

The Meanings of the Move?

From “Predicaments of Mobility” to “Potentialities in Displacement”

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■ **ABSTRACT:** In this article I draw comparatively on ethnographic material from my work with war-affected populations from postcolonial Mozambique and diasporan Liberia to argue for a fundamental shift in the conceptualization and study of displacement. I argue first for a need to shift from an emphasis on physical mobility as the *sine qua non* of “displacement,” to an empirical investigation of the less-than-self-evident relationship between physical mobility and social mobility. I illustrate how the meanings and outcomes of physical mobility are far from given but must be treated as an empirical problem, in which the social opportunity structures that cultural agents ultimately navigate are reconfigured in complex, contradictory, and inadvertent ways that simultaneously generate new and socially differentiated challenges as well as opportunities.

■ **KEYWORDS:** agency, displacement, Liberia, Mozambique, opportunity topography, “predicaments of mobility,” social relations

Displacement Predicaments or Potentialities?

In this article I want to argue for the usefulness of a fundamental shift (or two) in the predominant analytical approach (i.e., the questions we ask, the assumptions we deploy, and the concepts we utilize) in the study of wartime displacement. More specifically, I want to argue for a shift from an *a priori* emphasis on the predicaments of those who migrate under conditions of duress, to a more open-ended investigation of (a) how physical mobility affects social mobility at the individual level; (b) how both of these mobilities interact to transform social power and relations at the societal level; and (c) from a focus on migrants to the migration-affected.

Against a long-standing tendency in the scholarship of displacement to reflexively equate migration in conflict with loss,¹ I first aim to illustrate how the meanings and outcomes of physical mobility for individuals are far from given, but rather must be—always and everywhere (including under the seemingly most dire circumstances)—treated as an open empirical question. The transformation of an individual’s relationship to place through migration (or conversely through immobilization) can profoundly alter the social opportunity structures that cultural agents must navigate—not only in order to survive but also in order to realize all aspects of the life projects to which they aspire. However, as this article aims to demonstrate,



such “opportunity topographies” are almost always reconfigured in ways that are complex and contradictory in their enabling effects, resulting in outcomes that are often inadvertent and unforeseeable, and that therefore simultaneously present actors not only with new challenges and but also with new opportunities.

While loss and social disenfranchisement often result from the “social navigation” (Utas 2005; Vigh [2003] 2006) of warscapes, a much broader spectrum of possible outcomes is conceivable. These include situations in which wartime movement opens vistas on new social opportunities and/or serves as the conduit for upward socioeconomic mobility and social empowerment. I will argue that more often than not, the reconfiguration of social opportunity topographies resulting from wartime movement is likely to have mixed effects—generating new possibilities that may be socially empowering in some respects while simultaneously presenting daunting new challenges that are disempowering in other respects.

The cases discussed here also demonstrate that such wartime transformations of social opportunity topographies are more likely than not to be highly socially differentiated in their effects. This observation is not novel. However, when coupled with a recognition that migration is capable of not only generating “loss” but also empowering opportunities through which new “social winners” may emerge, it suggests that wartime displacement always holds enormous potential for reconfiguring the terms of struggle in many longstanding and fundamental forms of social relations by rearranging balances of power within families, communities, and societies. These recalibrations are likely to underwrite profound transformations in social relations and may affect social differentiation at all these levels of society.

Moreover, to the extent that the life chances of all individuals are bound in important ways to social others, the novel possibilities and challenges that emerge within reconfigured opportunity topographies for any particular category of social actor, will be complexly intertwined with and mutually constitutive of those changes that other categories of social actors also experience. Building on this observation, one of my aims here is to demonstrate how migration can affect migrants and nonmigrants alike through the effects it has on the social relations in which both are implicated. From this perspective I suggest that displacement is less a migrant condition than a migration-affected condition—which can be experienced by migrants and nonmigrants alike. The study of displacement should thus not be focused merely on those who move, but rather *on those who are affected by movement*. Ultimately I argue that mobility-affected transformations of sociality in their full complexity should be the primary subject of a refocused interdisciplinary field of displacement studies.

I outline the basic parameters of a revised analytical frame that takes up this perspective by: first, focusing on all the migration-affected (rather than just on migrants); second, recognizing and investigating the effects on actors of the mobility of significant social others; third, taking the reconfiguration of social relations, opportunity structures, and social power as its central problem; fourth, investigating the full range of displacement’s transformative potentiality in terms of all its impacts on socioeconomic, cultural, and political processes—including the new possibilities and opportunities it generates—instead of studying only the predicaments; and fifth, reconfiguring its theoretical scope for analyzing social agency to account for how social agents identify and respond to the full range of social potentialities that reconfigured opportunity topographies present to them.

In constructing this argument I rely primarily on ethnographic material from my two longest and most multifaceted research engagements with war-affected populations from (and in) Mozambique and Liberia.

From Inventorying Loss to Documenting the Complex Transformations of Social Opportunity Topographies

Wartime migration has with relatively few, and all rather recent, exceptions been thought of as a process that generates various forms of disempowerment: social, economic, political, economic, cultural, and even psychic. Consequently the frameworks and theories for analyzing and studying refugee experiences have focused overwhelmingly on inventorying, comparing, contrasting, and tracing the effects and experiences of migration-effected “loss” (McDowell and Morerell 2010)—whether these be losses of social networks and capital (Marx 1990), of economic and material goods and means (Bascom 1998), of political and legal rights (Harrell-Bond 1986; Verdame and Harrell-Bond 2005); of “home” (Hammond 2004; Malkki 1995) or, more recently, the power and capacity to negotiate “emplacement” (Jansen and Löfving 2009); of agentive power (Kunz 1973, 1981); or even of cultural capital.

This *a priori* emphasis on the “predicaments of mobility” constitutes a sort of shared analytical substrate that has remained largely undisturbed by the major waves of theoretical critique that have swept through the interdisciplinary community of “displacement” scholarship (variously referred to also using other terms, i.e., forced, involuntary, refugee migration, etc., which together serve as the community’s heuristic signposts). Thus for example, one of the most sustained and arguably profound of these theoretical critiques has sought to reintroduce “agency” into the analysis of refugee experience by debunking various theoretical presumptions about the overdetermining effects of violence and precarity, and/or by exploring how socially and culturally differentiated agents interpret various forms of predicament and maneuver around or cope with it. What has been far less frequently explored in studies of refugee agency is the extent to which newly emergent opportunities and possibilities for social gain might inform the social navigation of agents, or the extent to which agency may be as oriented to these potentialities as they are to coping with new predicaments.²

As I have termed it, this “predicaments of mobility approach” tends to preempt analytical space in ways that preclude *a priori* questions about whether meanings and outcomes other than “loss” might be imputed to wartime migration and its effects by warscape inhabitants themselves. More specifically the “predicaments of mobility approach” has largely (if usually implicitly) precluded questions such as the following: What if wartime movement does *not* always—or for everyone in a particular setting—represent a major disruption of life strategies (for example, if these strategies are already premised on migration)? Are loss and disempowerment the *only* possible results of wartime migration? More radically: is it possible that wartime migration might inadvertently *increase* the social power, introduce new options, and open up hitherto unavailable economic and political opportunities for some categories of actors? If so, under what circumstances and conditions might this occur? In what ways may the agency of migrants and other warscape inhabitants represent navigational maneuvers that seek to respond to new opportunities (rather than merely react to loss or other predicaments)? In precluding such questions, the predominant analytical reflex in the study of displacement implicitly predefines the experience that analysts recognize and use to define wartime migrants—as that segment of social experience which is coterminous with loss and disempowerment.

