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The paradox of impermanence: Africanist political imaginations and rights claiming in Johannesburg

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Abstract

New ways of conceptualising patterns of human mobility and the political, economic and social effects of these movements are driving current migration research. Furthermore, there is a call to develop greater understanding of both the spatial and temporal aspects of migration. This includes understanding how these aspects affect the experiences of migrants in claiming rights and establishing a sense of belonging in a host state. The following research report responds to this call by developing a theory around 'the paradox of impermanence' which I construct from empirical research conducted with migrants living in Johannesburg, South Africa. This paradox identifies two distinct forms of impermanence which are caused by the following factors: insufficient access to state immigration documentation that regularises a migrant's stay in South Africa (state-imposed impermanence); and the personally expressed desires of migrants to return to their home countries (self-imposed impermanence). Further analysis develops the concept of 'African brotherhood', which I argue provides an explanation for how migrants construct their political imaginations in order to claim rights, in spite of their experiences of this paradox of impermanence.