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COMMENTARY

A right to research?

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Gerawork Teferra, a colleague and collaborator of ours who lives in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, observed on taking a course about global history that refugees were only marginally present as historical actors and that no refugee scholars figured as authors of the course texts. The absence of (especially encamped) refugees as historians is an extreme version of a by now well-documented phenomenon: that scholarship about the Global South, and in particular about Africa, is overwhelmingly produced by scholars in and from the Global North (Jeater, 2018; Mama, 2007).

As other social scientists, historians and Africanists have argued, this inequality in scholarly production is fed by prior inequalities that are both material and epistemic (Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective, 2018; Auma et al., 2020; Biney, 2016; Landau, 2012; Martin & Dandekar, 2021; Monson, 2016; Vanyoro, 2019). Universities and research centres in the United States and western Europe are far wealthier than their African counterparts and able to finance ambitious international research agendas. Many excellent initiatives have attempted to channel some of those funds to African scholars through workshops, training programmes and research partnerships, but the inherent inequality of the funding structure persists (Schenck & Wetzel, 2022). Still, funding alone is only part of the story. As Diana Jeater observes, the most important journals routinely reject the scholarship of African authors because it does not conform to hegemonic, Global North understandings of 'good' knowledge production (Jeater, 2018). Exclusion from these journals perpetuates inequalities in access to resources, as funding bodies prefer to support those projects that will have high 'impact', as measured by publication in prestigious academic journals.

Exacerbating these inequalities and exclusions in the case of refugee and displaced historians are conditions of often extreme material deprivation, lack of citizenship status and consequent confinement to refugee camps, and limited access to institutions of higher education that could provide training, support and other resources to refugee researchers. For refugee historians, the kind of international mobility, access to vast institutional repositories such as libraries and archives, and engagement with a global network of colleagues and peers – the background conditions of historical scholarship for Global North scholars – are typically unthinkable. What's more, as refugee studies scholars have repeatedly shown, a hermeneutic of suspicion greets refugees, who are almost paradigmatically doubted as bearers or producers of knowledge (Fassin & D'Halluin, 2005; Gatrell, 2013; Jensen, 2018). As we have written elsewhere, '…refugees living in camps are [assumed] not [to be] historians for 'historically explicable reasons,' to borrow Bonnie Smith's phrase. They do not do the things historians do because they cannot: they cannot consult archives, they cannot access [libraries]…It is as though (encamped) refugee and historian have been defined as mutually

exclusive identities. A person residing in a refugee camp cannot be a historian because a historian, quite simply, cannot be a person residing in a refugee camp' (Reed & Schenck, 2023).

The exclusion of refugees from the work of knowledge production is particularly troubling given the now well-established and widely accepted framework of standpoint epistemology, which holds that knowledge is socially situated and thus that a person's social position is salient for the kinds of knowledge to which they have access. The recognition that social circumstances matter for knowing should encourage a profound democratisation of knowledge production in order to open up as many ways of knowing as possible. As philosopher Olúfémi Táíwò argues, however, the operation of standpoint epistemology in practice tends to concentrate power in the places where it already lies, selecting a few 'marginalised' voices for inclusion without engaging or dismantling the structures of exclusion that keep most marginalised people on the outside in the first place (Táíwò, 2020).

What would it mean to take a more robust approach to standpoint epistemology? Put differently, what would it mean for a refugee to be a historian, or for the 'right to research' to be meaningfully extended to those who are so often the subject of Global North academic inquiries, but all too rarely historical narrators in their own right (Appadurai, 2006)?

For the rest of this short piece, we explore one imperfect but generative attempt to move towards a world in which refugee authors are taken seriously as historians in their own right, capable – perhaps uniquely so – of producing rich historical and social scientific knowledge. The Afro-Asian Networks Research Collective (2018) 'call[s] for an attitudinal shift where research is not 'owned' or 'discovered,' but enabled and shared' and where 'continuous, "real-time" collaboration – from project conception to group archival research, source-sharing, and online collaborative spaces' becomes the norm, rather than the exception. This approach allows for a wider participation of voices in (historical) scholarship.

In response to Gerawork Teferra's observation that refugee historians were missing from our global history course, we developed an oral history and research methods training course, called the Global History Dialogues Project (www.globalhistorydialogues.org), that provided refugee, displaced and host community students around the world the opportunity to learn skills in interviewing, historical research and project design. Our classroom internalised inequalities and power imbalances that are normally sharp divisions on the academic and pedagogical landscape: Global North academics working with Global South students; U.S. and European citizens training refugee and displaced researchers; the list goes on. However, the project differed from most comparable programmes in that it was not a 'co-researching' project in which refugee authors generated data for, or assisted in the implementation of, a predetermined research agenda. Rather, participants had the flexibility to design their own research questions and methods to match their interests and circumstances. The teaching staff played a facilitating role, helping researchers develop their projects, addressing questions about research ethics and method, and providing feedback and editing assistance during the writing-up process. University funding enabled researchers to offset the costs of research, in terms of both travel to interview sites and the opportunity cost of participating in the program.

Student-researchers produced ground-breaking scholarship that contributes to our collective understanding of humanitarian organisations, refugee experiences of encampment, migration circuits in Eastern Africa, and much, much more (Omar, 2022; Reed & Schenck, 2023; Teferra, 2022). But the ability to inquire into the unknown and answer questions of pressing personal or community importance is only part of a meaningful right to research. Just as important is being taken seriously by wider publics as a bearer of knowledge. This raised the complicated question of publication and dissemination. How should the results of this research be shared? To which publics? In what form?

While no part of the Global History Dialogues Project was ever free from the inequalities and power imbalances inherent to such a collaboration, these questions of how to share research results proved thorniest. Informed by our backgrounds, academic training and areas of expertise, we emphasised traditional forms of publication in academic venues, including refereed journals and university presses. For some student-researchers, reaching local audiences or humanitarian organisations through community-based presentations was more important. Cognizant that the democratisation of historical knowledge production that we imagine is a process that must be worked out in practice, with many setbacks and false starts, we have found in these disagreements and challenges important moments for collective reflection on the limitations of this mode of working towards a real right to research (Abdalla et al., 2021).

The process of becoming researchers in a highly unequal global context thus becomes, in its own right, a site of inquiry, which can hopefully nourish and inform future attempts in this vein (Wetzel et al., 2023).

In *The Right to Research*, an anthology of student-researcher essays from the first two years of this program, we explore in more detail both the rich and crucial insights that flow from the historical understanding generated by refugee and migrant scholars, and the profound challenges and tensions that shape any attempt to facilitate such research and bring it into wider conversations involving audiences of academics, affected communities and humanitarian practitioners (Reed & Schenck, 2023). An enormous amount of work remains to be done: the efforts we describe here are deeply flawed and not intended as blueprints or models. Rather, we hope that by opening the conversation about what a real right to research would mean – and whether that is even a helpful framework for thinking about the production and sharing of knowledge – we invite as expansive a public as possible to join us in thinking about, and addressing, the stark inequalities that have so deeply moulded both our world and the ways we understand and interpret it.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13145.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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