak generally had considerable understandings of what they could and should say, and were able to tell a good story.

This collusion was made visible through research in Juba in July 2011, when I conducted what could be called “meta-interviews” – interviews about interviews – with several groups and individuals who had been interviewed before by the BBC, Reuters, and various UN and NGO bodies for their “life stories” over the last fifteen years. It was difficult to generalize about the format of past interviews, but the understanding that a concise “refugee life story” must be produced within a short conversation necessarily produced a demand for a specific starting point, themes of displacement and violence, and a search for a complementary conclusion. One interviewee explained that he knew his various interviewers, including NGO workers and journalists, wanted to know the emotional and physical details of his flight to Uganda when he was eleven, but not specifics of his life on the streets there.<sup>74</sup> These practical demands evolve into implicit understandings of what constitutes a successful interview and a useful life

<sup>71</sup> MM, CD (IOM officials, personal communication, 7 July 2011); GVB (personal communication, Souk Cinema, Juba, 7 July 2011); all but two of the eleven people I spoke to about the process of interviewing, in Godele, Juba, had been interviewed for their stories multiple times.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Roper, “Analysing the Analysed: Transference and Counter-Transference in the Oral History Encounter,” *Oral History* 31–2 (2003), 20–32, 30.

<sup>73</sup> Alfred Logune Taban, “The Spreading Crisis,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrud (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), 143–157, 146.

<sup>74</sup> MOK (personal communication, 13 July 2011).

story, and make up the backbone of the “life story” genre by the late 1990s. The exigencies of composite authorship in a concise interview engineered efficient and extremely managed life stories. The common understanding between interviewer and storyteller extended to the lines of questioning within the construction of the story itself. One man explained the conventions of his many interviews with journalists about his return to Juba: “They say are you a returnee, you say yes. They are working about the returnees. They say when did you go and when did you come back. This is how they ask.”<sup>75</sup>

For both the various international organizations and Sudanese interviewees engaged in this particular historical project, life stories emerged as a useful tool, providing space for self-justification, historical and personal explanation, emotional blackmail and financial demands, while demonstrating a democratic ideal of giving voice to the voiceless. The “life story,” evolving as a generally understood basic framework, was influenced by this array of expectations, previously told stories, and accumulated understandings of the social, political and moral context at stake.<sup>76</sup> There is no one “moment of production:” the whole history and context of the production and representation of the story is central to its interpretation.<sup>77</sup> The “life story” grew into a managing framework that was simple, malleable and easily communicable, but also emotionally powerful; as their production increased, the stories grew structural patterns, a general vocabulary and standardized boundaries through repeated negotiation of what experiences should and should not be included, and how they should be expressed.

The rest of this paper will examine the rhetorical tropes that emerged in these accounts by the 2000s, and conclude with a further examination of the question of agency in this narrative genre.

### “Storylines” in Life Histories and the Structuring of a Genre

By the 2000s, these life stories had evolved into a genre, demonstrating rhetorical consistencies across accounts, within a standard narrative framework despite more heterogeneous interests in their production. Genres are evolutionary processes, with constantly developing sets of tropes and conventions; in this case, a clear set of narrative structures, vocabulary and phrasing grew to frame and legitimate a comprehensive and “authentic” account. This was essentially based on the deterministic rhetoric associated with being “a refugee,” both to those engaged in humanitarian work and to

<sup>75</sup> MOK (personal communication, 13 July 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Corinne A. Kratz, “Conversations and Lives,” in: Luise White, Stephan Miescher and David W. Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 127–161.

the speakers themselves. Being “a refugee” is a powerful concept that has developed an associated rhetoric and vocabulary; in order to be a refugee, you must be *overwhelmed* or *traumatized*, *uprooted* in a *perilous exodus*.<sup>78</sup> “It was a trek of pure and brutal survival, a flight through a haze of painful memories: burnt villages, Arab raiders on horseback, rape, famine, enslaved family members.”<sup>79</sup> This narrative conformity is not a passive phenomenon but an attempt by those involved in narration to establish the “truth” of exile, and what it meant (and what needed to be experienced and vocalized) to become “a refugee.” “Refugee-ness” is an explanatory tool, providing a narrative structure to cope with demands of condensing and explaining experience, but the refugee must know how to tell their stories “properly.” The editing power of this idea created consistent similarities in accounts through time.

