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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Return to what? Reimagining home and belonging after conflict and refugee status cessation among Liberians in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how displaced persons conceptualise home and evaluate the possibility of return after the cessation of refugee status and the narrowing of mobility options. Drawing on fieldwork with first-generation Liberians in the defunct Oru Refugee Camp in south-west Nigeria, it analyses how shared histories of violence, prolonged exile, and the withdrawal of legal protection shape return decisions long after the formal end of conflict. Although the international refugee system promotes repatriation as the preferred durable solution, Liberia is no longer considered by many interlocutors as a viable future homeland following the termination of their refugee protection. Home is sustained through everyday social life in exile, while return is assessed through comparative and forward-looking judgements about safety, trust, and the durability of peace within a defunct camp environment characterised by long-term social continuity alongside legal and political precarity. This paper demonstrates that the loss of refugee status, when combined with decades of camp-based exile, recasts return from a presumed resolution into a strategic and frequently rejected outcome, providing a lens for understanding mobility decisions in other post-cessation settings where protection ends without secure pathways to belonging.

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Introduction

How do displaced persons conceptualise home after conflict when refugee protection has formally ended, and how does this shape long-term refusals of return. Although durable solutions frameworks prioritise repatriation once peace is officially declared (Chimni 2004; UNHCR 2006), they often assume that return will naturally follow the end of conflict and the withdrawal of refugee status. This study challenges that assumption by examining return as a prolonged and contested process shaped by memory, fear, and the afterlife of violence in settings where refugee status has been formally revoked.

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While existing literature has richly explored questions of home, belonging, and return (Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak 2019; Edler, Krause, and Segadlo 2024; Mbazumutima 2023; Omata 2013; Tozan 2025; Yacob-Haliso 2016), the long-term experiences of displaced persons who refuse return after the formal cessation of refugee protection remain underexplored.

This paper makes three interrelated contributions. Empirically, it examines long-term refusals of return among first-generation Liberians in Nigeria whose refugee status was terminated under UNHCR cessation clause in 2012, a context that has received limited sustained ethnographic attention following refugee status cessation. Conceptually, it brings fear and trauma into direct conversation with repatriation processes, showing how they operate as temporal and relational logics through which return is evaluated under conditions of legal abandonment. Analytically, it demonstrates how termination of status transforms return from a promised resolution into a site of anticipatory risk, where the past and the feared future converge to render return untenable.

Liberia's civil war, spanning from 1989 to 1997 and 1999 to 2003, was characterised by widespread violence, killings, ethnic tensions, the use of child soldiers, and the collapse of state institutions (Afolabi 2017; Morten 2005). Over a million people were displaced internally, while many sought refuge in countries across West Africa, including in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria (Crawley and Fynn Bruey 2022; UN 2023). By the end of the war in 2003, around 340,000 Liberian refugees remained in the region (UNHCR 2007), most of whom had received *prima facie*¹ recognition during the conflict. Post-war peacebuilding efforts framed repatriation as the primary durable solution, premised on the assumption that Liberia's return to constitutional order and democratic elections signalled an adequate threshold of safety and stability (UNHCR 2012). However, resettlement remained largely inaccessible and local integration was uneven, precarious, or actively resisted by host states (Antwi-Boateng and Braimah 2021; Omata 2014). Many Liberians thus found themselves suspended between an unviable return and foreclosed integration, even as institutional narratives of resolution intensified.

In 2012, following post-war elections and constitutional restoration in Liberia, the UNHCR invoked the cessation clause under Article 1C(5) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, declaring that conditions in Liberia had 'fundamentally changed' and that refugee status was no longer warranted (UNHCR 2012; UNIDO 2017). Hence, cessation marked a decisive legal rupture through which refugee protection was withdrawn, mobility pathways narrowed, and return was reframed as an obligation. However, for many Liberians, this declaration did not correspond to lived experiences of safety, justice, or reintegration. Rather than signalling the end of exile, cessation intensified uncertainty, revealing the disjuncture between institutional timelines of peace and the affective realities through which return was assessed. While some individuals did return, many others refused, citing persistent insecurity, social fragmentation, and distrust in the political order.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the defunct Oru Refugee Camp in Ogun State, Nigeria, this study focuses on first-generation Liberian refugees who fled during the civil wars between 1989 and 2003 and remained in Nigeria following the termination of refugee status in 2012. After cessation, they lost their refugee status without acquiring Nigerian citizenship or secure residency, leaving them in what Durodola

(2023) referred to as ‘a condition of legal ambiguity and socio-political marginality’. This precarity involved the absence of recognised residence permits, exclusion from national identification systems, limited access to formal employment and public services, and vulnerability to harassment, detention, or forced relocation (Durodola 2025). Although some individuals retained expired refugee documentation or informal attestations from local authorities, these provided no durable protection and were unevenly recognised. As a result, while Nigeria functioned as a space of relative safety and everyday life, it could not be securely claimed as home in a legal or political sense ‘residual refugees’.

The term ‘residual refugees’, as used in this paper, refers to displaced persons who remained in host countries after the cessation of refugee status without securing citizenship, permanent residence, or alternative legal protection. The term circulates primarily within policy and academic discourse (Crisp 2003; Omata 2014) rather than as a self-designation. While analytically useful in signalling institutional abandonment and post-cessation² marginality, it also carries connotations of surplus or remainder, reflecting how such populations are rendered invisible within durable solutions frameworks. Many first-generation Liberians continued to describe themselves as refugees in everyday terms despite the legal withdrawal of that status, underscoring the disjuncture between juridical categorisation and lived experience (Durodola 2025). This ambivalent positioning is central to the analysis, highlighting how refugeehood can persist socially and affectively even after it has formally ended.

The paper examines how memories of violence, distrust in state institutions, and the erosion of social and moral structures shape long-term refusals of return among these ‘residual’ refugees. Rather than treating home as a fixed location or return as the natural endpoint of displacement, interlocutors describe the homeland as a place emptied of the social, emotional, and political conditions necessary for belonging. Building on but extending existing critiques of repatriation orthodoxy (Bradley 2012; Long 2013; Mbazumutima 2023; Omata 2013; Tozan 2025), the analysis illustrates how fear and trauma operate not as individual pathologies, but as historically rooted and future-oriented assessments of risk that render return untenable even after conflict has formally ended.

