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## Labour, Lodging and Linkages: Migrant Women's Experience in South Africa

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*This historiographical overview examines the literature on women migrants in South Africa, arguing that it is important to consider domestic struggles and their impact on women's urban experiences within and beyond the workplace in order to understand the unfolding of the migrant labour system in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Looking at writing on pre-1994 migrancy, it highlights women's experiences in the workplace, in the residential spaces they occupy, and in their associational life. We also draw out some of the major trends in the post-1994 period, focusing in particular on scholarship that considers HIV/AIDS. Migrant women, we argue, are neither simply home-based nor town-linked; rather their experiences and struggles provide the means to accommodate both while also transforming these polarities.*

**Key words:** gender, historiography, migrancy, women, housing, apartheid, associational life, informal work, domestic work, factory work, HIV/AIDS

In 2010 Mark Hunter challenged scholars writing on post-1994 migrancy in South Africa to think beyond the received wisdom of the 'male-migrant' model, particularly in studies of HIV/AIDS (Hunter 2010a). Public perception, he noted, continued to conceive of male migrants as the primary agentive forces responsible for transmitting the disease. The release of the South African film *Yesterday*, he suggested, was indicative of this. In it, a young woman from rural KwaZulu-Natal is infected with HIV by her migrant husband, who had been away from home working on the mines. Despite some criticism of the film's unproblematic representation of rural, uneducated women, it was nominated for an Oscar and shown at the Bangkok AIDS Conference in 2004 (Hunter 2010a:27).

But, as Hunter and others note, the prevalence of the 'male-migrant' model has a long history. Despite a very rich literature on the system of migrant labour in South Africa, much of the analysis has focused on the lives of migrant men. Such accounts have often tended to erase women's experiences from view. Perhaps this was inevitable in analyses of a system that, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1930s and 1940s, had mainly relied on cheap black male labour on the mines, in homes and in factories. It is also the product of the hidden nature of much of migrant women's work. And it has something to do with of the belated entry of

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‘gender’ to social science (in South Africa as elsewhere) and a related tendency to keep it, once it had arrived, separate from the main stream. In Harold Wolpe’s (1972) famous analysis, women did feature as a fundamental part of the migrant labour system, but they remained as rurally-based cyphers, functioning to reproduce the household while migrant men sent money home from urban South Africa. His account, like some that have built upon it, opened no space for an understanding of women’s experience of work, struggles for housing, and associational life. Our aim here, drawing on and bringing together a range of accounts, is to attempt to fill that space.

It is certainly the case that academics of a later period brought to light the experiences and patterns of migrancy of black women from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as they first started to move to urban settings (see Wells 1993; Walker 1990a; Walker 1991; Bozzoli 1991a; James 2000; Cock 1989). Works ranged from analyses of black women’s beer-brewing in the 1930s (see Bonner 1990; Maylam & Edwards 1996; Bradford 1987), to women’s anti-pass campaigns (Wells 1993), to urban forms and performance of women’s ethnicity (James 2000; Bank 2011), and examinations of migrancy and health (SL Kark 1999; S Kark 1950). Central to much of this analysis was a discussion about the presence or absence of an ideology of ‘female respectability’ that was echoed in global literature on women’s urbanisation of the era.<sup>1</sup> In South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s, this work formed part of a feminist agenda and form of analysis within the broader social history project which sought to give a ‘voice to the voiceless’ and place women’s agency at the centre of understandings of contemporary South African history. These concerns have remained central to the analyses of women’s migration in the post-1994 period (Lee 2002; Kihato 2013). Scholars of urban life and geographers have also contributed to this literature, asking more generalised questions about urban gender relations in the late apartheid and early democratic era (see Hunter 2010b; Hunter 2010a; Mager 1999); while those concerned with the contemporary South African state have asked what African women’s post-1994 experiences can tell us about the shifting and morphing of the state in a new era (see Ally 2010). This literature has been important in painting a complex picture of African urban life and changing gender relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, something remains to be said about how African migrant women’s experiences, in turn, have affected the system of migrant labour. While extensive analyses exist on the nature of cheap labour extraction and the role of the ‘rural’ in fuelling urban life – two major features of the migrant labour system in South Africa – we know less about the part played by the experiences of individuals, particularly women, in shaping whether and