In the following section I want to draw on the research that I have conducted in two different settings of wartime displacement—Mozambique and Liberia—to demonstrate how a more open-ended approach that focuses on investigating a variety of transformations experienced by wartime migrants, rather than merely inventorying loss, can reveal what may be somewhat surprising answers to the questions I have posed above.

In the process, by including an examination of how nonmigrant populations are affected by migration, I also aim to dislodge analytical conventions that continue to reserve the term “displacement” for migrants. By and large, the scholarly debates about displacement have revolved around how to categorize various forms of migration and migrants (Bakewell 2008; Hathaway 2007; McDowell and Morrell 2010; Richmond 1988; Turton 2005), yet have largely failed to fully account for the transformative effects of wartime mobility on those who do not move.³ Inasmuch as migrants and nonmigrants are mutually implicated in social relations, I argue that the “invisibilization” (Polzer and Hammond 2008) of the latter significantly distorts the analysis of the behaviors and experience of the former. Consequently, I posit a reconceptualization of displacement as a form of social condition that is neither a forgone conclusion for those who do move nor a condition from which nonmigrants are immune.

Case 1: “Displacement” or “Inadvertently Fortuitous Migration”? The Wartime “Moves” of Mozambican Men

I start with a brief discussion of what I have elsewhere (Lubkemann 2008b) described as a case of “socially fortuitous” displacement in which the wartime relocation of men from central Mozambique initially represented more a case of continuity than of disruption with the past, and ultimately generated social opportunities that led many of these men to develop novel and empowering risk-diversification strategies and to renegotiate gender and state relations in ways that were highly to their advantage.

Shortly after Mozambique achieved independence from Portugal in 1975, the country’s hostile neighbors (the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia) instigated a civil war that would last nearly a decade and a half. Over its fifteen-year course this conflict claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and led to the flight of millions more—some within the country and others across international borders into neighboring South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia (Hanlon 1996). The remote rural district of Machaze in the central border province of Manica was the point of origin for all the residents in the field study I conducted between 1994 and 2002 and was one of the first areas in Mozambique to experience armed conflict between the antigovernment faction (RENAMO) and the government forces (FRELIMO) (Lubkemann 2008a; Vines 1991).

By 1981, little over two years after the conflict had started, most of the district’s residents had relocated from their preconflict homesteads at least once. The best available estimates suggest that between 40 percent and 70 percent of the population left the district to South Africa, Zimbabwe, or other internal destinations within Mozambique during the conflict (CARE 1994; GTZ 1993, 1996). However, wartime relocation in and from Machaze was patterned in highly gender-specific ways in that almost twice as many women as men remained in Machaze or in neighboring rural districts (CARE 1994; GTZ 1993, 1996; Lubkemann 2008a) throughout the war and those women who eventually did relocate farther afield resettled in refugee camps that were established in Zimbabwe starting in the mid-1980s. By way of contrast, most adult Machazian men moved out of the district to the peri-urban areas in South Africa during the first few years of the conflict. Despite the long duration of the war, very few women ever migrated to South Africa to join their spouses.

The gendered distribution of wartime migration and an understanding of the meaning of these moves require an understanding of the roles that migration had historically come to play in local socioeconomic strategies and in state–society relations before the war in this area. As I have documented extensively elsewhere (Lubkemann 2000b, 2008a), by the time of the outbreak

of the Mozambican civil war, international migration had been a central feature and organizing force in Machazian social relations and subsistence strategies for well over a century. Before the war, household strategies of social reproduction were premised on a social division of labor between female agricultural subsistence labor and male migratory cash-earning labor. Almost without exception Machazian men pursued lifelong careers as circular migrants employed in industrial enterprises in peri-urban South Africa. These sojourns abroad that spanned months or, more often than not, years were interspersed with what were usually short visits back to spouses and other family members in Machaze. This pattern of labor migration usually continued until men ultimately retired to the district to live out their old age. In contrast, Machazian women did not participate in labor migration but organized their daily activities and social existence around the pursuit of subsistence agriculture within the district and as the recipients of regular remittances sent by labor migrant spouses or sons.

In order to understand gendered migration patterns during the war, it is also particularly important to note that universal male labor migration not only served as a pillar of household social reproduction but had historically also been the primary and frequently deployed strategy for responding to periodic intensifications in colonial labor recruitment and heavy-handed taxation drives (which the Portuguese levied only against men in this area). Thus, in many ways, Machazian men's relocation at the outset of the civil war closely resembled the tactics that had so effectively frustrated Portuguese colonial administrators throughout much of the previous century. Much as they had responded to episodes of intensified colonial forced labor recruitment, early in the war men from Machaze successfully evaded forced recruitment drives and compulsory relocation efforts by the Mozambican government and the insurgency alike by simply reentering (or staying in) the international labor migration stream to South Africa.

This reentry of Machazian men into the South African labor migration stream at the outset of the war thus did not represent a radical disruption with the past nor an interruption of the mobility strategies that most Mozambican men depended on to knit together their own sense of emplacement. With time however, Mozambique's fifteen-year civil war would eventually pose disruptive, and unforeseen, challenges to the life strategies of men separated from their spouses and other family members who remained back in Mozambique. The vast majority of Machazian men initially believed that the war would be brief and their own relocation temporary (as had been the case during colonial labor recruitment campaigns): "so uma temporada" (just an [agricultural] cycle) as one man recalled in our interview. However, as the war wearily dragged on year after year, and intensified in Machaze in ways that made returning or even sending assistance back to relatives in war-torn Mozambique less feasible, these men began to confront new challenges that had not been typical under the prewar migration regime. As separation from spouses and other family members grew more prolonged and some men lost contact with family members altogether, a growing number began to confront the possibility that they might never be able to reclaim or resume their lives back in Mozambique. Even among those who maintained contact with wives and other relatives relocated to UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) camps or other safe areas, there was growing recognition that life strategies that continued to count heavily on Mozambican social options were less than secure.

