

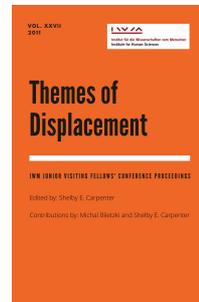
Themes of Displacement in Israel and Sierra Leone – Preface

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I chose the title “Themes of Displacement” for our Junior Visiting Scholars’ Volume because it lends itself to a wide range of considerations within different academic disciplines. In particular, “Themes of Displacement” challenges anthropologists and political scientists to reexamine some of our preconceived assumptions about peoples and places.

For example, my anthropological research was in Sierra Leone, where the 1991-2002 civil war forced millions of Sierra Leoneans to flee across national borders to settle temporarily or permanently in environments in which they had few cultural connections, uncertain legal rights, limited control over their lives, poor economic prospects, and significant risks to health and survival. Although refugees the world over experience similar problems, beleaguered aid agencies tend to see all refugees in the same light. In fact, different refugee populations have very distinct collective identities. They do not tell the same story.

Conventional labels such as refugee, internally displaced person, and even rooted terminology such as citizen, create a sort of normalization of place that limits our understanding of a continuously changing reality. In both the anthropological and psychological literature of “cultural bereavement” and trauma, there is a presumed pathology resulting from being dislocated or displaced. [1] How might we reevaluate these biases and rethink these categories in terms of varied considerations such as prolonged military occupation, globalization, or long-term conflict? How is identity shaped by (forced) migration, or a (forced) sedentary lifestyle? What does displacement mean to multiple generations of refugees who might never become citizens?

Within anthropology, Appadurai has framed the problem as, “...The task of ethnography now becomes the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of the locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?”[2] In other words, how are understandings of individuals, communities, and regions formed and experienced? In our short collection of articles, we look at displacement and how it has shaped lives through various social processes in Israel/Palestine and among Sierra Leoneans living in post-conflict Freetown.

Michal Biletzki’s article “Citizenship in Crisis – The Palestinian Citizens of Israel: A Counterintuitive Account,” examines the conception of citizenship through two discourses – the civic-republican and the liberal-democratic. Using three distinct case studies, Michal compares the violations of Palestinian rights by the Israeli state over time. She examines how a self-identified democratic state, which shoots and kills its Palestinian citizens, can go from seeking justice for those whose rights were violated to failing to seek similar justice a mere four decades later.

Shelby Carpenter’s article “Trust Building in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone,” explores the topic of distrust and trust through the lens of ordinary Sierra Leoneans living in Freetown after the civil war. I examine how trust might be altered by trauma and displacement, and what alternative social structures (to kinship and contract) might actually help promote trustworthy relations.

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Notes:

1. Eisenbruch, 1991, 1992; Good, et al. 2008; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Malkki, 1990, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1997.

2. Appadurai, 1991:196.

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