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RESEARCH NOTE

THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVE: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ANALYSING VOICES OF THE MARGINALIZED IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This Research Note reflects on the question of representing marginalized people's voices by discussing field research based on open-ended narrative interviews with rural populations that had been displaced by natural resource extraction in Mozambique. It highlights the methodological challenges of representing narratives of the marginalized by discussing several aspects of the politics of narrative. On the one hand, narratives that emerge in fieldwork encounters are contingent articulations of oneself that unfold through the implicit negotiation process between a researcher and a research participant. On the other hand, these narratives are embedded in broader socio-material relationalities. Through this discussion, the Research Note demonstrates how these methodological aspects of the politics of narrative should be reflected upon as a way to navigate complex ontological narratives that emerge in one's fieldwork, as well as highlights how this narrative reading overcomes the potential danger of fetishizing individual agency and/or overlooking broader structural inequalities.

WRITING ABOUT, OR ATTEMPTING TO REPRESENT, voices of marginalized people has been widely debated within academia, and the question of structural limitations and opportunities within which agency is embedded has been an important area of intellectual inquiry within scholarship on Africa.[1] With the recent increasing focus on quantitative data analysis,[2]

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1. William Brown and Sophie Harman (eds), *African agency in international politics* (Routledge, London, 2013).
2. Nic Cheeseman, Carl Death, and Lindsay Whitfied, 'Notes on researching Africa', *African Affairs* 5 (2016), pp. 1–5.

and the lamentation about the 'ivory-towerization' of research on Africa,[3] legitimate concerns have been raised about widening rifts between researchers and empirical complexities on the ground.[4] In this context, methodological reflections on how critical research interprets narratives of the marginalized in the context of broader structural constraints remain as pertinent as ever.

In this Research Note, I reflect on how to represent marginalized people's voices, and discuss my critical political economy fieldwork research based on open-ended narrative interviews. These research methods stem from critical research traditions including standpoint feminism.[5] Within this field, on-the-ground research is understood as a multifaceted experience of self-representation through which unequal power relations are negotiated, social identities are performed, and meanings are co-constructed. Therefore, fieldwork is not simply a means for exchanging information, but consists of disquieting encounters through which a researcher and a research participant co-construct 'data'.[6]

I reflect on the methodological challenges of representing narratives of the marginalized by discussing several aspects of the politics of narrative – namely, how narratives that emerge in fieldwork encounters are contingent articulations of oneself that unfold through the implicit negotiation process between a researcher and a research participant, as well as how these narratives are embedded in broader socio-material relationalities. My field research in Mozambique focuses on ontological narratives – subjective stories that one tells to oneself and others about one's place in the world[7] – that were articulated in open-ended interviews with rural populations dispossessed by natural resource extraction. Drawing on this research, I reflect on how the encounter between a researcher and a research participant co-constructs a narrative, as well as how the socio-material context of one's narrative is not simply a background or receptacle within which the narrative emerges, but directly influences that narrative. Through this discussion, I demonstrate how these methodological aspects of the politics of narrative should be reflected upon as a way to navigate complex ontological narratives that emerge in one's fieldwork, as well as to overcome the potential danger of fetishizing individual agency or overlooking the broader structural inequalities. This is significant, because within academic scholarship on

3. Mark Duffield, 'From immersion to simulation: Remote methodologies and the decline of area studies', *Review of African Political Economy* 41, 1 (2014), pp. 75–94.
4. Morten Jerven, 'Research note: Africa by numbers: Reviewing the database approach to studying African economies', *African Affairs* 115, 459 (2016), pp. 342–358.
5. Stina Hansson, Sofie Hellberg, and Maria Stern, *Studying the agency of being governed* (Routledge, London, 2014).
6. Julia Gallagher, 'Interviews as catastrophic encounters: Loss and loneliness in IR research', *International Studies Perspectives* 17, 4 (2016), pp. 445–461.
7. Mona Baker, *Translation and conflict: A narrative account* (Routledge, London, 2006).