With the continuation of the conflict, Machazian men who had fled abroad began to take stock of the many social and economic consequences of the possibility of permanent nonreturn: How would they constitute families? How would they have children who would support them in their old age? Where would they retire and under what conditions? At the same time, these men also began to explore new social opportunities that had begun to present themselves in South Africa, especially in the townships in which a majority of Machazian migrants who had

previously worked in mines had begun working and living just prior to the war (Lubkemann 2008a). Emergent sociodemographic shifts in these townships, including the balancing of gender ratios as a result of greater rates of rural to urban migration by South African women (Lubkemann 2008a: 100–101; Smit 1985), presented Machazian men with new spousal prospects precisely during the time when the prolongation of the war began to raise doubts about their social futures back in Mozambique.

Thus, throughout the war, a growing number of Mozambican male migrants in South Africa began to establish permanent conjugal relationships with South African women. Although some of these men essentially abandoned their Mozambican marriages, a majority sought to retain their marital rights with both South African and Mozambican spouses, despite maintaining minimal (if any) contact with the latter, sometimes for well over a decade. This new strategy of “transnational polygyny” (Lubkemann 2000a, 2004b, 2008a) allowed Machazian men to have families and children who could contribute to their old-age care, while still retaining the option of eventual post-conflict return.

Throughout the decade that followed the end of Mozambique’s civil war, Machazian men’s interest in maintaining the South African options that had inadvertently emerged during the war continued to grow for a number of reasons. Many men doubted whether the peace between RENAMO and FRELIMO would hold and the postwar economic situation in Mozambique, particularly, in Machaze, remained bleak. The vast majority of men who returned to Machaze after the war quickly realized that migration to South Africa for employment was still their only earning option.

However, at the same time, political and economic developments in post-apartheid South Africa also left many migrants apprehensive about their postwar prospects in the townships. Throughout the 1990s, South Africa suffered from growing rates of unemployment as it emerged from over a decade of isolation that had paradoxically protected many of its industries from international competition. By 1997 a majority of Machazian men in South Africa were unemployed and increasingly forced into the same informal sector activities that were the last resort of many other residents in South Africa’s burgeoning townships. Throughout the late 1990s, hundreds of small “tuck shops” dotted the sprawling Vaal townships where most Machazian men lived, often in no more than an additional room built onto a small shack, guarded by strong welded bars and padlocks deployed in an effort to combat the rising tide of violent crime.

In short, postwar Mozambique and post-apartheid South Africa each presented Machazian men with disparate challenges, opportunities, and risks, to which a growing number responded by attempting to pursue a strategy of simultaneous social and economic investment in both countries. Maintaining spouses in both Mozambique and South Africa afforded the ideal mechanism for pursuing this strategy. Male interest and involvement in this strategy of transnational polygyny gained traction throughout the first postwar decade. In a 1997 survey, my research thus found that 23 percent of the respondents had spouses who lived only in Mozambique and another 26 percent had spouses who lived only in South Africa. However, 37 percent were involved in conjugal relations in both South Africa and Mozambique at the same time, while another 2 percent were actually involved in conjugal relations in three countries at the same time (South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe). Just under 90 percent of the 200 men I surveyed in 1997 stated their intention to return to reestablish homes and families in Machaze, and yet 79 percent of these also planned to keep a house in South Africa (Lubkemann 2000a: 448–449; 2008: 270–274).

How then does the experience of these Mozambican men who migrated during the war to South Africa speak to the questions that I have argued should not, but often are, precluded by predominant “predicament” approaches to displacement?

First, the initial wartime migration to South Africa was not in and of itself a dramatic disruption for most Machazian men. Nor did it initially generate the types of “losses” that tend to be analytically inventoried in studies of wartime movement. Rather, the prolongation of the conflict engendered the forms of social vulnerability and insecurity usually associated with “displacement.” Notably however, this insecurity resulted from the impossibility of return migration—a form of “immobilization” that disrupted established circular migration strategies on the “back end” (i.e., preventing a return home)—and not from their initial act of outmigration per se.

Second, while the prolongation of the war generated unforeseen and increasingly critical challenges to the life strategies these men sought to emplot (by disrupting contact with relatives back in Mozambique), it also transformed their social opportunity topographies in other advantageous ways. As culturally generative agents, they readily availed themselves of new and empowering social opportunities, several of which ultimately proved to be socially fortuitous. In particular, engaging in new practices of “transnational polygyny” allowed many Machazian men to diversify their exposure to the risks posed by larger political and economic conditions while augmenting their social autonomy and power within their kinship networks.

Case 2: “Displacement” or “Diaspora”? Liberian Strategies for Pursuing Socioeconomic Mobility by Claiming Refugee Status

My more recent and still ongoing work among Liberians in the United States, Ghana, and Liberia provides yet other examples of how wartime migration can produce forms of socioeconomic empowerment and upward mobility for at least some classes of social actors, in ways that profoundly shaped the meaning and organization of movement itself by migrants and other war-scape inhabitants.

By brief way of background, Liberia’s descent into political turmoil began in 1980, not long after the Mozambican conflict had arrived in Machaze district, with a coup that ended over a century’s political dominance of Liberia’s Americo-Liberian settler elite and brought a member of one of the country’s many politically excluded and subordinated indigenous groups to power (Master Sergeant Samuel Doe). Despite an initial commitment to remedying Liberia’s long history of social and political exclusion through democratic reform, Doe soon began to exploit ethnic divisions and violence in an effort to consolidate his power resulting in a first wave of outmigration during the 1980s. In 1989 an insurgency that splintered into rival factions led by different warlords succeeded in overthrowing the government and killing Doe, after which Liberia slid into seven years of horrific civil war. A tenuous peace brokered in 1997 brought one of the originators of the 1989 incursion, Charles Taylor, to power. The Taylor regime continued a policy of brutal repression of political opponents and predatory governance for personal gain while fostering civil wars and political unrest in neighboring countries.

Many of the estimated 700,000 refugees who had fled Liberia during the 1990–1997 period consequently chose to remain in exile. Migration within the country and out of it accelerated once rival factions again launched armed challenges from neighboring countries against the Liberian government in 2000, sparking even more brutality from Taylor’s regime in response, until under considerable international pressure Taylor went into exile in Nigeria in mid-2003. A much stronger level of international commitment and intervention has allowed Liberia to fitfully, yet ultimately (to date) successfully, navigate a period of political transition initiated with the election in October 2005 of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

The quarter century of political violence and upheaval suffered by Liberia between 1980 and 2004 led to the internal displacement of an estimated 70 percent of the country’s total population, and generated a global Liberian diaspora composed of several hundreds of thousands of

displaced Liberians located in the “near diaspora” in neighboring West African countries (most notably Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire) (Dick 2002; Scott 1998) as well as smaller populations numbering in the thousands or tens of thousands who have relocated much farther afield in the “far diaspora” (most notably in the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Sweden). Since 2000 my research has focused first on the experiences of Liberians living in the United States as well as those in the “near diaspora” in Ghana, and more recently (since 2005) on the social, political, and economic impact and participation of the U.S.-based diaspora in post-conflict Liberia.