how people put down urban or rural roots: that is, about the shaping of the cheap labour system from within.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, adding women's stories to the picture has often simply offered an additional set of experiences to the story of migrant labour, with the effect of turning 'women's history' into a kind of ghetto. In the early 1990s, Linzi Manicom flagged this as a pervasive problem that had dogged earlier scholarship. 'The separate treatment of women,' she notes, 'could serve to confirm their marginal and particularized relationship to those (male) subjects already established as dominant and universal' (1992:443). While acknowledging this point, we argue that adding women's experiences to our understanding of migrant labour offers an important insight into the functioning and structure of the system, given its fundamentally gendered character. Inspired by Bozzoli's pioneering 1983 article on patriarchies and migrancy, we use her methods and conclusions to analyse the relationship between the private spaces of women's urban lives and the broader migrant labour system (Bozzoli 1983).<sup>3</sup> While Bozzoli focused on the structural factors that underpinned 'experience', her argument was novel in foregrounding such experience and the domestic space in which it was constructed. Much analysis of migrant labour thus far, she argued, had taken the (male) gender of the first migrants as biologically determined. It could not account for the fact that in Afrikaner societies, for example, it was women who migrated before men. To explain this, Bozzoli relied on the concept of 'domestic struggle' as influencing who migrated and how. In African societies, a particular form of pre-colonial patriarchy governed the homestead. In interacting with white patriarchy – one of the underlying pillars of the colonial system and migrant labour – it was men's labour power that became available to mining and industry before that of women.

Taking further an interest in the logic of what happens in 'domestic' spaces in which patriarchies hold sway, networks of sociability arise and identities are formed, this article builds on earlier works to explore, in addition, how women's lives in urban private/public spaces shaped the unfolding of the migrant labour system in a later period. (Bozzoli 1991a; Brandel-Syrier 1979; Longmore 1959). The structure of society and the experience of gender relations in the home delineated the way in which the migrant labour system played out, but enabled women to exercise some agency. This is not to suggest that African women migrants, treated in appallingly discriminatory fashion by the white states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were able to overcome their social and political position. But it is to emphasise Bozzoli's point in *Women of Phokeng* that 'experience' and the consciousness it engenders in migrant women

has an impact on the decisions they have been able to make despite their constrained environment (Bozzoli 1991a).

We thus consider some key works on women migrants in the pre-1994 period in order to draw out the effects of women's experiences as migrants on the system of migrancy overall. After considering three major features of the literature on migrant women in South Africa – their experiences of working life, struggles to gain access to housing, and associational life – we turn to focus briefly on the shifts and turns in the post-1994 literature, with a particular eye to disease and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In looking at these key areas, we foreground the opportunities women have had to return to the rural areas, or alternatively to settle in urban South Africa and shape the system of cheap and extractive labour. Women's experiences have been, and continue to be, fundamental drivers of this defining aspect of contemporary South African society.

### **Women as Workers**

Extracting cheap labour from black Africans was at the heart of the migrant labour system in its original form. However, over the period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly in the late 1980s, trade unions contested wages and the terms of labour extraction. The mining industry offers the most dramatic examples, with men's identities and their political struggles continuing to shape the terms of labour. Despite changes to the structure and policies on labour in the mining industry, many men still 'feel' rural and thus are attempting to maintain two homes: homes which their current salary cannot support. This point was at the core of the Marikana miners' demands for a wage that would enable them to sustain both a rural and urban home (Hartford 2012; Reddy 2014; James & Rajak this Special Issue; Beinart this Special Issue). Their experiences in the workplace and their identities as migrants continue to change the nature of the labour system in the contemporary day. But *women's* shifting experiences in the workplace have also served to entrench features of the labour system. Too often, women's 'working experiences' are omitted from discussion because they are assumed to be located primarily in the informal economy or domestic arena, and therefore deemed too informal to constitute 'work.' This is problematic on two counts. Firstly, a substantial number of African female migrants have worked and continue to work in formal employment; and secondly, research on 'the worlds of work' needs to incorporate the domestic and informal realm and consider how its protagonists may be considered 'workers' as well.

