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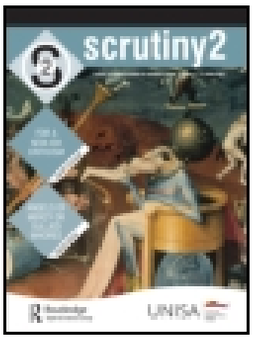
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‘A picture speaks a thousand words’

Understanding women’s migration in Johannesburg through visual diaries[1]

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Abstract

Using the visual diaries of a group of African women migrants now living in Johannesburg, this article explores what is now termed the “feminization of migration.” It does this less by drawing attention to the fact that women are moving than by using women’s own images and narratives to reveal dimensions of that experience that have yet to be understood. Central to the article’s argument is an assertion that images communicate to us in ways that can reveal not only the material conditions of groups that are often hidden from view, but also their own political locations, and society’s own assumptions about them. Women’s visual diaries and their narratives reveal the ways in which they negotiate the structural impediments of asylum officialdom, police harassment, patriarchy, unemployment and poverty. The research argues that current understandings of the feminization of migration fail to reveal the socio-cultural and political complexities of women’s mobility on the African continent. Women are not the silent emissaries that dominant iconography portrays them as being. Their discursive practices and images “talk back” to society, sometimes subverting, while at other times reinforcing hegemonic modes of representations. Thus, while many have overcome significant structural hurdles in order to survive, they are not always heroines. Using visual methods the article reveals women’s schemas – their ways of making sense of, and conceptualizing their worlds and experiences. This research offers an alternative way of reading the complexity of African women’s mobility in the twenty-first century.

ntroduction

Recent migration scholarship draws attention to what many scholars refer to as ‘the feminisation of migration’. In a study area that has focused largely on the migration of men, the spotlight on women is shedding much needed light on a phenomenon that, we now are beginning to understand, has played a significant role in shaping social-economic processes on the continent. Recent statistics released by the United Nations Population Division (2002) reveal that international female migrants constitute 47.2%

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of all migrants in sub-Saharan Africa. The number in Northern Africa is not far behind at 42.8%. What is most startling about the figures is that despite the fact that women's migrations equaled that of men[2] at the turn of the twenty first century, migration literature has focused on male migration. The insufficient treatment of gender in migration has undoubtedly had significant consequences on understanding the process of migration as a whole.

Some studies are making attempts to correct this, and this study builds on and contributes to work examining the intersections of gender and mobility on the African continent. It does this less by drawing attention to the fact that women are moving than by using innovative methods to reveal dimensions of that experience that have yet to be understood. Historical and contemporary studies on migration in and to South Africa have tended to focus on the movement of labour (Crush et al 1991) and the consequences of mobility on the social and economic locations of migrants, host and sending countries (Peberdy 2004; Hunter & Skinner 2003; Dodson 1998; Reitzes 1997). Some studies focus on understanding the underlying motivations and patterns of mobility in South and Southern Africa (Cross 2006; Wentzel *et al* 2006; Gelderblom and Adams 2006). Increasing incidents of trafficking and xenophobic attacks on migrants have resulted in a plethora of studies with concerns around human rights issues regarding the position of women and children (Human Rights Watch 1998; Palmary 2002; Oppelt 2000; Klusener 2000). Where primary research has been conducted, most studies have relied on surveys (FMSP 2003; Belvedere *et al* 2003) interviews with migrants (Kihato 2007; Bozzoli 1991; Pineteh 2005) or participant observation (Rodgers 2004), to obtain data. These are invaluable techniques that provide important parameters for understanding the nature and consequences of mobility on our societies. However, they are beset by a pair of problems. One is the consistent reproduction of concepts and characterizations implicitly embedded within social science discourse. What phenomena we see, and how we understand them is a factor of our location within dominant paradigms, or what Foucault calls "discursive formations." The use of new methods can help us see different phenomena, or the same phenomena in different ways. The second problem is the "flatness" of migrants' self-representation. Although many scholars use extensive and often challenging quotations from migrants, the power of words alone is limited. By using images that have been taken and explained by the research "subjects" themselves, we begin to understand not only what is important to women who have been displaced, but the complex politics and power dynamics of representation. The remainder of this article briefly outlines the research method used to collect the data that forms the basis of the argument made here. Following this, it turns to a discussion on theorizing images and the camera, which lays the foundation for analysing some of the themes that emerge from the women's visual diaries.

Research method

Terry Kurgan (a professional artist) and I invited 11 participants from various countries on the continent to participate in bi-weekly workshops, over a period of six months between November 2007 to April 2008. There were two women from Cameroon, two from Kenya, three from the Democratic Republic of Congo, one Zimbabwean, one from Burundi, one from Rwanda, and one from Uganda. Two broad questions directed the activity: "What happens in a typical day in your life in Johannesburg?" and "What are the markers that punctuate your day?"

We held a series of initial workshops with participants, which introduced the concept of a visual diary and provided a basic lesson on taking photographs. Subsequent workshops

discussed the images that had been taken. Each participant was asked to explain their images, and their explanations of each frame and ensuing conversations were digitally recorded. There were two primary reasons for using photography in our methodology: the first was to complement verbal questions by using photographs as prompts to encourage conversation. The second was to obtain a visual archive of women's everyday lives in Johannesburg and prise open spaces that are often concealed to outsiders.

The decision to use group rather than individual interviews was based on two factors: the time we had for the project and the need for us to capture conversations between the women rather than conducting two-way conversations between interviewer and interviewee – the latter carrying an implication of a one-way power dynamic between researcher and research subject. We wished to reduce these power relations by establishing a group of peers in which we were viewed as facilitators rather than the "experts." Groups can be particularly interesting in uncovering burning issues, triggering memories of other group members, verifying facts, challenging different views, and obtaining robust discussion about things women (as peers) find important to them (see Slim, Thompson, Bennett and Cross 1998). As the women got to know each other better, the conversations became more candid. In some of the workshops, participants took over the conversations, and directed discussions as they debated common themes in their experiences. In these discussions Terry's and my role shifted from interviewers to moderators — instigating initial questions, but leaving the conversation to take on its own identity and direction. Typically the questions that we would ask were: "Which of your pictures evoke the deepest emotions?" "Are there pictures that you would like to be part of your daily life that are currently missing?" "Are there pictures that are in your daily life that you would like to erase?" "Which are your most and least favourite pictures?" "Do these pictures capture your life?" "What is the most important thing you have lost as a result of migrating to Johannesburg?" "What is the most important thing you gained as a result of moving to Johannesburg?"