The article is structured as follows. The first section develops the conceptual approach, engaging debates on home, return, fear, trauma, and the distinction between place and space. The second section outlines the methodology. The third section presents the empirical findings, examining how fear, trauma, and the withdrawal of protection shape long-term refusals of return in the post-cessation period. The conclusion reflects on the implications for peacebuilding and displacement governance, arguing for a rethinking of return beyond legal milestones, such as the formal end of conflict, official peace declarations, and the withdrawal of refugee status, with greater attention to the emotional and relational conditions that make home possible.

Conceptualisation of home and return in the afterlife of displacement

This study examines how displaced persons conceptualise home and make sense of return in settings where institutional solutions to protracted displacement are foreclosed. Instead of advancing a new theoretical framework, this section draws on existing

conceptual debates to illuminate the specificities of post-cessation refusal of return among Liberians in Nigeria. At the core is a challenge to conventional policy discourse that equates repatriation with resolution. Since the 1980s, international refugee systems have positioned return as the primary durable solution, underpinned by assumptions of restored state capacity, national protection, and the idea that returning to one's place of origin signifies a natural endpoint to displacement (Ray 2000; Zetter 2021). This approach treats return as a fixed outcome, often failing to capture the complex, subjective, and affective meanings that displaced persons attach to home.

In challenging this linear and statist logic, this study draws on literature (Bakewell 2008; Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak 2019; Landau 2019; Long 2014; Omata 2013; Zetter 2021) that re-theorises return as a negotiated and often contested process, shaped by memory, identity, and fractured belonging. It adopts a critical-pragmatic approach that centres lived experiences, structural constraints, and the agency of displaced persons within coercive environments. What distinguishes the present case is that return is negotiated in the aftermath of refugee status withdrawal, when the option to remain is legally and politically delegitimised, yet return itself is experienced as unsafe, uncertain, or morally untenable. This context sharpens existing debates by showing how return is evaluated beyond relation to peacebuilding outcomes, but in response to the withdrawal of protection itself.

This approach is informed by the *mobility turn*³, which challenges the assumptions of rootedness and fixity in conceptions of identity and home. Anthropological scholarship has long critiqued the idea that people's sense of belonging and identity is fixed permanently to a single place (Hammond 2004; Jansen and Lofving 2008; Malkki 1995; Parent 2022). As Malkki (1995) notably argues, framing return as resolution often obscures processes of deterritorialisation through which identities are reshaped in exile. In the Liberian post-cessation context, deterritorialisation does not signal detachment from the homeland, but a heightened critical engagement with it as a site of risk, betrayal, and unresolved violence.

Within this framework, return exceeds the restoration of a lost home and becomes a destabilising process, particularly in post-cessation settings where formal peace does not align with felt safety, social reintegration, or the reestablishment of rights and belonging. This argument resonates with Hammond's (2004) work on refugee return and home-making in Ethiopia, which demonstrates that return requires sustained labour to transform territory into home through social relations and everyday practice. The present case, however, establishes a different situation in the displacement trajectory, particularly long-term refusal of return under conditions where refugee status has been withdrawn and alternative pathways to belonging are foreclosed. Here, the work of home-making cannot be relocated to the country of origin without re-exposing individuals to risk, nor fully consolidated in the host state due to legal and political precarity. The contribution of this paper lies in showing how prolonged exile, status cessation, and institutional withdrawal reshape the conditions under which home can be imagined, deferred, or refused.

Similarly, Long (2013) argues that return must be understood beyond physical relocation, accounting for shifts in political and moral orders following conflict. When these shifts are ignored, return becomes a technocratic exercise oriented toward restoring the status quo and reducing refugee numbers rather than addressing the lived realities

of displacement (Bradley 2018; Crisp 2003). In the case examined here, this disjuncture is intensified by cessation, which transforms return from a voluntary solution into a perceived obligation and amplifies the stakes of return decisions.

To analyse these dynamics, this paper engages the spatial distinction between place and space. Following Massey (1994), place is understood as a provisional and contested articulation of social relations stretched across space, rather than a closed or internally coherent container of identity. This distinction is central to critiques of sedentarist assumptions in displacement governance, which presume fixed national belonging and frame exile as an abnormality to be reversed. Massey's intervention resists the view of place as bounded, static, and secured through exclusion. Instead, she argues that the specificity of place emerges through its multiple connections, histories, and encounters, including those that link it to wider geographies of power (Christophers et al. 2018; Lave et al. 2018). Scholars of forced migration similarly posit that repatriation is often framed as a return to territory, or as a technocratic exercise of locating people territorially, while neglecting the wider social processes through which place becomes liveable as home (Hammond 2004; Maple and Hovil 2025; Saunders 2017). The Liberian case demonstrates how this place-based logic becomes fragile once refugee status has ended, as displaced persons must assess whether the homeland can still function as a livable space in the absence of trust, justice, and protection.

At this point, it is important to clarify the analytical distinction between 'home', 'homeland', and lived spaces of exile. The analysis does not suggest that home disappears as a meaningful category. Instead, what becomes unstable is Liberia's status as a future homeland, understood as a space toward which return promises the restoration of belonging. Many Liberian participants articulated strong attachments to the places in Nigeria where they have lived for decades through practices of dwelling, care, and sociability. These attachments, however, were rarely framed as secure claims of home in a legal or political sense. In Massey's terms, this matters because home cannot be reduced to a territorially enclosed origin (Lave et al. 2018). It is produced through social relations, power-laden interconnections, and the lived negotiation of difference (Lave et al. 2018). Instead, home emerged as a social and emotional condition that was partially sustained in exile but foreclosed in both directions, unattainable through return to Liberia and constrained by precarity in Nigeria. Hence, home appears as a lived but unresolved condition rather than a territorially secured endpoint.