The U.S.-based Liberian diaspora exercises a high level of social, economic, and political influence that is disproportionate to its relatively small numbers (by most reliable estimates totaling fewer than 150,000). This influence and impact crosscuts many publicly visible sectors and domains, including the population of public administration and government positions such as cabinet ministers, district superintendents, and other government officials—indeed four of the five leading contenders for the presidency in 2005 and the winner herself all hailed from the diaspora. Leadership and representation in technical, professional, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) positions such as university posts, health and medical positions, international organizations, and NGOs; leadership and influence within all the leading political parties are similarly dominated by the U.S.-based diaspora.

The U.S.-based Liberian diaspora’s influence also operates and weighs heavily at other social levels, especially within extended families and within local communities. Many Liberian families in particular rely heavily on the remittances they receive via Western Union from relatives in the United States. Families and communities alike have witnessed diasporans exercise important forms of economic and sociopolitical power in myriad ways. One of the most noteworthy and potentially problematic in the postwar context are the land/property claims that diasporans increasingly make in Liberia. Land is a particularly complex and politically volatile problem in post-conflict Liberia, and diasporans are influencing it in a variety of often highly problematic ways that include efforts to reclaim land that was occupied by others during the war, sometimes by attempting to reclaim property that relatives “held for them” during the war, sometimes by using their relatively greater economic power or political connections to stake new claims on land through purchases that often have dubious forms of title; and often by freely exercising their economic power and social or political connections to influence the outcomes in both formal and traditional courts, both of which are highly susceptible to corruption (Isser, Lubkemann, and N’Tow 2009).

In short, in many ways the Liberian diasporans in the United States constitute a sort of sixteenth “power county” that profoundly and pervasively affects the post-conflict Liberian polity and society, from a privileged position of intertwined economic, social, and political power. Notably, this “power county” was produced almost exclusively by wartime migration and is constituted by people who were almost all wartime migrants. Nicholas Van Hear (2006) has critiqued the lack of class analysis in the study of displacement, particularly in terms of the filtering effects of socioeconomic class that play such an important role in determining who gets to participate in which migration streams. Certainly, this dynamic was at play in the Liberian context as well, most particularly among the political and socioeconomic elites, and among the first vintage of migrants in 1980 who hailed predominantly from the privileged Americo-Liberian settler class.

However, as my own sociodemographic surveys and ethnographic work in several communities in the United States is revealing, the later and much larger vintages of Liberians who arrived in the United States between 1990 and 2004 did not predominantly hail from these elite groups but were constituted by Liberians who were far more representative of the spectrum of

socioeconomic (and ethnic) backgrounds found in the country itself (Isser, Lubkemann and N'tow 2009). For a great many of these later migrants their “displacement” to the United States has provided them with new educational, socioeconomic, and even social networking opportunities that link them to the diasporan elite through social forums like churches, community associations, and the like, which now underwrite the enhanced power and status they are able to exercise and enjoy vis-à-vis relatives and home communities and within the polity at large in Liberia.

The extent to which being able to “become a refugee (and by implication gaining entitlement to—at least a chance of—being sent to Europe or the United States)” has been viewed quite explicitly by many Liberians as a pathway to upward socioeconomic mobility has been driven home to me in myriad contexts and numerous ways in the course of my fieldwork. Thus for example, during fieldwork conducted in 2003 among Liberians who were living in the former UNHCR refugee camp in Buduburam, Ghana, and later in the United States itself, I got to know several Liberians who between 1997 and 2005 had traveled back and forth between Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Sierra Leone in a continuous search for the refugee office that was most active in securing refugee status and visas (or comparable Temporary Protected Status) to the United States or Europe. Which of these offices and which camp was regarded as the best bet and most promising stepping-stone to a non-African destination varied over the course of years, in many ways following the course of the political turbulence that washed and ebbed in these different Mano River area nations throughout the late 1990's and into the first years of the new millennium. However, in almost all cases the likelihood of the desired outcome was closely correlated with a spike in conflict and danger in the particular country in question. I found that the pursuit of what was sometimes referred to as “the ticket” (to America) had led several of the Liberians to migrate, in some cases two or three times, from a relatively safe place and into a conflict zone, in what was in essence a continuous form of “camp shopping.” Rumors about where to go and how to get “the ticket” were always a hot topic of conversation that circulated through the various mechanisms of the grapevine, including Hai tai shops, interrogations of recent arrivals, and the ubiquitous probing of friends and relatives in the near and far diaspora by cell phone.

During fieldwork in Buduburam I also deployed an experimental technique that sought to gauge the aspirations of young Liberians in the camp by sponsoring an essay contest at one of the local schools, dedicated to the theme “How will I achieve a successful future?” Notably, over 90 percent of the essays submitted narrated a trajectory to success that involved winning the coveted lottery that would provide assured passage as a refugee to the United States and access to educational and socioeconomic opportunities envisioned (not always so realistically) in glowing terms.

Meanwhile, in the course of my research among those Liberian diasporans who had obtained “the ticket” and migrated to the United States, I found that for many a primary concern—cross-cutting and profoundly informing all their life projects—was to protect and preserve their ability to remain there. For over a decade now more than 3,000 Liberians in the United States have yearly confronted the possibility that their Temporary Protected Status (TPS) may not be renewed, thus forcing them to either return to Liberia or become illegal aliens. The struggle to maintain TPS has been mitigated by neither a decade of post-conflict peace, nor the consolidation of democratic governance in Liberia, nor even appeals by the president to “come home.” Much to the contrary the desire of the overwhelming majority of TPS holders is to “not return home (i.e., to Liberia)” —at least without a status that would allow them to come back to the United States if they so wished. Most TPS holders view any form of return to Liberia that prevents them from maintaining a U.S. option as an inevitable ticket to downward socio-

economic mobility. Interestingly enough, it is a view shared by many of their relatives back in Liberia—albeit for their own somewhat different reasons, fearful that a return will leave them without a “control number” in the United States (a reference to the number used to retrieve the remittances relatives send via Western Union).

This brief empirical examination of the experience of at least some members of Liberia’s displacement-produced diaspora thus suggests a somewhat different question about the relationship between wartime migration and class than that Van Hear (quite rightly) urges us to consider. In addition to asking about how displacement is produced by class, when it serves as a “predicament filter” that distributes socioeconomic classes into very different migration streams, we also need to investigate how displacement *produces* and alters socioeconomic class. Such production hinges on how displacement underwrites and alters pathways of socioeconomic mobility, potentially both upward as well as downward, of different categories of social actors over different spans of time, across different contexts, and under different circumstances. To wit, as one Liberian government official wryly noted during a conversation we had in early 2014 in Monrovia: “Liberia has a middle class. It’s just that that middle class lives in Minnesota.”

