

Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Life in an In-Between City



Caroline Wanjiku Kihato
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Caroline Kihato's ethnography of migrant women in Johannesburg provides the reader with productive disruptions. It disrupts our thinking about African cities. It disrupts binaries of insider/outsider, legal/illegal, formal/informal that shape the migrant experience. It shakes the foundations of recent scholarship on urban governance, and it requires the reader to re-examine the complexities of the margins, where migrant urban lives and livelihoods in Johannesburg—like the city itself—are in a constant state of becoming. The visual methods the author employs contribute not only to our understanding of women's public and private lives; they also bring attention to photography as a "method of analysis and theorization of the city" (117). A number of salient themes emerge strongly from Kihato's carefully rendered work. In combination they shed light on the city from "below" and highlight the migrant experience of entanglement, liminality, and mobility from a reflexive point of departure.

Reflexivity

The journey from self (home) to research (field) involves a journey into the contact zone¹ where the researcher negotiates the self and the "other." The contact zone is "a social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."² The boundary between "field" and "home" in Kihato's work is a productively blurred one. This borderland is the site of a subject/object performance where science tells us the researcher must be detached from bias while searching for truth. In practice, however, we never fully disengage from the self as we step into the street and move toward the subject in the field. Rather, we operate within a dynamic contact zone situated somewhere between field and home. It is in these interstices where contact shapes *how* we see, *who* we see, and *what* possibilities for knowledge transfer and production emerge. Kihato's reflexive position provides a constructive point of departure.

The preface to *Migrant Women of Johannesburg* takes us into this contact zone by reflecting on a question that was asked of her by a fellow Kenyan who was sheltering from xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg in May 2008. The simple question "Where do you come from?" is used to frame the experiences of the migrant women she so carefully

explores, but it also signals a moment of deep reflection about belonging, place, and identity that permeates the methods, analysis, and contribution of the research underpinning her work. Kihato draws on the intellectual wallpaper lining her memories of childhood home in Kenya, asking her to trace her own migrant journey. The narratives of migrant women such as Fazila, Jean, Rosine, Namwene, and many others who provide the book's empirical backbone seem to inhabit a perpetual state of flux, somewhere "in-between." While this liminal state evokes feelings of "sympathy, compassion and kindness" (110) in response to the vulnerability of living lives at the margins, the author demonstrates that such thinking blinds us to the power and resilience of migrant communities.

Liminality

The productive nature of the liminal state is further explored in the chapter evocatively entitled "Between Pharaoh's Army and the Red Sea." In-betweenness characterizes not only the lives of those women that Kihato explores; it is also a state in which the author finds herself as a migrant, having come to Johannesburg at the dawn of South Africa's democracy with hopes of a brighter future. Through deeply rooted participant observation, and the application of visual methods throughout four years of ethnographic fieldwork, Kihato skilfully employs feminist approaches that push at the boundaries of our notion of liminality. She demonstrates how the lives of cross-border migrant women defy binary logics. Such defiance is illustrated in chapter 2 where a legal "notice" is served to informal trader Hannah for her contravention of Johannesburg's informal trading by-law. The failures of the state to capture and control the mobility of traders like her are exhibited in the incomplete details on the notice. Hannah's ability to productively engage her marginality is complicated by the state's inability to trace her "structural-legal invisibility" (33). Hannah's story is typical of migrant women who live somewhere between legitimacy and illegality. That is not to say that liminality provides a fluid medium through which migrant women may transition easily. As she notes, "Johannesburg is a liminal space ... [where migrant women] are caught in its vortex, unable to move onto other destinations because they lack the material means to do so" (69).

Entanglement

While Johannesburg may indeed be a liminal city, it nonetheless is situated at the heart of African cross-border migrants' desires, drawing so many into its centrifuge as the narratives attest. Within the vortices of the city, migrant women's lives are thus entangled in legal and socially embedded mobilities. Seen in this light, Kihato demonstrates how the liminal city is generative and a "gateway rather than a ghetto" (129), where entanglements transform migrants' social status while they also illustrate migrant women's tactical relationship to the city. The relationship that migrant women of Johannesburg have with the city is intertwined with the politics of survival against pressures imposed by culture, laws, and incidents of violence upon which Kihato reflects in three vignettes emerging from xenophobia in South Africa in 2008. Drawing upon—and extending—Sen's³ "capabilities approach," Kihato illustrates how migrants' capabilities are limited by their liminality and their socially embedded mobility. Beyond a social-capital thesis, the author underscores the political nature of mobility, and the ways that mobility forms the foundation of the migrant experience.

Mobility

Seen through the prism of the "new mobilities paradigm,"⁴ the mobile lives of cross-border migrants disrupt the formerly static nature of the social sciences. Kihato's work may be understood as a response to Sheller and Urry's challenge to re-examine relationships between materiality and mobility. If we understand mobility as an "entanglement of movement, representation and practice,"⁵ then the narratives of Kihato's migrant women add new dimension to the relationship between material and mobile lives. The migrant women in her book exemplify mobility not only through their physical movement from "Home" (where they come from) to their adopted "home" in Johannesburg as a rite of passage, but also social mobility where social status is

meant to be transformed through cross-border migration, and demonstrated materially through remittances and gifts, and symbolically through photographic evidence of their success in a new city.

The sum of migrant women's stories in *Migrant Women of Johannesburg* disrupts conventional views of the African city and its governance from "above" and allows a view of the city from "below" that speaks to "how urban dwellers navigate the city, access urban resources, and related to the state and others" (124). Using their own vocabularies, voices, and eyes through visual methodologies, Kihato demonstrates that migrant communities have agency that is realized in liminal spaces, through entangled relationships to people and place, in the context of highly politicized and mediated mobile lives.

NOTES

- 1 M.L. Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 33–40.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 3 A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 1999).
- 4 M. Sheller and J. Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 207–26.
- 5 T. Cresswell, "Toward a Politics of Mobility," in *African Cities Reader: Mobilities and Fixtures*, ed. Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse (Cape Town: Chimurenga and the African Centre for Cities, 2011), 160.

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Belonging: The Social Dynamics of Fitting In as Experienced by Hmong Refugees in Germany and Texas



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Whenever refugees and immigrants arrive in new places, there are pertinent questions about how they will adjust to living in their new society. These processes have been studied in terms of "integration,

assimilation, and acculturation"—terms that have been critiqued as unidirectional and not as central to arrivals' experiences, such as the term *belonging*. In *Belonging: The Social Dynamics of Fitting In as Experienced by Hmong*