This distinction helps explain how the homeland may remain identifiable as a place while ceasing to function as a viable space. In settings characterised by the withdrawal of refugee protection, fractured social ties, and lingering trauma, return often fails to regenerate a sense of home (Bradley 2013; Omata 2013). Instead, it confronts individuals with the absence of the social, emotional, and moral infrastructures that once underpinned belonging. Massey's reconceptualisation of place draws attention to the fact that the meaning of a place does not derive from an internally preserved essence or a singular past, but from the ongoing and contested relations through which it is constituted. In this sense, what has been lost for many 'residual refugees' extends beyond access to national territory to include the social worlds that once made that territory inhabitable as home. In Oru, prolonged residence in a former camp environment sharpens this contrast, as relative stability in exile coexists with persistent insecurity in the imagined homeland.

This analysis further distinguishes trauma from fear as related but analytically distinct dimensions of displacement. Existing literature often conflates the two or reduces them to abstract affective states, a tendency reinforced by humanitarian frameworks that pathologise suffering and detach it from political conditions (de Tubert 2006; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Lijtmaer 2022; Villarreal 2022). Here, trauma is understood as an embodied and persistent response to past violence, rooted in memories of rupture, loss, and betrayal (Miao et al. 2018). Although anchored in the past, it continues to shape present subjectivities and future orientations. For many ‘residual’ Liberian refugees, trauma does not recede with the formal end of conflict, but is sustained through prolonged uncertainty, repeated experiences of failed peace, and the absence of accountability.

In essence, fear operates alongside trauma as a future-oriented assessment of risk shaped by these temporal layers. It is anticipatory rather than pathological, structured by perceptions of potential harm and evaluations of political credibility (Farrall, Jackson, and Gray 2009). In neurological terms, fear engages cognitive processes that encode threat and memory in ways that inform long-term perceptions of danger (Rubin, Neria, and Neria 2016). In participants’ narratives, fear is articulated through idioms of mistrust, vulnerability, and the possibility of history repeating itself rather than through clinical language. This distinction enables a more precise analysis of how displaced persons respond to pressure to re-avail themselves of protection in their country of origin.

Collectively, trauma and fear illuminate why return remains untenable even after conflict is formally declared over or refugee protection has ended. Long-term refusal of return emerges from historically accumulated experiences in which peace has repeatedly proven fragile and reversible. The cessation clauses revoke refugee status without addressing these affective conditions, reinforcing return as a site where unresolved violence and anticipated risk converge. While many Liberians did return and continue to live with similar legacies of violence and loss, this paper focuses on those for whom these shared conditions translated into long-term refusal. Refusal is therefore understood as one possible response to common experiences of insecurity rather than as evidence of heightened psychological harm.

Methodology

This paper draws on separate qualitative research conducted between 2019 and 2023 at the defunct Oru Refugee Camp in Ogun State, Nigeria. Although the camp was officially closed following the cessation of refugee status for Liberians in 2012, Oru remains an important site of displacement. Approximately 500 ‘residual refugees’ continue to reside within the former camp space, with over a thousand more self-settled in Oru town and neighbouring cities such as Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. These include individuals who refused to repatriate as well as those who returned to Liberia and later re-exiled themselves. Fieldwork was therefore carried out in a former camp environment whose material remnants, spatial concentration, and dense social networks continue to organise everyday life. This setting shaped access, interactions, and the narratives produced, functioning as a relational and epistemic space through which displacement, safety, and belonging were collectively remembered and evaluated.

The research focuses on first-generation Liberians who arrived in Nigeria between the early 1990s and early 2000s and were granted *prima facie* refugee status during the civil war years. For this paper, 24 participants (13 men and 11 women), all aged 40 and above, were selected from interviews conducted during the fieldwork period. This age focus reflects the specific analytical aim of the paper rather than the composition of the wider dataset. Participants aged 40 and above were selected because they had direct experience of the Liberian civil war and of displacement to Nigeria, having arrived as adolescents or adults during the 1990s and early 2000s. By contrast, younger participants in the broader study were either born in Nigeria, were infants at the time of flight, or had limited lived memory of the conflict and initial displacement, and were therefore less able to speak to the processes of war, flight, and early exile that are central to this analysis of return and home.

The narratives, gathered over multiple encounters, form the empirical basis of the analysis. Interviews were conducted in English and Nigerian Pidgin, depending on participants' preferences, and included individuals from Mandingo, Bassa, Kru, and Krahn ethnic backgrounds. Interviews focused on experiences of displacement, memories of war, perceptions of home and return, and interpretations of peace and security. These were complemented by informal conversations and participant observation conducted during two periods of fieldwork between July and December 2019 and July and December 2023 in and around the former camp, including religious gatherings, commemorative events, and routine communal interactions.

Participants' accounts were shaped by the regional context of south-west Nigeria. Ogun State was consistently described by interlocutors as comparatively calm and predictable, particularly in contrast to regions affected by insurgency and communal violence elsewhere in the country. This regional differentiation formed part of the situated context through which narratives of safety, displacement, and return were articulated.

Ethical approval was secured from the relevant academic institutions⁴, and all participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms are used throughout. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to trauma, allowing participants to pause or withdraw at any point. The emotional weight of war memories and repeated displacement shaped the pace and depth of many conversations. Trust was built gradually through return visits and engagement with pre-existing community networks, with care taken to avoid extractive research practices.

Data analysis was guided by an inductive and thematic approach. Transcripts and fieldnotes were first coded manually through repeated close reading, allowing themes to emerge organically. Open coding was followed by more focused coding aligned with key concepts such as home, trauma, fear, betrayal, and belonging. NVivo software was subsequently used to organise codes and support thematic clustering. While the empirical sections are illustrated through selected quotations, interpretive claims are based on patterns recurring across interviews, life histories, and sustained engagement in the field. Individual excerpts are treated as entry points into broader narrative structures, shared idioms, and collective modes of reasoning rather than as standalone evidence. Analytical interpretations were developed iteratively through comparison across interviews and fieldnotes, with attention to convergence, contradiction, and silence. This process explains why some claims extend beyond the literal content of a single

quotation, reflecting patterns that became legible only through longitudinal and comparative engagement with the material.