Other recent studies have similarly highlighted displacement as an experience involving a socially differentiated combination of losses and gains in social position (Utas 2005), political power, and economic opportunity and status (Hammond 2004). Taken together such studies demonstrate the value of investigating the full array of effects that stem from wartime migration, with the expectation that these effects are likely to be highly complex, varied, and even contradictory (Lubkemann 2008a). Ultimately, if we do not wish to be complicit in the reproduction of the distorted image of the “helpless refugee” (Malkki 1997) of which analysts of forced migration have been so critical, we need to reframe our conceptual terrain and analytical strategies in order to require an equal consideration of the circumstances and ways in which wartime migration can result in social empowerment and gains (as well as loss) even within the lives of single migrant individuals.

Transformative Social Struggle in Displacement

To claim that wartime migration is likely to have socially differentiated effects is not a novel theoretical point. The “predicaments of displacement” approach has churned out a vast array of studies and analyses that demonstrate the greater challenges and vulnerabilities occasioned by wartime migration for particular categories of social actors over others; women, children, and sometimes ethnic minorities featuring particularly prominently in many of these. However, the theoretical implications of this point may be rather different and somewhat more far-ranging when the task is reframed as a more open-ended investigation of a full range of opportunities, and not just the predicaments, that are generated by the transformation of social opportunity topographies. In particular, I argue that it compels and enables an analysis of forms, courses, and outcomes of transformational social struggle in a way that an approach to displacement as the “predicaments of mobility” largely misses altogether because of the latter’s predominant and a priori preoccupation with loss and disempowerment alone. By instead identifying how different categories of social actors simultaneously win and lose in different ways and to different extents, the alternative approach that I am proposing here inherently highlights the lines along which social struggle is likely to intensify and the processes of contestation that unfold therein. It thus opens up space for a fuller analysis of how displacement influences the reorganization of social relations, reconfigures social struggle, and ultimately transforms social structure and social imaginaries.

Again I hark back and expand my discussion of the Mozambican case to illustrate this alternative approach by discussing the experiences and the relationships to migrants of yet another category of (relative) “losers” in the wartime development of transnational polygyny: namely, the Machazian spouses and parents of the same migrant men already described. At the very outset of the civil war, and even as their husbands sought to avoid forced recruitment by reentering the migration stream to South Africa, many Machazian women also drew upon historically established models for dealing with political duress by temporarily relocating to more remote areas within the district where they could continue to pursue some form of subsistence agriculture. Women could cultivate on improvised fields in relative safety in areas that were several days’ travel by foot from the communal villages where the government had garrisoned its troops and in which a minority of district residents found refuge.

However, starting in 1981 a severe drought that would last three years gripped large portions of Mozambique, including Machaze, and eventually resulted in the death of an estimated 100,000 Mozambicans (Human Rights Watch 1992: 102). By 1983 subsistence agriculture was untenable throughout most of the district. As the drought deepened, troops on both sides intensified their demands of the local populations in their areas of control and opportunistically preyed on labor migrants who visited the district or who conveyed the remittances of others back to their families. As subsistence conditions worsened and remittances dried up, many Machazian women resorted to historical strategies for coping with drought, by relocating westward into the Chimanimani highlands or north toward the Buzi River, areas that had historically proved more resilient to drought. The highlands closest to the Zimbabwean border attracted the largest number of these migrants. Most of the Machazian women who reached these border areas preferred to remain in Mozambique where greater land availability permitted them to continue to carry on subsistence agriculture, an option that was not often available in Zimbabwe where both government land policies and an earlier wave of Mozambican refugees left little land available for newcomers. Meanwhile many of their adolescent sons sought employment across the border on the plantations in Zimbabwe. Thus, for many of these partial households, the border became the crossroads for a furtive, yet vigorous form of “commuter migration” carried out by young men who found occasional work in Zimbabwe, yet who maintained continuous contact with mothers and younger siblings who lived on the Mozambican side, scratching out a difficult but still largely self-reliant and independent existence based on subsistence agriculture.

In the late 1980s the Zimbabwean government increased its troop presence along the border in an effort to stem the rising tide of self-settled Mozambicans and to coordinate its efforts with the Mozambican government against RENAMO. This militarization of the border forced a growing number of Mozambican women and their children to abandon cross-border commuting strategies and opt for residence in either Zimbabwe or in Mozambique. Responding to both the intensification of military violence in the area and to renewed drought, most Machazians opted to cross over into Zimbabwe where the majority initially sought to remain as self-settled, and thus technically illegal, immigrants. In response to both the growing public controversy surrounding the massive presence of self-settled Mozambicans and its own security concerns, the Zimbabwean government allowed UNHCR to open Tongogara in 1984, the first and eventually largest of five major refugee camps that were established in the country (Tandai 1992). However, most women remained reluctant to resettle in these camps in large part because it would have prevented them from continuing to practice the forms of independent subsistence agriculture that provided them with a basis of social autonomy and authority within their households. Other than small communal gardens used by international NGOs for agricultural training programs, no subsistence agriculture was possible within the camp’s crowded confines. Most of these women thus only entered refugee camps either as an option of last resort or under duress

when a massive Zimbabwean police sweep of the border provinces in 1987 forcibly relocated self-settled Mozambicans into UNHCR camps. By the time the war had ended and repatriation was being organized in 1993–1994, the bulk of the Machazian population in Zimbabwe, overwhelmingly composed of women and children, had settled in one of two major refugee camps closest to the southern Manica border: Tongogara and Chambuta (Lubkemann 2008a).

This brief comparison of Machazian men and women's wartime mobility experiences highlights how the meanings and effects of wartime migration were highly gender-differentiated. Yet, first some similarities in their experience also bear highlighting. Interestingly, for many men and women alike, initial wartime migration represented a certain degree of continuity rather than disruption with a past that, even under nonwartime conditions, had been characterized by periodic duress. Similarly, for both men and women, impediments to mobility (return migration for men, "transborder commuting" for women) or what I have also termed "involuntary immobilization" initially occasioned greater forms of vulnerability and social disruption than migration *per se*.

However, there are also striking differences in what migration came to ultimately mean and imply. The movement of men to South Africa and of women into refugee camps in Zimbabwe had diametrically opposite effects on their social opportunity topographies in the longer term. While it undermined the autonomy, status, and social power of migrant women, it enhanced the power, status, and autonomy of migrant men. Even more fundamentally, the wartime differentiation of opportunity structures generated by migration underwrote the development of new social practices—most particularly that of transnational polygyny—which profoundly transformed Machazian social relations. Such practices fundamentally altered the balance of gendered and generational power within families and the meaning of core social institutions such as marriage itself, transforming marriage into a site of heightened social contestation after the war.