In these accounts, memories are arranged into a set pattern, an apparently neat and definite linear chronology, with a negotiated starting point. “This is not the first time I have seen terrible destruction. I am old and the first [civil] war [1955–1972] was there as well. This one began in 1983.”<sup>80</sup> Stories have a definite starting point, often the moment of crisis itself: Lilian Juwaa begins, “one day there were gunshots in my village.”<sup>81</sup> In spite of the often sporadic and mobile nature of the conflict and the frequent, sometimes constant movement of much of the population, there was a general authorial insistence on periodization: “before the war” is sometimes like “once upon a time,” when “I was happy and innocent.”<sup>82</sup> Although place names are often listed, “the bush” – the scrublands and wildernesses that make up a lot of common land in southern Sudan – serves as a non-place that soaks up time; “we go to bush,” and return home “from the bush,” where a person can be “wandering around for four years.”<sup>83</sup> The sudden change in pace from months and years in a story to a single,

<sup>78</sup> For examples, see: Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 1; Rädä Barnen, “Unaccompanied Minors,” 15; Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” particularly Daniel Deng Garang, 11, and Sebit William Garang, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Alan Boswell, “As Sudan Prepares to Split, Many Still Stranded Far from Home,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/26/112834/as-sudan-prepares-to-split-many.html> (accessed 1 May 2011).

<sup>80</sup> Nyakong Pouh, quoted in Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 9; the inserted clarifications are Hutchinson’s editorial.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Rappeport, “Uganda Shows It Cares.”

<sup>82</sup> Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts*, 67; Karak Maylik Nyok, quoted in Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Benjamin Basal, interviewed by Allison; Howe, “Sudanese Refugees Return;” Idja Anok, quoted in Sam Gonda and William Mogga, “Loss of the Revered Cattle,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrund (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), 63-82, 76.

unspecified night of terror demonstrates Bernasconi's "narrative contraction."<sup>84</sup> "After a month things got worse, and one night (...) the army came."<sup>85</sup> Sometimes this manipulation of time is only apparent in comparison: it took Lilian Juwaa two days to walk through the bush from Kajo Keji to Uganda, but it took Moses Taban two years to do the same journey in his account.<sup>86</sup> This can be partly attributed to a common means of processing trauma.<sup>87</sup> For the collectors, this manipulation of time is dramatic, and there is no point filling in the gaps for an audience that has little comprehension of places or distances in Sudan. Many stories also have a sense of timelessness and inevitability about constant suffering: "we start out with our children not knowing where we are going, staying sometimes for months in the forest. When we hear a gunshot, we move to a place of silence ahead of us (...) But then guns break the silence and we have to run again."<sup>88</sup>

Each life story is principally a story of migration, a "biography as itinerary."<sup>89</sup> Accounts are fundamentally territorial, as people list the names of their homes, where they travelled and rested in great detail.<sup>90</sup> Being "displaced" or a refugee is in itself a territorial concept, assuming a definite place of origin and a journey, particularly across national borders; the accounts must reflect this to be true "refugee stories." The USCR's compilation of life stories recorded definitively how many times each interviewee had "fled" in how many years, likely partly to justify its consequent point about the complexities of providing aid to people in often temporary settlements.<sup>91</sup> This preoccupation is echoed in Hammond's study of Tigrayan life stories, where Tigrayans' "experience of flight became a major landmark in the terrain of memory."<sup>92</sup> Previous migrations that are not associated with the war are edited out, or mentioned later and pushed to one side. Hutchinson's authorial note explains Riek Kai's previous migration: "[having worked as a day labourer in the Khartoum construction industry in 1978], I knew Khartoum."<sup>93</sup> Although a "strictly geographical definition of identity" is not necessarily true in practice, it is necessary to

<sup>84</sup> Oriana Bernasconi, "Negotiating Personal Experiences over the Lifetime: Narrative Elasticity as an Analytic Tool," *Symbolic Interaction* 34–1 (2011), 20–37, 25.

<sup>85</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Bishop Ngalamu, interviewed by Allison.

<sup>86</sup> Rapoport, "Uganda Shows It Cares."

<sup>87</sup> For discussion of trauma in narratives, see: Coker, "'Travelling Pains'."

<sup>88</sup> Unnamed woman, quoted in the draft report of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 1993.

