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## Depicting protracted refuge. Postcards from a refugee camp

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### ABSTRACT

This essay confronts the viewer with protracted refuge by looking at the Meheba Refugee Camp, Zambia. Created in 1971 and still running well beyond the moment of emergency at its origin, Meheba challenges the generic and generalized visual representation of refugees and refugee camps. This photo-essay seeks to depict how displaced populations forge a life in exile in spite of all the adversities, but also of how the spaces of refuge evolve, consolidate, and become part of the territory in which they are located.

### KEYWORDS

photography, crisis, forced displacement, Angola, Zambia, Southern-Africa, humanitarianism, politics of aesthetics

### BIO

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## Introduction

As Liisa Malkki poignantly remarked more than two decades ago, “most of us have a strong visual sense of what ‘a refugee’ looks like” (1995: 9). The same could be said of refugee camps. Visual representations of ever-unfolding refugee crises circulate in the media, social networks and in a myriad of platforms virtually every day, while also making regular appearance in museums, art galleries, films and other outlets (cf. Demos 2013). The customary focus on the time of flight and the subsequent initial deployment of camps and humanitarian aid, or on an alternative framing but in which the emergency and despair prevail, is arguably at the core of such generic and generalized sense of how refugees and refugee camps – should – look like. We have a less clear perspective, if any, about situations of protracted refuge and less mediatized crises.

Indeed, in spite of the plethora of causes, circumstances, contexts and duration of refuge, the visual expressions of displaced individuals and camps invariably resort to a set of purposeful visual tropes. Time goes by and stereotypical representations of refugees and refugee camps remain seemingly unchanged. Particular aesthetic canons that link beauty and horror are part and parcel of this visual culture of refuge. The picturesque –by presenting ragged figures of people, nakedness, ruins– and the sublime –as has been proposed by Edmund Burke, evoking more than human catastrophes, destruction, terror, and in which the shipwreck is one of the most illustrative examples– are among the aesthetic styles most recurrently employed. Common themes arising from Christian iconography also echo in most representations of refugeeness: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, featuring the physical, psychological and material degradation arising thereof; Mary and Joseph carrying some of their possessions in their “Flight into Egypt”; the walking caravans as in the mass displacement in “Exodus”; or “Madonna and Child” are but a handful of archetypes (Wright 2002: 57). Moreover, the images of displacement and the accompanying captions tend to simplify and reproduce well-known symbolic narrative structures, invariably telling about unambiguous victims, villains and saviors (cf. de Waal 2002). This approach to depicting refuge might reveal to be effective as it draws the attention to existing sensitive situations while eliciting self-identification between the spectator and who/what is being portrayed. Eventually, the perceived “distant suffering” translates into compassion, leading to outsourced action in the form of aid and humanitarian programs (Boltanski 2004). While not dismissing the hardships and suffering of those represented, nor aiming at discrediting the more or less tangible positive effects and outcomes arising from the production and contact with similarly compelling images, this path turns out to be remarkably problematic.

Evident in the privileged position given to snapshots of contingency to the detriment of depictions of an after, the essentialisation of *the refugee* and of *the refugee camp* entails stuckness in time. The way forced displacement is commonly depicted plays a powerful role in how we construct, and on what we perceive, as being the –fixed, changeless – reality of chronic despair. This view curtails alternative perspectives on refuge and the spaces arising thereof, suggesting a missing picture of the *longue durée*. The missing pictures of how displaced populations forge a life in exile and integrate in the local landscape in spite of all the adversities, but also of how the spaces of refuge evolve, consolidate, and become part of the territory in which they are located, could tell us about a lesser-known constellation of stories. This becomes more relevant as we learn about the growing number of protracted refugees living in long-standing camps, which are no longer exceptional spaces, but places – if not cities – in their own right (cf. Jansen 2018). These missing pictures could pave the way for the recognition of individual agency, while restoring the displaced to the present and to a certain “normality”. And yet, this does not mean that violence is not there.