If many men benefited from new forms of transnational conjugality, the development of marriages between Machazian men and South African women eroded the benefits women in Machaze had once experienced from polygyny, while accentuating many of the problems they had experienced because of it. Before the war, polygyny realized solely within Machaze represented an ambiguous combination of potential gains and losses for Machazian women. Whereas a co-wife was often regarded as a rival and potential source of witchcraft (*uloi*), she could also help ease heavy domestic labor requirements. Consequently, many women instigated and participated in the selection of an additional wife for their spouse. In a polygynous configuration in which both wives remained in Machaze, a junior wife could also provide labor to and enhance the status of a senior wife and/or release her from the culturally prescribed responsibilities of assisting a mother-in-law, thus affording her greater independence and enhancing her autonomy.

By way of contrast, transnational polygyny afforded no labor relief or enhanced autonomy to Machazian women because transnational co-wives were not physically present in Machaze. Moreover, Machazian wives in transnationally polygynous marriages often received a reduced share of resources from migrant husbands, since South African wives had the advantage in pressing their claims at the point where the money was earned by their spouses. Finally, while Machazian women remained dependent on migrant husbands for cash, their husbands who could realize social options such as marriage, having children, building homes, and even returning (with South African pensions in some cases), were now less dependent on them. Accordingly, power within Machazian marriages was redistributed to men's advantage. Whereas Machazian women still had to fulfill the obligations required of them by marriage, such as assisting mothers-in-law, and these obligations were made more difficult without co-resident co-wives, they lost

much of the leverage they once had in enforcing a husband's fulfillment of the reciprocal obligations that defined marriage as a social relationship.

South African marriages, in which parents played no part, also significantly reduced the leverage parents had historically exercised over migrant sons. Local kinship alliance imperatives as largely determined by senior relatives, especially fathers, did not factor into South African marriages in the same way they had in Machaze. Moreover, the drain of resources in favor of South African social interests made it more difficult to manage the extended households of migrant sons that often included wives and children left behind. Heightened dissatisfaction of neglected wives placed marriages at greater risk of failure and consequently threatened the loss of a daughter-in-law's labor. These factors along with an awareness of the pull of other social obligations and options far away in South Africa all conspired to heighten parents' ultimate fear that children would neglect their old-age support.

In short, the development of transnational polygyny structurally repositioned migration and marriage in the struggle for power in the Machazian domestic sphere—in the process transforming the very meaning of those social practices and institutions. In transnationally polygynous marriages, men and women, and men and their parents, increasingly evidenced mutually exclusive expectations about what marriage should “mean”—that is, what rights and obligations the relationship should imply. In many ways there was a zero-sum relationship between contesting views, as men's desire to practice transnational polygyny violated the expectations held by Machazian women and parents about what marriage should entail. As I have discussed at greater length elsewhere (Lubkemann 2008a), the ramifications of this transformation are wide-ranging, influencing domains as diverse and fundamental as subsistence strategies, beliefs and practices about the spiritual and moral order, and patterns of migration themselves.

The effects of wartime migration on gender relations and domestic balances of power have played out no less consequentially or transformatively in the Liberian context. As Mats Utas has insightfully documented in his ethnographic tracing of the trajectory of one young Liberian woman, Bintu, through nearly a decade of migration throughout Liberia and the immediate surrounding countries, she not only faced new risks but also frequently confronted and seized new social opportunities. Bintu's journey first to the “safety” of exile in Guinea, but later back into the very thick of the Liberian civil war, is revealed by Utas's careful contextual analysis as a continuation of prewar patterns of social navigation. As Bintu gains knowledge of the dangerous topography of the Liberian social zone she also gains an understanding of the opportunities it offers, and she makes good use of those in her manipulations of her social surroundings—whether in the form of using ties with boyfriends, “mates,” commanders, civilians, or peace-keepers, in “girlfriending,” or even in taking up arms herself. War can thus be socioeconomically empowering for young marginalized people such as Bintu, and active participation in it can be preferable to passive life in refugee camps. Yet this navigation can also be dangerous since it occurs in a context that is less predictable, more volatile, and in which the stakes may be extraordinarily high since: “Life itself is often at stake” (Utas 2005: 426–427).

My own ethnographic engagements with Liberian diasporans who resettled during the war in the United States, reveal that gender, age, and class intersect to produce very divergent experiences and understandings of both initial outmigration to the United States and of the desirability and meaning of return migration to post-conflict Liberia. Thus both surveys and recent ethnographic case studies that I have conducted indicate that Liberian women who have benefited from the educational and socioeconomic opportunities in the United States are generally far more reluctant to return than Liberian men. Notwithstanding the status of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia's and Africa's first elected female president) as an icon for progress in gender equality, many Liberian women whom I have interviewed in the United States remain deeply

ambivalent about the prospect of returning to Liberia because they fear the loss of the forms of autonomy, power, and opportunity many have come to enjoy in the United States. Such fears are particularly pronounced among women whose higher education credentials and professional experience would suggest they might be attractive recruits for government posts or NGOs back in the “New Liberia,” where gender equality and empowerment feature among the most trumpeted refrains of the international donor community. Many of these women are well aware, however, that while education may afford them access to status, maintaining that status in culturally prescribed ways is likely to place enormous pressure on them to eventually forgo the professional activities they currently pursue.

Thus, at the highest social levels, status for women in Liberia is still largely mediated by marriage. While their education may open the door for professional Liberian women to marriages with men of higher social status, Liberian social conventions about how that status is to be maintained and enacted often highly constrain or preclude women from certain forms of professional, economic, and political activity. Confronted with a Liberian social ideology that continues to render social status antithetical to, or at the very least highly restrictive of, certain forms of professional activity and personal autonomy, many educated Liberian women resettled in the United States thus prefer to remain abroad where many social objectives are more mutually conducive rather than socially contradictory.

By way of contrast, men, and particularly those who once held elite status in Liberia, are arguably among the most eager to return to postwar Liberia, and the most vocal in claiming and performing their Liberian identity. In part the strong interest in return among these down-fallen elite men is explained by the fact that sentiments of abjection are particularly pronounced within this group because their educational qualifications have often failed to be recognized in the United States, and the political or socioeconomic status they once held in Liberia has not translated into commensurate standing in their country of refuge. Many also angrily decry the presumptions of the institutional refugee resettlement system that requires them to nevertheless seek employment, but only offers them positions for which they feel overqualified and that fail to offer pay or status commensurate with that they once enjoyed and to which they feel entitled. The predominance of such individuals in the myriad Liberian community associations throughout the country—and particularly in the fierce politicking therein—is readily noticeable, as is the extent to which they voice much greater interest in returning “home” than is the case for many others.