### *The informal economy*

From an early period in the evolution of migrant labour, many African women first came to the cities to work in the informal sector. State officials were mainly concerned about beer-brewers and prostitutes, but migrant women's informal sector activities also included hawking, laundry, dressmaking, sewing, gambling, traditional medicine and trading. The experience of earning an income outside of the formal structures that sanctioned black women's presence in urban areas did, however, unite these experiences in some ways. Perhaps one of the best-known works on the experiences of women in the informal sector is Philip Bonner's research on the East Rand. His writing gives us a good sense of the dangers involved in the informal sector and how women tried to overcome these obstacles to continue to earn an income in the townships of 'white' South Africa. In the 1920s and 1930s, Basotho women started entering urban areas in large numbers, as the migrant labour system began taking its toll on family life and subsistence cultivation in rural areas was put under severe strain. Largely unable to find domestic work because the profession was monopolised by men (Van Onselen 2001), women sought alternative ways to ensure financial security. At the same time, the state was attempting to control black urbanisation, particularly the brewing of beer (Bonner 1990; La Hausse 1988). For the most part, however, women successfully resisted police attempts at controlling their presence. This resistance was built on the back of successful anti-pass campaigns by the women of the South African Native's Congress or SANNC (later African National Congress or ANC) in 1913 (Wells 1993). Because the state was unable to control women's movements through passes, the regulation of women's presence and their beer brewing activities in urban areas was equally difficult. Women's dominance of the informal economy in this case enabled a long-standing urban presence of groups of women from the 1930s. Once apartheid had taken root, this existing presence of women meant it was harder for the state to enforce the 'ideal segregation model' and regulate women's access to housing through a male breadwinner. In the early part of the 1930s, then, women's financial autonomy and commitment to their urban existence seriously challenged the labour system.

The informal economy also allowed women the freedom to develop relationships of a kind denied to those who ended up in live-in domestic service. Interviews conducted, in the later period of the 1980s, with a number of women from Phokeng indicate that many of them chose to enter the informal economy in order to be able to sustain relationships with their husbands and children. For women who moved into the township to live with a husband or family, as Bozzoli shows, their:

... life strategy now became orientated towards constructing households of which they were joint or sole heads, and this required a different approach for many ... Most of the married women wished the households they envisaged to be more clearly under their own control, and were not prepared to live apart from their husbands, or to forego the rearing of their own children ... (1991b:23)

This meant that women who had come to the city with this end in view, and who were attached to a family, moved almost entirely into informal work. Despite the precarious character of informal work, they were able to achieve some permanence in the city. Developing an even freer and fuller range of connections with the black urban community were those women who had come to the city unattached, who had been abandoned by a migrant husband, or who had initially married but were seeking to escape rural patriarchal authority. They did so at the cost of being 'reviled by white administrators' as 'notorious unattached and undesirable Sotho women,' as Bonner shows (Bonner 1990:240). But the sexual liaisons which these 'unattached women' formed served to root both themselves and male African workers more solidly in urban spaces. Viewed by the authorities as a 'subversive effect', this meant that many miners were 'moving to settle permanently in the towns, thereby becoming detribalised and of no further use as mine labourers,' notes Bonner. 'Bastard families were becoming a serious menace, forming the class known as the *amalaita*' (Bonner 1990:232).

Writing in a similar period, on life in the townships of East London in the 1940s and 1950s, Anne Kelk Mager has noted another way in which informal work rooted migrant women to the cities. Escaping patriarchal rule in the Ciskei, many unmarried Ciskeian women relished the financial and social independence that informal work gave them. Interestingly, as Mager argues, this rebellion and independence made them the allies of young migrant men – often their sons – who likewise fled the generationally-specific rural patriarchal rule. Mager argues that 'the interdependence of young mothers and their sons was forged in the common experience of slum culture' (1999:159).

The experience of working in the informal sector, then, presented women both with dangers and the opportunity to put down more permanent roots in the urban areas. Both the threats and the promises of such work were inseparable from those that came with living in informal settlements. We argue in the section on 'Accessing urban housing', below, that this kind of residential arrangement, particularly in the late 1980s, was precarious for many women who chose to spread their risks and responsibilities over a wider geographical area.

Both their work and the kind of living spaces they inhabited resulted in them feeling contradictory pulls: to stay in or leave the cities.

### *Domestic work*

The image of the downtrodden domestic worker is well known in South Africa. Its ubiquity speaks not only to dominant representations of domestic workers, but also to the high numbers of migrant black women working in white homes from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Natal and the Transvaal it was originally men who entered the domestic worker role as early migrants to the cities. On the frontiers of the Cape, Xhosa women had occupied this role from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Cock 1990). However, it was only when women began migrating en masse in the 1930s and 1940s that domestic work became the almost exclusive terrain of the black female migrant.

Domestic work held a particularly significant ideological appeal for many African women entering the urban areas to look for work, since it offered them a promise of respectability. The image of the decent domestic worker countered the authorities' ongoing moral panics about the presence of 'loose' female African migrants in the urban areas (Gaitskell 1979; Bonner 1990; Van Onselen 2001), as well as serving to allay the concerns both of rural black patriarchs about their increasing loss of control over migrating women, and of middle-class African women at the possibility of living cheek by jowl with working-class women of 'low morals' in the cities (Eales 1991). 'Christian compounds' for girls were set up in the cities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Along with the Inanda Seminary and other schools for girls (Hughes 1990; Chisholm 1990; Healy-Clancy 2013), these taught a moralistic ideology of femininity and respectability to guide urban women away from 'corrupting' activities. Mothering and domestic work were key to this ideology. For many women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, being employed as a domestic worker thus reaffirmed their respectable status and often their commitment to returning to a rural home where they had sent money for their children.

