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Living between compassion and domination? : an ethnographic study of institutions, interventions and the everyday practices of poor black Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is about a specific locality- the Central Methodist Church- and it details the lives and experiences of a large group of migrants who lived within this locality. The study also examines the activities of a wide range of humanitarian organisations that instituted interventions at the church and analyses how individuals' suffering is dealt with by humanitarian organizations. The individuals who inhabited the church were a product of large-scale structural factors- political conflict, economic decline and fragmentation and social despair. These individuals were however following traditional mobile livelihoods routes that have been part and parcel of the Southern African labour migration history. The central questions that this study examines are how and in what ways experiential suffering is dealt with and how the different ways and technologies of managing suffering, impinge upon individual and collective subjectivities in the specific locality of the church. In addition the study examines the categorizations and representations of indigent Zimbabwean migrants within South Africa and how these representations have been constructed and transformed over time. The findings made in the study are drawn from a year of ethnographic fieldwork, which combined a number of different methods. These included archival research, participant observation, in-depth interviews and narratives with individual migrants, state officials and officials from humanitarian organizations. The study also made use of diaries in order to detail the everyday lives of individual migrants and capture the texture of everyday life at the church. The findings indicate that the migrants emplaced within the Central Methodist Church were not only victims of structural, political and socio-economic factors as has been the common refrain in recent literature but were also victims of the 'invisible', silenced, unrecognized and unacknowledged violence and exclusionary nation-building mechanisms and processes in post-independence Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa. The study finds that the ways through which organizations deal with suffering is mediated by numerous factors and humanitarian interventions interact and articulate with the aspirations of individuals in complex and unpredictable ways often with perverse outcomes. One of the key findings that emerges from the study carried out within a specific locality challenges the notion of places such as refugee camps and asylum holding centres as being 'exceptional spaces' where individuals are bereft of rights and even their sense of individuality and worth. Rather such places ought to be understood in terms of contextual, material and historical realities. These places ought also to be understood in terms of the meanings that are attached to them by those who inhabit them. In this regard the study shows the Central Methodist church building to be a material and political resource used by the inhabitants and it's also an economic and political resource utilized by NGOs and other actors. The thesis shows that the ways through which humanitarian interventions are deployed leads to the creation of categories of victimhood and oftentimes these categories are negotiated and constantly reconfigured at times without necessarily interacting with the realities of the beneficiaries in the manner intended. The thesis shows that the everyday lives of indigent individuals are characterized not only by hardships but the manner in which these individuals attempt to assist each are processes fraught with tension and ambiguity. By so doing, the study challenges the romanticization of the lives of the poor which is often depicted as resilient and where the poor assist each other. The thesis makes a contribution to the anthropology of humanitarianism. In addition, the thesis contributes to broader debates on the intersections between migration, indigence, victimhood and the logics and practices of humanitarian institutions.

Keywords: migration, suffering, structural violence, humanitarian organisations, biopolitics, everyday practices, urban migrants