Africa, especially in the context of international development and poverty, attention to individual narratives and agency can depoliticize the structural inequalities that shape those narratives.[8]

The Research Note is structured as follows. It first provides a brief overview of the methodology of open-ended narrative interviews, before discussing the methodological challenges of representing complex narratives that emerge in fieldwork encounters. It outlines how I navigated the complexity of these narratives by focusing on an implicit negotiation process between the researcher and research participants, and the sociomaterial context of my research. In concluding, I discuss the methodological implications of this reading of narratives.

Narrative methodology

Within critical research traditions, knowledge building is understood as an ongoing process that emerges through critical engagement with texts, research subjects, or data. In these epistemologies, conversational modes such as open-ended interviews are employed in order to enable research subjects to recount their life experiences in their own words, and in the process construct their own identities or challenge those already preconstructed by others.[9] However, the fact of having interviewed research subjects does not allow one to claim to have captured the 'truth' of those people's experience; rather interviews reveal how people actively represent their lifeworlds. One way to methodologically acknowledge this element of agency is to interpret narratives as a whole, thus identifying meaningful characterizations that shape experiences of research participants.

In my research, influenced by sociological narrative theory,[10] in order to understand lived experiences of the populations affected by natural resource extraction, I employ the concept of ontological narrative: 'personal stories that we tell ourselves [and others] about our place in the world and our own personal history [that] are interpersonal and social in nature but remain focused on the self and its immediate world'.[11] This form of narra-

8. Shahra Razavi, 'World development report 2012: Gender equality and development – a commentary', *Development and Change* 43, 1 (2012), pp. 423–37; Lucy Ferguson and Sophie Harman, 'Gender and infrastructure in the World Bank', *Development Policy Review* 33, 5 (2015), pp. 653–671.
9. See Brooke A. Ackerley, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True, *Feminist methodologies for international relations* (CUP, Cambridge, 2006); Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist methods in social research* (OUP, New York, 1992).
10. Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (Sage, London, 2008); Jane Elliot, *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (Sage, London, 2005).
11. Baker, *Translation and conflict*, p. 4.

tive is perceived as a 'mode of being' that enables one to make sense of one's past and understand how it shapes the present.[12] Therefore, epistemologically, stories told by research participants are not seen as empirical representations of 'real life';[13] instead, they constitute 'facts' that we come to perceive as 'reality'.[14] As Margaret Somers observes, 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities'.[15] When people provide accounts of their lives, they arrange and describe elements and events of their personal stories in order to create meaning and mediate between the self and the world,[16] and, in doing this, they create 'the selves' as characters of their stories.[17] As such, narratives are understood as practices through which individuals construct their subject positions.[18] This reasoning implies that on-the-ground research is shaped by power relations,[19] and fieldwork encounters function as 'sites for negotiating meaning,'[20] as well as 'performance'[21] and resistance.[22]

Therefore, narratives are perceived as products of an implicit negotiation between a narrator and a listener.[23] According to Stina Hanson, 'we come into being as a response to a call from the other'.[24] For a research participant, a researcher triggers an active moment of articulation of

