All along the African road - Chris Daly

Prologue

This is a book about a road trip through Africa. A story told I hope, on Africa's own terms – albeit subjectively - through pictures of everyday life. It's a lyrical documentary if you will, starting in Gatwick airport, en route to Morocco. What happened after that was disorientating, intoxicating and entirely unpredictable - I rarely knew what would happen next.

With a couple of exceptions everything here is far away from the media's conventional African narrative – war, poverty, gender equality, a refugee camp, corporate rapaciousness or the environment and so forth. Ironically, the workaday nature of the pictures, without an obvious meaning or messaging of a cause - seems unconventional in this visual mainstream.

My intent was to reflect the actuality of 'Being There', discombobulated and driving 8500 miles through places almost entirely off the Internet's algorithmic radar and as a consequence, out of the rest of the world's sight. And to convey the effect of the enormity of it all.

Pictures of a road trip are inevitably a metaphorical iceberg – revealing glimpses of the surface informed by timetable pressures and constant movement. Which I think lends a fast and slow tone to the iamgery, sometimes almost as if taken by different people. Which I like, because of the faithful resonance with the tension that lies between the rhythm of freedom that long distance driving provides, and its juddering edginess of continuous change, different bedrooms and patchy sleep. The timetable did not allow much for stories of myth and allusion, the brutal history and the culture of folktales, proverbs and lyrics. So, while Africa's troubled history is a main character in the story, it is unrealistic to address fully here in a short text where I want photographs of the present to maintain priority. Instead, the past is analogised in every picture by the film's black keyline frame.

The pictures and writing are a provocation to reflect upon how photography shapes our perception of reality and the concept of photographic authenticity. The book does not offer answers, an understanding or prescriptions - just more questions and an invitation to readers to suspend their judgement, pre conceived ideas and media memories to instead engage and speculate about what lies beyond the viewfinder's frame - in Africa today, the present, the now.


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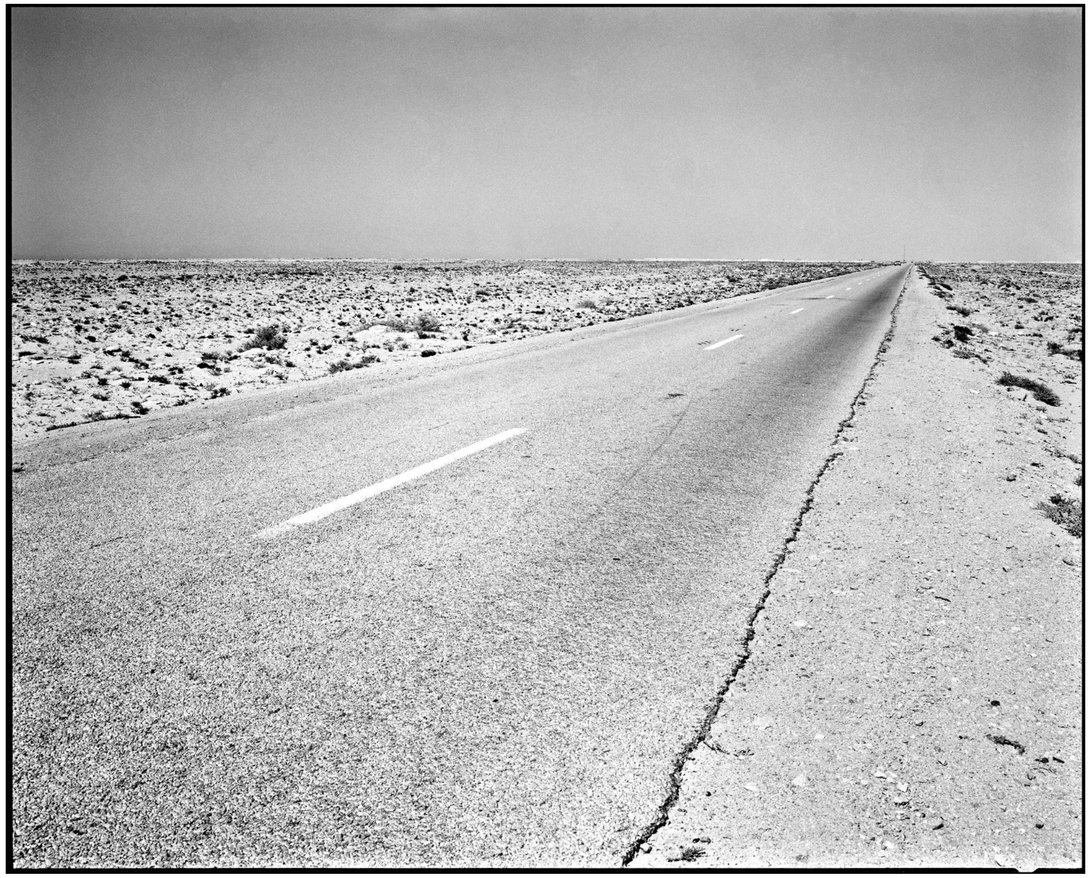


