

Brauer, Paula

The Refugee Camp Between Displacement and Emplacement in Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns*

In:

Chowdhury, Touhid Ahmed (Hrsg.), Displacement, Emplacement, and Migration : an Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays, Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, p. 55-67. 2024. DOI: 10.20378/irb-58625

Bookpart - Published Version

DOI of the Article: 10.20378/irb-94491

Date of Publication: 27.03.2024

Legal Notice:


This work is protected by copyright and/or the indication of a licence. You are free to use this work in any way permitted by the copyright and/or the licence that applies to your usage. For other uses, you must obtain permission from the rights-holder(s).

This document is made available under the **Creative Commons Lizenze CC BY**.



This licencse information is available online:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

The Refugee Camp Between Displacement and Emplacement in Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns*

Paula Brauer  <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3291-1786>
University of Münster, Germany

Introduction

Most forced migrants cross through at least one refugee camp on their journeys, some in passing, but others spend years, sometimes even decades, in them. So-called 'protracted refugee situations', i.e., cases where forced migrants remain in limbo for more than five years, are on the rise. In most of these cases, it means that people are stuck in a camp. As the historian Peter Gatrell explains, "[t]he experiences of countless refugees in the African continent have been bound up with the refugee camp" (241). This means that today forced migration, perhaps contrary to what one might believe, is to a large degree characterised by immobility.

Because they are of such central importance to journeys of forced migration, much of the contemporary literature narrating these journeys also sets foot in a camp at one point. One of these texts is Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns* (2016). Unlike many others, it does not only pass through a camp but is entirely set there.¹ The common understanding that the refugee camp is a temporary space of transit or a sort of 'non-place' is therefore rebutted. Instead, it paints the picture of a place where people live and which they call home. Refugee camps are the sites of humanitarian catastrophes but at the same time places where people live their day-to-day lives. They may offer a momentary refuge from what the people are fleeing from and from the challenges they are still to meet, yet they themselves are full of hardships and dangers. This essay discusses the tension

¹ Examples of the former are, to name but a few, Atia Abawi's *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes* (2019), Fabio Geda's *In the Sea there are Crocodiles* (2015) or Emma Jane Kirby's *The Optician of Lampedusa* (2017).

that comes with this, the camp being the setting of both displacement and emplacement at the same time.

Ben Rawlence is a writer, journalist and former researcher for Human Rights Watch. *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp*, which was published in 2016, is his second book. It is based on multiple long visits to Dadaab, a complex of refugee camps in eastern Kenya near the border with Somalia, and research he conducted as part of his position with Human Rights Watch. Dadaab consists of three camps – Dagahaley, Hagadera and Ifo – and had a registered population of over 200,000 in 2019. Until 2011, there were close to 500,000 people living there, which made it the largest refugee camp in the world at the time, whereas today it is the third largest. Its population is largely Somali.

The Camp as an Urbanized Cosmos

City of Thorns can be seen as a series of interspersed portraits of fictionalised camp inhabitants that Rawlence encountered during his time as a researcher. To this, the author repeatedly adds details about the overarching political conditions that affect life in the camps. With the help of multiple characters and their individual storylines, he illustrates how a camp such as Dadaab becomes its own cosmos. It has its own internal logic, social order, structures, and institutions along with its own economic market. It makes sense that the camp is constantly described as a “city” throughout the novel. Right at the beginning, Rawlence remarks:

How to describe to people who have never visited, the many faces of that city? The term ‘refugee camp’ is misleading. Dadaab was established in 1992 to hold 90,000 refugees fleeing Somalia’s civil war. At the beginning of 2016 it is twenty-five years old and nearly half a million strong, an urban area the size of New Orleans, Bristol or Zurich unmarked on any official map (2)

The camp’s market contributes decisively to its urbanisation. The novel goes into its workings at length, describing what goods are traded and with whom (46; 65). The market is also where many of the novel’s characters find employment and earn the necessary cash to supplement their food rations. Many of them come from smaller villages or from families

with nomadic backgrounds and must adapt to the hustle and bustle of the camp, an inevitable effect of its sheer size, at first. The effect of urbanity is especially generated in comparison to the camp's direct surroundings, which are "sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped" (Pérouse de Montclos and Kagwanja 206). Significantly, "Dadaab was the largest economy of the region" (Rawlence 176). Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos and Peter Mwangi Kagwanja explain that: "After a certain period of time, refugees appear to be some sort of 'urban dwellers in the making' and camps to be a preliminary step towards urbanisation. For pastoral people especially, the cosmopolitan make-up of the camps and the change to a sedentary lifestyle play a major role in this regard" (206). Anthropologist Michel Agier shares this assessment but at the same time scrutinises and puts a limit to it:

The Dadaab example shows that the process of the camp is indeed that of a town in the making: an embryonic economy . . . ; a social division adapted to the plurality of constraints and resources . . . ; an occupation of space that, however precarious, gives meaning to a place that was originally deserted and is already no longer so . . . [e]verything happens 'as if' it was a town. Everything is potential, and yet nothing develops The camp, even when stabilized, remains an amputated town, bare by definition. (145)

This potential he alludes to is certainly palpable in the novel as is this notion of pretence, which we will go into more detail on later. Adding to the question of whether or not the camp can be called a city, Liisa Malkki opens up the question of why urbanisation *should* be regarded as desirable in the first place and why urban development is seen as an indicator of the quality of life in a refugee camp (355). But, although the comparison can only hold up until a certain degree and, Malkki is right to argue, should not be seen as normative, it gives an expression to the fact that the camp space in *City of Thorns* has become a permanent place of residence for its inhabitants.

Caught up in the In-between Space of the Camp

The fact of its permanence, however, is not officially recognised. Rawlence remarks that:

No one wants to admit that the temporary camp of Dadaab has become permanent: not the Kenyan government who must host it, not the UN who must pay for it, and not the refugees who must live here. This paradox makes the ground unsteady. Caught between the ongoing war in Somalia and a world unwilling to welcome them, the refugees can only survive in the camp by imagining a life elsewhere. It is unsettling: neither the past, nor the present, nor the future is a safe place for a mind to linger for long. To live in this city of thorns is to be trapped mentally, as well as physically, your thoughts constantly flickering between impossible dreams and a nightmarish reality. In short, to come here you must be completely desperate. (5)

Rawlence uses spatial terminology, such as 'caught between' or 'flickering between', here in order to locate his characters in the in-between space of the camp.

The truth is that there is no real other option for people than to remain in the camp. Different characters in the text go through what could be perceived as other options, illegally settling in Kenya outside of the camp, returning to their home country or resettlement elsewhere, but neither are presented as valid alternatives. Life in Nairobi is just as, if not more, precarious than in the camp (180). The thought of returning awakes fears in the light of uncertainty, especially for those who were in the camp for a long time or who were even born there: "Kenya was a familiar tyrant. After twenty-five years, Somalia was a foreign country" (349). And even those who get the rare opportunity for resettlement, a generally lengthy and often uncertain process, like Kheyro who was chosen for one of few scholarships to a Canadian university, feel sad upon leaving: "It would be difficult to leave. She knew everything about her neighbours in A2, their characters, how they walked, laughed, snored even. She had seen the children crawl, totter, walk and marry and give birth to their own. She would be sad to say goodbye" (187). The camp is their home, mostly by necessity, but, as we can see, this does not mean that one cannot develop an emotional connection to it. What is more, the novel stresses that leaving must not mean leaving behind all problems, whether they existed before the camp or were picked up there, such as Muna's drug addiction that she developed as a result of the immense stress that she endured in the camp: "I heard in Australia there is khat too. Oh no!" (305).

In this way, the novel deviates from the dominant narrative of forced migration in which the camp is but an obstacle to be overcome and which usually ends with their protagonists' arrival somewhere that is deemed a 'safe' new place of residence, most often located in Europe or the Global North. The author alludes to the fact that it is precisely the predominance of this narrative that reinforces the problem concerning the pending status of the camp and that Kenya, as the camp's host nation, contributes to this significantly: "Kenya had succeeded in constructing an official narrative about the camp, one that had an ending. And even though it was a fantasy, that narrative arc cast a cruel shadow. Daily life simply got harder" (339). By pretending that the camp is only a passage in the migrants' journeys, the Kenyan government aims to avoid having to concede its *de facto* permanence, which would signify taking on a new and much more complex set of responsibilities.

Psychological Challenges Associated with Indefinite Waiting

What the text describes is a situation that many real-life forced migrants currently find themselves in:

refugees in protracted situations find themselves trapped in a state of limbo: they cannot go back to their homeland, in most cases because it is not safe for them to do so; they are unable to settle permanently in their country of first asylum, because the host state does not want them to remain indefinitely on its territory; and they do not have the option of moving on . . . (Crisp 1)

Officially, there are three solutions to issues regarding forced migration in the UNHCR's repertoire: repatriation, integration in the land of asylum and resettlement in a third country. The camp is not one of them. It becomes the default response to forced migration, however, as, with conflicts stretching out over the years, repatriation ceases to be an option, and those fleeing are denied the option of integration or resettlement. This leads Maja Janmyr to locate the refugee camp "between the temporary and the permanent" (112). As we have seen, its in-betweenness applies both on a temporal as well as on a spatial level. Although such in-betweenness might be associated with feelings of displacement, the text illustrates how emplacement can take place under such unlikely conditions. Although

initially not by choice, over time, its inhabitants build a connection to the camp that defies the ever-present uncertainty, while, of course, they are still being subjected to it.