<sup>89</sup> Feld, quoted in Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 40.

<sup>90</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Bishop Dotiro interviewed by Allison; Marcillo Dino, quoted in Badri and Sadig, *Between Peace and War*, 41.

<sup>91</sup> Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories."

<sup>92</sup> Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 50.

<sup>93</sup> Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 8; see also Daniel Deng Garang, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 11.

recognize that people articulate their ideas of themselves, their history and their situation in their world in territorial ways, and that the title “refugee” demands physical movement.<sup>94</sup> Practically, time and movement create a neat story in a short time, and provide the fundamental framework of exile that establishes the teller as a refugee.

Being an “eyewitness” is crucial to the implied veracity of an account.<sup>95</sup> Hutchinson’s detailed life stories are entitled “war through the eyes of the dispossessed,” and the storyteller had to prove that they were witnesses: “I saw them with my eyes” – “believe me when I say I saw many people die.”<sup>96</sup> This demand for personal memories of the war to prove experience is understandable, as memory appears to be an inherently individual phenomenon.<sup>97</sup> Ironically, despite their work ultimately producing a generic narrative homogeneity, the producers of these stories are pursuing the individual: interviewers are looking to differentiate the storyteller from the generic mass of refugees, and “raise awareness of their “individuality,” while the interviewees are presenting themselves as individual agents, innocent victims in the face of insurmountable obstacles.<sup>98</sup> Stories were presented in the first person singular, particularly by men, as survivors by their own courageous decisions, autonomous and alone.<sup>99</sup> Men’s stories often emphasize leadership, often backed up with the numbers of people they helped: “when the United Nations came, they thanked me very much.”<sup>100</sup> Some, like Jairo Bior Ajok, speak as courageous lone voices: “We don’t want

<sup>94</sup> Mary Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 5; for studies arguing against an essentialized, territorial understanding of “home,” see: Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries;” David Turton, “Migrants and Refugees: a Mursi Case Study,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 96–110, 106; Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 211; Catherine Brun, “Reterritorializing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies,” *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 83–1 (2001), 15–25, 15.

<sup>95</sup> Naomi Rosh White, “Marking Absences: Holocaust Testimony and History,” in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 172–181, 177.

<sup>96</sup> Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed;” Rebecca Ator Ayiik, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 53; Bak Geng, reported speech in Emily Wither, “Southern Sudan Homecoming Brings New Problems,” CNN, 8 March 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Hodgkin and Radstone, “Introduction: Contested Pasts,” 8.

<sup>98</sup> Nora Eltahawy, Brooke Comer and Amani Elshimi, “Introduction,” in: Nora Eltahawy, Brooke Comer and Amani Elshimi (eds.), *Voices in Refugee: Stories from Sudanese Refugees in Cairo* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2009) 1–4, 3–4.

<sup>99</sup> This gendered aspect to oral histories is noted more widely by Mary Chamberlain, “Gender and the Narratives of Migration,” *History Workshop Journal* 43 (1997), 86–108, 90.

<sup>100</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Mbange, interviewed by Allison.

you to be our leader,” he says he would tell the highest officials in Sudan’s government, “if you want to kill me for saying this to you, it is up to you.”<sup>101</sup> The demand for a survivor’s individual voice of experience makes the teller a unique subject and often an implicit hero.

This individuality is to a large extent a fabrication. Practically, an individual cannot have witnessed everything; this is implied in some stories, where the author was “told they raped the women,” or where a teenager explains his mother’s death in detail, including the direct speech of the soldiers, but says that her friends “came and told us what had happened.”<sup>102</sup> Memories are far less individual than supposed. Webs of relationships, discussions, and wider family and community histories produced perfectly extractable first-person eyewitness life histories, “[speaking] with stories that circulate to explain what happened.”<sup>103</sup> The manufacture of “individual life stories” could be almost farcical – “minors worked on compositions in pairs by assisting each other to remember significant issues.”<sup>104</sup> These stories involve wider ideas, expressions and expectations of what constitutes the history of exile and refugee experience in South Sudan.