12. Roberto Franzosi, 'Narrative analysis—Or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998), pp. 517–554, p. 528.
13. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community: The idea of narrative in human sciences* (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1997), p. xvi.
14. Hayden White, *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1987), p. ix.
15. Margaret Somers, *Narrativity, narrative identity, and social action: Rethinking English working-class formation* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1992), p. 600.
16. Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, p. xvi; also see Camilla Stivers, 'Reflections on the role of personal narrative in social science', *Signs* 18, 2 (1992), pp. 408–425, p. 419.
17. Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, p. xviii; Maria Erikson Baaz and Maria Stern, 'Studying reform of/in/by the national armed forces in the DRC', Stina Hansson, Sofie Hellberg, and Maria Stern (eds), *Studying the agency of being governed* (Routledge, London and New York, 2015), pp. 105–129.
18. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (Sage, London, 2007).
19. Brooke A. Ackerly and Jacqui True, 'Studying the struggles and wishes of the age: Feminist theoretical methodology and feminist theoretical methods', Brooke A. Ackerley, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist methodologies for international relations* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006), pp. 241–260, p. 256.
20. Tami Jacoby, 'From the trenches: Dilemmas of feminist IR fieldwork', Ackerley et al. *Feminist methodologies*, pp. 153–173, p. 171.
21. Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and subversion of identity* (Routledge, New York, 1990).
22. Maria Stern, 'Racism, sexism, classism, and much more: Reading security-identity in marginalized sites', Ackerley et al. *Feminist methodologies*, pp. 174–198, p. 191.
23. Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, p. 9.
24. Stina Hanson, 'Analysing responsibilization in the context of development cooperation', Hansson et al. *Studying the agency*, pp. 130–149, p. 144.

oneself as a subject, and thus narratives that emerge through fieldwork encounters should be seen as verbal articulations and active construction of oneself.[25] Providing these insights, a research methodology based on ontological narrative offers a method to focus on people's experiences as they express them in their stories, as well as allows us to create texts on how people make sense of their situations and how they relay 'a sense of self'.[26] Following this epistemology, narratives that emerge out of fieldwork encounters are perceived as contextually embedded. According to Catherine Riessman, broader contexts in which narrators are embedded 'speak themselves' through the individual story, and, through the act of narration, the speaker responds to broader contexts in order to actualize a particular 'presentation of self'.[27] Therefore, narratives do not only order oneself and one's experience, but also reveal how broader contextual frameworks shape that ordering.

Following this theorization, I discuss how narratives that emerge in fieldwork encounters should be understood as contingent articulations of oneself. On the one hand, these articulations are shaped by an implicit negotiation process between a researcher and a research subject. On the other hand, they are intertwined with broader socio-material relationalities. Contextual embeddedness permits or inhibits certain kinds of stories being told, and fieldwork encounters are moments in which a researcher and a research participant co-produce the narrative as a microcosm of the broader macrocosm of social reality in which they find themselves.[28] In the next section, I discuss these narrative dynamics in my own research.

Narratives of suffering and contestation

My research focuses on enforced population resettlements caused by coal mining in the province of Tete, Mozambique. Since 2006, nearly six million hectares of land (60 percent of the province) have been allocated to several international mining projects, which led to the dispossession of nearly 2000 households (approximately 12,000 people). Rather than depriving these people of land, this dynamic of dispossession resulted in the private sector-led resettlement process of these populations. To date, the rural resettlement of Cateme, built to house 917 families, has been the biggest enforced population resettlement project in Tete. Since its implementation, civil society groups have raised multiple concerns about

25. Elliott, *Using narrative in social research*, p. 129; Jacoby, 'From the trenches'.
26. Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, p. xvi; Elliot, *Using narrative in social research*, p. 126; Riesman, *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, p. 7.
27. Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative analysis* (Sage, London, 1993), p. 5; Hakan Thorn, 'How to study power and collective agency: Social movements and the politics of international aid', Hansson et al., *Studying the agency*, pp. 85–102.
28. Franzosi, 'Narrative analysis', p. 544.

limited access to agriculturally productive land and water, a lack of viable livelihood opportunities, and inadequate housing in the resettlement site.[29]

During my fieldwork, I focused on ontological narratives of the most vulnerable members of the resettled rural population: small-scale subsistence farmers whose livelihoods are dependent on family labour on two or three hectares of land. As I was interested in their everyday lives in the resettlement area, I chose open-ended interviews to understand how their lifeworlds have been shaped by land enclosure, the social dominance of private capital, and dispossession. Between May and July 2016 I stayed in Cateme. In this period, I completed 130 open-ended interviews with Cateme residents that I randomly selected whilst moving through the resettlement site on a motorbike. I met 35 of them for follow-up conversations. Additionally, I carried out 27 interviews in areas from which the Cateme population had been displaced.

