

What does it mean to ‘belong’ in an African city? And what does it mean to be ‘different’?

How have contemporary South African – and wider global – discourses framed belonging and difference; and how is this framing encountered and altered by those who are positioned as ‘outsider’? Finally, how are notions of legality constructed by the state, and how are they contested by ordinary people? These are key questions for our imaginaries of citizenship in postcolonial Africa, where we deal with the legacies of colonialism and modernity through our somewhat arbitrarily constructed state-boundaries, and these are the key concerns around which Caroline Wanjiku Kihato’s ethnography of migrant women in Johannesburg centres. This book is about Johannesburg’s in-between spaces, and the agency of the people who inhabit them and who, in so doing, change the face of the city. In South Africa’s current context of ever-surfacing xenophobic sentiment, it is a book that matters to notions of the ‘local’ versus the ‘foreign’, and to our notions of the legal versus the illegal life in a city.

Discourses of Migration in the Current World

Kihato opens with a question that we have all encountered but one which can be surprisingly hard to answer: where do you come from? For urban Africans born and raised in large cities, do we trace belonging to a street in Nairobi or Kinshasa, or do we trace it back to the places our parents, or our parents’ parents, or our great-grandparents, came from before they moved to the city? And if we do this, do we follow our mother’s or our father’s line? This simple series of questions raises issues of belonging, and raises the simple fact – which is nonetheless a fact that the world appears to have forgotten in much public discourse about migrancy at present – that people have always been mobile, and that home is a place that is made.

In mid-2015, Europe encountered what has been described in the news media as a migration crisis, as large numbers of people fleeing the war in Syria have made their way toward Europe. For those of us watching the European situation from Southern Africa, popular talk of ‘influx’ and ‘crisis’ seem all too familiar, and bring to mind the multiple moments, in multiple countries, in which various groups of persons from other parts of Africa have been viewed as (illegitimately) ‘pouring’ across the borders. These global responses to massmobility show the failures of our current public discourses. As Nyamnjoh writes,

The [globalisation] rhetoric of free flows and dissolving boundaries is countered by the realities of borders, divisions and violent strategies of exclusion.... The accelerated flows of capital, goods, electronic information and migration induced or enhanced by globalisation have only exacerbated the insecurities and anxieties of locals and foreigners alike, bringing about an even greater obsession with citizenship and belonging (Nyamnjoh 2006:1).

The City as Borderland: Migrancy and Frontier Life in Johannesburg

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

By Caroline Wanjiku Kihato

Wits University Press, 2013, 174 p., ISBN 978-1-86814-755-7, R280

Movements of people in the modern world are represented as though people are out of place, as opposed to enabling us to think of movement and mobility as a normal part of human life. In many ways, this stems from the geopolitical boundaries created by the nation-state, which create spaces to which certain people belong, and spaces to which they do not. The very notion of illegal versus legal migration implies that we are born into certain places (our ‘places of origin’), and that we should not move from those places unless certain conditions are met, despite popular talk of globalisation and increasing movement. It implies, in other words, that mobility is ‘unusual’, a fact belied by any perusal of human history, and a fact belied by Kihato’s detailed ethnography.

In contemporary South Africa, these global discourses surface through the prevalence of xenophobia, despite the regional history of movement between people in Southern African countries and beyond. Gibson (2011) argues that Fanon foresaw the emergence of such xenophobic discourses in postcolonial contexts when ‘nationalism does not become a humanism with programmes and practices that give it genuine social and political content, including real citizenship for all’ (Gibson 2011:62). In other words, where nationalist ideologies do not bring about ‘real’ change, but instead give way to neoliberal global forces – as we clearly see happening in South Africa today – it is unsurprising to Gibson that anti-foreigner sentiment surfaces. In South Africa, the derogatory term ‘makwerekwere’ is used for (black African) ‘foreigners’, and is based in a judgement on ways of being in the world – makwerekwere, so the story goes, is a word that refers to the unintelligible nature of the languages of non-South Africans, whose language sounds like gibberish or makwerekwere. It is worth noting that white foreigners do not face the same challenges.

Kihato’s book examines the lived effects of these underlying global and local ideas of whether one is entitled to move into a space or not, and whether one is a ‘proper’ person – in the eyes of the state, and in the eyes of the state’s citizens – or not. Despite the difficult topic, it is largely a positive book, and one that highlights the agency of women

who work within these discourses and who are nonetheless able to carve out spaces for themselves in Johannesburg. By so doing, Kihato argues, women are able to change the nature of public discourse. Kihato argues that by focusing on the experiences of women migrants in Johannesburg, one is able to read the city differently, and thus to see the ways in which we have become accustomed to conceptually organizing cities and persons, and to see the problems with the conceptual categories that have been created. She writes that,

African cities defy easy characterization. Cities are at once spaces of opportunity and abject poverty; connected to global circuits of people, goods, and ideas, yet simultaneously contain spaces of marginalization; cities are places of hope and creativity and at the same time of despair and despondency; they are the harbingers of democracy yet sites where some of the most violent abuses of human rights have taken place. Urban life in Africa often means straddling multiple worlds (p. 130).