To fit these life stories into this broader history, the stories are stripped of any political complexities, instead emphasising a total moral history of the Sudanese war, where the North is the oppressive aggressor and the southern refugee is a principled victim. This moral war was a common contextual language for most in southern Sudan since the early 1980s, and provided an ethical framework for stories of victimhood and survival – even if the narrator’s experience contradicted it. Regardless of the fact that Elijah Chol Manyang admitted that he fled from the SPLA Nuer faction’s violence against the local Dinka community in 1991, “the real enemy of his people is an oppressive government based in Khartoum.”<sup>105</sup> Individual stories frequently paper over any experiences of the internal divisions or southern militias’ forced recruitments. The stories were structured by their tellers and editors to concur with the dominant political and racial generalizations perpetuated in the usual introduction to any explanation of the Sudanese civil wars: “the Arab-Muslim north dominated and oppressed the black African Christians [and] animists.”<sup>106</sup> The wider historical

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 54.

<sup>102</sup> Lilian Juwaa, quoted in Rappeport, “Uganda Shows It Cares,” Gatcaar Biliu, quoted in Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 2.

<sup>103</sup> White, *Speaking with Vampires*, 30.

<sup>104</sup> Rädä Barnen, “Unaccompanied Minors,” 37.

<sup>105</sup> Elijah Chol Manyang, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 23; for an explanation of this factional violence, see: Johnson, *Root Causes*, 91–97.

<sup>106</sup> Martin Barillas, “Passover for Sudan’s Slaves,” *Spero News and American Anti-Slavery Group*, 26 April 2011, <http://www.speroforum.com/a/52848/Rabbi-Polak-of-Boston-recalls-Passover-story-for-freed-Sudanese-slaves> (accessed on 27 April 2011).

explanations of the war emphasize the storyteller's place in a national struggle, and "complete" potentially patchy or incompatible memories. This is written in by both the editors (interested in a more apolitical narrative that fits with their summarized explanation of the civil war) and the speakers, as people justified the necessity of their experiences and fitted themselves into their political context.

Sudanese interviewees also articulated mystical and religious explanations and justifications for their suffering. This heroic setting is not the preserve of male narrators: Nyakong Pouh explained "living conditions grew worse and worse until 1985. That's when our young men became strong and went to the bush to unite with the SPLA. They were fed up with being beaten! If you're a man, you can't just die, you must fight. A man can't die like a woman."<sup>107</sup> Abusharaf recorded accounts referring to historical injustices and centuries of slavery from the Ottoman times.<sup>108</sup> These wider cultural references are not exclusively historical, but draw on metaphor, myths and the divine, particularly in accounts taken by religious organizations like the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) or Tearfund. Personal survival was often attributed to heavenly intervention; Chol Manyang "survived not because of intelligence, but because of God."<sup>109</sup> Stories included Biblical references to the "exodus," and integrated divine intervention to the plot. Bishop Ngalamu had a vision that saved him; "I had a dream (...) someone called my name (...) get up! Enemies coming to kill you, go out quickly. And this voice was very strong, and big. So I waked."<sup>110</sup> Figures of speech or parables were frequently annotated for their foreign audience: "death divided into two [guns and disease]."<sup>111</sup> Heroic and mystical ideas of the historical context of the war and survival in exile provided a larger explanatory framework for individual suffering. In situating their personal suffering within a broader political and theoretical context, the narrators could regain some sense of agency over and causation for their experiences, and emphasize their personal position in a wider political and moral context, all of which fitted well into the needs and aims of their editorial audience.

This national narrative of the moral war thus frames the innocent refugee's victimhood. This apolitical and depoliticized "refugee" was not just a product of the international image of refugee camps and their administrative systems, as Malkki argues, but was an understood role for the life

<sup>107</sup> Nyakong Pouh, aged 50 and speaking in 1990, Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 9–10.

<sup>108</sup> Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 53.

<sup>109</sup> Elijah Chol Manyang, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 23; for other examples see the testimonies of Carlo Atem Atem and Alhadi Mohamed Abraham, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 34, 47.

<sup>110</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Bishop Ngalamu.