Yet among men we also find that this interest is differentiated with respect to socioeconomic class. Thus representing one end of the spectrum is the case of a Liberian waiter in the greater Washington, DC, metro area who has become a “big man” in his own village because he has been able to translate what are relatively meager earnings in the U.S. context into a significant, and social-status-enhancing, set of contributions in his rather remote rural hometown. To him the travails of relatively low social status as a waiter in the United States are bearable because they translate into—indeed enable—higher social standing at home. For others, such as one former government minister whom I came to know well, the demotion of status suffered in diaspora—where his educational credentials were not acknowledged and his menial job ultimately led to a series of humiliating outcomes that “no minister should have to tolerate”—is strong motivation for returning to a country in which his status will be rightfully remembered and restored. At the other end of the spectrum, I have also encountered Liberian refugees who were able to achieve levels of educational and professional success in the United States that would most likely have been denied to them in Liberia because they did not hail from the privileged socioeconomic classes, or benefit from the patronage networks, for whom most privilege and power was (and still largely is) reserved in Liberia. Many Liberians—men and women alike—in

such circumstances remain skeptical about what their prospects would be should they return to a country in which neopatrimonial networks continue to shape social and professional prospects and trajectories—far more powerfully than do the claims of degrees or the professional accomplishments listed on curricula vitae.

What is ultimately at stake for all these migrants is not actually whether they move or not but rather how migration—including both their own and that of socially significant others—affects their social mobility by reconfiguring the field of social relations and opportunity topographies they must navigate in order to achieve life-course goals.

Displacement as a Social Condition

Displacement, I argue, is ultimately a social condition rather than a category of mobility. Before expounding on this claim, let me first be clear that I do believe migration, or the alteration of mobility patterns upon which life strategies are based, is an essential part of what defines an analytically useful concept of “displacement.” If it is not, then we run the risk of conflating the term “displacement” so that it simply denotes everyone who suffers in or because of a conflict or whose social relations are transformed by duress, or in and as a result of conflict. At such a point, the term would apply to so many individuals and conditions that it would mean too little to be analytically useful. Consequently, I would reserve it to apply to those whose social relations and opportunities are migration-affected (the displaced), and to the process by which migration (or mobility-pattern alteration) effects social transformation.

An important point that I am making in this redefinition is that it is possible to be profoundly affected by wartime migration, in disempowering or empowering ways or both at once, *without ever moving at all*. In fact, as analysts for over twenty-five years (Bascom 1998; Chambers 1986) have argued and documented, one need not even be in an active warzone to be affected by wartime migration, since, for example, one can be migration-affected by just being the resident of a location that experiences what are often rapid and massive influxes of migrants who are fleeing from somewhere else altogether.

Meanwhile, the residents who stay put in war zones throughout a conflict may also confront all manner of new conundrums (and opportunities) as well as unprecedented and unforeseen choices about sociality itself because of the outmigration of important social others. Thus, for example, the spousal separation occasioned by prolonged wartime immobilization would ultimately prove particularly problematic for many Machazian women who remained interned in Mozambican villages or refugee camps. In particular, prolonged spousal separation during the war had highly gender-differentiated effects on the social project of fertility. Over time spousal separation presented ever more serious challenges and dilemmas for many Machazian women who sought to realize their fertility in culturally sanctioned terms. Women could remain faithful to long absent or missing husbands with the long-term consequence of having fewer or no children. Alternatively, wives could have sex with men other than their long absent husbands, allowing them to bear the children that were essential to securing their future security. However this latter option violated cultural prescriptions and thereby undermined their future claims on the children borne through illicit unions in cases of divorce because the payment of bride wealth secured a husband's (or his kin's) claims on at least some, and in certain cases all, of a married woman's offspring.

Over the course of the war, spousal separation thus created novel contradictions in women's lives by making the only options for the realization of their biological fertility ones that could potentially jeopardize their culturally prescribed “social fertility” (Lubkemann 2000a, 2005b,

2008a). This dilemma grew more acute for more women as the war came to span more and more of the window of opportunity that biology afforded them for realizing their fertility objectives. The impact of the fifteen-year duration of the war on forcibly immobilized women separated from their spouses becomes even more apparent when we consider the “fertility work” that most Machazian women aimed to accomplish in their lifetime and the high rates of child mortality suffered during and because of the conflict itself: most women whom I interviewed expressed a desire for at least six surviving children in the hopes that at least one would support them.

A significant number of the women who remained in the militarized villages within Mozambique throughout the war ultimately opted to have children through temporary conjugal relationships with government soldiers. While these choices often provided them with the children they desired, they generated other forms of social vulnerability that came home to roost after the war when husbands (or their relatives) returned and attempted to exercise their claims on these children. As I have detailed at greater length elsewhere (Lubkemann 2000c, 2008a), a significant number of these women, who had never left the district even once during the war, migrated out of the district for the first time *after the war* in an effort to avoid or contest such claims.

A point that bears underscoring here is that while their migration out of the district after the war occasioned its own set of socioeconomic difficulties and dilemmas, their condition of “post-conflict displacement” actually started *before* their migration and even motivated it. It was thus the return migration of significant others, husbands and/or their kin, to Machaze after the war that dramatically altered these women’s opportunity topographies and recast their social positions in profoundly problematic ways. They were, in short (detrimentally) migration-affected (i.e., “displaced”) before they were ever migrants.

Alternatively, some actors may witness a dramatic alteration in their social opportunities and life chances because it becomes prohibitively dangerous from them to engage in forms of migration upon which culturally prescribed life-course progress depends. I have already discussed how the inability to return to Mozambique and realize social relations eventually posed new social dilemmas to Mozambican men who had migrated to South Africa and how they eventually solved these by marrying South African wives. Their ability to solve this dilemma contrasts sharply with the lack of options for those young men who grew up and found themselves isolated in the militarized villages of Machaze for a decade or longer during the war. Thus as young men came of age in the villages during the war they faced particularly bleak social prospects, often finding themselves unable to establish sustainable marriages because they had never participated in labor migration. As one young man explained:

When you saw you [became] a man and a little bit stronger maybe you would want to find a wife but there was no money for you to pay lobola, not even to give a capulana [cloth wrap] to your wife or her mother. All you could do was be together with a woman. ... But then even if you had children ... [her] relatives would say that you could not give them names because you were just together.⁴

After the war those raised in the villages found themselves at a distinct social disadvantage to those in their cohort who had made it to South Africa and had by and large attained much more material success. In short, if one can be displaced without migrating then I would hold that the reverse is also true: one can migrate without being displaced, at least in the most meaningful sense of that term.

The defining criterion of displacement as a condition is never movement itself but rather what movement (whether one’s own or that of others) does to one’s social opportunities and relations. It is also not correct to define displacement as merely the migration-effected *disruption* of social relations, at least inasmuch as there are plenty of cases in which the disruption of

the social status quo is welcomed and actively embraced as an opportunity by those who hold subaltern positions within it. Or, put in other words, analytically, “disruption” is not inherently coequal with “detriment” because disruption, while producing disempowering challenges for some, is also capable of generating empowering opportunities for others.