Having said this, the set of photographs that follows is an attempt to offer the reader/viewer a glimpse into a long-standing refugee camp. The Meheba Refugee Camp, in Northwestern Province, Zambia, created in 1971 and still running, and whose broader dynamics I have described in detail elsewhere (Neto 2014, 2018, 2019) is a case in point. With these pictures, collected in three different periods of extensive fieldwork (2012, 2014, 2018), captured with different devices, in different formats and sizes (35mm film camera, digital and mobile phone camera), I aim at depicting the normal – or, perhaps better, normalized – life in a (post)humanitarian setting. Absent of this selection are the images of people queuing up for food distribution or vaccination (though from time to time, it does take place), nor undernourished mothers with clingy toddlers (even if such situations do exist), let alone emergency

shelters in the form of UNHCR tents (notwithstanding the fact that such plastics are used and rearranged in creative ways). Thus, with these disputably banal pictures and the complementary descriptive captions, hence provocatively called postcards, I expect to open up the potential of another “imagination” (cf. Azoulay 2012). An imagination that, in spite of all the hardships and constraints lived by refugees still considers their pioneer actions in the process of crafting new settlements, new habitats. An imagination that would allow us to move beyond stuckness in time, to give dignity back to those represented and stimulate further thoughtful debates about refuge and the everyday life in spaces as such. Indeed, as new and complex driving forces of displacement emerge, the spaces of refuge are here to last.



**PHOTO 1:** Road to nowhere. Meheba’s main road to Rd 36, Block D (2012)  
The camp extends for more than 720 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly the size of Singapore or the Bahrain, and is organized in 8 blocks (from A to H). Road 36, in Block D, is Meheba’s administrative and economic center and where most of the existing NGOs are – or have been – based.



**PHOTO 2:** Warming up. Football field near Road 18, Block B (2012)

After church services on Sunday, football matches attract people from all over Meheba and the from the villages in the camp's surroundings. Block B and Block D are the most densely populated and cosmopolitan blocks and host the best teams.

As of 2018, Meheba officially counted with a refugee population of some 18.000 individuals, most of which from the Democratic Republic of Congo. In early 2000s, during the last period of war in Angola, the camp reached a population of more than 50.000 displaced people, 90% from Angola.



**Photo 3:** Gents. School restrooms, Block B (2012)

Restrooms' distribution illustrate the gender imbalance in terms of enrollment. Meheba schools also count with students from as far as Lusaka and Livingstone. This is mostly due to the fact that schools in the camp are perceived as of higher quality standards than elsewhere in the country. One of the teachers in the camp, a refugee from Rwanda, once shared his dream: that Meheba would host a university, that the camp was transformed into a *campus*.





**PHOTO 4:** Real estate dynamics. House for sale in Block D (2014)

The renting and selling of houses and agricultural plots is supposedly disallowed in refugee camps (as locally defined by the Zambian Refugee Control Act of 1970, as well as by the UNHCR). This does not mean that people do not try and do sell their houses, namely when moving elsewhere, upon repatriation or otherwise. Moreover, mining activities in the vicinity of Meheba have attracted a growing number of individuals seeking accommodation. This has resulted in a relatively dynamic real estate market within the camp.



**PHOTO 5:** Between camp and town. Minibus to and from Solwezi (2018)

Two minibuses travel between Meheba and the nearest city of Solwezi (some 70km from the camp, on EN-2) on a daily basis.

People travel to Solwezi in order to handle paperwork, buy a myriad of different items which are inexistent in the camp or cheaper in town, get money remittances, sell agricultural surplus, and/or visit relatives and friends. Refugees moving outside the camp are supposed to hold gate passes issued by the administration offices in Meheba. As a result of widespread corruption practices and the legal constraint of a maximum of thirty days duration for gate passes, it is not unusual to acknowledge “special” permits issued against the payment of extra fees. In addition, travelers and minibus drivers face further bribing by Zambian police officers in the checkpoints along the way.





**PHOTO 6:** Leaving no traces. Administrative housing ensemble in Block B (2018)

Fidel and his family lived in the camp until 2016 when his mother, a Zambian nurse, and his father, a retired Angolan teacher and fierce supporter of MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the Marxist-Leninist inspired political party), had to move to Solwezi. After Fidel's father retirement the family was no longer entitled to live in the houses that compose the administrative housing ensemble of Block B. In 2017 Fidel moved to Lusaka to enroll in a medical school.

In 2018, the house remained empty.





