Review


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Caroline Wanjiku Kihato’s ethnographic account of migrant women living in Johannesburg’s inner city is a timely, relevant, and unique contribution to the wider literature on migration and urbanisation. It is unique because it explores the lives of foreign migrant women, often rendered invisible and insignificant in South Africa’s current political milieu. Focusing on the daily lives of migrant women from Cameroun, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Nigeria, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, the author gives insight into how they negotiate everyday life and cope with a frighteningly mercurial state and the threat of xenophobic violence.

Kihato’s compact book is a powerful account of what it is like to live ‘between and betwixt’ multiple worlds, suspended between a past ‘back home’ and an imagined future elsewhere. Kihato begins with a highly personalised notion of ‘home’, locating herself as a migrant woman, a social scientist and an activist in the research process. Building on the work of feminist scholars writing on women and migration in South Africa, Kihato makes a conscious effort to portray her research respondents not as victims of an oppressive situation but as actively shaping their own daily realities and the larger urban processes in which they are embedded. While she privileges the micro-level perspective of these women’s daily lives, she is also able to contextualise them within larger material and symbolic structures of power. Her ability to move between different levels of theoretical analysis is a strong point of the book.
Kihato’s methodological approach gives rise to the originality of her research. Recognising that oral techniques sometimes failed to communicate the women’s experiences effectively, the author made the bold choice of employing self-photography as a visual complement to her rich interview and archival material. She let the women’s words, concerns, and images figure prominently in her book, approaching the city ‘from below’ as she puts it. Her arguments are set out in a clear, confident and accessible style. A main argument that runs throughout the book is the need for social scientists to move beyond simplistic dichotomies – such as theory/ practice, subjective/ objective, informal/ formal, illegal/ legal, and micro/ macro dualities – that characterise our understandings of urban processes in Johannesburg and elsewhere. For Kihato, these are in constant dialogue, continually producing hybridised urban landscapes. The main weakness of the book is probably in the author’s frequent references to urban policy and planning which tend to smooth over the complexity of her work and direct her analysis along certain channels.

In the introduction, Kihato describes a key concept in the book – that of the liminal or ‘in-between’ city. For the author, the globalisation literature does not adequately capture the ambivalent reality of urban life for women migrants, who alternatively experience Johannesburg as a city of hope and despair, opportunity and lack. Borrowing from Turner’s concept of liminality in his study of Ndembu rituals of passage in northwest Zambia, the author explores the uncertain position of foreign migrant women, many of whom seem to live in limbo with an uncertain life trajectory while they await confirmation of their refugee status. For Kihato, the concept of liminality brings into sharp relief the notion of thresholds in the city – the physical, social and psychological boundaries that women navigate in their everyday lives. These boundaries, however, are fragile – as when violence breaks through domestic walls. These bordered places can be like traps, where women are unable to go back or move forward – yet they also provide a space outside of the state’s gaze, where agency and structure are in constant relationship.

In chapter two, ‘The notice: rethinking urban governance in the age of mobility’, the author explores cross-border women’s interactions with the state on the streets of Johannesburg, inviting us to reflect upon local practices of urban regulation. She focuses on the case of Hannah, a street seller who is caught by police selling her wares illegally. The police issue a notice to Hannah to appear in court. As the police and Hannah go through
this bureaucratic ritual, the author doubts that the address or ID number provided by Hannah was correct and wonders whether the police also realise this. Kihato reflects on this ritual in which both are participating but which appears to be a charade. In writing about this incident, the author reconfigures the boundaries between legal and illegal practices and shows how the interactions between street traders and the police produce a hybrid social order held in balance as much by an acknowledgement of state laws as by recognition of ‘street laws’. In this chapter, the author makes a strong case for how urban dwellers continually reconfigure the nature of urban governance.

Chapter three highlights the contradictions of migration where her respondents seem to face impossible choices – hence the title of the chapter, ‘Between Pharoah’s army and the Red Sea: social mobility and social death in the context of women’s migration’. The author explores the tensions between migrant women’s needs to get ahead in their host countries and their personal ties to kin in their home countries. Returning home is rarely an option, given the social expectations of success and the moral obligations of kinship relations. The author explores this dilemma through the experiences of Burundian refugee Rosine, where we come face to face with the tension between social obligations and moral pressure on the one hand, and personal well-being on the other. This tension means that women live a double life. Celebrated in their home communities because of the images of success they send home, they often live in impoverished circumstances in Johannesburg. The social pressure to be successful frequently results in women being marooned in the city – too ashamed to go back home, and unable to move elsewhere because of lack of legal papers or money. Caught in this space, migrant narratives and imaginations become productive, developing alternative ways of measuring success, and repositioning relationships with communities in multiple sites.

Kihato tackles the sensitive and often neglected topic of domestic violence in chapter four, ‘Turning the home inside out – private space and everyday politics’. Other authors writing on female migration in South Africa, such as Belinda Bozzoli and Rebekah Lee, have investigated the meaning of domestic spaces and constructions of ‘home’ among migrants to the city. Kihato’s work explores another dimension of domestic discourses and practices by not only giving a sense of the emotionality of these spaces, but also linking it to the everyday lives of ‘invisible’ foreigners. Illustrating her point with the case of Linda, a Zimbabwean woman, she shows how
migrant women’s personal lives are intertwined with the wider community and with their economic and political struggles.

Migrant women invest meaning in domestic, nurturing and mothering roles as they carve out a life for themselves in Johannesburg. These roles are important markers of achievement and success. In order to delineate themselves from South African society and maintain their traditions, migrant women put a high value on creating harmonious domestic spaces on their own terms. The women’s own pictures of ordinary domestic tasks and activities in their home are touching, allowing the reader into the intimate spaces of their lives and the identities the women fashion for themselves and their families. At the same time, these spaces are fragile, such as when domestic violence intrudes. Just as the private sphere can symbolise a space that resists the dominant cultures and discourses, it can also be disempowering and used to reinforce prejudice. Indeed, the women’s social networks can be characterised as much by exploitative relationships and anti-social behaviour as by reciprocity, support and cooperation.

In chapter five, ‘The station, the camp, and refugee: xenophobic violence and the city’, the author explores the xenophobic violence that broke out across South Africa in May 2008 (and continues to be an issue in recent times). Deploying three ethnographic case studies, Kihato brings to life the characters in a police station and a camp where displaced refugees were relocated during the violent attacks. She argues that, despite the structural odds, refugee actions prompted state responses – therefore, the periphery can influence the centre. In my view, the author puts forward a less convincing argument in this chapter. She favours the agency of migrant women in these complex negotiations – yet one is left wondering about the limits of their agency, given the repressive legacy of state power in South Africa and the insecurity that informs the women’s lives.

In a strong concluding chapter, Kihato reiterates her position that in the liminal city, women’s experiences defy binary either/or logics. Their lives reveal that they are both legal and illegal; occupy both the official and unofficial city; interact in the formal and informal economy; and remain rooted to their sending countries while being located in Johannesburg. In short, the women live in multiple social worlds which, despite being contradictory, are experienced as one reality in everyday living. She underscores that the liminal city is a productive, hybrid space that is constantly about becoming. This is an exceptional book that poses larger questions about contemporary African cities through the specificity of migrant women’s lives.