<sup>111</sup> Nyakong Pouh, quoted in Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 11.

history narrator.<sup>112</sup> The storyteller could not be partisan or have had a dubious moral position in the war; the justifications and demands for assistance and advocacy from the storytellers and collectors would be undermined by their involvement in the conflict, particularly if they were involved in retrospectively dubious wartime activities. This innocent suffering had to be created through judicious editing on all sides. There was no cause for the violence, perpetrated “by unknown people for unknown reasons,” because the speakers had done nothing wrong.<sup>113</sup> “I don’t know why they attacked. What is in the heart of someone who does that? You don’t know.”<sup>114</sup> The aggressors became anonymous and nebulous, with specific details provided by narrators further edited into apolitical and generic “fear of the [government militia].”<sup>115</sup> Benjamin Basal by his own account became a director of the Anyanya militia’s often brutal forced requisitioning and manipulation of the local population, but his account of this work to Allison was elusive: he explained that his work was “to organise the natives that you see this way, you move this way, you must not go to Congo... (...) you will help us to fight.”<sup>116</sup> Individuals disassociated themselves from acts of violence and by extension from the political motivations behind it. Samuel Da said, about his time living in the bush: “I went for my own life, not to join the SPLA,” and Tereza claimed “she has no political convictions about the war around her.”<sup>117</sup> Mentions of violence by the SPLA and its factions were so lacking in context as to make no sense, or were made obliquely through comparisons: “The last war which we experienced was the Anya-Nya I war. But the Anya-Nya were good.”<sup>118</sup> Although most people had relatives and friends in the armies, and were involved personally, ethnically, and communally in the various conflicts, in their stories they created themselves, and were depicted, as pure victims.

These accounts were far from apolitical; they were illustrative of an economy of guilt, for personal justification as much as for editorial priorities. The broad historical explanation of the moral North-South war was applied in practice: the duplicity of the “Arabs” is highlighted within the life stories’ accounts of violence, in comparison to the integrity of their

<sup>112</sup> Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 378.

<sup>113</sup> Karak Maylik Nyok, in Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 54.

<sup>114</sup> Carlo Atem Atem, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 35.

<sup>115</sup> Shantytown resident, quoted in Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 45.

<sup>116</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Benjamin Basal.

<sup>117</sup> Samuel Da, interviewed in Itang refugee camp, Ethiopia, by Mike Wooldridge, “Why They Fled,” in: Nigel Twose and Benjamin Pogrud (eds.), *War Wounds: Development Costs of Conflict in Southern Sudan: Sudanese People Report on Their War* (London: Panos Institute, 1988), 139–142, 140; Tereza Paul, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 21.

<sup>118</sup> “Old people,” speaking in a group interview, in Gonda and Mogga, “Loss of the Revered Cattle,” 137.

victims. Riek Kai explains that the enemy dressed as civilians when attacking: “[this] was a lie, an untruth!”<sup>119</sup> Sexual morality is a continuing theme. Gatcaar Biliu reported that his mother died because she stood up to Arab soldiers and refused to be raped; he also refused to be the “wife” of Arab soldiers in Bentiu.<sup>120</sup> Trauma also creates an economy of guilt: people’s explanations of why they survived are part of the development of “a consoling narrative that could both exonerate and valorise the journey,” an aspect of what has been called “survivor syndrome” in anthropological and medical literature.<sup>121</sup> As Hammond notes of Ethiopian stories of exile, people did not want to be “famine victims,” but wanted to tell their stories as people who were displaced through the conflict; Riek Kai is adamant that he fled Adok not because of the drought – which he describes in detail – but because of war.<sup>122</sup> The moment of fleeing is continually justified, emphasising the forced aspect of forced migration. As Jeremiah Datiro explained to Allison: “I said, my final decision is not to go away. While I was saying this I saw someone running for me, one of my friends, he came and said Bishop, please, leave everything and take your home and disappear as soon as you can.”<sup>123</sup> The narrators are clear that fleeing the conflict does not mean they have escaped the war’s suffering or were not involved in the war effort, as explained earlier. Benjamin Basal detailed his arrests in 1955 and 1956, and Cecilia Andrea Apaya explains, “my house was burned three times.”<sup>124</sup> Narrators emphasize that they are part of the national struggle, that they are on the right side, and that their flight did not make them immoral or weak.

Although many narrative tropes are justificatory and defensive, not all of the recurring motifs of southern Sudanese “life stories” were necessarily only self-serving or consciously tactical. Life stories were told to each other as well as for public consumption, and often attempted to address ways of vocalising and managing traumatic experiences. Accounts were either

<sup>119</sup> Riek Kai, quoted in Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 7.

<sup>120</sup> Gatcaar Biliu, quoted in Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 2, 3.

