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Narratives of homelessness and displacement : Life testimonies of Cameroonian asylum seekers in Johannesburg

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2008-10-22T10:37:46Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/5785

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PHD Thesis: Narratives of Homelessness and Displacement: Life Testimonies of Cameroonian Asylum Seekers in Johannesburg.

Abstract

This thesis is based on an analysis of the life testimonies about homelessness and displacement told by the Cameroonian refugee community in Johannesburg. It seeks to understand not only the experiences and the conditions of migrancy within a specific group of involuntarily displaced persons in an African city but also how these experiences are constructed and reconstructed 'in the telling'. The main thrust of the thesis is a discourse analysis of the oral narratives and stories that Cameroonian asylum seekers and refugees living in the city of Johannesburg tell about themselves, their past, present and future, their journey to exile and their aspirations, memories of home and sense of identity as forced migrants in a global era.

The data for this study was gleaned from a series of interviews with twenty Cameroonian forced migrants and the interviews are used in this thesis as my primary texts. The analysis focuses primarily on the narrative construction of migrant experiences, exploring how Cameroonian forced migrants use varied narrative strategies and patterns to articulate broader exilic discourses such as the construction of memory, identity and spaces. Therefore, through the testimonies collected and recorded from my informants, I was able to access individual lives as well as the subjective and collective experiences of Cameroonian forced migrants, and explore how they interpret and construct these experiences. Also, the testimonies provided a platform from which to examine how

Cameroonian forced migrants narrativise exilic experiences, construct identities, remember the past and represent diasporic spaces.

The study has produced a number of significant outcomes. Firstly, the testimonies tend to represent exile as a place that provides solutions for the predicaments of displaced persons. Secondly, the study also reveals that migrant narratives can be multi-dimensional and multi-functional if individual experiences and element of time are taken into account. This is evident from the multiple, shifting and somewhat contesting narratives produced by different respondents.

Thirdly, because of these narrative features, the testimonies are often affected by the logic of ambivalence, emerging from the constant subversion and undermining of the same narratives using different narrative patterns, metaphors, images and symbols. Finally, the multiplicity, subversion and the shifts of the narratives therefore draw our attention to the fact that testimonies from the same refugee community have the potentials of generating different interpretations of shared experiences of displacement.