Not all group interviews work as they should, particularly if there are dominant participants who subdue the voices of quieter participants. Terry and I had to ensure that everyone in the group was able to participate. In this, the photographs provided a good platform for all participants to speak about their own images and experiences. We realized that we were sometimes out of our depth, particularly when women were discussing traumatic issues around their past or present circumstances. In a session about the past, one of the women shared her experience of the Rwandan genocide, and another revealed that she had just found out that she was HIV positive. Under these circumstances, we found ourselves without the necessary counselling skills, and frequently questioned whether we had made the appropriate responses. Yet what amazed us was the capacity for the group to offer collective support to the narrator during these times. The way everyone responded to issues of trauma by listening empathetically and being present with the narrator was something I found reassuring. Nevertheless, due to the intensity of some of the sessions, we linked women who needed it to a free professional counselling service.

The camera's limits

As has been discussed before, one of the aims of using images in this research was to prise open spaces that are often not visible to outsiders and provide a pictorial account of a day in the life of migrant women. Despite this, we realized that there were areas where the camera was unable to penetrate for fear of the repercussions of being caught. Ironically,

these invisible spaces were often where women engaged with state emissaries — Home Affairs officials and the police. Even with a method that seeks to explore women's multi dimensional existence in Johannesburg, visual absences remain.

One of the Congolese participants explains:

> Every two months I have to go to Home Affairs to renew my refugee permit. I am not able to take pictures in Home Affairs, or on the streets. It is very stressful. But this experience makes me feel caged. I am not free. To symbolize this I could try to take a picture of a gate, someone who has two hands behind the gate, this symbolizes I am not free.

Reflecting on a similar situation, one of the Zimbabwean participants told of her experience:

> Many times when we are going home from the restaurant in the evening in a taxi, we find a lot of police roadblocks. We all know these police are just there to target Zimbabweans because they know we have just finished working and we have money from tips. I would really like to take a photograph of a policeman taking money from us, but I don't know what they will do if they catch me.

The discussions of "invisible pictures" shed light on the dark and impenetrable spaces of the city where women find it difficult to navigate. These "invisible" images provide important clues about the social context in which migrant women live their lives, and the risks present as they navigate the streets of Johannesburg. At a subjective level, these traumatic experiences are a significant part of living in the city. They code women's perception of figures of authority in ways that shape their relationship with the state, its emissaries and people they encounter. And while one can use symbols to represent spaces that are difficult to photograph, we cannot ignore the impact of the environment in shaping women's choice of frame. It is telling that most of the images that the women have produced are taken in spaces that are perceived as "safe," and around people who are known to them, and this undoubtedly means that some aspects remain hidden in ways that impair our full understanding of their lives in Johannesburg. Nevertheless, these absences reveal much about the city, and particularly what women consider fearful or stressful encounters.

Theorising the image and its meanings

> … the image, which stands at the centre of visual culture … function[s] as a sign or text which produces meaning. (Hall 1999:309)

Cultural and media studies have drawn our attention to the importance of the "image"as a communication tool (see Evans & Hall 1999). Just as words are accepted as an evocative interface in communication, so too is the visual image, particularly in an era where digital technology and mass media continually produce and circulate images effortlessly across space and time. How do images communicate? What are the dynamics involved in producing meanings? If we consider that people communicate through a variety of mediums, artefacts, symbols, and gestures, we acknowledge that images are as much a language as the spoken word. While disciplines like literature have traditionally relied on words to understand and explain social phenomena, the practice of "reading" images is not new to historians, anthropologists, cultural and media studies. Historians use photographs as sources that allow for greater insights into the past (see Guy 2001). Visual anthropologists assert that photography is a significant tool for constructing "ethnographic authority" (see Wolbert 2000), while others argue that understanding the use of photography within people's socio-cultural contexts, provides important insights into ordinary people's everyday lives (see Ruby 1981; Sontag 1977). Images are thus a form of language as they use

certain signs and codes to communicate about a subject matter. And just like oral language or text, "photographs often employ classical rhetorical language and the literary figures of metaphor, simile and metonymy, as are most often apparent in the persuasive discourses of advertising" (Evans 1999:14).

Like oral communication, images are mediated by a variety of factors, including the photographer's intentions, the context in which the photograph is taken, the relationship and power dynamics between the photographer and the subject, and the receiver's interpretation of the image that is produced. The snapshot not only makes visible a material reality that, in the case of migrant women, is often invisible to outsiders — women's snapshots also reveal the dynamics of the socio-political context within which they are located and the signifying practices of both the viewer and the viewed. In other words, migrant women's images not only reveal critical aspects of their own lives and subjectivities, but of the ways in which society "sees" them. Making sense of the photograph therefore needs to take into consideration the inter-relationship between the subject and the audience and the ways in which both these groups construct and produce meaning. As Evans and Hall point out:

> Meaning is constituted not in the visual sign itself as a self-sufficient entity, nor exclusively in the sociological positions and identities of the audience, but in the articulation between viewer and viewed, between the power of the image to signify and the viewers capacity to interpret meaning. (1999:4)

The images discussed in this article have to be understood within this broad framework. They have not been produced in a vacuum, but rather are embedded in social practices, relationships and ways of seeing that are located within specific socio-political dynamics. The following section illustrates the point: modes of representation of displacement are located within complex political, institutional and economic contexts, all of which shape the meanings that images convey.