As a Nigerian researcher in my late twenties with regional proximity but without direct experience of cross-border displacement, my positionality shaped access and the form of responses elicited. Cultural familiarity facilitated entry to the field, particularly among the Yoruba host community, where shared language and social norms enabled rapport and sustained engagement. At the same time, my academic affiliation and outsider status to the lived experience of forced displacement required careful navigation. Gender also structured the research encounter. As a male researcher, I was able to access male-dominated spaces with relative ease, where participants often spoke openly about livelihoods, security, and community relations. Access to women's perspectives required more deliberate strategies, including working through trusted intermediaries, adapting interview settings, and creating informal environments that supported participation. Age further shaped interactions, as many participants were older and had lived through the war as adults, which influenced both the authority of their narratives and the expectations placed on me as a younger researcher. Reflexivity was therefore central throughout, particularly when participants articulated grievances directed at both Liberian and Nigerian institutions. These accounts are treated as situated knowledge woven in historical memory and strategies of survival.

Reimagining homeland in the aftermath of conflict and end of refugee status

The following two sections present the core empirical findings from interviews and life histories with 'residual' Liberian refugees in the defunct Oru Refugee Camp. These narratives examine how participants make sense of home and return after the end of conflict and the cessation of refugee status. Beyond framing return as a legal or geographic event, participants describe it as a process shaped by affective rupture and relational loss. Memories of betrayal, the disappearance of loved ones, and persistent fears of insecurity inform refusals of repatriation long after humanitarian protection has been withdrawn and resettlement or mobility pathways have closed. The findings are organised thematically to highlight the psychological, social, and political dimensions through which home is remembered, contested, and reimagined in displacement. Although the analysis identifies a small number of life histories in detail, the themes discussed here recurred across the wider set of interviews. Concerns about failed return, insecurity, loss of property, inability to reclaim land, precarious livelihoods, and the need to prioritise everyday survival were expressed repeatedly by men and women across the dataset.

The first empirical section focuses on return as strategic judgement, examining how participants assess risk, instability, and the credibility of peace in deciding against return. The second focuses more specifically on the psychological and relational aftermath of violence, showing how traumatic loss, broken kinship ties, and the erosion of social worlds render return emotionally uninhabitable. Collectively, the two sections analyse long-term refusal of return through related but distinct frames, with one centred on forward-looking risk appraisal and the other on the enduring rupture of home as lived relation.

These accounts are embedded in everyday life in and around the former camp, where long-term co-residence, dense social networks, and shared histories of displacement continually reactivate memories of war, return, and loss. The former camp functions as a collective and relational space in which assessments of home, safety, and belonging are articulated and reinforced through daily interaction. This expands Holzer's (2014) analysis of humanitarian crisis as an everyday condition, in which displaced populations construct moral and social worlds through ordinary practices of dwelling, care, and material life. In Oru, such practices did not eliminate precarity, but sustained forms of relational continuity that shaped how safety and the risks of return were evaluated.

'There is nothing left to return to': strategic risk, emotional dislocation, and the loss of home

This section examines the sense of loss and emotional dislocation experienced by 'residual' Liberian refugees in Oru, where the idea of home has been fractured through years of displacement, trauma, and an inability to return to a meaningful sense of belonging. At the beginning of my interviews, a recurring question emerged: how do these individuals perceive home after decades of displacement, shaped by forced departure, the protracted nature of exile, and the closure of the camp that once offered temporary refuge? While their accounts resonate with Ahmed's (1999) observation that displacement unsettles fixed notions of home and belonging, they extend this view by illustrating how home becomes a site of ambivalence, shaped by strategic risk assessment, distrust, and continued disconnection from both host and origin contexts. The emphasis in this section is on how participants judge return as a risky and unreliable political and social project long after the end of refugee protection. It examines the anticipatory reasoning through which Liberia is evaluated as unstable, unsafe, and incapable of sustaining renewed life, even where attachment to it remains.

I asked about the places they had lived before arriving in Nigeria, the memories they carried, and the connections they once had. A male Liberian respondent recounted:

I, my brothers we went to Ivory Coast [...] We trekked to go [...] It took me one week.

A female Liberian respondent similarly described a longer and more fragmented journey across multiple countries before reaching Nigeria:

It is the border linking Liberia and Ivory Coast [...] It was the friend that helped me to cross the border to Ivory Coast [...] We went to Abidjan [...] and took a cab from Abidjan to Nigeria by passing through Togo and all the places before we go to Nigeria.

This account reflects a broader pattern of overland movement across West Africa, where journeys span multiple transit countries but are often recounted selectively, with intermediate locations compressed in retrospective narration. Their narratives revealed that home memories are not always comforting or restorative. Instead, they can be violated, whether through physical violence or the emotional rupture of forced separation. This expands the dilemmas Tozan (2025) identifies in the experiences of Syrians in the UK, where efforts to connect with home evoke pain, homeland no longer feels like home, what is missed may no longer exist, and there is a simultaneous desire to connect with and detach from the idea of home. These tensions, in turn, trouble the emotional,

temporal, and cognitive dimensions of home that Taylor (2013) outlines, producing ambivalence in people's relationships with their previous homes.

For many first-generation Liberians who lived through the civil war, traumatic memories deepened fear and shaped their decisions, making them view Liberia as a site of abandonment. Several questioned whether the conditions that forced them to flee had truly changed. One such person was Collins, a 45-year-old Mandingo man from Monrovia. Sitting quietly beyond the worn walls of the defunct camp, he recounted a life unravelled with crowded roads of fleeing families, chaos, and survival under threat. His memories of Monrovia, once tied to belonging, are now inseparable from loss and betrayal. For him, 'home' no longer offers refuge but evokes the shattered hopes and dangers of the past.

My life was back together, but tensions escalated, and war broke out again and had to flee in 2001. At first, I thought it would stop, but it didn't. [...] I had to start all over here with raising my family. I love Liberia, but I cannot risk returning there now because I've experienced peace talks before, returned, and eventually lost everything to another war. I cannot take that risk again.

This narrative illustrates Collins' inability to reimagine Liberia as a space that could provide belonging. Liberia, as he remembers it, has evolved from just a place to a site of betrayal, representing the unpredictability and instability of his past. Home, for him, is now a concept emptied of spatial and emotional security, where place has been overwritten by fear, risk, and irrecoverable loss. It is the epitome of what it means to return to a place but find no space, dwelling, community, and stability to support belonging.