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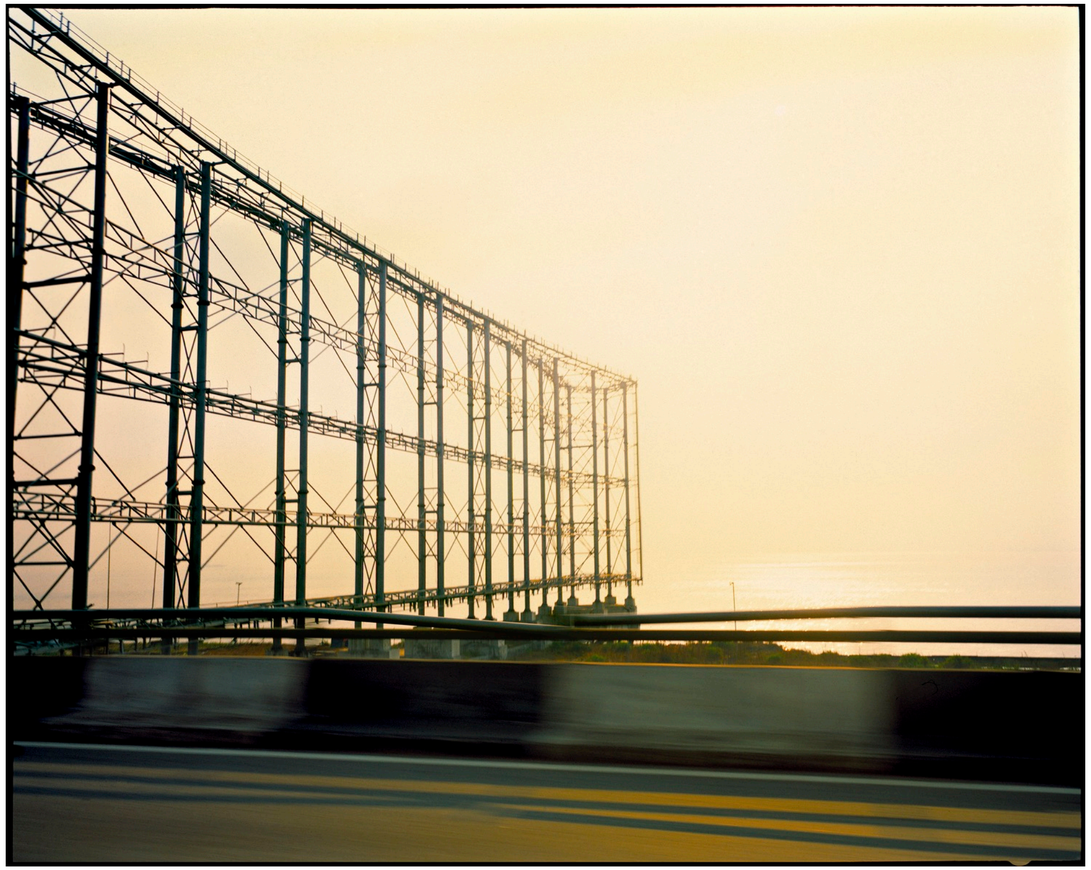


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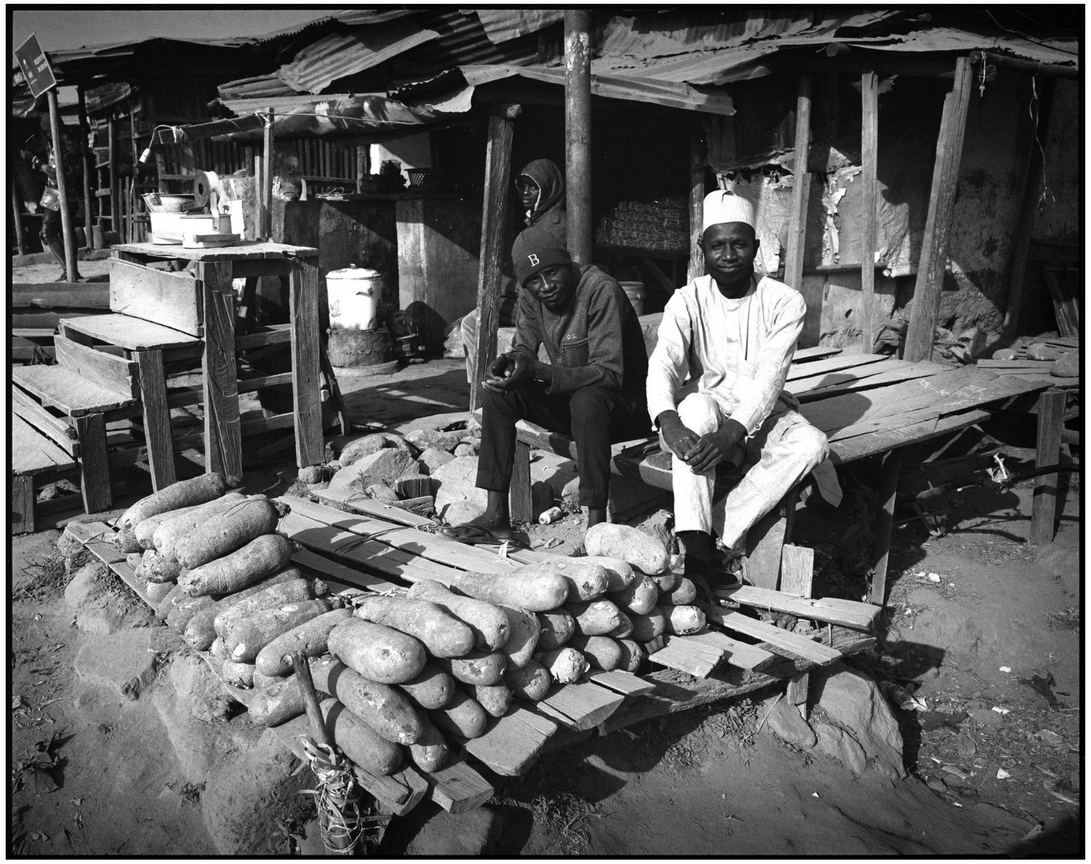