Within the first several weeks of my fieldwork in Cateme, one narrative became particularly prominent. Shared collectively, it was one of suffering and hardship that the resettled population faced after being dispossessed. Irrespective of their age or gender, being part of an otherwise relatively homogeneous social group,[30] Cateme residents spoke of not being able to continue practising their livelihoods. As one of them reflected, 'before we did not have much, but at least we had land, we had something to do to feed our children. Here we don't have anything. This is not living, it's suffering'.[31] Through the construction of this narrative, Cateme residents presented themselves as living in extremely precarious conditions, and assigned little significance to the everyday strategies they employed to cope with the situation of hardship created by the resettlement process.

In addition to the resettlement site where my interviews initially took place, I also visited agricultural fields, neighbouring villages, and the enclosed lands, some of which at the time still had not been explored by the mining companies and were temporarily reclaimed mostly by young men from the resettled villages. Stories told in these settings added complexity to the collectively shared narrative of suffering that emerged in the

29. João Mosca and Thomas Selemane, 'Mega-projectos no meio rural, desenvolvimento do território e pobreza: O Caso de Tete', *Desafios para Moçambique 2012* (Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos, Maputo, 2012); Human Rights Watch, *What is a house without food? Mozambique's coal mining boom and resettlements* (International Human Rights Watch, 2013).

30. Rural classes are highly heterogeneous, and thus, rather than slotting these groups into simplistic conceptual registers, it is important to acknowledge people's complexity. However, whilst I do not claim that my research participants easily fit into one ready-made category, the same ethnicity/religion, geographical location and livelihood patterns allow me to understand their narratives as an articulation of collective experience of a relatively monolithic social group.

31. Anonymous interview 1, Cateme, 20 June 2016.

resettlement site. On the one hand, they equally conveyed the hardship caused by the resettlement process, the livelihoods that had been lost, and how life had been better before the resettlement. On the other hand, however, my research participants also reflected on how they were coping with these everyday hardships. They spoke of how they started to return to areas from where they had been resettled. Many of them built temporary shelter and stayed there three to four weeks at a time, returning to visit families left in Cateme when possible. As one Cateme resident reflected, 'with the resettlement our life became worse, it was not organized well, we were promised a lot of things, but until now we have not received anything. I had to do something to survive. So I decided to go back and work the land'.[32]

This aspect of coping within one collective narrative of suffering was made particularly prominent by a group of seven young men who returned to continue artisanal brickmaking. On several occasions, I spoke to some of these men in the resettlement site, and, like many others, they told me about their suffering, whilst underemphasizing that they themselves were temporarily migrating to their former villages. However, the narrative that emerged outside of the resettlement site was slightly different. Instead of speaking only about the hardship they face in Cateme, they also emphasized how they had to do something in order to cope with the difficult situation. According to them, they were the real landowners in the area, and the mining companies could not separate them from their land. As company security cars were occasionally passing by on the road several hundred metres from us, some of these men joked that private security officers were afraid of them. 'We are the real landowners here, if they came here to bother us, to tell us that we can't be here, we would take their cars and they would have to walk back to their offices. Even you, standing here, we could do anything we wanted to you, you can't escape now', laughed the group leader.[33]

I returned to the area several weeks later to find the same group of men; the mood, however, was different. There were no jokes about the security guards, and the group leader told me of how several days before my visit the mining company representatives came to measure their artisanal brickmaking workstations. In this unpleasant encounter, monitored by security guards, these men were told that they would have to leave soon because the land they were working was part of the private concession. Somewhat uncomfortably, I reminded them of what they had told me the last time I was in the area. After a few minutes of silence, one of these men lamented: 'what can I do? They [the mining company] have