The construction of displaced women and children in iconic photography

> Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. (Sontag 1977:5)

While there has been a growing stream of photographic works that use images to illustrate mobility and displacement on the continent (see Badsha 2002; Salgado 2005 and to some extent some of Tillim's (2005) pictures of Johannesburg), there has been little attention given to the use of photography as a method of analysis and theorization of the migration process. Iconic images of migrants in the popular media tend to produce depictions of extremities that show conditions of squalor and extreme degradation of the human body and spirit. While these shocking images are needed to make visible the horrors that many people live, they ironically, perpetuate the invisibility of certain dimensions of the lives of those they purport to make visible. There is a fine line between visibility and invisibility; the very act of foregrounding certain aspects of an event can eclipse and consequently frustrate a holistic multidimensional understanding of reality. So the manner in which images are produced, made visible and interpreted is critical to providing a transformative analysis.

Although the focus on women's mobility has drawn attention to a much-neglected area in migration studies, it has tended to represent women as lacking agency – as "silent emissaries" who are vulnerable, disempowered, and desperate (Malkki 1996). In particular, iconic photography of refugees is located within a particular discourse of displacement – a construction that rests on the choices made by photographers and the press (Hamilton 1997). Contemporary

iconic images of refugees and displaced populations represent women and children as victims — malnourished, violated, and weak. These images are not accidental: they do not simply occur. Rather, they are, as Foucault suggests, constructed within a "regime of truth" which is supported and informed by scientific discourse, political and economic power, educational institutions, the media and so on (Foucault 1980:132). Contemporary images of refugees are constructed within a "regime of truth." By the time pictures of refugees or displaced people enter our homes through television screens, the internet or newspaper articles, behind the scenes a whole host of social and institutional practices have already been set in motion. Politicians and civil society organizations may have already begun to draw attention to the "humanitarian crisis." Watching the situation closely are international aid agencies gearing up to respond to emergency food and sanitation requirements. Diplomats and other negotiators may be contacting the leadership to try and stem the crisis, as regional peacekeeping bodies prepare to send their troops to the location. Media houses prepare to send their journalists to the area. Responding to horrific images on television and in newspapers are markets and entrepreneurs who, depending on the nature of their business, are either investing or disinvesting in the affected economy. Development institutions such as the World Bank could be watching closely to prepare for the possibility of a reconstruction programme once things are back to normal. So refugees are constituted within these political, economic and humanitarian practices. Others speak and negotiate on their behalf. Aid is obtained to feed and clothe them. The international community takes it upon themselves to protect them. As Malkki says, refugees' apparent helplessness and silence calls for the actions of others more powerful (Malkki 1996).

Some of the most famous images of human displacement are the works of award-winning photographers Sebastião Salgado and Kevin Carter. Salgado's images on what he terms the "African drama" are aimed at drawing attention to the unprecedented scale of human displacement caused by famine, war and drought (Salgado 2005). His images of refugees and displaced populations in Africa tend to depict women and children as weak, violated and malnourished.

So compelling are these images that they circulate in official UNHCR calendars, in newspapers, on television, the internet and other media. One of the most shocking images of the consequences of displacement is Kevin Carter's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a vulture hovering over the body of a dying child. The image is about basic survival. Yet who or what will survive – the child or the vulture – remains ambiguous. It is a chilling depiction of human fragility, with the human being no longer at the top of the food chain. In Carter's controversial image, representations of powerlessness, dehumanization, vulnerability and the complete depletion of the human spirit all manifest in the single frame.

Images such as Carter's and Salgado's are essential in raising awareness of human suffering. While compassion and humanitarianism are indeed important, what these images do is deny refugees any agency; any action contemplated is outside the refugee. In photographs, events are taken out of their contexts and reproduced in particular sequence within texts that serve to convey a particular argument. Most images of displaced populations have a predictable universal storyline. It does not matter who the individuals in the picture are: the photographs do not tell their specific histories or geographies. The people in the picture could be transposed anywhere and their plight would be the same. They are caricatures, disconnected not only from their history, but also from the experiences and histories of those who consume their images (Malkki 1996).

Notwithstanding the problematics of representation in dominant iconography, one must acknowledge the complexity within which they are produced. Here Malkki makes an important point that iconic images bring to us *a dimension of reality* — a fragment of what is real at a particular time. Our relationship with dominant representations of migrants thus cannot be a complete dismissal of them — but an acknowledgement that they can only be partial in the telling of the refugee story.

> And yet the mechanisms involved here are more complex than that. For one might argue that what these representational practices do is not strictly to dehumanize, but to humanize in a particular mode. A mere, bare, naked, or minimal humanity is set up. This is a vision of humanity that repels elements that fail to fit into the logic of its framework. (Malkki 1996:390)

Given the images that have come to represent displaced populations, it is not surprising that the concept of the "refugee" conjures up feelings of hopelessness, desperation and powerlessness. This is not to say that alternative images do not exist. A recent exhibition sponsored by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) of cross-border traders operating between Zimbabwe and South Africa provides a welcome break from pictures of desperation, but these are often less publicized or common (2006). In our mind's eye, images of barefooted, malnourished, hungry people fleeing are associated with displaced populations — and it is these pictures that are ingrained in our psyche. Shocking photographs of displacement have become the way in which we think about and imagine refugees. These are our registers and frames of reference for women and children who flee violence and socio-economic hardships. The ethical debates around publishing shocking images pitch the idealists who argue about the importance of telling the truth about societal injustices against the cynics who see it as sensationalist media in search of greater profit. Similarly, the development aid industry also exploits these images to gain support for its causes. While there is no denying that these images are, for many, a reality, I wish to stress that they unwittingly establish an association of victimhood, powerlessness and dehumanization with the refugee and migrant condition.

These regimes of knowing, circulated and reinforced by institutional practices, raise important questions about how we know (and from whose vantage point) and whether other regimes of truth are possible. Epistemologically, the analytical frames with which we construct gendered theories of migration tend to represent women as vulnerable to trafficking, prostitution, and coerced or otherwise exploitative labour (see Piper 2003; Aghatise 2004 and Chammartin 2001). Works on migrant women's domestic labour describe the manipulative nature of their recruitment, the poor conditions of labour, and their lack of choices, which result in women being captives of their employers, pimps and husbands in their host environment (see Andermahr, Lovell & Wolkowitz 2002). Further, much of this discourse is framed around a moral concern with Western scholars endeavouring to "save" women from these inhumane practices (Agustin 2003: 378), and a human rights agenda that seeks to stop "from above" the trafficking of women and children."