**PHOTO 7:** Past skills. House in Block D (2014)

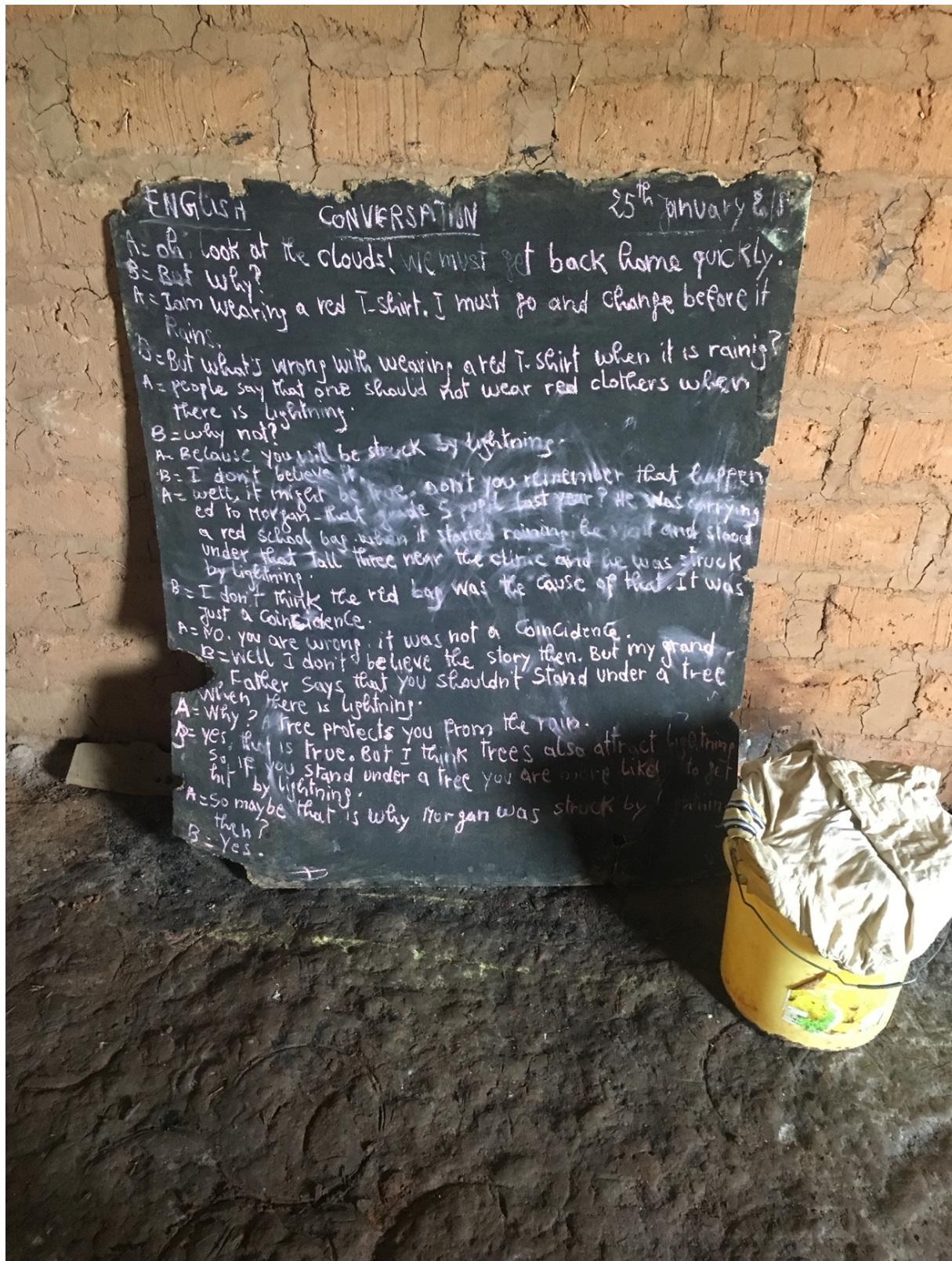
Terracotta roof tiles can be found in a number of houses in Meheba, namely among Angolans. The owner of the house depicted above left Angola in early 1994. His father was a colonial mason master. Most inhabitants in Meheba resort to thatch-roofing whose assembly and maintenance is inexpensive. Aluminum roofing sheets are increasingly present and preferred among the camp's communities given their transportability and market value.