Here, Collins' account extends Taylor's (2013) framing of home by questioning both the spatial and temporal dimensions. The physical spaces that once constituted his social world such as streets, religious centres, and homes are no longer accessible or meaningful. They have been transformed by conflict and rupture. Likewise, the temporal aspect of home, anchored in memories of the past and aspirations for the future, is fractured. His recollection is shaped less by nostalgia than by caution, distrust, and the memory of cyclical loss. In this sense, the past undermines any future-oriented hope, reinforcing a sense of exile that extends beyond territory and into time.

As several respondents explained, the very idea of returning to a place that once held meaning becomes irrelevant when the spatial infrastructures that once sustained emotional and social life are no longer present. What was once home is now void of the elements required to restore belonging, creating an emotional and temporal void that further deepens the reluctance to return.

After the first phase of the Liberian war, Collins was encouraged to return to Liberia in 1998 long after an election that brought Charles Taylor to power. He believed that the preceding election had produced a period of stability and that lessons learned would prevent renewed conflict. With cautious optimism, he returned, rebuilt his life, married, resumed university studies, and established a small business combining a photo studio, money exchange, and call centre. However, this fragile stability was short-lived:

I had to drop out of university and leave my businesses behind. My wife did too, and we fled with our two young children. I had no destination in mind. I just followed a Nigerian evacuation flight out of Monrovia. When I arrived, I was devastated by the loss of my home and livelihood. I questioned how I ever believed things would return to normal.

Importantly, experiences such as Collins' were not unique to those who refused return. Participants frequently acknowledged that many Liberians who returned, as well as those who never left, endured similar violence, loss, and instability. Therefore, refusal of return does not indicate heightened trauma or psychological incapacity. Rather, it represents one possible response to shared conditions of suffering, shaped by prolonged exile, repeated displacement, and the withdrawal of refugee protection.

This demonstrates that conflict involves complex psychosocial processes that have deep and lasting effects on individuals (Lijtmaer 2022), regardless of whether they become asylum seekers, refugees, or undocumented migrants in the host nation. The narrative shows that safety concerns expressed by displaced individuals are more likely to lead to long-term strategic decisions based on a risk assessment that takes into account their past experiences and the uncertainties of the future. While some participants may have an affinity towards their country of origin, their decisions are influenced by repeated exposure to failed peace processes and the unpredictability of conflict resolution, leading them to prioritise stability and peace over returning home. These decisions were made within conditions of severely constrained choice. With refugee protection withdrawn, resettlement pathways closed, and mobility options restricted, return was evaluated not as one option among many but as the only officially sanctioned outcome. This narrowing of alternatives intensified the stakes of refusal and sharpened its consequences.

Moreover, this sense of constraint contributed to emotional entrenchment in displacement, manifesting as a dislocation of self, meaning, and memory. The emotional disconnection from Liberia is deepened by the failure to restore a space of belonging, which, according to respondents, is far more complex than simply finding a place. The absence of this space is a psychological and structural condition that exacerbates the rupture of home and a fundamental sense of self. As Edler, Krause, and Segadlo (2024) observe, displaced individuals often define peace not as the mere cessation of violence, but as the presence of formal structures and institutions that protect rights, offer reliable support, and recognise one's humanity. Collins' experience expands this view, as his long-term refusal to return is not due to a lack of attachment to Liberia, but to the absence of structural guarantees that peace will be sustained.

This strategic reasoning was reinforced by other participants whose decisions to remain were shaped by survival, housing, and access to land rather than by any simple attachment to camp life. Azeez, a 57-year-old Liberian man and former secretary of the Liberian Refugee Welfare Council in Oru, explained that staying was tied to the practical demands of sustaining family life under constrained conditions:

Our decision to stay back is not necessarily because we had a lot of money. For instance, I squatted in this settlement and later decided to find a single room in another location. It's a matter of survival for families. We stay where there's shelter and work to provide for our family. It's not that we are living a luxurious life, but we are making ends meet. So sometimes, we have to make choices that are hard for others to understand. [...] It can be problematic having this hope here and thinking about returning.

The above account demonstrates that long-term refusal of return was also shaped by the comparative evaluation of available livelihoods and shelter in Nigeria against the uncertainty of starting again elsewhere. Similar concerns emerged in other interviews,

especially around housing, access to work, and the practical impossibility of rebuilding life in Liberia after years of exile.

During my interviews with Collins and other respondents, it became clear that this strategic risk calculus, borne from their construction of their homeland as a site of neglect, also lingered because of the breakdown of social systems of control and authority, which led to the loss of loved ones, adding to feelings of disorder, discomfort, disillusionment, and deprivation during the exilic journey from Liberia to Nigeria. Collins shared that he was particularly devastated upon arrival in Nigeria during the Civil War, as many of his family members had passed away due to the invasion of homes in Monrovia:

Soldiers made their way into my parent's house where they were hiding alongside my sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins. They shot at all them but allowed my sisters to go after raping them and looting what was left.

In contexts expressed in these accounts, social systems in place have failed these displaced individuals as the government of their home country was unable to ensure their safety and security during such times of crisis or conflict. These signs of community breakdown and deteriorating social controls influence the perceptions of 'residual' Liberian refugees regarding home and the risk of violence and disorder, contributing to their long-term decision not to return. The perception of societal breakdown in one's homeland suggests a loss of control, care, and the attrition of shared values within the community and its surroundings (Jackson and Sunshine 2007; Lijtmaer 2022). Without conviction in the presence of effective social control, fear of uncertainty, hidden dangers, and suspicion of those left behind continue to grow. This is because feeling safe within a community depends on formal rules and informal relationships, and when these are weakened, insecurity becomes embedded in everyday social life. In such post-conflict settings, return itself can become a source of renewed tension, as conflicts often emerge between those who return and those who remained, further complicating the social reintegration of displaced populations (Schwartz 2019).