In more recent times, domestic work has similarly shaped the way young black women think about themselves and their urban presence in the face of the criminalising discourse of 'loose women' propagated by both black and white patriarchs. Domestic workers, as shown by the work of Shireen Ally and Laura Phillips, have aligned themselves robustly with ideas of hard-working Christian virtue (Ally 2010; Phillips 2011). However, in this more recent literature on domestic and female respectability, there is also mention – albeit fleeting – of the difficulties of maintaining 'the good Christian life' (see Mager 1999;

Casale & Posel 2002; Ardington & Lund 1996; Bank 1999). Many domestic workers have needed, for example, to supplement their incomes through beer-brewing. Despite these inconsistencies, domestic work nonetheless gives them a certain defensive identity in the face of the range of experiences they have had while working in the cities (Bozzoli 1991a; Phillips 2011).

Domestic workers' lives up until the early 1990s also offered a distinctive experience which shaped their engagement with the city and their 'rural' homes: while there were many exceptions to this stereotype, a majority of African domestic workers worked as 'live-ins' in their employers' homes. This meant that they worked long hours, often six days a week and were isolated from other migrants. The isolated and atomised nature of domestic work meant that many women did not develop a collective political identity. Instead they worked in the intimate space of their employers' homes, and struggled to make demands for improved working conditions. In addition, domestic workers living in such settings had few opportunities to put down roots in the urban areas (Ally 2010).

Analysing working lives and experiences, in the case of the many domestic workers in South Africa, is a complex task. This is so because, as has been argued by Ally, Phillips and others, many domestic workers see their wage-earning activities in the urban areas as a form of 'mothering', rather than one of 'working'. Domestic workers' 'relationship to waged work as a labouring class', notes Ally, is connected 'to their understandings of mothering, and care, and their class subjectivities are thus completely inflected by their commitments as mothers' (2010:181).<sup>4</sup> We might then understand their experience of working as domestic workers as one which embeds their identity as a mother, and commitment to returning 'home', away from the urban spaces of their employers.

### *Seeing women as workers*

Migrant women did not only work in these separate and informal spaces; they also took jobs in factories and the broader industrial sector from the late 1970s onwards. The fact that there is little published research on their experiences probably owes itself to the way 'women's issues' have tended to be ring-fenced in the academy, so that women have been seen as operating in domestic spaces and in the informal sector rather than as workers in the 'conventional' work environment (assumed to be gender-neutral). This is a serious omission which skews our understanding of developments and shifts in the migrant labour system from the 1970s, and in particular of men's relationship to employment and the extent to which female entry into the labour force represents a threat to their livelihoods and their gendered

identities. Focusing on the industrial decentralised zone in Phuthaditjhaba in the former Qwaqwa Bantustan, for example, Leslie Bank (1994) recounts an alarming event in which a group of 400 men marched through the streets of the town to a factory employing women, stoning the women and chasing them away from work. We are left to guess at how such hostility may have affected women's work experiences. Did these women retreat to their homes to avoid this danger? Did they eventually re-enter the workplace? Did urban gender relations become increasingly violent, as Hunter suggests was the case in KwaZulu as unemployment levels rose dramatically from the 1980s? And what did this mean, in turn, for the decisions women made and the options they had in deciding where to settle, how to become financially secure and what networks to rely on (see Slater 2002)?<sup>5</sup>

The minimal literature we do have suggests that factory and industrial workplace experiences were significant in shaping migrant women's decisions. Pat Gibbs, for example, outlines women's involvement in unions in the Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage area from 1972 to 1994, showing how female strike activity peaked in 1973 and again in 1980 (2007: 323). But she does not tell us about the experiences of these women or explain why they were striking. The roots of shifts in the migrant labour systems and wage agreements from the 1970s, which must have been underpinned by such gender dynamics, are in turn poorly understood.