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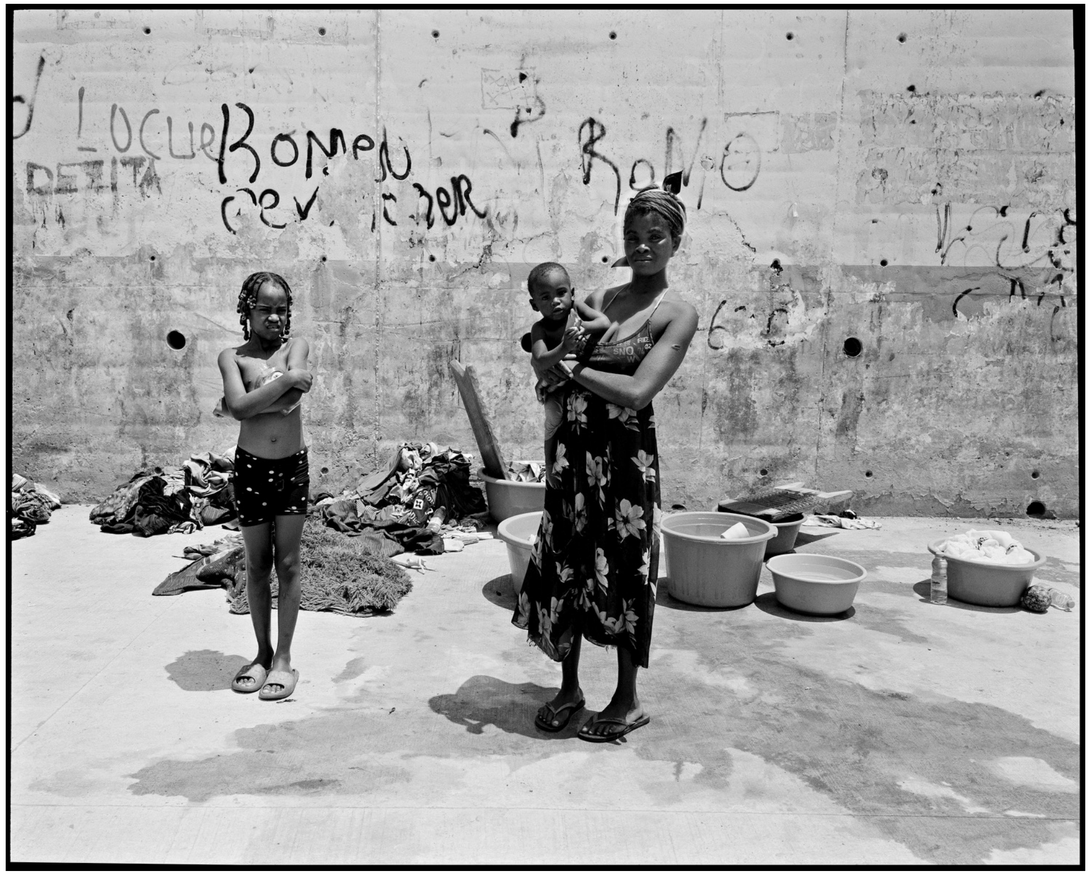

