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 everyday people? These are key questions for our imaginations of citizenship in post-colonial Africa, where we deal with the legacies of colonialism and modernity through our somewhat arbitrary constructed state-boundaries, and these discourses that form the condition 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, we trace to the city in which we were born and raised in large cities, do we trace it back to the places our parents, or our parents’ parents, or Kinshasa, or do we trace it back to the place of origin? In other words, this book examines the geopolitical boundaries created by the state, which create spaces to which certain people belong, and spaces in which they do not. The very notion of illegal versus legal migration implies that we are born into certain places, and 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 conceptualizing cities and persons, and to see the problems with the conceptual categories that have been created.

She writes that, ...

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 state, which create spaces to which certain people belong, and spaces in which they do not. The very notion of illegal versus legal migration implies that we are born into certain places, and 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 conceptualizing cities and persons, and to see the problems with the conceptual categories that have been created.

African cities defy easy characterization. Cities are at once spaces of opportunity and abject poverty: connected to global circuits of people, goods, and ideas but also simultaneously containing spaces of marginalization; cities are places of hope and creativity and at the same time of despair and despondency; they are the harbinger of democracy and 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 socioecnomic 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 at Kihato’s notion, 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 constructed by ordinary people. These are key questions for our imaginations of citizenship in post-colonial Africa, where we deal with the legacies of colonialism and modernity through our somewhat arbitrary constructed state-boundaries, and these discourses that form the condition 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 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. And if we do this, do we follow our father’s or our father’s line? This simple series of questions raises issues of belonging, and raises the simple fact – which is none-the-less true – 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 make 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...
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**
