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## Book Review: Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Life in an in-Between City

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**Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Life in an in-Between City**  
by **Caroline Wanjiku Kihato**. 2013. Wits University Press: Johannesburg pp xvi+174.  
R270. ISBN 978-1-86814-755-7

**Reviewed by Mandi Maodzwa-Taruvinga<sup>1</sup> and Chiedza R. M. Taruvinga<sup>2</sup>**

In the celebration of the global transgressor of time and space, globalization literature misses these 'in between' spaces-the interstices - which the majority, who are not part of the elite, struggle to cross" (Kihato, 2014, p16).

Yet the liminal space ...can be empowering, providing a place of respite outside of the state's gaze. It is a space where agency and structure are in constant interrelationship. (Kihato, 2014, p18)

The role of migrants in shaping cities in Africa is central to both colonial and capitalist discourses. In "Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Everyday Life in an in-Between City" Kihato revisits the issue of migration and urbanization with a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens. The book is a creative non-fiction which combines women migrant's narratives and formal academic discourse. Although written from the vanguard field of urban studies, its content and theorization cuts across multiple disciplines and fields, to surface issues of nationality, gender, class and race within the socio-economic and political sectors of Johannesburg South Africa.

Through a rhythmic combination of storytelling and theoretical analyses Kihato reinserts the lives and stories of African migrant women to the centre of urban scholarship even as they are viewed as being at the margins. In spite of being made invisible African women "entered into the wage economy" to supplement men's meager wages at the height of primitive accumulation of capital and have played a central role of subsidizing capital and shaping cities. The choice of Johannesburg is not incidental. In an age of high global mobility, the city represents an economically viable node in the network of capitalist metropolitan cities that has been a destination of choice for the rest of Africa. Although Johannesburg's population constitutes a diverse racial, ethnic and class profile of migrant women it is discussions of male migration that have dominated South African urban scholarship. The author's focus on gender and migration therefore allows the surfacing of black migrant women's actions in the city. The writing is executed with a pace and pulse which will resonate with the reader's imagination and possibly experiences and is equally generative of alternative theoretical perspectives. The book provides compelling empirical evidence and insights of how life at the edge of the inner city constitutes a centre of resistance, resilience and survival that shapes and reshapes State laws and statutes through engagement with law enforcement agents whose role is to impose order and control. In the process it lays bare how multiple actors "co - construct" urban governance in new and significant ways.

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## **Methodology**

The vignettes of migrant women's experiences are in the form of prose narratives and "visual diaries" – photographs. They are indeed every woman's story – whether that migration is physical or psychological; real or imagined. Frustrated by the limits of language, Kihato uses photography to expand the migrant women's experiences. The photographs produced go against the dominant narratives of women migrants as victims and gives them a power to represent themselves in ways they choose, and in the process project a particular image of the city, a view of "the city from below". The ethnographic research and style of writing enables the unpacking of multi – layered realities and meanings at the personal and institutional levels.

While unmasking the researcher's location or situatedness and her close proximity to her subjects has ethical and epistemological implications, the insights it affords makes the approach not only authentic but instructive for others considering similar research.

## **Introduction: Welcome to Hillbrow, You Will Find your People Here**

The book is set in Johannesburg's Central Business District (CBD) and residential suburbs of Berea, Hillbrow and Yeoville. As with other cities, Johannesburg's CBD has gone through periods of booms and busts. Various push and pull factors lead migrants from all over Africa to the high density hive of accommodation and retail opportunities making distinctly visible the demographic and economic transformation of the city. The flight of capital and ensuing poverty reflects a race - class nexus with inequality, exploitation, alienation crime and grime providing the hotbed of women's narratives in the book. The women come from all over Africa - "Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Nigeria, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe", in search of a better life. Indeed Hillbrow houses all African nationalities.

Johannesburg is painted as "an ambivalent place – a sight of opportunity and lack, hope and despair" (2014 p2). The checkered nature of the city and the transition of inner city Johannesburg motivate the author's focus on migrant women. The city is "a place where new comers saw themselves living for only a short duration of time- their sight set on Johannesburg's northern suburbs or on cities in North America and Europe" (p8). Migrant women's experiences are located and narrated in this condition of suspension.

The link between migrant women's mobility, and their "relationships with host and home communities, the South African state, its economy, and the city of Johannesburg" (Kihato, 2014 p 9) reveals urban processes and governance that make it possible ask new questions and to posit new answers. Hence, "rather than ask how political forces and global capital shape Johannesburg" Kihato invites the reader to turn "the dominant urban question on its head, and interrogates how cross-border women shape Johannesburg's politics, regulatory systems and local economies" a "counter hegemonic" approach to understanding the cartography of Johannesburg through the agency of doubly marginal actors - migrants and women.

## **The Notice: Rethinking Urban Governance in the Age of Mobility**

The interplay between the State and state agents and migrant women as depicted in the act of giving a “notice” to appear in court for illegal vending reveals a complex relationship between these various actors.

It is evident that the complexity of African cities finds expression in the mobility of its populations. The inner city’s decaying infrastructure, poverty, and slippery governance reveals presences and absences as well as inadequacies of regulatory frameworks. There are many issues at play that confound the State’s and local government’s ability to enforce regulations reducing any such attempts to mere rituals. In the process, alternatives to the legal statutes are created through what Kihato refers to as “socially embedded codes derived from relationships between actors in the state and outside of it” (p 32).