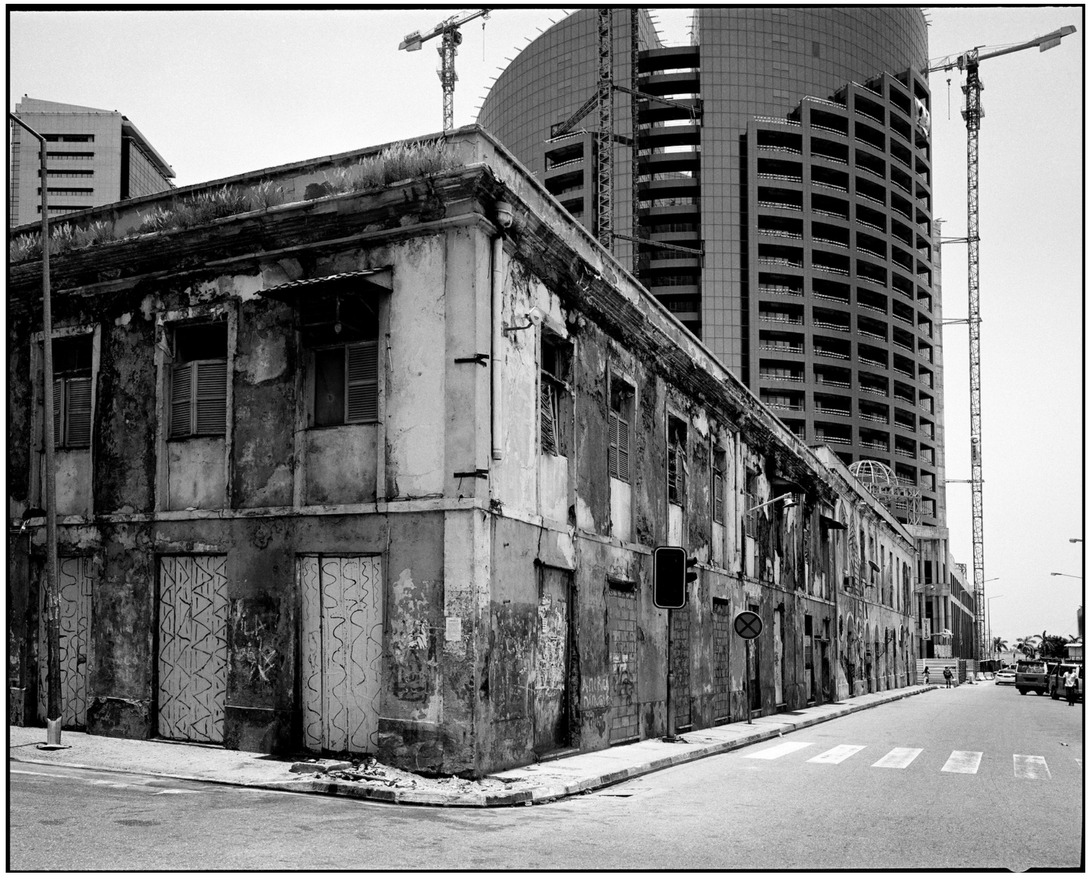

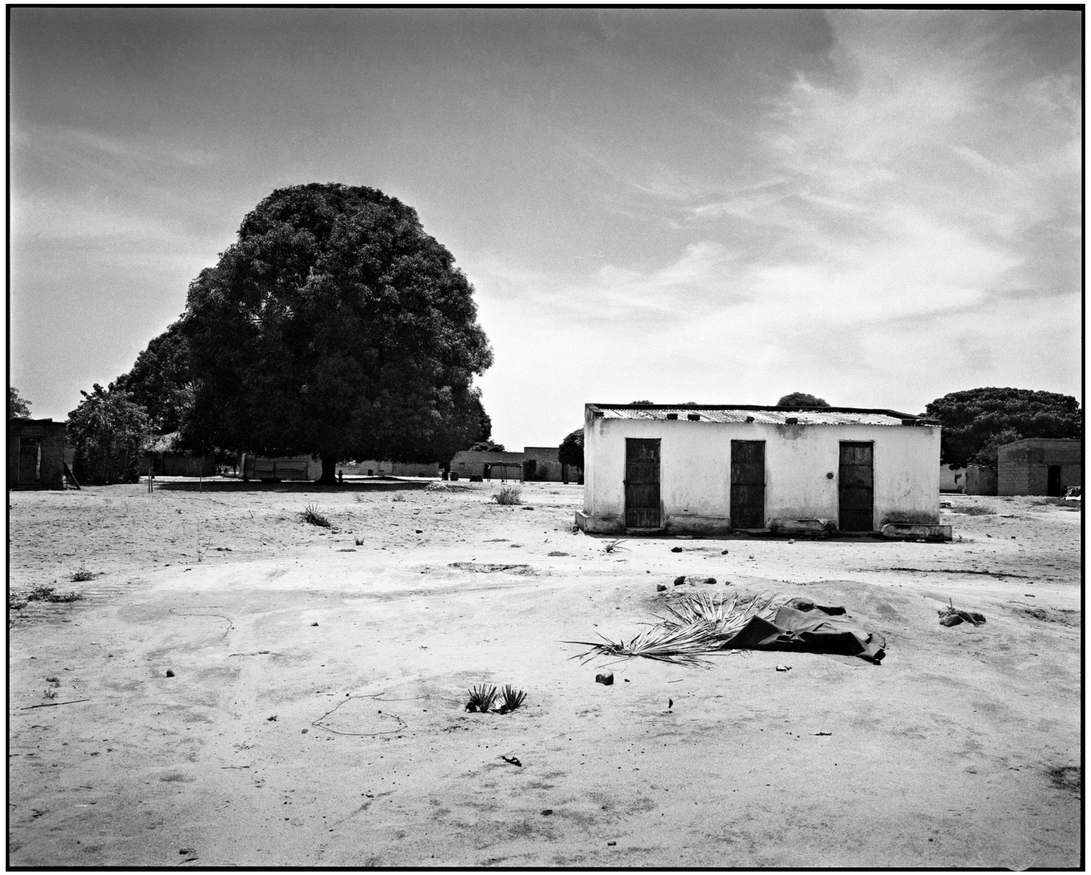

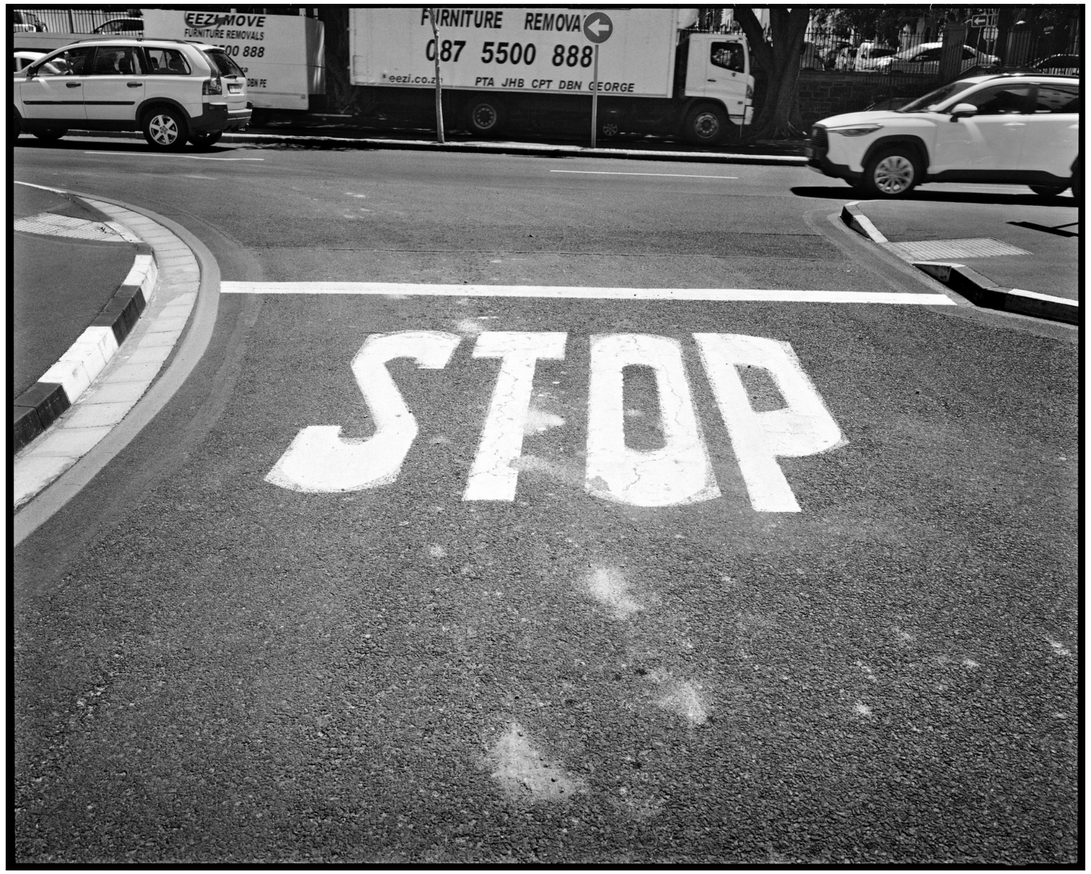
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If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth... A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point." James Agee

In 2023 and 2024 I spent six months on a road trip driving eight and a half thousand miles through eighteen African countries from Marrakech to Cape Town. I was there as a freelance videographer, photographer and driver, working with a small team from an Irish tech company who were navigating the length of Africa to visit their customers and create content about the adventure for a marketing and branding promotion. Notice of the trip was short. Before departure there were only a few days to grab essentials – get some inoculations and prepare for an idiosyncratic job with a very loose and uncertain specification.