Migrant women's visual diaries

The previous section highlighted how particular sets of images and discourse "fix" or stereotype displacement, particularly the plight of women and children. It shows the power of the image, produced within a particular institutional, social, economic and political context, to inscribe despair and hopelessness upon particular bodies. The following section discusses another set of images produced by migrant women, many of whom are asylum

seekers and refugees in Johannesburg. While acknowledging that their realities differ from women and children who live in refugee camps, it presents another face of displacement and migration — another viewpoint from which to understand women's mobility. Like the images referred to in the previous section, the women's images discussed here are not produced in a vacuum. Their meanings are mediated by women's marginal social location in South Africa, their conscious or unconscious need to counter the asymmetry in the ways they are represented in popular media, and the interaction between their own intentions and my own interpretations as a researcher.

Women's self-representations and interpretations of their everyday lives present more textured and humanized depictions of displacement and mobility. Knowingly or unknowingly, their images are subversive, challenging tropes of the suffering fragile refugee. Yet they also highlight some of their vulnerabilities in Johannesburg. In some respects their images represent a site of contestation that resists dehumanizing hegemonic representations of displaced populations. Through images of their femininity and domesticity, the women appropriate domestic spaces and tasks, turning them into important spaces of self-identity and power. They reveal how, through their mobility, they shift their social status within family and community structures and are able to participate in decision-making. Yet they also reveal significant areas of their vulnerability — providing insights into the nature of violence in the home, the various levels and contours of exclusion from South Africa's polity, and their vulnerability to exploitation. What is revealing about the images they produce is the fact that they are in sharp contrast to those we have become accustomed to.

Reading domesticity



Image 1: Reading domesticity

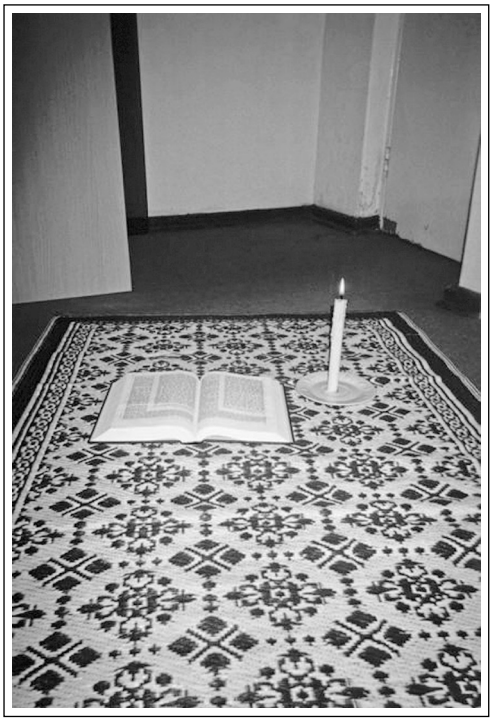


Image 2: (above) Hope in my life
Image 3: (below) 'Here is my family, a happy family!'

While running workshops and interviews with women, I was surprised at how often the domestic realm came up in conversations and images. Given my interest in women's engagement with the "city," these conversations seemed at first mundane and uninteresting. Yet they featured prominently in women's lives, and not as a source of anguish but as a space of pride. Numerous images and conversations revolved around mundane everyday domestic tasks and scenes.

In the home, the preparation of food, nurturing and cleaning, play an important role in defining women's identities. In image 1, one of our participants from Rwanda is pictured conducting ordinary household tasks — cleaning, preparing her daughter for school and preparing food in the kitchen. Talking about her images, Jane[3] says: "I like to see my family because I don't have other family here … only my husband and children. I am very much happy because when I see my family I just feel I'm whole."



Hope in my life

As Mary from the DRC explained her daily activities in the city, she told the group that she lit a candle in her room and prayed as an important part of her daily routine. This space, created every day, symbolized hope in her life.

MARY: Here it is a time which have a big meaning in my life, this time, this picture symbolize when I'm praying, after doing my work I take time to read my bible and here I usually pray, it symbolizes hope in my life.

Image 3 shows a father and three children sharing a couch in their living room. Mary took the photograph while the family was watching television. One is struck by the intimacy between father and children. From the narrative accompanying this frame, it is clear that the snapshot is intended to portray contentment and happiness. Mary explains this picture thus: "Here is my family, a happy family!"

With the exception of a few images, which are discussed below, domestic space is portrayed as a place of safety and happiness. The performance of household tasks seems a significant reference point in the women's everyday lives. Yet their images and accompanying narratives do not fit within dominant feminist discourses that frame domestic work and roles as patriarchal oppression. Rather, their ability to take care of their families is integral to their identity as women, and a source of pride. Consider this snapshot of the breakfast tray.



Image 4: The breakfast tray

Like other images, the breakfast table raises questions. Was the tray prepared for the camera? Was it "posed" to send a message about the preparer and her family? The choice of the frame, the way in which the food is displayed, the attention to detail (notice the Tic Tacs placed on the serviette), portray a creativity and an energy which is discordant with ideas of food preparation as sexist oppression. It is an assertion of selfhood that overturns commonplace prejudices of marginalized communities as lacking creativity and aesthetics. The tray depicts a bounty that may or may not exist every day. Given the harsh economic conditions that refugee women and their families experience, the tray could have been prepared specially for the camera. Or, there may be times when the family can afford a hearty breakfast, and times when they cannot. Whether this is an everyday picture is less important than what it symbolizes. This image seems to say, "Look at me. I am no different from you. I can take care of my family." At stake here is the very identity of the preparer of the breakfast tray and her need to show her ability, as a mother and a wife, to nurture and care for her family. In other words, it seems important to project the image of being a "good woman." The most mundane domestic task — preparing breakfast — takes on new meaning. Domestic spaces and tasks represent complex intersection of notions of identity (womanhood/selfhood), control (empowerment) and creativity. And while they may at times be spaces of vulnerability and disempowerment, they also symbolize strength and hope. Thus, everyday domestic activities cannot simply be written off as patriarchal oppression; they seem much more complex.