Let us examine some of her key themes as a means of exploring the contradictions of the city that emerge through her detailed fieldwork.

Kihato’s Johannesburg

Kihato’s methodological approach informs the kind of text she produces, and the detailed arguments she is able to make. Eschewing big-picture social science methodologies – which she argues dominate scholarly understandings of Johannesburg – and which ‘have tended to read the city “from above”, using approaches that analyze the macro socioeconomic and political forces that shape urban spatial form and social relationships’ (p.13), Kihato embraces what she terms ‘the city from below’. By this, she means detailed ethnographic methodologies that are based in the experiences of women migrants to the city, and that allow for women’s interpretations of the city to take centre stage. It is this methodological approach that gives her access to situations which show the ways in which structure and agency are mutually constituting, such that ‘the everyday actions (of

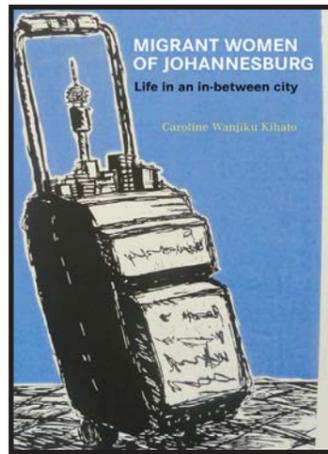
men and women) reconfigure, tweak, and sometimes transform the nature of urban institutions’ (p. 14). It also allows for a feminist reading of the city that is important to her argument. It is worth noting that Kihato’s notion of the city from below is not confined to the women themselves, but extends from their interpretations to consider the ways in which the broader social sphere is constituted by those who are considered marginal to it: in other words, women are active agents who transform cities as well as inhabit them.

Nonetheless, Kihato’s book is situated in ‘the city’s in-between spaces’ (p. 113). Liminality, and the lives lived between boundaries, is another key theme of the book. She argues that the women she interviews and works alongside live ‘between homes’, in spaces that are neither here nor there, neither one thing nor another. As such, migrants are ‘suspended’, aspiring to be elsewhere physically or economically, living between ‘a romanticised past and an imagined future elsewhere’ (p. 17). In speaking to the multiple binaries that women are caught between – legal and illegal; foreigner and local; insider and outsider; success and failure – Kihato shows the ineffectiveness of such binaries in capturing the realities of life, where it is possible to be illegal in some contexts and legal in others; or to be considered a success by one’s older brother’s ‘back home’ in Brazzaville when living what others might define as a deeply constrained life in Yeoville. The ineffectiveness of the binaries that Kihato invokes to describe the actual realities of the lives she has carefully documented is one area where Kihato perhaps could have pushed her critique further: while she provides a cogent description of the ways liminal zones transgress binaries, she still seems to rely on the binaries in order to do so. This is a small criticism, however, of an otherwise excellent analysis of the ‘in-between spaces.’

A further theme of Kihato’s which is worth considering here is that of the actual flexibility of supposedly inflexible law. Through her descriptions of interactions between women traders and the police on the streets of Yeoville, and her descriptions of interactions between ‘illegal immigrants’ in camps for displaced people following xenophobic violence, Kihato provides sound empirical discussions of the ways that, in everyday practice, ‘the law’ is made and unmade, stretched and altered, in ways that one would not necessarily expect. She asks,

What does being ‘legal’ mean in a city where those with valid visas or refugee permits are considered illegal on the streets? What is ‘official’ when police officers collude to turn a blind eye on ‘unofficial’ street trading? What is ‘urban governance’ in a context where multiple regulating authorities exist with differing values and moral economies? (p. 114).

Rather than considering the law and urban regulations as a solid set of practices that underlie life in the city, Kihato sug-



gests that we should instead look more closely at the ways legislative mechanisms are undone by state agents such as police officers. Rather than law as a formal set of rules and practices, then, what Kihato's work uncovers is a set of 'informal systems of exchange' (p. 17). As such, 'if we look carefully, we can no longer speak of a city in which firm boundaries exist between official regulation and enforcement on the one hand, and unofficial and extralegal practices on the other' (p. 18). Rather, what we see is the ways in which the state itself

– rather than 'illegal' non-state actors like immigrants – is implicated in the making of the so-called 'ungoverned' city. Conversely, her empirical work also shows the ways in which non-state actors are actively involved in reconfiguring governance within cities, in that they too are part of these informal systems of exchange. In other words, 'informality' need not be the enemy of the postcolonial city: at times, it is a productive force that is presently ignored in much of the wider policy-driven discourses around urbanity.

Conclusion

Kihato's book provides an excellent addition to the literature on the city, and its ethnographically grounded approach is a useful one in capturing the contradictions and paradoxes at play in urban spaces. She deftly captures the difficulties of defining 'belonging' in the contemporary world, and her book stands as a good reminder to social scientists and urban planners – indeed, a good reminder to everyone – that mobility is a normal part of everyday life, and a normal part of what it means to be human.

References

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