The opposition of these two forces working against one another is repeatedly expressed in the text. The passage quoted here points our attention to the fact that this uncertain state of limbo is immensely psychologically challenging:

No one wants to admit that the temporary camp of Dadaab has become permanent: not the Kenyan government who must host it, not the UN who must pay for it, and not the refugees who must live here. This paradox makes the ground unsteady. Caught between the ongoing war in Somalia and a world unwilling to welcome them, the refugees can only survive in the camp by imagining a life elsewhere. It is unsettling: neither the past, nor the present, nor the future is a safe place for a mind to linger for long. To live in this city of thorns is to be trapped mentally, as well as physically, your thoughts constantly flickering between impossible dreams and a nightmarish reality. In short, to come here you must be completely desperate. (Rawlence 5)

The City of Thorns presents us with a spectrum of people psychologically affected, some so badly that they resort to chewing the narcotic khat that circulates widely within the camp. The author stresses, however, that it is not the camp as such that is the main culprit but the failure to acknowledge its permanence.

The detrimental effects of this are especially present in the novel's younger characters, who grew up in the camp. Rawlence points out how their upbringing is essentially determined by and unique to the camp environment. It introduces them to perspectives outside of their traditional cultures. An important factor in this is the UNHCR and its training courses:

The youth of the camp saw themselves as leaders-in-waiting: indeed they had been encouraged in that vision by the rhetoric of countless NGO workshops and trainings. They adopted the political correctness, the bureaucratic habits and even the

dress of the NGOs, and they spoke in clichés. Words like ‘democracy’, ‘transparency’, and ‘accountability’ were to them like new outfits. Having marinated in the UN vocabulary their whole life they had a nave idea of the outside world: that there was a standard, a normality that existed somewhere, in America, in Europe, in the United Nations, for which they were practising. (245)

In spite of this, they retain a sense of optimism:

The second half of the speech was motivational: ‘We are refugees by status but not by choice,’ Tawane said. ‘We are not vulnerable people, we are super humans. Refugee is a state of mind. Look at the examples of Madeleine Albright, of K’naan.’ It was a valiant effort, but it was more an expression of faith than experience. And that was the contradiction of Dadaab. To many of the educated young people coming up behind Tawane and trapped in the camp, Tawane’s vision might have seemed like a distant dream. To the tens of thousands denied a place at primary or even secondary school, to the grinning boys pressed up against the mesh windows, it was in practice almost meaningless. And yet, the defining characteristic of the young people in the camp was a surfeit of brimming optimism: a conviction that life for them had not yet begun; even Fish, the wrong side of thirty, spoke in the future tense. Among the rowdy kids outside was a budding teacher, a doctor and a premier league football player. (246)

The optimism conveyed here is unfounded, as the novel stresses by referring to Fish’s age. From this results an insurmountable intergenerational conflict between the camp youth and their elders, who were acculturated outside of the camp according to more traditional value sets. Some traditions, like weddings, cannot be practised in the same manner due to the financial constraints of camp life and some values need to be adapted to the new material circumstances (120). For instance, in “Somali culture one wishes others *bash* – the blessing of the rain – but no one does that in Dadaab any more. For the farmers and the nomads, the rain was the rhythm and compass of life. But in a makeshift city, atop hard stone, with no drainage and no sewage, water brought new terrors: flooding and disease” (125). Most importantly, their different socialisations lead to insurmountable differences between those born in the camps and their parents: “Tawane stood on a threshold. He was a new kind of person from his parents. But the bonds of the old world were still visceral, still strong.

He was a prisoner of guilt and of fear. The fear belonged to his parents but the guilt was his own: at having survived, at not remembering” (145).