32. Anonymous interview 2, Chipanga, 22 July 2016.
33. Anonymous interview 3, Chipanga, 22 June 2016.

the government on their side, there is nothing we can do to stop this, our lives do not mean anything', his voice broke.[34] 'But I wanted to know what kind of activities you would do to support your family when you can no longer work here', I asked him again, myself feeling the inappropriate weight of my question. 'You need to come back here to see what is going to happen, I have no fucking idea', he replied abruptly, and walked away into the direction where the rest of the men were standing.[35]

As this brief fieldwork account demonstrates, the ontological narrative that focused on everyday suffering was collectively shared by the dispossessed population. However, rather than being homogeneous, this narrative that predominantly focused on suffering in the resettlement site was rendered complex by fieldwork encounters in which Cateme residents articulated possibilities of contestation and did not see themselves as victims of dispossession, but as 'real landowners'. As a result, I was faced with a challenging methodological point of reflection of how to represent this complex narrative of suffering that emerged throughout my fieldwork.

Politics of narrative

The narrative methodology explicitly acknowledges that stories that appear 'after putting together the narrative' are not 'a reflection of how the narrator chose to remember and describe events relating' to the particular research question,[36] but rather are the researcher's 'conception of the whole'.[37] Following this reasoning, the methodological reflection about fieldwork encounters such as the one described above is perceived as a 'deliberate moment'[38] within one's research when the narrative is co-constructed by a researcher who chooses forms of representation.[39]

How did I navigate this 'deliberate moment' in my own research? On the one hand, I could have read the elements of the collective narrative, such as the self-representation of the young men as 'real landowners' not intimidated by the private security guards, as indicating contestation that discursively challenges one's marginalized position. Analysing these elements of self-representation can be intellectually productive in its own right as it points to possibilities of contestation dormant within realities of

34. Anonymous interview 3, Chipanga, 6 July 2016.
35. Anonymous interview 3, Chipanga, 6 July 2016
36. Sofie Hellberg, 'Studying the governance of lives through bio-narratives', Hansson et al. *Studying the agency*, pp. 167–186, p. 179.
37. Edward Bruner, 'Ethnography as narrative'; Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, p. 266.
38. Bina D'Costa, 'Marginalized identity: New frontiers of research for IR', Ackerley et al. *Feminist methodologies*, pp. 129–152, p. 140.
39. Ackerly and True, 'Studying the struggles', p. 258.

marginalization that some authors see as the most important dynamic in the class struggle in the long run.[40] Similarly, there has been a tendency to do this within the literature on agency in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, where uncertainty is perceived as containing possibilities of resistance.[41]

On the other hand, these elements of the narrative were in dissonance with the broader socio-material context within which they emerged: the land enclosure and dispossession that shaped people's lives by resettling them into a different location and limiting their semi-subsistence livelihood opportunities. This was made particularly visible by the fact that the element of the discursive contestation was omitted several weeks after the mining company representatives visited the workstations of the men trespassing the mining concession. That is, rather than continuing to represent themselves as 'real landowners', during my follow-up visit, these men lamented that their lives 'did not mean anything'.

How can one make sense of this complex narrative that conveys both suffering and discursive contestation? Within the critical scholarship on Africa, it is customary to acknowledge that in the context of the material deprivation and inequality it is important to be attentive to how research participants might have vested interests in the way they represent themselves, because in these contexts, vulnerability, and the way it is 'performed' and represented, is often associated with development assistance.[42] Therefore, a critical reading of narratives requires an understanding of broader contexts in which these narratives are embedded. As I discussed above, narratives need to be understood within the researcher's 'conception of the whole'[43] that in the process of representation identifies meaningful overarching characterizations of the collective narrative. For me, this conception of the whole was the socio-material relationality of the private land enclosure.