In order to understand the significance of these domestic scenes, it is important to delve into the contexts within which they occur, and dismantle some of the prejudices around domesticity in dominant feminist discourse. To some, the apparent "celebration" of domesticity in the images illustrates a social conservatism which, after all, is not unusual amongst a group of women from Africa of a certain class and educational background. Mohanty shows that scholarly writings on women in the "Third World" unwittingly construct the "Third World Woman" as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimised, etc." (Mohanty, 2003: 22). In other words, the descriptive category "Third World Women" presupposes certain sociological characteristics. In this view, images of domesticity produced by the migrant women in this study are *necessarily* socially conservative and depict women who continue to be bound by oppressive patriarchal traditions. They are *a priori* sociologically constructed as domestic and tradition-bound.

Others explain domestic images as a lack of life-choices. If migrant women had the choice, surely they would not choose to celebrate their role as nurturer or their domesticity? In a debate around this issue, I was told: "I don't buy that these women actually like doing domestic work. I don't know about you … I like cooking once in a while, but I hate domestic work." While it may well be true that if they were given a choice the women would have different perceptions of housework, the argument is a logical fallacy — one which emanates from constituting all women as having identical desires and aspirations regardless of their race, ethnicity, class or cultural locations (Mohanty 2003:21).

Within the context of high levels of crime, the insecurity of being a foreign migrant, and a lack of control of what happens outside the home, domestic space becomes a place where migrant women can exercise control and create a level of security. Moreover, having left their country of origin, for political or

economic reasons, and entered South African society, which is often hostile and difficult to navigate, they are dislocated. From the location of dislocation, having a home or a kitchen and performing mundane tasks such as cooking and cleaning takes on a more positive connotation. For refugees or people seeking asylum, performing the ordinary tasks of feeding, cleaning, and nurturing is a significant feat – one that middle-class women in stable political and economic contexts take for granted. Given this context, women's snapshots elicit a sense of power: "*I* cook for my kid and husband. *I* feed them". Given their circumstances, it is hard to see how the conclusion that their celebration of domesticity is conservative can be substantiated.

Reading violence

Ironically, while the home provides a sanctuary and source of power for women, it is often also a space of violence and abuse. In particular, women's status as refugees or undocumented migrants turns the home into a significant point of vulnerability because of their lack of status and fear of the police.

The following images taken by Lucy, a Zimbabwean woman, illustrate the fragility of the safety of home. These images show how domestic violence disrupts family life, and the difficulty women face addressing domestic abuse because of their status as asylum seekers or refugees. Below image shows Lucy's daughter and niece taking a bath in their flat in Hillbrow.

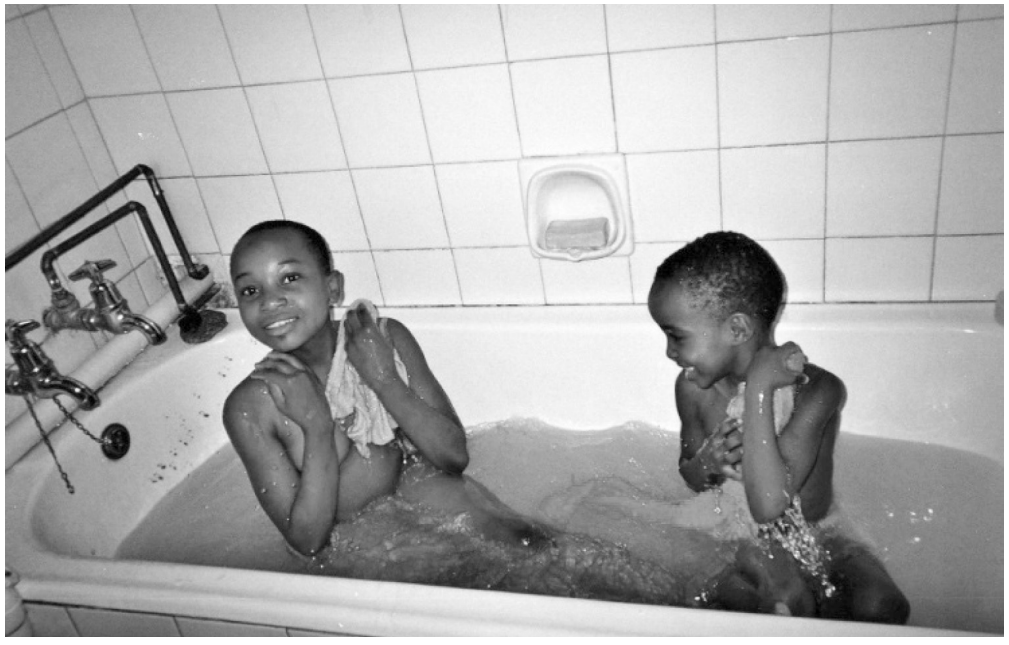


Image 5: Fragile spaces

In the next image, the bath is splattered with bloodstains. It was taken a few weeks later, when Lucy got home to find that her sister had been in a fight with her boyfriend. She narrates the story:



Image 6: Fragile spaces

L: … My young sis had a fight with her boyfriend and she ran away to my room. … he hit her with a hammer and he is the one who did this and destroyed my property.

T: Is he from Zimbabwe or SA?

L: Zimbabwe …. He ran away and went back to Zim, he was hitting my sister against the bath, you can see the blood here …

T: Gosh, is she all right?

L: She is much better now. They couldn't, you know, stitch her head because it couldn't come together he was hitting her against the tap. He used a hammer … I was at work! I came back from work at about 3 in the morning. I just saw blood and, like, I said to the security [guard]: "Who were you fighting with?" He said to me: "Are you saying that? It's your sister who has been hurt; they took her to the hospital." … she is out now and she is okay.