<sup>121</sup> Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, “Part II: Remembering Suffering: Trauma and History,” in: Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), 97–103, 99; Chamberlain, *Narratives of Exile and Return*, xi. For an overview of the medical and anthropological literature, see: Melissa Parker, “Social Devastation and Mental Health in Northeast Africa: Some Reflections on an Absent Literature,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 262–272.

<sup>122</sup> Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 57; Riek Kai, quoted in Hutchinson, “Eyes of the Dispossessed,” 6.

<sup>123</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Bishop Datiro.

<sup>124</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Benjamin Basal; Salva Agany Louis, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 32; Cecilia Andrea Apaya, quoted in Badri and Sadig, *Between Peace and War*, 38.

phrased or translated into the international language of psychological trauma: "Village men [confided] that a sense of utter despair is driving their wives mentally ill." And Luja Achang said frankly: "Upon hearing of [my son's] death, I nearly committed suicide."<sup>125</sup> However, the majority of stories explained the emotional impact of the war through allusion. Means of narrating particularly painful events or feelings evolved and formed conventions across accounts. Unlike when speaking about less painful memories, speakers often edited themselves out at the point of explaining traumatic events, reverting to the second or third person or turning to descriptions of communal suffering: "If your son had a wife, they would just fall on her [and rape her] without a word."<sup>126</sup> Like in Hammond's study of Tigrean refugees and James' study of Uduk stories, "many of those who did mention the death of a close relative did so in passing" so briefly as to appear detached and unemotional.<sup>127</sup> At the end of his interview with Allison, Benjamin Basal mentioned his children being shot, then explained briefly and factually that his children and his brother were shot, and his home was destroyed.<sup>128</sup> "Everything horrible you can imagine was done," and "our suffering in Kadogli was beyond imagination too."<sup>129</sup> Pain is often euphemistic or physical instead of emotional throughout these accounts. Angela Keiji Moga explained: "The constant upheaval has left her feeling physically fatigued and emotionally disoriented."<sup>130</sup> Coker observed that complaints of heart pain were associated with the distress of loss of identity, and this is echoed in these stories: "My heart's gone bad with the North, I want to go South!"<sup>131</sup> Food is another means of expressing the complete psychological and physical impact of events: "My heart just couldn't face the food."<sup>132</sup> This is often contrasted with the "healthy idealisation of Southern Sudan," where you could eat anytime, and food was restorative and filling.<sup>133</sup> "When we ate that fruit, it was a medicine. (...) because of it, we had no malaria, no stomach problems. At this place, we do not get such fruit."<sup>134</sup> As James argues in her study of Uduk conceptualizations of fear,

<sup>125</sup> Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 14; Luja Achang, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 58.

<sup>126</sup> Nyakong Pouh, quoted in Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 9.

<sup>127</sup> Hammond, *This Place Will Become Home*, 57; James, "The Names of Fear," 124.

<sup>128</sup> Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Basal.

<sup>129</sup> Vaughan, "Reported Speech," 71; Riek Kai, quoted in Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 6.

<sup>130</sup> Angela Keiji Moga, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 40.

<sup>131</sup> Coker, "Travelling Pains," 28; Nyakong Pouh, quoted in Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 12.

<sup>132</sup> Gatcaar Biliu, quoted in Hutchinson, "Eyes of the Dispossessed," 3.

<sup>133</sup> Coker, "Travelling Pains," 23; see Daniel Deng Garang, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 11.

<sup>134</sup> Rebecca Ator Ayiik, quoted in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 53.

ideas of “anger, fear and bravery” were “transmitted through a large repertoire of narratives, idioms, metaphors and other means which give collective shape to experience”; “the fears of the time are most easily catalogued when later turned by language into stories.”<sup>135</sup> As well as practically and tactically arranging the presentation of their refugee lives in war, many of the narrators’ continuities in phrasing and imagery were involved with producing ways of acceptably explaining pain and suffering.

### Conclusion: Choosing to be a Refugee

The categories of refugee and internally displaced person that emerged as foci of the humanitarian industry during this period were more than academic concepts or legal categories. The generation of “refugee” life stories was shaped on all sides by the conceptual baggage of what being a “refugee” and “in exile” should mean for both narrators and listeners within this publishing economy. Stories were told by people who were selected to speak specifically as refugees and returnees, and approach the ordering and telling of their stories as representatives of these labels. This life story production was a closed industry, restricted generally to prominent, often self-nominated representatives who understood what should be produced and the principles behind the genre.