I arrived in Marrakech and immediately felt submerged. The days blurred as we travelled long distances across startling and unfamiliar surroundings cocooned in air-conditioned Toyotas. I was conscious of a 'separation'; a feeling of alterity. At the photographic level, this seems inevitable - it is a solitary pursuit in a dynamic and often indifferent reality. This wasn't a negative feeling - quite the opposite. I experienced it as a brave new world if you will, an addictive stream of transience with ephemeral connections to places and people. I wondered what it must be like to live where I saw - hundreds of miles from paved roads, running water or domestic electricity – and watch us pass by in convoy, like astronauts from another world.

For his own book about America – first published a lifetime away in the late 1950's and arguably the most revered of all road trip monographs, Robert Frank said about 'The Americans': "Work of this kind is, I believe, to be found carrying its own visual impact without much work explanation." Quite. He settled instead on a five-hundred-word introduction from his friend Jack Kerouac, and even that generated criticism years later.

Which might explain why photo books are often silent, without commentary. Why invite jeopardy by elaborating with words beyond pictures that ideally, speak for themselves? A picture paints a thousand words, n'est-çe pas? It's a dilemma. So you may wonder why I've chosen to write about my own work in an epilogue - to make myself visible.

Because back at home, after the trip, my usual response to anyone asking me how did it go, or what was it was like etc, would be to answer truthfully, but elliptically: "It gets philosophical pretty quickly there".

My thinking turned to how or whether to even try to contextualise the photographs in writing. But the scale of Africa's contentious history and the compexity of the outcomes make this a daunting, continetial scale proposition – and a different book altogether. Nothing's easy -

But. There's a responsibility to engage with what it means to be there, albeit as a white european and to exist within its own realities - and to try and contribute to the discourse surrounding its culture, dark-hearted histories of empire and their ongoing consequences.

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There is no hierarchy or boundary of subject matter in the pictures I've included in this book. Many choices were intuitive – for example, using black and white film in the desert at the edges of Western Sahara. Looking back, I assume I felt that the misrepresentation of monochrome would best illustrate my disorientation in an otherworldly place. The intense heat was a physical shock.

The shattering light, cinematic irradiation and a hollow deep blue horizon seemed to twist and stretch time into another register. I had no familiarity or experience on which to build an image I could recognise at all. Weirdly, the ground there is brighter than the sky. It was like photographing a snowscape. And while I became dizzy with dehydration, local currency traders, taxi and lorry drivers, hawkers and phone card sellers ventured outside in impossibly heavy coats as protection against the sun.

Approaching the equator, moisture returned to the air with a vengeance. In rural areas jaundiced bruise-coloured wood smoke from sunrise bonfires immerses into an earthier brew from burning crop stubble and wild grass. This mixture cooks under blanketing humidity to create a velvety alchemical haze, imbuing the landscape with a hallucinogenic matt burr and grainy amber aesthetic.

Trying to describe the scene probably creates sensory overload for the reader, which is analogous to the way that the atmospheric mist anaesthetises the air and is too much for the cameras' film - making landscape photography blotchy and difficult.

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The road and its hypnotic imagery, which cured into photographs and memories – became the project's substance, more than dramatic incident or fanfare. There were six am starts and multiple different bedrooms each week. Sometimes there were bed bugs and middle-of-the-night 'disturbances'. Other nights we had crisp white sheets and frosty air conditioning. Or a swimming pool the size of a football field (in Bissau). There were occasional moments of acute 'singularity' - danger or beauty - where physical shock had its own soundtrack and haptic, signals that time's everyday fabric had ripped: the doppler effect of a truck's horn screaming waaaay too close, the prickle of road dirt and gravel on my bare skin or the sobering sound of my own breathing and heartbeat brimming inside my head at forty six degrees in a desert. Somehow my memories all remain in sync with their own time, none distorted into slow motion replay, as happens during trauma.

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In Accra, Ghana, I had a conversation with a man holding a chicken. It started when he approached me, hoping to make a sale of it. I was taking photographs with an ancient 1950's camera in a mobbed outdoor coach station, which I had discovered sparked curiosity that was a great ice breaker.

"What am I going to do with a chicken?" I laughed.

I countered by asking him for his photograph. He was standing in front of a pristine burgundy coach that I knew would make a great background and i was hanging around next to it for that very purpose. Call it pre-meditated randomness.

"How much will you pay me?" He asked. After all, what was he going to do with being photographed?

I explained that I didn't want a staged or complicated arrangement. He was aggrieved at my stinginess, but I sensed he was proud of the chicken and we shared good-humoured mutual incredulity at the absurdity of the other's proposition. His friend arrived. A three-way debate began in earnest, with the second man loudly condemning the idea of a freebie. The chicken relented. His friend, complaining to the end, didn't move out of the shot. It was quarter to five on a Saturday afternoon.

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A camera's viewfinder does not reveal the full picture. It can't. Szarkowski called this the 'monocular viewpoint' and like holding a steady gaze with one eye closed, a lens cannot accommodate seeing everything that's 'there'. Peripheral vision and therefore context is lost by looking through a lens, so t follows that a photograph can't provide an impartial or objective version of reality.