Following this reasoning, narrative elements that indicate possibilities of resistance could also be seen as performative. Through fieldwork encounters, unequal power relations are negotiated, and social realities and identities are co-constructed by research participants as a response to the presence of a researcher. Therefore, fieldwork situations are experienced as challenging encounters of implicit negotiation in which research subjects make attempts to overcome the unequal power relationship that

40. James Scott, *Weapons of the weak* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1985).
41. See AbdouMaliq Simone, 'People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg', *Public Culture* 16, 3 (2004), pp. 407–429; Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, 'Writing the world from an African metropolis', *Public Culture* 16, 2 (2004), pp. 347–372.
42. Ramah McKay, 'Afterlives: Humanitarian histories and critical subjects in Mozambique', *Cultural Anthropology* 27, 2 (2012), pp. 286–309.
43. Bruner, 'Ethnography as narrative', Hinchman and Hinchman, *Memory, identity, community*, pp. 264–280, p. 266.

characterizes the fieldwork.[44] Therefore, the positionality of a researcher is important as it might trigger particular forms of self-representation. In the case of my research, both my research participants and myself shared the same 'masculine' social identity and belonged to a similar age group. Therefore, the assertion of being 'real landowners' by these 'young men' could be interpreted as their active attempt to re-affirm their 'masculinity' in this particular context where they had lost control over their livelihoods and thus had been made highly vulnerable. Their assertion that I as a researcher was dependent on their good will to collaborate, and that 'they could do anything they wanted to me' indicates how the fieldwork encounter is characterized by shifting power relations, and the narrative that comes out of this encounter is negotiated in relation to a researcher.

It is a researcher's responsibility to communicate this narrative without romanticizing it or brushing over its complexities or points of contention. Given that fieldwork encounters function as 'sites for negotiating meaning,'[45] it is important to highlight how these fragments of narrative that indicated indifference to security guards or emphasizing the real ownership of the land demonstrate how, despite the land enclosure, life is made livable under extremely precarious terms. Rather than representing 'real life', narratives are constructive of 'reality';[46] this element of contestation within the collective narrative of suffering shows exactly that – namely, how, in the face of dispossession, these men try to make ends meet and thus co-create their 'reality' in the context of the large-scale socio-material reconfigurations brought about by extractive industries.

However, even though it is important to be attentive to narrative elements that forefront contestation, the prominence of suffering – namely, that the very same group of young men omitted the discursive articulation of possible contestation after the mining company representatives visited their workstations – reveals how the specific socio-material relationality of the private land enclosure in Tete co-constructs the narrative of suffering. This broader socio-material dynamic and the fact that these men had no rights to the land on which they worked was revealed through their words that without the government on their side, their 'lives do not mean anything'. Therefore, I argue that it is precisely through focusing on how their narrative is embedded within the broader socio-spatial relationality that we can make sense of what research subjects articulate in fieldwork encounters.

44. Gallagher, 'Interviews as catastrophic encounters'.
45. Jacoby, 'From the trenches', 171.
46. Hayden, *The content of the form*, ix.

Conclusion

In this Research Note I discussed how narratives that emerge in fieldwork encounters are contingent articulations of one's subject position that are shaped by an implicit negotiation process between a researcher and a research participant, as well as broader socio-material relationalities. Through my reflections on this particular fieldwork situation, we see how the complex narrative that emerges through the encounter between a researcher and research participants internalizes and reveals the socio-material dynamic of life in Tete. It demonstrates that life, despite its fleeting nature disclosed through people's coping strategies and discursive contestation in the face of dispossession, is made extremely precarious by socio-material dynamics of the private land enclosure. The nuances within the collective narrative that indicate resistance demonstrate how this enclosure is not complete, and that the dispossessed population co-produces these socio-material relationalities, either by trespassing on the land or even discursively portraying themselves as 'real' landowners. However, this discursive resistance was temporarily overshadowed by the context of the massive socio-material reconfigurations constituted by the coal mining industry in the region, which highlights the importance of a careful and politically responsible reading of the narrative that emerged in the fieldwork encounters.