But the methodological implications for this engagement go beyond the manipulation of categories and legal status. The structural demands of the “market” of consumable refugee life stories by the early 2000s, and the nexus of power, knowledge and language in the production of these stories by their narrators and editors, restricted agency and action outside of the increasingly formalized tropes of the genre.<sup>136</sup> The financial, social, and political benefits of buying in to the life stories economy broadly outweighed and constrained individual and editorial agency.

The most visible demonstration of this is the silence, or writing-out, of those who challenged or could not adhere to the terms of the genre. Those who disagreed with this narrative manufacturing, who did not have access to this specific historical project, or found what was expected of them bewildering, pointless or irrelevant, did not give their “life stories.” Throughout the articles, books, videos and recordings are examples of

<sup>135</sup> James, “The Names of Fear,” 115, 121.

<sup>136</sup> For a contemporary example of one editor’s attempt to “break out” of this “subject-less” trap while also maintaining the personalized and individualized “story” approach, see the “humanizing” project of the Humans of New York UN World Tour August–September 2014, a continuation of the street photojournalist project of Brandon Stanton, who visited Juba, South Sudan, in early September 2014. The photos published online are captioned with a mix of casual everyday conversation, and short “stories” that remain consistent with the genre detailed here. See: <http://www.humansofnewyork.com> (accessed 29 September 2014).

people who chose not to engage with this process, who stated their disagreement with the apparent necessity of telling their story within this genre, or who did not believe in its ability to prove their “agency,” help them personally, or act as therapy. Dabora, an unusual potential storyteller because of her situation as a very poor and young mother, “seems confused that any outsider would express interest in her life,” and was justifiably frustrated when the questioner tried to draw her away from her discussion of her children’s suffering towards a life story narrative: “‘There is nothing I am thinking,’ [she] responds impatiently when asked about the future of her family and her country, ‘All I am thinking about is that this child might die too of malnutrition.’”<sup>137</sup>

Discussions of the production of stories, more common from the 1990s, were filled with these silences and refusals to engage with the tropes and stylistic features necessary to complete a “refugee story.” When an interviewer asked Achol how she managed to live through the war, requesting a justification or moral comment on her situation as a survivor, she refused; “‘There is nothing to think,’ she says brusquely, ‘there is just that my husband and children have died and I am hungry.’”<sup>138</sup> Refusing to verbalize and repeat this suffering contradicted the assumptions, inherent in western ideas of counselling, that “telling their stories, it was thought, would be positive for their mental health.”<sup>139</sup> Some people, speaking after the Addis Ababa Agreement or their return to the South after the CPA, justified their silence through closure, as there was now no need to remember: “Now, we have finished with the bad side, nobody wants to think of the past; nobody want to bring it back;” “there is nothing good that [we] can remember of Khartoum, so [we] just want to forget about it.”<sup>140</sup> Refusing to tell a personal history, to allow people to have empathy or to enter into a narrative, “flouted the conventions” of a life history interview.<sup>141</sup> By rejecting the justifications for this life history collection, and refusing to adhere to the genre, these people challenged the idea that telling a story provided dignity, therapy, influence or agency.

Silences were statements: not speaking, and therefore denying the necessity of telling a personal history, was a demonstration of the argument that “people do not need discursive accounts to represent themselves as historical entities;” “I think there’s no need for me to tell the story (...) you

<sup>137</sup> Dabora Adhieu Duot, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 26–27.

<sup>138</sup> Achol Mangok Agoth, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 16; Jairo Bior Ajok gives a similar refusal, quoted in Dumtra, “Sudan: Personal Stories,” 55.

<sup>139</sup> Rädäda Barnen, “Unaccompanied Minors,” 36.

<sup>140</sup> Chief Albino Akot, quoted in Deng, *Heritage of Survival*, 165; GA (personal communication, Souk Zande, Godele, Juba, 13 July 2011).

<sup>141</sup> Roper, “Analysing the Analysed,” 29.

know the story.”<sup>142</sup> Although refugee life stories are structured and edited to appear universal and exemplary of communal experience, the people who refused to enter into this role-play show that there was a wider debate about how or whether experiences should be told this way, and questioned the usefulness of what this telling produces. “What is the point of telling you my story if I can’t get my children back?’ [Deng] said.”<sup>143</sup> At the point of “collection,” Sudanese refugees had the ability to “break” the genre through querying the process, relationship and aims of this project.<sup>144</sup> Ultimately, this industry of life stories involved a wider Sudanese debate over the expediency of oral history in explaining and dealing with the war.