Statutes relating to visa, asylum seeking and refugee protocols create “structured legal invisibility” of cross-border women and the attendant drama of their daily struggle to survive. The “invisibility” explains the challenges of documenting and counting migrants and in turn affects urban planning and development. This “invisibility” also makes enforcement of regulations a tentative exercise hence one of the migrant women mockingly asks “Who will catch me?” ...” Where will they find me? Who am I?”

### **Between Pharaoh’s Army and the Red Sea: Social Mobility and Social Death in the Context of Women’s Migration**

There is no underestimating how the migration of women represents a contradictory location captured in the expectation to earn enough to ensure upward social mobility and have surplus to remit home, and the alienating and at times dehumanizing conditions of life for migrants. The images and tales that portray “success” and are relayed back home, belie the conditions of struggle or even impoverishment in Johannesburg. Cross-border trading, informal entrepreneurial activities of various kinds are the mainstay of income generation for skilled and unskilled qualified and unqualified migrants alike. The hand to mouth survival of these women leads to an inability to go back home due to the imagined or real pressure of social expectations. The illusion of success engendered by capitalist ideology reflects a false consciousness by both migrants and their compatriots who have bought into conspicuous consumerism and commodity fetishism.

Clearly notions of success in the urban space need to be redefined in order to challenge the acceptance of impoverished lives in imaginary “Promised Lands. Sadly, the narratives in the book do not even hint this is a possibility? Indeed African citizens need to rethink and redefine success and take steps towards the reclamation of socio - economic and political freedoms and rights on sustainable terms anchored in their natural environments.

### **Turning the Home Inside - Out: Private Space and Everyday Politics**

The experience of domestic violence soon exposes how the status and vulnerability of migrant women influences decisions of whether they have recourse to the law. Given their illegal status they resort to alternative conflict resolution platforms, a social network of compatriots, in order to avoid outing themselves and the perpetrators of violence to the police. This reveals according to Kihato reveals “a complex labyrinth of moral codes and obligations that govern urban relationships” (2013, p22). These layered modes of operation indicate the

need for alternative approaches to urban legal regulation if the law is to be upheld. This is necessary for the creation of an image of a safe and crime free city.

### **The Station, Camp, and Refugee: Xenophobic Violence and the City**

The backlash against migrants is a world-wide phenomenon that brings to the fore the disjuncture between the ideal of human rights constitutional provisions and the realities of State regulations and the attitudes of host citizens towards foreign migrants. From slavery holding cells of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the concentration camps of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century to the refugee camps of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the history of Africans is one of suspension and no entitlement to “political claims and rights and the law” (2014, p97).

The chapter begins with the irony of a police station courtyard turned into a refugee camp with foreigners fleeing from xenophobic attacks being secured by the “notorious Red Ants” who normally assisted the City of Johannesburg, and the police to evict and arrest “illegal aliens”. The running motif of formal structures, the police, working in alliance with informal agents, the Red Ants, appears to effectively turn the city into a prison like site where one is silently watched, monitored and at an appropriate time flashed-out and attacked. In this context, an impression is created among migrants that there is no recourse to legal protection when law enforcement agents have an understanding and a working relationship with community members with xenophobic tendencies. The law is indeed tenuous and subject to reshaping in inclusionary or exclusionary ways through interactions of various actors considered either at the centre or the margins. As in the interactions of the police with street vendors the propensity of state power to operate within and outside the law and made clear.

While the spotlight is cast on relations of the South African government with foreign nationals, there is a silence about the responsibilities of sending governments. Migrants are effectively *persona non grata* – ambivalent figures in need of humanitarian aid under international convention.

### **Conclusion: Ways of Seeing – Migrant Women in the Liminal City**

It is evident that women perceived as operating on the fringes of society create their own centres. They have the agency to struggle, contest and resist various forms of oppression and regulation. The edge affords a fluid space, that at once transforms the migrants as they also transform the place and spaces with which they engage at multiple levels. The interconnection of the personal and the public, visibility and invisibility, living in the city while dislocated, being in the inner city and aspiring to be elsewhere “geographically, socially and economical”, being legal and illegal, official and unofficial, formal and informal represent states of flux, where boundaries collapse and blur into each other.

This liminality disrupts boundaries, binaries and dichotomies that dominate the theorization of urban processes and spaces, but does not erase the paradox of seamlessness and contradiction in migrant women’s everyday experiences. The evident crisis migration creates, provides an opportunity to rethink a new paradigm for the construction and reconstruction of urban spaces in ways that not only recognize all the actors, but is highly generative of alternative models and processes. Kihato’s incisive theorization of migrant women’s experiences in Johannesburg demonstrates how migrant women’s stories are part and parcel of the story of humanity and that a holistic understanding of processes, institutions and structures requires that

women be reinserted into an epistemology that captures all knowers and ways of knowing. This is an ethical stance that the book silently proclaims.

Lurking in the background of liminal Johannesburg is how the socio-spatial and political spaces of African cities are constituted as peripheral sub- metropolises of the central global cities. The lives of the migrant women of Johannesburg provide a textured and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of urban development under conditions of global capitalism.

Scholars of urban studies, geography, history, anthropology, sociology, migration and gender studies as well as readers who wish to understand the dynamics of cities in Africa will find Kihato's book a worthwhile read. The book raises critical issues about the state of urban spaces in the context the global phenomenon of migration. Their depth invokes serious attention, and ought to be engaged with and reflected upon because they have implications for human development and poverty reduction.