Instead, my photographic intent was to find an essence and evocation of the often somatic moment at hand, to create an intangible layer that lies in front of the pictorial. To try and produce images as if snatched from a dream, a 'photo-fit' mimesis that transmitcaptures and transmits the visceral energy of the scene, its sounds and physicality, the confrontational heat & deafening light - how it felt there. Which, if an analogy helps, is how I experience a Bruegel painting – which have an ethereal force and trans-portative powers - that take me to a story in another time and place. As Don McCullin put it: "Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling. If you can't feel what you're looking at, then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures."

Perhaps authenticity is relational - something to be judged in context of a specific time, place and serendipity, rather than as a fixed measure. Momentarily valid in the photographer's eye at the click of the shutter, in that moment it is the real thing. Maybe it's even better than the real thing.

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In Gabu, Guinea-Bissau, I met two boys who were car mechanics. Their clothes were so steeped in dirt and oil that the cloth had turned a deep brown. I guessed they were around twelve or thirteen years old. Over the course of a day, I watched as they performed complicated repairs on one of the cars.

Taking their portrait broke my usual rule about photographing children. They don't usually possess reliable agency and it's easy to slip into sentimental cliché (or worse, poverty porn). In this case, I made the choice to photograph them to provoke reflection on child labour I will take the criticism as needs be. The boys worked hard and showed their experience. Certainly they ought to have the opportunity of a childhood and an education instead. But my concern is tempered, by the thought that by the time they are adults, they will have the solid basis of an income in a country and continent where poverty is endemic. The outstanding issue is whether I should have taken the photograph and printed it here.

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Probably the most intangible concept to capture without falling into trope or stereotype, was the abstract, subjective and personal sense of time or chronoception. It stretches like elastic according to whether one is an African inhabitant, or a visitor. Perception is not

linear and relies instead on some other sensibility.

All along the road, in many aspects of life (and photography) in Africa, it is only ever now. The past and future, cause and effect blur in the energy of the actual moment at hand.

The writer Achille Mbembe's book On the Postcolony (2001) expands on this metaphysical perception: "In the post-colony, the living and the dead, the past and the present, the visible and the invisible, the ideal and the material are entangled. Being and time are not neatly separated; the passage of time does not erase traces but accumulates them."

Intuitively, I like the idea that this cultural experience of time is an affective state which can't be seen, it can only be felt. And I wonder if my spontaneous swapping and choosing between black and white or colour films is reflective of the elastic pace of the moment I want to photograph.

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In rural Nigeria, I asked a young woman – a girl, chatting with her friends around a water well - for her portrait. She hesitantly agreed and then asked me if I could please wait until she could find another friend to join her?

When they returned, smiling & laughing, I used the backdrop of a nearby wall for their photograph. It was smothered with posters of local politicians, who were of course, all men. They were delighted by this and I believe they told their back story through the picture they gave to me - knowing that they would most likely never see it. It felt like a statement.

While in Nigeria the group travelled with a security team of six soldiers and their driver, who were on call twenty-four hours a day, armed with machine guns (and more theatrical axes and machetes) in full combat uniform. In situ, surrounded by people, it would have been difficult and most likely unpopular with the soldiers and surrounding crowd to try and photograph those scenes. In small towns, the effect of the force field that they exuded became like static electricity. People stared. Everyone knew that our group fell inside their lethal orbit.

Confusingly, their appearance belied their easy-going personalities and default smiles. One of them told me he had been in a gun fight a few weeks previously where people had died. In their portraits and without discussion, their demeanour is serious.

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I think about Teju Cole, a critically acclaimed author and post-colonial African critic who wrote an infamous New York Times Magazine article titled: "How do we know when a photographer caters to life and not to some previous prejudice?" (30 March 2016). The piece demolished the widely known travel photographer, Steve McCurry, as "Boring, but also extremely popular….[indulging] in fantasy" and offering a "certain ideal of photography: the rule of thirds, a neat counterpoise of foreground and background and an obvious point of primary interest, placed just so."

Ouch. And I like my compositions, just so.

Binyavanga Wainaina's pair of "How to Write About Africa" essays Granta No.92, 2005 & "How to Write About Africa II: The Revenge" Granta online, January 2019, published posthumously further highlight the dilemmas of depicting Africa, especially if wearing khaki and bearing witness: "Fuck that".

I did wear khaki, sometimes while taking photographs.

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A photograph catches me by surprise during post production. It was taken somewhere in rural Eastern Nigeria, passing through a tiny village. There are pictures of children hanging around a water tower, a young boy minding a herd of cows. And another - of three boys standing on a mound of earth. The oldest stands tall, wearing a red t-shirt and looking away from the camera. One of the other younger boys was more curious. He stared at the camera. It is only then, months after that moment and thousands of miles away, gazing at the picture in Photoshop, that I notice that he seemingly has malnutrition.

