

*Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Everyday life in an In-Between City.* By Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, 2013, Wits University Press, Johannesburg

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Set in Johannesburg's inner city, central business district and adjacent northeast residential suburbs of Berea, Hillbrow and Yeoville, *Migrant Women of Johannesburg: Everyday life in an In-Between City* by Caroline Wanjiku Kihato concerns the stories and experiences of 11 migrant women from 10 African countries – from Nigeria to Tanzania – who crossed borders over land, eventually gaining entry into South Africa through Mozambique and Zimbabwe. Utilising the stories and self-supplied photographs of these women's lives in Johannesburg, Kihato reveals something of their daily reality by exploring their living conditions, their ability and inability to meaningfully participate in their host country, the spoken and unspoken codes for social acceptability that they face, and the rejection and turmoil they often experience. The women are of varying ages, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and their largely desperate and dangerous journeys to South Africa were prompted by diverse circumstances, the common denominator being a search for safety and upward economic and social mobility. The book is a result of up to five years of Kihato's personal interactions with several of the women, in which she positions herself autobiographically as a "black, African, middle class migrant woman" (2013: xiv).

Kihato's account of the 11 cross-border migrant women paints a picture of hope intertwined with despair, giving readers a window into the complex lives that they and similarly positioned others lead, as well as the dignity, resourcefulness, audacity and resilience that they demonstrate while navigating the astringent spaces in which they unexpectedly find themselves in Johannesburg. The book is organised into six main chapters. The first chapter, entitled "*Introduction: Welcome to Hillbrow, You Will Find Your People Here,*" rather harshly inaugurates the work with the words: "Get out!

GET OUT!” (2013: 1), echoing the kinds of reception and sentiment that some cross-border migrant women encounter upon arrival in Johannesburg. Kihato introduces Johannesburg as a “liminal city” with a rich yet deeply disturbing history that continues to subjugate many of its residents, imperiously reinforcing historical injustices, exclusions and persecutions.

The second chapter explores relations between the state’s legal instruments and street dwellers, exposing the fluid nature of the boundaries between legal and illegal practices in the city, and how “street laws” come to be constructed and fortified. In the third chapter, Kihato considers how the migrant women constantly negotiate the new social and cultural norms and expectations that they find within their host city and migrant communities from their sending countries that they meet in Johannesburg. The women’s pressure to portray a well-to-do-lifestyle to people in their sending countries clashes with the reality of the poverty that many of them are immersed in. Chapter four takes us into the heart of the women’s private lives, concerning issues such as love, beauty, family, domestic violence as well as the politics and complexity of their local migrant communities. The following chapter gives an account of the xenophobic violence that erupted in South Africa in May 2008, weaving together the experiences of some migrants and state officials who were based at the Cleveland police station and Glenanda camp for displaced refugees. Here Kihato gives voice to the migrants’ grievances about the pain inflicted by the overbearing arm of South African state power.

In the conclusion of the book, the author argues that understanding urban processes in Johannesburg and elsewhere on the continent should transcend the “simplistic dichotomies” that continue to dominate planning and governing the African city. Her work demonstrates the blurred boundaries between the divisions – “legal and illegal,” “official and unofficial,” “formal and informal,” – which inform and shape the lives of migrant black African women at the margins of the city. She questions the selective exercise of power by state agents, pointing out systems of corruption and other injustices that keep migrant women in a constant state of want and need. She also provides insights on how the women devise strategies and tactics for survival, which ultimately makes them significant agents in the matter of how and why the ‘City of Gold’ is governed as it is. The author’s portrayal and analysis of her subjects’ day-to-day living challenges epistemologies of the city “from above” and makes a strong case for a balanced view that includes perspectives “from

below.” This is a bold move that calls on citizens, scholars, urban planners and policy makers into closer proximity with the raw conditions that many face in Johannesburg.

Kihato’s work can be situated within a broader literature on women’s migration and urbanisation on the continent, including *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1983* by Belinda Bozzoli with Mmantho Nkotsoe (1998), and Teresa Barnes’ (1999) *We Women Worked So Hard: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956*. All three works concern women who seek better prospects in the city, and who emphasise the importance of being “good” or morally upright there. The women in Bozzoli and Nkotsoe’s work migrated from rural to urban South Africa and later returned home to proud retirements, while the women in Barnes’ study followed a similar trajectory in Zimbabwe, migrating into Harare and also eventually returning to their rural origins with a sense of dignity and accomplishment. Indeed in both cases some of the women even contributed to political freedom struggles.

By contrast, many of the cross-border migrant women in Kihato’s work are immersed in the shame of their impoverished conditions in Johannesburg and believe that they would face “social death” were they to return home. This is not to suggest that the women are wholly subjugated, as they do express their voices and agency in different ways. Kihato notes that the space the women inhabit “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” (2014: 18).

One of the strengths of Kihato’s work is her deployment of a bold feminist methodology that mixes ethnography, narrative inquiry and standpoint theoretical underpinnings. She interviewed the women while interacting with them in the spaces that they ordinarily inhabit and at bi-weekly workshops over an extended period of time. Noting that “there were times when no words in any spoken language could have articulated the women’s feelings, memories, and ideas” (2013: 11), Kihato adds a visual component to her data collection methods in which the women took and shared pictures of their daily lives. While the women experienced this method as empowering, and Kihato used pseudonyms to protect their identity, like her, I cannot help but wonder whether the images could ‘incriminate’ any of the women in one way or another if the state were to identify them.

It is a widespread critique that South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world yet is also notorious for crime, inequality and gender-based violence. Portraying the women in her research as neither victims nor heroines, Kihato's work is situated within the broader context of systemic problems in South Africa that require urgent redress. *Migrant Women of Johannesburg* is a timely, relevant and significant work that positions marginalised migrant black African women as a group whose rights must not be ignored in the spirit of upholding universal and indivisible human rights, pan-Africanism and calls for a 21st century African Renaissance.

## References

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