**PHOTO 8:** Queuing up. Meeting with road and block leaders, UNHCR lodge (2014)

Road and block leaders regularly meet with the camps' administration (the UNHCR and Zambian governmental authorities) to discuss relevant issues such as repatriation procedures, local integration opportunities, third country resettlement requests, food and health needs, schooling, gender violence, etc. The UNHCR lodge is now walled for security precautions and administrative meetings no longer include meals.





**PHOTO 9:** English conversations. Blackboard in a Congolese house, Block D (2018) A family of four orphans from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, recently arrived in Meheba, tries to catch up with English by reading stories from an old blackboard. Episodic arrivals of DRC nationals, namely unaccompanied minors and often orphans, reflect the constant outbreaks of violence in the country. Currently, Congolese constitute the major group of humanitarian concern in Meheba. Still, these come from very different provinces and belong to different ethno-linguistic groups.





**PHOTO 10:** On wire. House in Block D (2018)  
 Solar panels are not uncommon in the camp, but only a small number of households own fuel-powered generators. Batteries allow the charging of mobile phones and provide power for TV displays. Satellite dishes ensure access to local and international broadcasters and DVDs and Supervideo CDs, sold in the camp's markets, bring the latest Holly-, Bolly-, Nolly-, and Bongowood productions.



**PHOTO 11:** Ruins. School sign in Rd 36, Zone D (2014)  
 The existence of ruins is illustrative of the passage of time and sheds light into the long duration of camps well beyond the emergency at their origin.





**PHOTO 12:** Riding the camp. Road 36, Block D (2014)  
Weekday in the busiest street of Meheba.



**PHOTO 13:** Like any Zambian village. Housing and agriculture plot, Block C (2014)  
Most houses in Meheba are made of adobe house with roof-thatched roof resembling those  
in the camp's surrounding villages. Beyond the plot for housing, each  
household is allocated farmland upon arrival and is expected to attain self-sufficiency.





**PHOTO 14:** UNHCR sheets, House in Block D (2014)

As time goes by people settle down, improve their houses, devote their time to agriculture production and care for their gardens. The plastic sheets provided by the UNHCR upon arrival are often later used in roofing insulation.



**PHOTO 15:** *T-junction* (2014)

T-junction is the name given to the urban settlement that sprouted at Meheba's gate and where many refugees come to sell their agricultural surplus. The junction is a stopping point for trucks and buses driving the main national road connecting Solwezi with the border with Angola. Plans to create a new town have been discussed and would comprise T-junction and Meheba's block A and B.





**PHOTO 16:** The gate is a mental frontier. Meheba Refugee Settlement gate (2014)  
The gate police halted its functions in 2013. The camp's perimeter is not fenced and there is virtually no control on who/what enters or leaves the camp's premises.



**PHOTO 17:** Keep Meheba clean. Central Market, Block D (2014)  
The marketplace in Block D condenses the most varied produce grown in the camp (maize, rice, cassava, tomatoes, pineapples, mangoes, cabbage, groundnuts, etc) while also offering a myriad of shops and services (wholesale shops, video shops, mobile banking, phone houses, barber/hairdresser, bicycle repair workshops, restaurant and bars, restaurants, tailors, etc). Meheba once had a garbage collection system in place.





**PHOTO 18:** From Refugee Alliance to Brave Heart. NGO headquarters, Rd 36 (2014)

In 2014, Refugee Alliance was the only NGO operating in the camp. The team was comprised of a group of three young volunteers from Norway that provided unskilled support in the local clinic and supervised kids in an improvised kindergarten.

A group of doctors operating under the RA umbrella made erratic presence. In 2018 the NGO changed the name to Brave Heart but had no ongoing activities.



**PHOTO 19: Closed doors and windows. Former World Food Program office (2014)**

WFP offices closed in early 2000s. Nowadays, food supplies from the WFP or any other donor are erratic notwithstanding the periods of shortage. Ever since the end of the conflict in Angola (1961-2002), and in spite of the continuous arrival of refugees from the DRC and from other geographies, aid programmes have diminished substantially.



**PHOTO 20:** The elephant in the room. North-American School bus, Block C (2018)  
In spite of the good intentions at the origin of this gift, the fact is that this old North-American School Bus has never been used. Most people walk or cycle within the camp.

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