This article disputes Coker’s argument that refugees have “no ready-made cultural ‘script’ for their experiences.”<sup>145</sup> They, and others involved in the production of testimony, have been negotiating a script over decades of discussion. The expectations and debates over the idioms of “displacement” or “exile,” and what being a refugee and having experienced war actually entails, are the fundamental structural guidelines in these life stories. “When you smell the smoke of gunfire and hear the ear-splitting bombing and see old and young people running in every direction, dust rising, *you know that you are displaced* and that your life has changed forever” (emphasis added).<sup>146</sup> Being a displaced person, or a refugee, is itself “a profoundly meaningful historical identity,” being or having been in exile is an “historicising condition,” and these terms have descriptive weight in stories, to the point of being a shorthand: “I took refugee to Congo.”<sup>147</sup>

This study broadly supports Fassin’s statement that “humanitarian agents define the legitimate manner to tell the world the ‘victims’ truth,” but also demonstrates that this Sudan-specific established economy of story production has arguably become a generic web without explicit subject.<sup>148</sup> This essay argues that there is a normative discourse for presenting “African refugees” that has emerged over the last thirty years, that has worked financially, morally and socially across these lines of editor and narrator. Building

<sup>142</sup> Vaughan, “Reported Speech,” 68; Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Bishop Ngalamu.

<sup>143</sup> Quoted in: *The Daily Telegraph*, “Children of Three are Slaves in Sudan.” For other examples, see: Terence O. Ranger, “Concluding Reflections on Cross-Mandates,” in: Tim Allen (ed.), *In Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa* (London: James Currey, 1996), 318–328; MOK (personal communication, 13 July 2011); Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 381, 378; Badri and Sadig, *Between Peace and War*, 5.

<sup>144</sup> As also demonstrated by Briggs, “Mediating Infanticide,” 316, 318.

<sup>145</sup> Coker, “‘Travelling Pains,’” 17.

<sup>146</sup> “CW,” quoted by Abusharaf, *Transforming Displaced Women*, 41.

<sup>147</sup> Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries,” 378, 381; Sudan Archives Durham, 816/13, Mbange.

<sup>148</sup> Fassin, “The Humanitarian Politics of Testimony,” 555.

on Grele's idea of an "ideological problematic," these "life stories" are engineered to fit a to fit and endorse a wider, internationally comprehensible "truth."<sup>149</sup> But the extreme selective editing of these "life stories" actually produces accounts that demonstrate very little "agency" at all: the moral, political and emotional demands on what is presented as the "truth" of surviving the Sudanese war as a refugee actually cut the stories down to relatively uniform templates. The constraints of limited time in finding and discussing personal histories, and the expectations of all parties in producing a "refugee life story," combine to create a narrative trap. Overall, this sustains the agency of the editors of this discourse, who give "voice" rather than authorship or ownership to these refugees: "participants were assisted in organising their memories."<sup>150</sup>

Ultimately there is very little in the way of historical detail and social reality that can be found through approaching oral histories with a pre-determined "life story" framework, or through the powerful historical and political concepts of displacement and exile; far more can be produced obliquely. "Life stories" do not explain much more than what is expected of a displaced refugee in a generic war, and reinforce or perpetuate the power/knowledge dynamic between international agent and local informant. Moving beyond this – towards presenting the realities of wartime experience in a way that promotes the agency and independence of refugees – requires a more creative methodological approach.<sup>151</sup> "All southern Sudanese (...) have this story of running and running. It is the only story you will get."<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ronald J. Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 38–52, 48.

<sup>150</sup> Bützer, *The Long Way Home*, 69; see: Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>151</sup> For instance, the Overseas Development Institute's Development Progress project asks whether growing access to technology will challenge the role of "traditional story-tellers – journalists, photographers, filmmakers and charities" at a discussion panel on 26 February 2015 at the Royal Geographical Society. <http://www.developmentprogress.org/peopleslens> (accessed 31 January 2015).

<sup>152</sup> King Deng Kuot, in Dumtra, "Sudan: Personal Stories," 43.

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