C: Did you report the matter to the police?

L: Yes, actually. You know what happened, he [the boyfriend] paid the police R600. He is out now. 600 Rands only! He bribed the police. We fear for our lives but he was banned from the flat. The security guards are not allowed to let him in any more coz he is already out. But you know, sometimes the system can let you down.

L: But, like, at home it's different … like at home it's different. When you do crime … in Zim the crime there is very low. When you do something wrong you have to pay, like go to court, get arrested, they don't even allow bribes, if you bribe a cop you will be in big trouble. Or like if you pay to get out you will be in big trouble. So I have got these pictures and I am just thinking to go to the police again and show them and ask them where is the person who did this to us? He never even went to court; he never even slept in the cell the whole night.

JANE (a group participant from Rwanda): You know what they [the police] do? They just keep you coming you come and you come, until your money is finished; you get tired; you leave them.

The next account of domestic violence by Mary (from the DRC) illustrates how women negotiate complex social codes within their communities. Being part of a community often means securing some form of protection in times of crisis. Churches and other forms of

association provide food and money in times of crisis. They are also important networks for accessing asylum seeker permits, space in markets and business opportunities. Ironically, their membership in communities also makes women vulnerable to domestic and other forms of abuse within the community. Women are sometimes bound to certain codes, which force them to protect perpetrators in their own community for fear of being labelled a traitor and excommunicated:

MARY: Now this picture there symbolizes domestic violence. I usually go to give advice to couples, persons who are in need. That day I went to help this couple. They had quarrelled, they broke everything. The husband chase away the wife and kids, he throw everything outside… ja that is why I took those pictures.

TERRY: Were you able to calm them down?

MARY: Yes. Yes.

TERRY: What caused the problem?

MARY: The husband said the wife was impolite. He said she answered bad in front of people, and that day he said he can't support it any more. At least I took time to give them advice, we prayed and the wife get into the house and everything become normal again.

CAROLINE: Did you or anyone else call the police?

MARY: You must understand how we live in our community. The police are not safe … we have complications. If that woman went to the police she could have been rejected by the community because she went to report one of us. Also she does not have "real" papers, only these refugee papers, and the police can tear them up and send her to jail because she is an illegal alien. Before she go to the police she has to find a way of sorting it out among the community. That is why they called me. I am known and from their church.

Mary shows the dilemmas facing women in situations of domestic violence. Women



Image 7: Fragile spaces

fear going to the police because of their lack of legal status in South Africa. Even where women have legal asylum-seeker or refugee documents, which allow them access to services and legal protection in the country, these are often not recognized by the police or other service providers. Moreover, going to the police means exposing a member of the community, which can lead to being exiled by one's own community.

Mary's account of domestic violence also illustrates how migrant women walk a tightrope between protecting themselves and protecting "the community". Women often use their communities, churches, and extended family members to mediate and resolve domestic or other forms of conflict. But just as membership in their communities offers them protection at times, it can also make them vulnerable to violence. Mary shows how women protect domestic spaces from penetration by the state. Going to the police in a domestic violence case is seen as being disloyal to the community. Women, therefore, become buffers, protecting crime and criminals within their own communities. And while they do not necessarily condone the acts of violence, their fear of losing the "protection" of their own communities is often much stronger than that of facing violence at home.

Reading livelihoods: the Yeoville market

Women's legal status and attitudes, together with the view of giving jobs to foreigners as "stealing" from South Africans, limit their access to job opportunities. Despite having the legal right to work, asylum seekers and refugees are often discriminated against by employers, who demand "green IDs" given to citizens or permanent residents. One Congolese woman illustrates the frustrations of not having an ID:

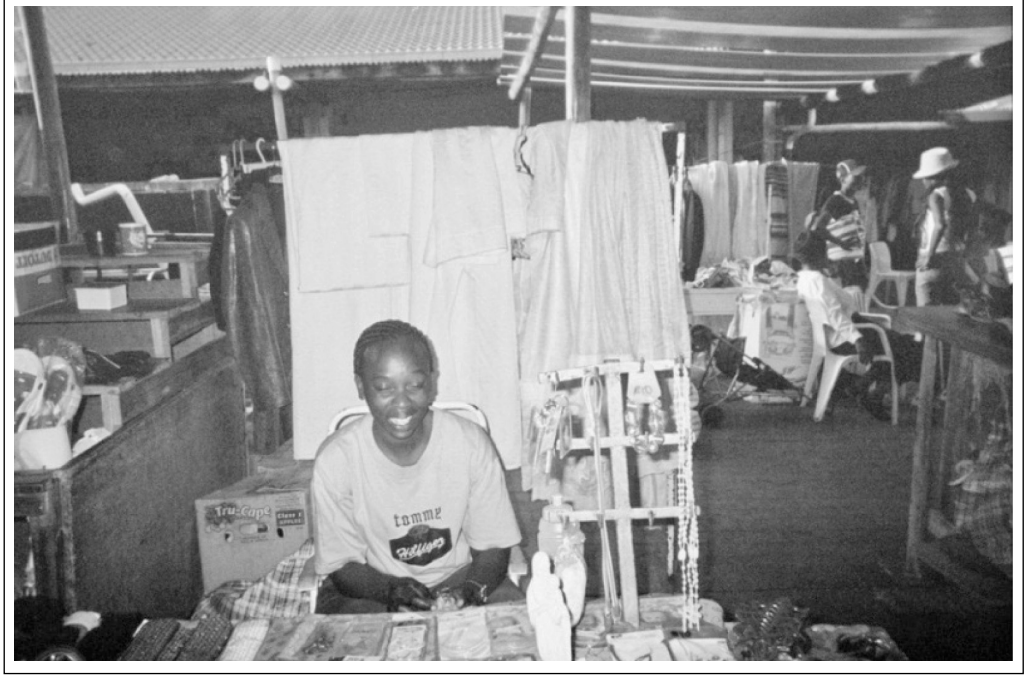


Image 8: Helen in Yeoville Market

I cannot participate in South African life the way I would like to. Here, if I try to get a job I cannot because I am not South African, and I do not have an ID [identity document]. This makes me feel an outsider and also angry because it is not because I cannot do work, but because I am not from here.