However, the novel stresses that these differences lead to nothing: “Having acquired all the educational garlands possible, they had reached Dadaab’s glass ceiling and were eager for a bigger life elsewhere” (149). A life elsewhere, as we know, is unattainable for most. In their leadership roles within the camp, they still hold immense responsibility, but without receiving the appropriate compensation and/or prestige. As Rawlence puts it, they are “running a medium-sized city without a budget” (150). What little money they, or others engaged in other more profitable economic endeavours, make and are able to save, cannot be spent within the camp. There are no houses to be bought because permanent dwellings are not permitted, and owning a car is pointless given the movement restrictions (144). On top of this, Rawlence explains how mentally damaging it is to lose all prospects of a future, especially because it skews with one’s sense of time and makes present actions appear inconsequential:

Life was only a process of waiting. And this was their problem too: in such circumstances, people are more inclined to act without consequences, without limits, to be caught by a hedonism of the senses or the indulgence of emotion, or the violent righteousness of religion. Nothing had any permanence, there was no building anything, since both the people you loved or the people you hurt could soon be gone. (107)

As Patricia Ehrkamp puts it, pointing to the central importance of camps and their perceived role as waiting grounds, “waiting is a central experience of contemporary refugees” (817).

The Refugee Camp as a ‘Non-Place’?

In a sense, Rawlence’s fictional refugee camp can, therefore, be likened to Marc Augé’s non-place. According to him, non-places are phenomena produced by what he calls ‘supermodernity’ (Augé 34). They are the opposite of ‘(anthropological) places’ and are defined as follows: “If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned

with identity will be a non-place" (77 f.). He includes refugee camps on his list of examples: "The installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods (high-speed roads and railways, interchanges, airports) are just as much non-places as the means of transport themselves, or the great commercial centres, or the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked" (34). Although it appears drastic, 'parked' is a fitting word to describe the status of Rawlence's characters and in fact, closely resembles the vocabulary he uses to describe their situation. Augé further argues that the non-place is reigned by "actuality, the urgency of the present moment" (104). As we have seen, the same holds true for Rawlence's camp space, which is described as caught up in-between the past and an uncertain future. Without the ability to plan out a future, the only time that can be acted on is the present, so that the camp becomes a zone of temporality. The specific relationship between narrative place and time that Augé touches upon here can be best described in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, who introduces different types of 'chronotopes' to describe different types of relationships between narrative place and time, such as the chronotope of threshold, which, according to him, is where "the temporal element predominates" over the spatial and "time is essentially instantaneous, . . . as if it has no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time" (243; 248). For Bakhtin, the threshold is a literary metaphor, but in the novel, this manifests spatially with the camp being fashioned as a transitory, if *de facto* permanent, space in between two stages of a migrant's life. As I mentioned earlier, actions that take place there appear inconsequential because the time spent in the camp is said not to count towards a person's biography.

Augé argues that in a non-place, people lose their individuality in favour of a shared temporary identity that is defined by anonymity and responds only to the function of the non-place: "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. . . . The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (103). This is where the novel's camp characterisation, which is the result of its multitude of different, individualised characters, decidedly differs from Augé's. Firstly, the camp does not exist in complete isolation. Rawlence stresses its economic

importance for the entire region. It is also “a major part of the coping mechanisms for the vulnerable across a whole region”, with people entering to access the health care that is provided there, for instance (Rawlence 288). In this way it becomes intertwined with the surrounding areas and populations, meaning it does not exist in the kind of vacuum that would be characteristic of a non-place. Montclos and Kagwanja explain: “Camps are seldom isolated, as new local and international networks expand between them and their surrounding areas, as well as with other towns and diasporic groups” (206). Secondly, its inhabitants’ time in the camp does not just consist of waiting, although that may play a significant part. They also find jobs, pursue careers, volunteer, become involved with the organisation of the camp, form friendships and relationships, and have children. The latter is most significant, as we can see when Guled’s wife Maryam leaves without him: “With them gone, Ifo became again temporary, a transitional place. . . . Without Maryam’s things and the children’s clothes, and without the hope of money to oil his dreams of escape, the mud hut that had been their family home now resembled a cell” (Rawlence 261). In other words, family is what makes a place into a home.

The Question of Agency

Even if the camp is, to a very large degree, characterised by waiting, the question arises whether waiting must be seen as inactivity or whether it could also be active. Many of Rawlence’s characters take action despite the uncertainty, such as starting families or businesses. This is more than just the pragmatic necessity of sustaining one’s existence. Cathrine Brun uses the term ‘agency-in-waiting’ to describe what room for manoeuvre forced migrants have while living in camps. According to her, it “denotes the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of displacement from the subject’s history and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope. It does not indicate that people necessarily are able to control or shape their future” (24). The concept is illustrated well in the novel, which stresses that its characters possess more agency than what one may assume, even if that agency is heavily restricted and applies only to the present temporal dimension.

