



VIEW FROM DONALD'S STAND (AUGUST 2017), OLYMPIUS (ANTI-MARK & 15 MIN. F.A. 1/2500 S. ISO 200. © PIETER DE VOS

## LIVES IN MOTION

TOWARD GREATER DEPTH AND EMPATHY IN VISUAL STORYTELLING

BY PIETER DE VOS

**It is a cold Monday evening in mid-August 2011 in Moreleta, Pretoria. I am back in the country of my birth after a long absence. It has been an unsettling homecoming, fraught with contrasting experiences and emotions. I am here on a site visit as part of an exchange between Canadian and South African researchers to compare homelessness in the two countries.**

A bitter wind cuts between the rows of plastic shacks in Woodlane Village, ripping at the tarpaulins of the improvised shelters. The temperature has dropped to 2 degrees Celsius as day slips into night. Smoke blankets the informal settlement. The smell of wood fires fills the air as the residents of the squatter camp hunker down.

The place is reminiscent of the camps I witnessed in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, although here the settlement is surrounded by mansions, golf estates and shopping malls instead of collapsed buildings and mountains of rubble. In Woodlane Village, the displacement of people is driven by economic and political factors rather than by acts of God.

The informal settlement is home to 3000 people living in 846 shacks. Most of the residents of the settlement are refugees and migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and South Africa. The Village is a contested place. It was created as a temporary settlement in 2009 after years of advocacy by human rights lawyers. It is called Plastic View by the neighbouring homeowners who describe the place as a hotbed of crime and pestilence—and oppose integration and community-building efforts.

Prior to this, the municipality had attempted to forcibly remove the squatters. This included illegal midnight raids by police and security forces where shacks were set ablaze and people were shot. In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there are places that have been wiped from the map. Suburbs have replaced farmland. Cities have been

reconfigured. Ethnic enclaves have been bulldozed, and people relocated.

### SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND

This initial encounter sparked an eight-year exploration of spatial justice in South Africa. I wanted to understand how people experience home and belonging in a community that straddles the tension between social inclusion and exclusion. I also wanted to come to terms with the country of my birth.

When I first arrived in Woodlane Village, I fought the temptation to jump to photography, opting instead to focus on people's stories of everyday life. I used a similar approach during a decade-long exploration of homelessness in Edmonton: relationship building took precedence over image-making.

I knew that any attempt to depict the community ran the risk of projecting my uninformed perceptions of the place or, worse, reinforcing stereotypes. As a former South African of Afrikaner ancestry who grew up in Canada in a middle-class family, I was mindful of the differences in socio-economic and cultural backgrounds as well as the differentials in power and privilege. The legacy of apartheid was also ever-present.

Honest storytelling requires that we enter communities with open minds and open hearts. Only by seeking to understand can we see the complexity, richness and nuances of the social worlds around us. Insight requires an investment of time and a commitment to relationships. It also requires reciprocity—that we are prepared to walk alongside others and to share something of ourselves. Otherwise, we run the risk of being tourists in the lives of others.

How do we better understand the hopes and challenges of those with whom we wish to collaborate? How do their "private" aspirations and struggles connect with "public" issues or discourses? What is the larger story in the story?

Continued on page 37



WOMEN SEWING (AUGUST 2016), OLYMPIUS E-MS MARK II, 17 MM, F11.8, 2.5, ISO 1600. © PETER DE VOS



DONALD BANDA WARMS HIMSELF UP TO A FIRE ON A COLD AUGUST NIGHT IN 2016. OLYMPIUS E-MS MARK II, 12 MM, F2.8, 1/100 S, ISO 800. © PETER DE VOS



STOKING HOME FIRES WITH THE ANC MANIFESTO (AUGUST 2016), OLYMPIUS E-MS MARK II, 12 MM, F2.8, 1/160 S, ISO 800. © PETER DE VOS



—DONALD AND ALIIE EMBRACE (AUGUST 2016). OLYMPIUS E-M1 MARK II, 12 MM, F2.8, 1/160 S, ISO 800. © PETER DE VOS



—“WE WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT”—DONALD (AUGUST 2017). OLYMPIUS E-M1 MARK II, 21 MM, F5.6, 1/800 S, ISO 200. © PETER DE VOS

### DEEP HANGING OUT

To explore these questions, I spent months hanging out with residents of the Village. I developed daily routines, blending with the rhythms of the place. I would make my way to the camp in the late afternoons. I would walk the rows. I would say hello, wave my hand and nod at strangers, and fall into conversations. I would sense the waning sun on my skin; the dust in my nose; and the smell of burning garbage, plastic and paper. I would listen to the sounds of voices, music, the chopping of wood, and children at play.

Through this process, I met and befriended Donald Banda, a community leader and local tailor. I remember the first day I met him at his stand. The gate to W1 307 was open, and Donald was sitting in his courtyard, mending a pair of jeans. A painted sign on the side of his shack read: “Tailoring. One-day service. We do alterations, zips, and stitches.” While he sewed, Donald spoke about his life in continuous looping sentences, and I listened. Eventually, my visits became a daily ritual—and the foundation of our friendship.

Donald grew up in Pretoria East, close to where the camp is located today. He remembers when the area was still bushveld. He recalls a time when the cycles of life and death were tied to the

land—when his deceased ancestors were wrapped in cowhide and interred in the very ground upon which they were born. This was before the suburb was established and before the surrounding hills were built up with expensive homes and estates named after the natural areas destroyed in their making: Silver Stream, Woodhill, Clearwater, Meadow Heights, Brookside, the Wilds. This was also before his family was forcibly relocated under apartheid.