This reading of narrative is methodologically important for several reasons. It effectively addresses the potential danger of fetishizing elements of individual narratives and inflicting what Hanson calls 'interpretative violence' through which on-the-ground complexities are brushed over by knowledge-producing practices carried out by a researcher.[47] Those engaged in the scholarship on Africa need to be cautious to strike a balance between seeing the agency in Sub-Saharan Africa – African states, societies, individuals, and governments as actors that act and are acted upon – and structural limitations and opportunities of the global system within which the forms of agency are embedded.[48] Within academic scholarship on Africa, especially in the context of international development, attention to individual narratives can depoliticize the structural inequalities that shape those narratives.[49] By acknowledging how the complex narrative of suffering was articulated in relation to me as a researcher, as well as focusing on how the socio-material context was co-constructing the narratives of my research participants, I did not follow this path and avoided the potential danger of fetishizing individual agency and overlooking the broader structural inequalities.

47. Hanson, 'Analysing responsibilization', p. 143.
48. See Harman, 'Film as research method', p. 738; Brown and Harman, *African agency*.
49. Razavi, 'World development report 2012'; Griffin, 'The World Bank'; Ferguson and Harman, 'Gender and infrastructure'.

Narrative reading is also methodologically important in order to overcome potential criticisms regarding the focus on reflexivity that sometimes are directed at critical research traditions. As I have observed, within the narrative methodology, acknowledging the co-authorship of narratives that emerge out of open-ended interviews is central, and the interaction between a narrator and a broader audience – a wider community from which a narrator comes or an audience that a researcher will be writing for – is understood as shaping the structure and meaning of narratives.[50] There is a risk that these types of arguments for the methodological value of reflexivity might result in the self-indulging pondering of one's privilege, usually the researcher's,[51] that is amplified by asymmetry of standardized knowledge and wealth, and often by racial difference.[52] However, this dynamic need not always be the case. In resonance with the literature that demonstrates how research methods are entangled with material-geographical realities studied,[53] this Research Note demonstrates why the co-construction of narratives by a researcher and research participants in relation to broader socio-material contexts need to be accounted for in the representation of those narratives.

Besides a broader epistemological point of view, this Research Note also illuminates broader dynamics of the politics of development in Sub-Saharan Africa. It shows how knowledge is constructed in the context of an extractive industry in Mozambique, which has been a battleground of production of contested meanings about development and human rights between displaced populations, civil society groups, private investors and the government.[54] In relation to the broader scholarship on Sub-Saharan Africa, this Note is of relevance for two reasons. First, exploring epistemological questions of how the context and the relation between a researcher and research participants shape knowledge, it contributes to the prominent debate on the relationship between structural limitations and agency.[55] Second, it demonstrates the value of critical on-the-ground research in the

50. See Sandra Harding, 'Introduction: Is there a feminist method?' and 'Conclusion: Epistemological questions', Sandra Harding (eds), *Feminism and methodology* (University of Indiana Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1987), pp. 1–15, pp. 181–90; Susan Hekman, 'Feminist standpoint theory revisited', *Signs* 22, 2 (1997), pp. 341–365.
51. Branwen Gruffydd Jones, 'Africa and the poverty of international relations', *Third World Quarterly* 26, 6 (2005), pp. 987–1003.
52. Christopher Cramer, Deborah Johnston, Carlos Oya, and John Sender, 'Research note: Mistakes, crises, and research independence: The perils of fieldwork as a form of evidence', *African Affairs* 115, 458 (2016), pp. 145–60, p. 152.
53. Jan Breman, 'Between accumulation and immiseration: The partiality of fieldwork in rural India', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13 (1), pp. 5–36, p. 5; David Mosse, 'Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (2006), pp. 935–956.
54. Jose Jaime Macuane, Lars Buur, Celso Marcos Monjane, 'Power, conflict and natural resources: The Mozambican crisis revisited', *African Affairs* 116, 465 (2017), pp. 1–24.
55. Brown and Harman, *African agency*.

context of increasing popularity of remote methodological trends and quantitative data analysis that might contribute to obscuring empirical complexities on the ground.[56]

56. Duffield, 'From immersion to simulation'; Cheeseman et al., 'Notes on researching Africa'; Jerven, 'Africa by numbers'.