Its restrictions become especially clear when we witness the registration process of the camp together with Isha, one of the novel's many characters:

Isha's name and those of her children were entered into the manifest on the computer. A wristband showed their family size in permanent marker. They smeared their fingerprints on the paper one by one and then a string around their upper arm graded their malnourishment. Isha had got them there just in time. Down the production line they went: interviewed about what had caused them to flee, immunized, wormed, injected with vitamin A, photographed with the webcam and issued with a health card. (Rawlence 90)

The register used here appears out of context. It consists of the vocabulary one would use to describe the herding of cattle, for instance. By creating a linguistic comparison between cattle and migrants, the latter are denied their agency. They are presented as though they were commodities to be handled by an outside party. The comparison even extends to the following page, where it is brought to a larger level when the novel discusses the practice of the refugee camp as such: "Hundreds of Sudanese refugees had been shipped from Kenya's western border with South Sudan on the other side of the country. Kenya liked to warehouse all its refugees in one place where someone else could be relied upon to feed them and where they were easily surveilled" (91). In other words, the nature of the camp as an institution means that its inhabitants' agency will always be restricted.

But nonetheless, the novel finds and points out pockets of agency and power. For one, it tells us about the political power the camp inhabitants hold:

The approaching election raised the tension further. Although nominally full of aliens, the camp was in fact a key constituency: teeming with Kenyans and people with illegal Kenyan IDs, as well as large volumes of people who could be paid to ink their thumbs in favour of one candidate or another. In Kenyan elections poor people are a commodity and violence is an inexpensive campaign tool. (219)

The camp inhabitants are currently being used by others to further their political interests, but this nonetheless points to a potential. We can also spot traces of that in the camp youth's involvement in the organisational politics within the camp. Two characters, Tawane and Fish, for instance, found their own organisation and get a seat at the table (350). They are empowering themselves. But the camp and its provisions, especially the free education, also play a part in their possible empowerment: "With their newly minted English, the boys had written all over the tin door to their hut the proud declaration: 'PEOPLE WHO LIVE THIS HOUSE HAVE EDUCATION.' In case, even for a moment, they ever doubted that the journey had been worth it" (348). For Isha's family, all the hardship and restrictions endured are worth it in the end for the education of her children.

Conclusion

To conclude, the text shows us how fiction can be illustrative of the reality of the refugee camp between displacement and emplacement. It adds nuance to the idea that the refugee camp is an obstacle to be overcome and that a refugee camp narrative must thus end with the protagonists leaving the camp, a line which is followed by many other such novels. It shows instead that leaving is often not an option or, if it is, that it does not necessarily signify an improvement of living conditions or might require enormous sacrifices. The picture of the refugee camp that emerges in the process is more varied and nuanced than that which predominates current discourse. It is that of an almost urban cosmos. In fact, we can say that the refugee camp, as it is presented in *City of Thorns*, is characterised by the dichotomy between struggling to make a life and being at home, between waiting and agency, between feelings of displacement in a place that is supposed to be but a temporary shelter and its factually permanent emplacement. If you will, the camp itself could be described as emplaced displacement.

Works Cited

- Abawi, Atia. *A Land of Permanent Goodbyes*. Penguin, 2019.
- Agier, Michel. *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government*. Polity, 2011.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 1995.
- Bakhtin, M. M. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Texas UP, 1981, pp. 84-258.
- Brun, Cathrine. "Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Towards a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2015, pp. 19-37.
- Crisp, Jeff. "A State of Insecurity: The Political Economy of Violence in Kenya's Refugee Camps." *African Affairs*, vol. 99, 2000, pp. 601-632.
- Ehrkamp, Patricia. "Geographies of Migration I: Refugees." *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 41, no. 6, 2017, pp. 813-822.
- Gatrell, Peter. "Refugees in Modern World History." *Refugee Imaginaries: Research Across the Humanities*, edited by Emma Cox et al., Edinburgh UP, 2020, pp. 18-35.
- Geda, Fabio. *In the Sea There Are Crocodiles: The Story of Enaiatolla Akbari*. Translated by Howard Curtis, Tamarind, 2015.
- Janmyr, Maja. *Protecting Civilians in Refugee Camps: Unable and Unwilling States, UNHCR and International Responsibility*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2014.
- Kirby, Emma Jane. *The Optician of Lampedusa*. Penguin, 2017.
- Malkki, Liisa H. "News from Nowhere: Mass Displacement and Globalized 'Problems of Organization'." *Ethnography*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2002, pp. 351-360.
- Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, and Peter Mwangi Kagwanja. "Refugee Camps or Cities? The Socio-Economics of the Dadaab and Kakuma Camps in Northern Kenya." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2000, pp. 205-222.
- Rawlence, Ben. *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp*. Portobello, 2016.