Since it is difficult to enter the formal job market, many women turn to the informal sector to earn money. Images and narratives of markets and the streets in Johannesburg reveal intricate networks of support and reciprocity between neighbouring street and market sellers. Survival on the streets is heavily reliant on relationships with other traders, and some level of organization between them. Helen, a Ugandan woman who sells her wares at the Yeoville market, explains how it works.

HELEN: This is me selling in the market. Inside the storeroom at the market, we have cages where we put our stuff. Mine is cage number 117. We pay R60 for the stall, and that covers the cages. You have to pack your stuff nicely and then put it in the cages to be safe.

HELEN: These are my friends who I work with at the market.

CAROLINE: Where are they from?

HELEN: These girls are South Africans. This one is a Kenyan, and this one is from my country – Uganda. This one is from Congo, Espe, I don't know if you know her … They are my friends, like now this one is watching for me my business. Also when she is not there I can watch for her sometimes.

Helen's images explore public life in inner city Johannesburg and relationships with people she spends most of her days with at the market. Within the context of the market and amongst the friends she has made, there seems to be a network of support amongst people from different countries. Helen's frames and her accompanying narratives question common assumptions that social ties are weak in

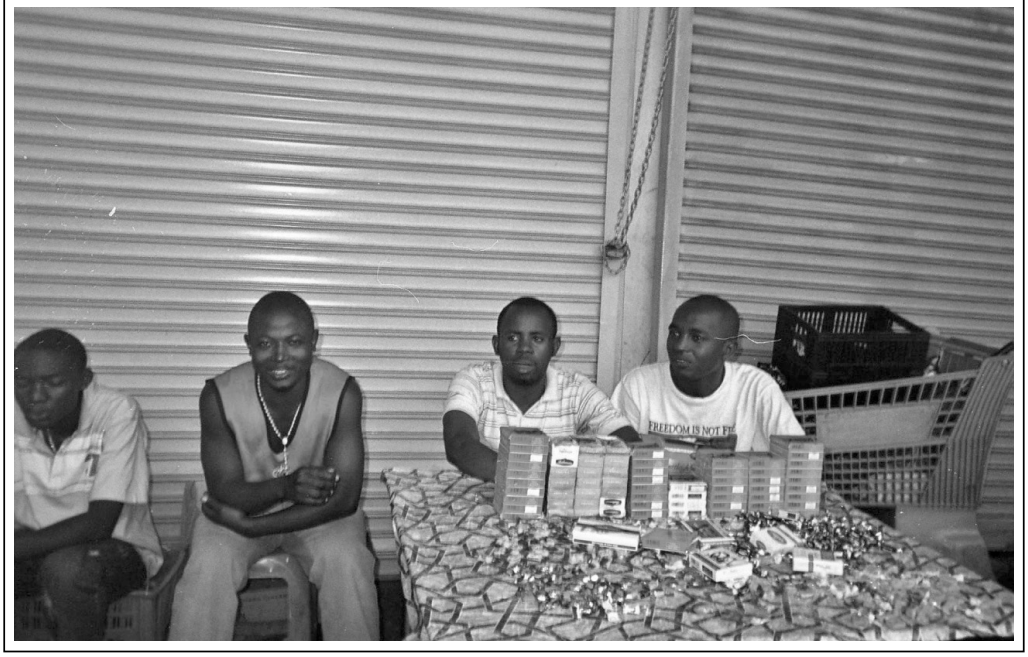


Image 9: Corner of Claim and Plein

inner cities. They also challenge xenophobic discourses, which pit South Africans against foreign Africans. While we cannot deny the fact that foreigners do experience acts of xenophobia, Helen's experience tells us that at the micro-level, there are relationships of reciprocity that are built across nationalities; dominant discourses sometimes overlook these dynamics in their attempts to highlight the social problematics facing inner-city communities in Johannesburg.

Corner of Plein and Claim

Emma and Rose (from Kenya) both sell on the corner of Claim and Plein, in inner-city Johannesburg. This location is considered illegal by the municipality as it has not been designated an official trading area and is therefore prone to police raids. Because of this, the street traders find they have to organize themselves, often paying a fee to a "spokesperson" who negotiates with the police. On the corner of Plein and Claim, where most sellers are foreign migrants, the appointed spokesperson is a South African woman. Everyone pays her R50 every month, although it is unclear how the fee charged by the spokesperson is distributed. Sometimes she is unable to fend off policemen; at these times, traders rely on each other to warn of the police raids and to remove their wares off the street.

ROSE: This is in town. These sweets and cigarettes are for another Tanzanian guy called Rasta. He sells just next to me. This one she is also selling somewhere next to me, she is from Mozambique. This one is from Malawi, both of them are selling next to me also. My things are somewhere here. So I think in town, and you have to keep together, with the person who is selling next door. You need each other for change, and also your neighbours can help you sell for each other. I've got to know the people next door. I even sell for him [the Tanzanian]. He leaves me here and goes. He tells me, "I'm coming just now," and I stand in for him.



Image 10: Corner of Claim and Plein

CAROLINE: Is this important?

ROSE: Yes, very very important, because if you do not stand together your business will go down. People will not warn you when police are coming and maybe you have gone to the toilet or to get lunch or something.

CAROLINE: Is it only foreigners selling in this market. Are there no South Africans?

ROSE: No. Very few.

Emma also has a stall at the corner of Claim and Plein. Her conversation reveals the constant fear of having one's goods confiscated by the police and she also provides some insight into how her business works. Because of the intense competition and small profit margins, street traders have to identify new products to sell on the streets. Emma's understanding of the market and business reveals a degree of sophistication that is rarely attributed to street traders. From details of who to hire, what goods to sell and the networks of wholesalers, to an understanding of profit margins, this conversation depicts Emma as a savvy business woman. Interviews show that Emma is not an atypical street trader. Many of the women interviewed had a good grasp of business principles, and what was failing and succeeding in their businesses. The fact that businesses did not always succeed is due less to the lack of business acumen than other environmental factors such as the enforcement of by-laws, and the lack of access to capital owing to the lack of legal status or citizenship.