Moreover, the severe losses experienced before flight, followed by relative stability in Nigeria, produced a lasting emotional dissociation from the homeland that became central to the post-cessation experience. These trajectories reflect the erosion of formal protection and the collapse of what Taylor (2013) terms the *relational home*, rooted in everyday interaction and mutual care. When these structures disintegrate, home becomes uninhabitable not because of geography, but because social meaning has been lost. For many post-cessation Liberians, this loss is continually reactivated, shaping how home and life itself are perceived. Although displaced persons often prioritise physical safety when considering return (Bradley 2008; Fagen 2011), prolonged exposure to violence and instability blurred memories of home to the extent that return was no longer imagined as desirable or viable in the long-term.

While these accounts emphasise loss, fear, and the breakdown of social order, other participants extended this reasoning by emphasising the material conditions required to sustain life after displacement. During my interview with Shedrack, a 55-year-old Liberian respondent, along with other FGD participants whose formal local integration applications were only partially implemented, this concern emerged through a focus on land, shelter, and livelihood as central to decisions about staying or returning. He

described remaining in the defunct settlement as a rational response to the loss or likely repossession of property in Liberia:

We search for work here to provide for our families and then opt to stay here (in the settlement) because we don't have to pay rent. We also have access to land given to us by Oba (King) to farm for processing, sale and profit-making. Looking back at where we are coming from (Liberia), we know we cannot access all these there now. Because even after the first war, some of us returned and attempted to access our property, but we saw that the rebels had taken control of them. We had to start all over again. If we go back today, some of us don't even have the papers to show that we are the owner. Nobody will believe us or come to our aid. So why throw what we have now here away? It is not reasonable, my friend. People move and stay for better opportunities. I am a Liberian and love Liberia, but I must stay alive first.

This narrative reinforces a pattern visible across several interviews in which return was assessed not only through memories of violence, but through what could realistically be secured in the present. Land, shelter, and livelihood emerged as conditions of stability and social continuity, particularly in the absence of refugee protection. For many participants, the uncertainty of reclaiming property or accessing basic means of survival in Liberia made return appear more precarious than remaining in Nigeria, even under conditions of post-cessation marginality.

Furthermore, like Collins, other participants expressed a wider concern that the challenges in Liberia are systemic and extend beyond the reach of any single leader or administration. A male Liberian respondent reflected:

Liberia's problems are bigger than one president. We've seen elections before. We've seen peace before. But nothing lasts. It always breaks down again.

These reflections clarify how fear operates alongside, but distinct from, trauma. While trauma is rooted in past violence and loss, fear here is anticipatory and evaluative. Participants drew on historical experience to assess the credibility of political assurances, the durability of peace, and the likelihood of renewed harm. Fear thus functions as a forward-looking mode of reasoning, linking memories of past betrayal to scepticism about future stability, rather than as an expression of anxiety detached from context. This scepticism was reinforced by memories of repeated peace failures and the persistence of impunity. Liberia's civil war was marked by broken agreements and recurrent relapse into violence despite ECOWAS mediation (Afolabi 2017; Levitt 2005). Hence, participants viewed peace accords as superficial, particularly given the absence of accountability. A female Liberian respondent explained:

They sign agreements to stop fighting, but nothing changes. How can we trust the country is safe when the same warlords are still in office? They talk peace, but we see the same faces who caused the suffering.

Here, we can see how the absence of justice further deepens mistrust. Despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's findings, no war crimes trials have taken place, and individuals implicated in violence, including Prince Johnson, a former rebel leader who remained politically influential until his death in November 2024, have held positions of power (Human Rights Watch 2022; Smart News Liberia 2024). This impunity undermined trust in reconciliation and deepened emotional distance from the homeland.

Similar dynamics are documented among Liberians in Buduburam (Antwi-Boateng and Braimah 2021; Omata 2013; Yacob-Haliso 2016) and in post-conflict settings such as Burundi and Rwanda (Cole and Bellon 2022; Edmonds, Mills, and McNamee 2009; Falisse and Niyonkuru 2015), where return often remains symbolic while home remains elusive.

Home, in this context, extends beyond the act of return. Across the wider interview set, participants repeatedly linked decisions to remain not only to memories of war and distrust in peace, but also to the practical conditions of life-making, including shelter, land access, livelihood, and the possibility of keeping family members alive. For some 'residual' Liberian refugees, it depends on the presence of relationships, safety, and emotional infrastructure that no longer exist in the homeland. Their absence creates a void that cannot be resolved by the formal end of conflict. Hence, home becomes a fractured and contested condition shaped by past violence and persistent uncertainty. Decisions not to return are informed less by legal status or immediate security than by a significant rupture from the self, community, and structures of belonging. A male Liberian respondent captured this shift when he recounted:

Home used to mean safety and family, but now it's just a memory. Liberia doesn't feel like a place to return to anymore. It's empty of everything that made it home.

This illustrates how the idea of home has shifted from a place of refuge to one of absence. Deprived of the social and emotional foundations that once made return conceivable, the homeland is understood by these 'residual refugees' as offering no viable space in which to rebuild lives or communities. The failure of the international system to reconcile legal frameworks with lived realities has left them in prolonged limbo. The cessation clause, intended to conclude refugeehood, has instead intensified displacement by revealing the fragility of a homeland stripped of protection. This paradox underscores a core flaw in conventional narratives of return. The assumption that the national declaration of an end to war and cessation of refugee status restore home overlooks the relational and affective dimensions of belonging. As the experiences of participants in this study demonstrate, the absence of justice, persistence of impunity, and erosion of social fabric render return neither safe nor viable.

Collectively, these accounts illustrate that long-term refusal of return emerges from the convergence of traumatic memory and anticipatory fear under conditions of prolonged displacement. Home is not rejected because it is forgotten, but because it no longer provides the moral, relational, and institutional foundations required for continuity and safety. If this section has shown how participants evaluate return as politically and socially risky, the next turns more directly to the enduring psychological and relational aftermath of violence, asking how traumatic loss itself renders return emotionally uninhabitable.