### SPEAKING WITH AND ALONGSIDE

Early in our time together, Donald confided that he had long desired to have his story chronicled—to produce something that declares unequivocally: “I am here. This is my life.” Our collaboration became a vehicle for his voice. With his permission, I recorded and transcribed hundreds of hours of conversations. I was also privileged to travel with him to significant places in his personal history and to meet his family and friends in the surrounding townships of Mamelodi, Soshanguve and Winterveld and the rural communities in Mpumalanga.

Donald’s story along with my photographs formed the basis for the book *Homelands* (published by Daylight Books in 2019). His narrative account captures the beautiful complexity, tensions and vitality of South Africa.

## 6 RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

### 1. TAKE THE TIME NEEDED

Understanding complex human realities requires patience, perseverance, and a willingness to continually face our own biases and assumptions. Often the most unsettling part of a documentary project is discovering how our own worldviews are continually influencing our perception of reality, leading to blind spots and tunnel vision.

### 2. SHOW GENUINE CURIOSITY IN OTHERS

Getting to know our participants not only facilitates relationships, it also provides the contextual knowledge necessary to avoid creating caricatures of people and communities.

### 3. RELATIONSHIPS ARE TWO-WAY STREETS

Compelling photographs are records of exchanges between photographer and subject. These exchanges are facilitated by our openness to reciprocate and share our own stories.

### 4. HONOUR OUR COMMITMENTS

Long-term documentary projects require making ethical and relational commitments and keeping the promises we make. These commitments can shift over time as relationships develop.

### 5. PAY ATTENTION TO THE EVERYDAY

Sometimes, complex realities are revealed in the mundane details of everyday life. Dramatic photos are often distorting. They can reinforce stereotypes if they are not counterbalanced by more nuanced images.

### 6. EXPECT SURPRISES

Documentary stories tend to reveal themselves over time. We have to be open to the emergence of new questions and new insights. The unexpected is potentially always around the corner. Some of these surprises can be unsettling. Life is messy.



DONALD AT HIS NEW STAND IN SOLOMON MAHLANGU VILLAGE (AUGUST 2018). IN THE PURSUIT OF A PLACE CALLED HOME, HE RELOCATED TO THIS COMMUNITY IN EARLY 2018. OLYMPIUS E-MY MARK KL. 21 MM. F/4. 1/2500 S. ISO 200 © PIETER DE VOS

I have been blessed to witness the richness of Donald's life. Poignant stories and photos emerged from our unscripted moments of companionship. As Donald shared with me, "You have to live it before you can write it. If you want to know what it's like to stay in a shack, then you have to stay in a shack."

#### A COMPENDIUM OF WONDERS

Our collaboration affirms the unfolding quality of human experience. Beneath our surfaces are countless permutations of thoughts, emotions and perspectives. As humans, our lives are always in motion. Things are always emerging. When we meet others, our stories shift. And sometimes, the trajectories of our lives also change.

Over the past eight years, my life has become intertwined with Donald's in profound and surprising ways. When I married in 2014, I took Rachel to meet him, and he joined us on our honeymoon. The following year, I was a witness to Donald's marriage to Rose. In 2017, I helped Donald

and Rose relocate to another community outside of Mamelodi, where they have established a new home.

As documentary photographers, we have to resist the temptation to create simplistic depictions of multidimensional realities. We have to maintain a sense of humility. We have to remain open to new ways of seeing and knowing the world. As Donald observes, "Life is a compendium of wonders. It is this mixed thing. It keeps on rolling. You think you know it all, and then you get to the other side and you find it is something else. It gives you many reflections of itself."

#### THERE IS A STORY IN OUR STORY

Embracing the complexity of the human condition opens up the possibility for deeper forms of storytelling and for new avenues of personal growth. One cannot be privy to the intimacies of people's narratives, especially those involving hopes and struggles, without being reoriented to one's own story and to the existential and moral questions posed by the human condition. As

As documentary photographers, we have to resist the temptation to create simplistic depictions of multidimensional realities.

Donald shared with me, "There is a story in our story," alluding to how our friendship challenges the racist legacy of our homeland.

But, in hindsight, there is nothing remarkable about the nature of our relationship. It is built upon mundane human encounters. There are the countless conversations. There are the long commutes to the townships to visit family and friends. There are the weddings and the funerals. There are the meals together. There are the moments of laughter, boredom and fatigue. And there are the periodic Skype calls and Facebook messages when we are apart.

These are the ordinary experiences that have sustained an extraordinary friendship. ●



#### HOMELANDS

by Pieter de Vos

Daylight Books, \$59, 156 pages, hardcover

*Homelands* is the result of seven years of documentary work for Pieter de Vos. It's an intimate look at South Africa 25 years after apartheid. It's also the story of the author's friendship with Donald Banda, a resident of the informal South African settlement called Plastic View, located near a wealthy suburb. When Donald expressed a desire for his story to be told, Pieter promised to help him. *Homelands* is the result of that promise. If Pieter's article moved you, this book is the next logical step to learn more about Donald's story and South Africa as well.

## Canadian Association for Photographic Art

# CAPAPA

- ✿ Promotes photography in Canada and Internationally
- ✿ Publishes **Canadian Camera Magazine** quarterly - for members by members
- ✿ Hosts Regional, National and International competitions for individuals and photography clubs
- ✿ Provides an internationally recognized **Judges Training Course**
- ✿ Presents a bi-annual national photography conference
- ✿ Offers membership to individuals and photography clubs
- ✿ Grants awards, recognition, medals, and honours
- ✿ Serving over 1200 individual members and 100 photography clubs



Canada's National non-profit organization dedicated to photography for over 50 years

For more information or to join CAPA please visit our website [capacanada.ca](http://capacanada.ca)