EMMA: This is my business, the one that the police took. I didn't used to put all the things on display, I put only a few, most of the stuff are in a sack, which we normally hide somewhere else so that when the cops come they cannot take all your things. Unfortunately that day I had everything there on the street …

EMMA: I normally only put a few things on top. On different days I have different things. This one is the plastics and cutlery. Sometimes I put more things like wallets, dozens of spoons and sometimes singles, the spoon holders …. But they (metro police) took them so I have to buy others.

TERRY: How did it happen?

EMMA: This was the lady who was selling for me on that day when the police came; she's the lady that Rose and I have employed.

TERRY: She had all your stuff.

EMMA: Ja, she's the one who was supposed to handle my stuff and run with it but she didn't, she's pregnant, she's very, very pregnant, eight months.

TERRY: Do you sell well when you sell?

EMMA: Well, ja, oh no, not really but that day it was picking up.

CAROLINE: So how much are you able to make in a day for yourself?

EMMA: Maybe about fifty or seventy [Rand].
CAROLINE: That's profit?

EMMA: No that's the gross, ja. The profit margins are very small. But my business is just picking up, in fact the day started this business, I brought things nobody else had … because no-one around there was selling cutlery, spoons, and the like. But immediately I put my things there, like in two days, another lady come with similar stuff. There's a lot of competition.

EMMA: Because it was very original, ja, because no-one else had thought of the things that I had brought, and it's right next to the taxi rank, so people were buying.

Women's survival strategies on the streets illustrate the vulnerability of their businesses — the intense competition for small profit margins, and the general insecurity of the locations of their businesses, which are considered illegal by the police. Their narratives reveal their reliance on other traders for security against the police and to watch their goods when they are away. Conversations with Emma not only reveal

the complexities of the business, but also her sophisticated understanding of what it takes to work, the pros and cons of hiring people, knowledge of the market, the supply chains and so on. These narratives dispute dominant constructions of migrant women. By reflecting on their narratives we understand the ways in which they negotiate everyday business and survival activities in the city.

Revisiting women's migration to Johannesburg

How do the photographs taken by refugee or asylum seeker women in Johannesburg articulate with more well-known representations of refugees? When juxtaposed with dominant iconography, migrant women's snapshots become more than mere repositories of daily events. The images subvert dominant ways of thinking about refugees, constructing alternative truths about migration. Whether articulated or not, they represent a battlefield that resists dehumanizing hegemonic representations of refugees. Indeed, taken as a collective, the pictures make, as bell hooks suggests of African American snapshots, a broader political statement on representation (hooks 1994). At the same time, they are also sites of production of alternative "true-to-life images" (hooks 1994: 48). Yet the snapshots not only offer us a "reflective mirror" through which we bear witness to migrant lives (Hall 1997:26). They also possess hidden meanings that move beyond the material sign, revealing underlying symbolic modes of representation, which have the power to resist and reshape stereotypical discourses. In the context of the dominant modes of representation of displaced populations, the images constitute an alternative counter-hegemonic and even transformative narrative of migrant women's lives.

The snapshots of domestic spaces show us the importance of notions of home in the context of displacement, migration and xenophobia. But they also reveal the complex boundaries that women negotiate between their communities and the state. Here their nationality, gender, and location as refugees or asylum seekers intersect to produce particular forms of power, which, in turn, shape how they relate to state power and patriarchy. Their creation of a sanctuary in the home is at once a resistance to insecurity on the street, hostility against foreigners, state power and patriarchy. Yet the safety of home is occasionally disrupted by violence — its resolution complicated by the codes of allegiance to their community and fear of the police. Their narratives reveal the tactics they employ to resolve these disruptions in ways that do not jeopardise their relationships with their community.

Through their pictures, migrant women are able to assert their identities as mother, wife, student, community member, and businesswoman. In addition, they also *create* a reality. Their images are a reflection of their aspirations and of how they want to be seen. They bring to life and humanize the "refugee" or "illegal alien" in ways that resist dominant representations of them. Their frames reveal their complicated realities, the multiple structural impediments they encounter and the tactics they use to negotiate around these barriers. Despite sometimes overwhelming barriers, women's images and narratives are not consumed with a sense of failure and defeat that is characteristic of dominant human rights discourses.

Street life and informal businesses reveal the importance of relationships across nationalities to ensure women's survival as traders. While reciprocity is important, women are also aware of the intense competition from their neighbours, and balancing these relationships requires delicate manoeuvring amongst neighbours. Women have devised ways in which they protect themselves and their goods from the police. They make sure that their

stock is not all displayed publicly, so that the police do not confiscate all their goods. These tactics are ways of overcoming the structural impediments that face their businesses.

Conclusion

Exploring the image as a meaning-producing object reveals the dynamics of the everyday lives of migrant women now living in Johannesburg. Their narratives and images interpret and make sense of their encounters with the state, patriarchy in their communities and networks amongst traders. At the centre of this analysis is the notion of the picture as the complex interaction of forces between the viewer and the viewed, and the political, social and economic contexts in which it is produced. Women's images are not produced in a vacuum, and the meanings they project allow us to rethink dominant stereotypes of displaced women who are often depicted without any agency. Women's lives seem more complicated than the caricatured ways in which they are represented in popular media. They show how structural conditions shape women's actions and schemas, yet they are not subsumed by the limits imposed upon them by state officialdom, police harassment, domestic violence, and the challenges of the informal sector.

Notes

1 This research was made possible by generous funding from project MITRANS through the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS).

2 Zlotnik makes the point that "for almost forty years, female migrants have been as numerous as male migrants" (2003:2).

3 Not her real name. All the names used in this article have been changed to protect women's identities.

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