'There is no space here anymore': trauma, relational rupture, and the uninhabitability of return

This section examines the psychological and relational rupture of home, focusing on how the trauma of past violence and the disintegration of social and emotional networks render the notion of return untenable, as returning to Liberia becomes a confrontation with

unresolved fears and broken ties. Across interviews, participants expressed a shared concern that returning to Liberia would not alleviate the trauma and loss experienced during the war. Personal experiences of violence were central to how return was assessed. The impact of war on fear is multifaceted, with some scholars suggesting that the relative harm influences fear levels (Farrall, Jackson, and Gray 2009), while catastrophic events that trigger migration are often closely tied to traumatic experiences (Lijtmaer 2022). In my conversations with two respondents, Caroline, a 70-year-old Liberian woman, and Michael, a 56-year-old Liberian man who fled to Nigeria during the war in the 1990s, their narratives illustrate how individual encounters with violence shaped reluctance to return. These accounts are presented in detail, but the patterns they express were widely shared across interviews, particularly in relation to loss of family members, unresolved grief, and the sense that return would reopen rather than resolve past trauma.

These accounts should not be read as evidence that those who refuse return are uniquely traumatised. Similar losses and psychological scars were widely recognised as collective experiences of war. What distinguishes the narratives examined here is how the erosion of social ties, prolonged exile, and the absence of institutional repair render return emotionally and relationally uninhabitable.

Caroline recalled fleeing during Charles Taylor's faction's attack on Monrovia:

During the night when Taylor's faction invaded Monrovia, we ran for our lives. I sat in one place, hoping they wouldn't reach us. They destroyed homes, killed people, and made it impossible to escape. I was with my mother, but my children were scattered. Till today, I don't know where they are. So why would I still call that place home when I have no one to return to?

Michael similarly described how violence transformed his relationship to the homeland:

When I think about why some of us see home far away from Liberia and refuse to return, it's clear the war did a lot of psychological damage. Friends and neighbours changed; some joined the rebels, some looted, some killed. I was forced to watch my mother and sister raped and butchered in my presence. The only thing I felt was anger and a thirst for revenge. While others hunted and killed, I fled by ship to Nigeria. If you survive like me, you live with horrifying nightmares. There is no peace, no closure. No one walks through all that and wants to return.

While the intensity of these experiences varied, similar accounts of bereavement, family dispersal, and enduring psychological distress were common across the dataset, indicating that long-term reluctance to return was based on widely shared histories. In above accounts, fear functions as an active assessment of danger rooted in lived history. Participants framed reluctance to return as a calculation shaped by memories of failed peace, social fragmentation, and institutional abandonment. Hence, fear becomes a way of navigating uncertainty, enabling individuals to evaluate whether return would reproduce displacement rather than resolve it. This mode of reasoning appeared consistently across interviews, where participants drew on past violence to evaluate whether return would expose them to renewed instability or social rupture.

At the same time, these narratives underscore how war irreparably disrupted lives and altered participants' capacity to imagine home in Liberia. These memories transcend recollections of the past and embody experiences that continue to shape emotional life. Taylor (2013) and Tozan's (2025) typology of home as simultaneously spatial,

temporal, and relational is relevant here. While the spatial and temporal aspects of home have been violently disrupted, it is the collapse of the relational dimension, formed through sustained interactions with family, neighbours, and community, that renders return emotionally impossible. Trauma is woven into everyday life, reconfiguring understandings of home from a geographic location to a symbol of rupture, loss, and betrayal. For these individuals, home no longer exists as a place tied to geographical coordinates. It is voided of meaning and increasingly associated with fear and hopelessness. When considered alongside Caroline's narrative, home appears less as a refuge than as a site of abandonment, as the very structures that once defined existence were violently stripped away.

For participants, returning to Liberia would expose what has been irreversibly lost. The social and emotional anchors that once defined belonging have been fractured by violence and memory. As Agnew (2011) argues, a 'place' goes beyond physical location and requires a deeper existential attachment, that is, a space that resonates with familiarity, security, and continuity. In this sense, Liberia is reduced to a place rather than a space. Space here is constituted through emotional and relational networks that sustain belonging. This expands Cardinali et al.'s (2022) conception of psychological home, which comprises four dimensions: feelings, behaviours, cognitions, and relationships. In exile, these dimensions are disrupted. The feelings of peace and safety are replaced by fear and grief; routines tied to home-making are suspended; cognitive meanings of home as a stable or inherited space dissolve; and the relationships that once underpinned belonging have been violently severed.

The disconnect between 'place' and 'space' lies at the core of the long-term reluctance to return. This distinction was articulated in different ways across interviews, with participants repeatedly describing Liberia as something that still exists geographically but no longer holds the social and emotional conditions required for life. Ideally, home is a space where origins and aspirations resonate and are sustained over time (Chattoraj 2022). For participants such as Michael, that resonance has been lost. Liberia has become a site of abandonment, saturated with memories of betrayal and fear. What does home mean when the place of birth no longer provides dignity or continuity? As a female Liberian participant reflected:

We hear Liberia is peaceful now, but peace is not enough. What is there for us? Our people and homes are gone and what we have left is being associated with the name of the country.

Another female Liberian respondent added:

I left with pain, trauma, and fear. That place is not the same anymore. Going back would be like returning to an empty shell.

These accounts give empirical weight to the preceding question. They show how trauma, violence, and a disintegrating sense of trust have hollowed out the meaning of home, leaving behind a place that exists in name only. After refugee status formally ends, the idea of home cannot be restored through political assurances of peace alone. Fear plays a central role in this evaluation. For participants, home is entangled with fear of renewed harm, fear of exclusion, and fear that the social breakdowns that prompted flight remain unresolved. As Caroline's narrative illustrates, the scars of war are psychological and relational as much as physical. The repeated cycles of violence, the failure of

peace to enhance viable social reintegration, and the absence of meaningful reintegration undermine trust in the state and shape how home is imagined.

Moreover, the loss of loved ones and the destruction of communities during the conflict further severed ties to the homeland. The collapse of state protection and social structures created a void where home once existed. As Taylor (2013) reminds us, the relational dimension of home is foundational and its loss reshapes one's sense of belonging. Community ties are central to this process (Azzouz 2023), and when they disintegrate, individuals experience existential isolation, that is, a loss that cannot be resolved by returning to a geographic location. Fear of the unknown, suspicion of those who remained behind, and distrust in political institutions reinforce perceptions that Liberia no longer offers the conditions necessary for home.