This picture seems to condense what is at stake in a lot of the theoretical questions and cultural critique about photography surrounding authenticity, subjectivity, pictorial compromise, ethics and history. But there is something more immediate than the theorising: the plain recognition of deprivation I would say the same about a photograph taken in London or Los Angeles: there is a child who does not have enough to eat.

The photograph and my responsibility for it, sits awkwardly alongside the wider debates about representation of Africa, where in, the discourse I often encounter, is framed through an etiological, i.e. historical perspective, where colonial history becomes the primary explanatory lens for the present.

But, as Clay Shirky commented 2008: "When we change the way we communicate, we change society." This tech based acceleration continues apace, causing the wheel of history to turn, accelerating again in the mid 2020's with the gestation of Artificial General Intelligence. This combines with the effects of permanent migration, urbanisation, financial and cultural globalisation, populist backlashes, demographics, Trump, China's resource ambitions, Ukraine and Gaza – to shift attention, (and billions of cameras), elsewhere.

And I'm caught in a metamodern bind of cognitive dissonance - unable to ignore the catastrophe of colonialism, but resistant to accepting the past as the most relevant or reliably productive force in Africa's future.

To quote Professor Howard French: "There is little sign that Africa is capturing the imagination of the outside world to the degree that is necessary. Time is wasting."

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It is easy to empathise with James Agee, the writer I quoted to start this piece. He worked with the photographer Walker Evans

on a latterly classic book titled “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” (1941). The work had initially been commissioned as a piece for Fortune magazine in 1936. [But] Agee’s often agonised meditation on representation, dignity, voyeurism and the ethical dilemma of documentary was considered too sprawling introspective. No-one was spared. Breaking the fourth wall, he asked: “Who are you who will read these words and study these photographs?”

Fortune magazine was not amused and declined to use his work.

In “The Civil Contract of Photography” (2008), Ariella Azoulay explored this wider idea that viewing a photograph is also an ethical act - that activates a relationship between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer, all of whom are implicated in the photograph’s meaning and its impact. Photography doesn’t happen in a vacuum. The pictures are connected and interdependent with the world inside and outside of the viewinder’s frame.

Despite a rigorously agreed specification with their creative director, the company that commissioned my photographs declined to use them, frustratingly, perhaps inevitably, without being able to articulate their reasons.

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Arriving in Lagos during a grainy languid dusk, driving along a freeway built on stilts above the lagoon. I saw the ghostly blue pall of wood smoke coming from the chimneys of hundreds of low-slung dwellings hovering on top of the inky water. This was Makoko, home to a hundred thousand people along the shoreline.

Makoko is an incongruous tourist destination, and in horrible paradox, it is often referred to as the “Venice of Africa”. Thankfully I was quite ill, tucked up in bed in an air-conditioned bedroom, stuffed with expensive anti-biotics and missed a trip there with colleagues. But while photographing people who are poor across the African continent is one thing, seeking out a place specifically for its combination of poverty, novel location, construction and aesthetic seems like a voyeuristic other.

Makoko is more cognitive dissonance. In the climate of scrutiny that surrounds photography in Africa my interest is simply maintaining photographic and artistic freedom, wherever the work is made. In a rapidly evolving world there is no universal standard of ethics. Or am I simply being judgemental about tourists gawping? And then there’s the limit to my own hand-wringing.

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Africa got into my psyche. The vast scale and climate of the landscape has a familial embrace and comfort. There’s the lure and promise of escape from the technology and its side effects of alienation and aporia that ‘the West’ is seemingly sliding into.

These pictures are the intuitive response to my photographic addiction, confronted with an exponential reality to sample and interpret. There are no answers or prescriptions here, just more questions. I want to bridge the gap - to understand and hopefully learn from - ‘Being There’.
Looking at my role in how people will see Africa, photography seems my best expression, my most reliable response to capturing life.

And Robert Frank was right about his sceptical approach to writing about his own work.

Early on the road trip, I thought about Nicholas Roeg's film, "Walkabout" (1971) and specifically, its epilogue, set years ahead of the rest of the film's story. The main protagonist becomes lost in a visual reverie, removed from her now domesticated and ordinary life. In her mind's eye we see she is lured momentarily back to another time and place, by the ethereal force and transportative powers of memories of all that happened there, in an Australian desert. At the time, thinking about this, I wondered how I would reflect on Africa in my own future, how I would process a period of time that was already having a substantial impact upon my psyche.

I took photographs and came home. I left a bit of me behind in places where I spent time as a spectator. An outsider. My objective? To make pictures that show how it felt being there.

Sources and influences

The works listed below served as references while writing and editing. I have read some completely, others only in passing - sometimes just a line or an idea remained. Together, they have influenced how I think, see, write, and photograph.

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Arendt, Hannah - The Human Condition
Azoulay, Ariella - The Civil Contract of Photography
Barthes, Roland - Camera Lucida
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Evans, Walker - Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (with James Agee)
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Žižek, Slavoj - Welcome to the Desert of the Real; Living in the End Times

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