It bears noting that, treating displacement as a social condition is—somewhat paradoxically—particularly important in the analysis of the experience of those who hypothetically suffer only or predominantly predicaments as the result of someone’s mobility (i.e., the most displaced as it were). This is because so often so much of their predicament—that is, their loss of opportunity and power—is a consequence of how mobility (detrimentally) impacts their social relations. Their predicaments are thus often intimately and directly related to what happens to important social others. Such has been the case when deported Liberian TPS holders can no longer send remittances to relatives back in Liberia, profoundly undermining the livelihoods of those relatives as a result. Conversely, a loss of social power and opportunity can also be directly and causally related to the new and empowering opportunities from which important social others benefit. Thus, the disempowering challenges Mozambican women confronted were directly related to—in fact directly produced by—the empowering opportunities that Machazian men took advantage of. Such cases demonstrate that even if we were to analytically opt to reserve the term “displacement” to refer to the most detrimentally migration-affected individuals, even their condition cannot be understood without an analytical frame that is capable of accounting for both empowerment and disempowerment—especially when these are mutually constitutive. The primary focus in studying displacement as a condition must therefore be the socially differentiated transformation of opportunity topographies, which all the migration-affected must navigate whether they are the ones who move or not.

Requirements for Investigating Potentiality: Toward a Theoretical Revitalization of “Agency”

In conclusion, any theoretical posture that investigates the transformation of social opportunity topographies and the renegotiation of social relations within them, requires that the agency of the migration-affected feature as one of its central theoretical concerns. However, that investigation must involve more than merely addressing how agents cope with the predicaments engendered by violence, uncertainty, and precarity. To this end I offer here the following final provocation: that one of the most important theoretical “turns” in the study of displacement (Essed, Frerks, and Schrivjers 2004) has not yet gone far enough. Thus, those theorists who have focused on how agency is organized and expressed in, and affects, displacement have oriented their accounts and analysis of agency by focusing on how it is exercised to cope with the same forms of social loss and disempowerment that also serve as the experiential starting point for the frameworks they are critiquing. The point of departure in the analysis of agency has thus continued to be the predicaments that the displaced confront, rather than the life projects they seek to realize.

This has resulted—somewhat paradoxically—in a peculiarly truncated and, arguably, “reactive” conceptualization of agency in which analysis is framed—and ultimately contained—by an a priori selection of particular aspects of the context that actors socially navigate, rather than by the social projects and imaginaries that motivate those actors in the first place. One significant consequence of this form of analytical truncation is the preclusion of aspects of agency that might be oriented and organized otherwise—for example, with reference, or in response to, the recognition of new opportunity. This analytical truncation characterizes many of the most

recognizable streams of displacement research in which agency has been theoretically invoked, including those studies that have drawn attention to how gendered or other forms of social differentiation inform the agency of refugees (Abdurahim 1993; Abusharaf 2009; Gale 2007; Indra 1999; Turner 2004; Van Hear 2006); those that have documented how agency mediates the effects of even the most hegemonic forms of biopower in situations of the most acute power asymmetries (Harrell-Bond 1986; Mallkki 1995; Peteet 2005; Vedirame and Harrell-Bond 2005); those who have established how agency shapes migratory projects and objectives (Bakewell 2004; Lubkemann, 2008a; Shandy 2007; Turton 2005); and even those that have shown that social agents have the capacity to culturally redefine the very meaning of their displacement experiences in self-empowering terms (Shahrani 1995; Wilson 1994).

A fuller theorization of how agency is exercised in displacement, and of its social effects, requires a different starting point: one that explicitly recognizes that warscape inhabitants will assess, seek out, and react to both the new challenges and the novel opportunities that emerge as a result of the migration-induced transformations of their social opportunity topographies. Analysts of displacement should thus be entirely unsurprised, expect to find, and even analytically be on the lookout for, those among the migration-affected, who are not interested in conserving or returning to aspects of their migration-disrupted lives, but who actively embrace and may even ardently defend the new possibilities wrought by the very “disruption” their societies have experienced. Certainly this is the posture of those Liberians in the United States who seek to maintain their TPS and “prolong their displacement” so as to be able to continue to reside in the United States rather than “returning home” (Lubkemann 2015). Similarly, as I have detailed elsewhere, migrant Mozambican men who sought to realize transnational strategies found themselves at odds with the humanitarian repatriation effort that sought to emplace them in one and only one location after the end of that civil conflict (Lubkemann 2008a).

The complex mix of opportunity and predicament that together constitute the “potentialities” that interact with cultural scripts and social differentiation to inform the agency of warscape inhabitants can be thrown into analytical relief if—and only if—we recognize that the everyday social existence of the war- and migration-affected is never only, and often not even primarily, a matter of coping with those processes—such as violence—to which we most commonly ascribe predicament-making power. Rather, as is also the case in times of less turbulence, social navigation in warsapes centers on the pursuit of a complex and multidimensional agenda of social struggles, interpersonal negotiations, and culturally scripted life projects. Throughout the conflicts I have studied, gendered, generational, and other forms of social struggle continued to powerfully inform interests and orient behavior—migratory and otherwise. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere (Lubkemann 2008a) that it is primarily with these “other struggles” in mind that agency is exercised by most warscape inhabitants. Rather than merely a matter of coping with violence, wartime existence is thus a matter of assessing and reacting to the array of new challenges—as well as opportunities—that transformed opportunity topographies present to agents in their efforts to realize ordinary and mundane life projects such as procuring subsistence, honoring (or avoiding) social obligations, getting married, raising children, protecting and enhancing social status, and so forth.

When such projects serve as the “analytical trigger” for investigating agency—they contextualize predicaments, rather than allowing predicament itself to preemptively claim the power to contain and direct the investigation of agency. By tracing how agents pursue their life projects we may thus come to a better understanding of how they assess the transformations in their social topography that are wrought by violence and other precarity-producing processes, and of how their navigation accounts for the full range of perceived potentialities—including both the predicaments and the opportunities—that are generated by the mobility of self and social others.

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NOTES

1. This domain of interdisciplinary scholarship includes those who typically identify their studies as addressing “displacement,” “involuntary” or “forced” migration, and refugees.
2. Some notable exceptions in the study of displacement that have sought to account for agent assessments and social outcomes that include social gains as well as loss include Horst (2006, 2008), Jacobsen (2005), Gale (2006, 2007), Shandy (2007), Landau (2006), Lindley (2010), Lubkemann (2008a), and Bjarnesen (2013). More generally however, the study of displacement would benefit from the analytical trends that have entered the mainstream in anthropological studies of wartime social processes writ large, which have increasingly focused on how social agents in war zones assess and react to both heightened risk and novel opportunities (Finnstrom 2008; Hutchinson 1996; Lubkemann 2008a; Thiranagama 2013; Vigh 2006).
3. Important landmark exceptions to this generalization include Carling (2002) and Bascom (1998).
4. Because there had been no payment of the bride wealth that would have culturally sanctioned the marriage and the man’s rights over a woman’s children.

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