For 'residual' Liberian refugees, displacement has thus evolved from a question of return to territory into a question of whether the relational and emotional foundations of home can be restored. Return, as participants understand it, requires the re-establishment of the social, emotional, and psychological infrastructures that make life livable. While Liberia's physical space endures, it no longer provides these conditions. This realisation complicates return by confronting individuals with the emotional and social emptiness of a homeland unable to offer refuge, belonging, or continuity. The complexities of home-making, therefore, extend beyond citizenship, legal status, or the mere restoration of territory.

This expands Black and Koser's (1999) argument that return must be reconceptualised beyond the end of conflict to include the sense of safety, stability, and emotional resonance that makes a homeland livable. For many participants, return goes beyond what Yacob-Haliso (2016) describes as the displaced reclaiming place by becoming 'peace-building actors' or 'economic and political agents'. Instead, it is experienced as a confrontation with unresolved trauma, loss, and abandonment. This condition leaves many suspended between two worlds, whereby they are unable to return to a homeland that no longer welcomes them and unable to fully integrate into the countries where they remain displaced. The space for home and belonging, therefore, continues to elude them.

For participants in this study, the question 'return to what?' captures how the withdrawal of refugee status and decades of camp-based exile reshape the terms on which return is evaluated. What is at stake is the possibility of rebuilding a life under conditions where protection has ended, mobility pathways are closed, and meaningful incorporation in the host country remains uncertain. In this setting, return is approached as a forward-looking judgement about risk, continuity, and the durability of social worlds rather than as a movement back to territory. Across the interviews, this judgement was expressed through recurring concerns about loss, fractured kinship ties, unresolved trauma, and the absence of any social world to return to. The post-cessation context therefore recasts return from an expected resolution into an option that must be weighed against the loss of protection, the absence of institutional repair, and the erosion of the relationships that once sustained belonging.

Conclusion

This study has examined how the displaced conceptualise home and negotiate return after camp closure and the withdrawal of refugee protection. For many 'residual' Liberian

refugees, return does not signify restoration, rather, it is a process shaped by emotional, social, and political uncertainties. While refugee status cessation represents an administrative endpoint, it does not undo the psychological and structural disruptions produced by displacement. Drawing on lived experiences in the defunct Oru Refugee Camp, the study shows that home is no longer anchored in a fixed place. It is reshaped by trauma, fear, loss, and institutional failure, rendering home a contested and unstable condition rather than a viable endpoint.

At the core of this disjuncture lies the distinction between place and space. Although Liberia remains geographically identifiable, it no longer functions as a viable space belonging for many. Years of war, abandonment, and fractured social ties have eroded the relational foundations necessary for home-making. The state's inability to guarantee safety or restore social cohesion renders the promise of return untenable for 'residual refugees'. This challenges the prevailing assumption within the global refugee regime that repatriation constitutes a durable solution once conflict has formally ended. Instead, return emerges as a relational and psychological process that extends beyond legal status change and depends on conditions that few post-conflict contexts can provide. State-led repatriation programmes, which often equate peace with the absence of war and return with physical relocation, overlook the long-term ruptures produced by violence and displacement. As some interlocutors' experiences illustrate, memories of betrayal, insecurity, and social disintegration persist beyond legal reintegration, shaping how return is imagined and whether it is pursued. Without rebuilding the emotional and social infrastructure of home, including trust, community, and safety, return remains symbolic at best and unsafe at worst.

Importantly, trauma and fear are not exclusive to those who refuse return. Many Liberians who returned, as well as those who never left during the war, continue to live with the legacies of violence and loss. Hence, refusal of return should be understood as one possible response to shared conditions of struggle rather than as evidence of heightened psychological harm. What distinguishes the experiences examined here is how prolonged exile, repeated cycles of failed peace, and the withdrawal of refugee protection shape assessments of risk and judgments about return. This unsettles simplistic distinctions between returnees and non-returnees and highlights the need to understand mobility decisions as relational, historically situated, and shaped by uneven access to protection. Comparative analysis of returnees and non-returnees offers an important avenue for future research.

This study also expands critiques of the idea of home as a stable endpoint. The narratives analysed show that home is continuously negotiated and shaped by evolving memories and shifting conditions. Trauma emerges as a collective and structural condition embedded in social life rather than as an individual pathology. For many 'residual' Liberian refugees, home is remembered but no longer felt, and the absence of relational stability renders return unviable and reveals the limits of legal frameworks that overlook the existential dimensions of displacement. Importantly, peace requires rethinking. In institutional discourse, peace is often reduced to the cessation of conflict or the restoration of political order. For displaced persons, however, peace is built through social trust, emotional repair, and the restoration of dignity. It is not secured through declarations or disarmament alone but through relational reconstruction. In the case of the 'residual' Liberian refugees, even after formal peace is declared, the conditions necessary

for home-making may remain absent. In this context, repatriation without attention to these conditions risks becoming another form of abandonment or a form of secondary cross-border displacement.

Finally, this study argues for a reconceptualisation of displacement beyond refugee recognition. The experiences of ‘residual’ Liberian refugees illustrate that the end of refugee status does not lead to the end of refugeehood. Displacement continues to reverberate through emotional and social life long after protection is withdrawn. Therefore, long-return decision is better understood through the restoration of belonging, as increasingly protracted displacement and growing disillusionment with institutional responses demand renewed attention to the lived dimensions of return, where home becomes a space rebuilt through trust, recognition, and relational repair rather than a place to just go back to.

Notes

1. Granted in response to evident conditions in the country of origin that cause large-scale displacement, ensuring access to vital humanitarian aid (Albert 2010).
2. In this study, ‘residual’ and ‘post-cessation’ refer to individuals who remained in former camps or informal settlements after their refugee status ended.
3. A shift in social sciences that focuses on the study of movement, migration, and mobility, emphasising the fluidity of identities and the critique of sedentary concepts of belonging and place (Parent 2022).
4. Ethical approval for the July – December 2019 fieldwork was granted by the Diaspora and Transnational Studies unit of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, and for the July–December 2023 fieldwork by the Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh.

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Ethics statement

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