Some insight is given into the way in which gendered battles in the factories were fought and won, and what this meant for the way women were able to work. It was through the efforts of women in the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (Numsa), for example, that maternity leave for black women was extended to six months, enabling them to return to work more quickly, and consequently to develop stronger urban ties (Forrest 2011; Shefer 1991). In more recent times, a few sociological studies have emerged about the experience of women as miners, a new phenomenon given space through the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act of 2002. Many women working underground on the platinum belt have settled in the surrounding areas of Rustenburg, but a significant minority rent a shack close to the mines and migrate from work to 'home' says Asanda Benya (2009). How are women in the mines shifting the particularly masculine mining cultures? To understand the changes in the migrant labour system in the post-1994 period we need to look to the old and newer work spaces that women are occupying and ask how this gender dynamic shifts and shapes the nature of labour and, in turn, the migrant labour system as a whole.

In sum, the literature on women in the workplace, where it acknowledges that these women do perform labour at all, focuses primarily on the informal and domestic spheres. There has been some change in this focus after 1994, but the lack of research that places women's experiences as central to the operation of South African society, the economy, and the state, is evidence that we still need a fuller analysis of the effects of 'domestic struggle' on migrant worlds.

### **Accessing Urban Housing**

Urban housing was a highly contested issue for African migrant men and women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The motivations of rural black patriarchs and white capitalists merged to give a particular shape to colonial rule (see Manicom 1992). The former sought to assert homestead control over young men's and women's wages and reproductive labour, while the latter wanted to extract the cheap labour of young, black men: initially for the mines and later for various industries. However, Hunter argues for a different kind of 'patriarchal bargain' in urban apartheid South Africa, where policies gave migrant men privileged access to housing and denied women housing unless they had section 10 rights that allowed them to live in an urban area under influx control laws, or were attached to a man who had secured a house (Hunter 2010b:6). Urban housing for black Africans was thus intensely gendered. As Cherryl Walker notes, women's housing options were determined in the earlier apartheid era through their relationship to men (1990b:190). For many women, housing was closely related to the networks they developed, the resources they were able to accumulate and the urban roots they were able to put down. However, and especially in more recent decades, many women also moved into informal settlements. Their access to these was equally gendered and was determinative of their urban experiences, particularly from the 1980s onwards as informal settlements mushroomed and influx control was scrapped. Examining women migrants' experience through the prism of housing and settlement thus offers insight into a set of relationships and the processes of identity development around which pivoted decisions about where and how to migrate. The historiographical interest in urban apartheid's forms has made for a rich literature on which to draw, to make these claims.

#### *'Vat en sit' housing access*

The segregationist and apartheid states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century increasingly tried to intervene in and structure the domestic and private lives of African families. In the 1930s, it was decided that African men should be the head of an urban nuclear household. Across the country,

African women and men sought out single migrants to marry in an attempt to secure housing, known as '*vat en sit*'. Women were particularly vulnerable in this search, as housing was owned in the name of the husband in marriage. Deborah Posel, writing about urban apartheid, cited an informant on the Witwatersrand:

There are a number of women I know who got married through this system of marriage ... Say, you want a house; you were not going to get a house unless you are married ... the man wants a house as well as you want a house, so you only get married because you both want a house. (2006:57)

This was the case across much of the country. In the province then called Natal, African women in the 1960s and 1970s desperately sought out a husband to ensure themselves a place in the cities. The security of a house and providing husband was very appealing to many rural women whose lives were severely restricted and difficult in the rural areas, Hunter suggests. He describes the physical interior of the apartheid provided 'matchbox' houses:

With an inside toilet, a kitchen, a living room, and two bedrooms, providing occupants with a living space of 51.2 square metres in all, a house of this design was seen as capable of becoming a home that promotes family life and the nurture of children. (Hunter 2010b:67)

The confined living spaces suddenly put men and women, often previously unknown to one another before the marriage, in close contact on a regular basis, making urban living a very intense experience. For many women the security and companionship of the '*vat en sit*' arrangement helped them put down roots in the city. For other women, relationships in these quarters became conflictual. Either way, many African migrant women tried to make the security of urban housing last as long as possible. As Hunter argues for women of KwaZulu, 'unlike men, women couldn't legitimately combine a rural-based marriage and temporary urban living' (2010b:72).

The case of Cape Town offers an instructive example of why and how women who had secured formal housing often remained in the cities as long as they could. Rebekah Lee's (2002) informants, African women from the Eastern Cape settling in council housing in Gugulethu, also felt the precariousness of their access to urban housing. While Rebecca Ginsburg (1996) has argued that women settling in Soweto deliberately, and even politically, decorated and renovated their urban homes as a hopeful sign of their permanent urban status,

Lee's interviewees thought of their actions in less political terms. Nonetheless, both groups of women felt precarious and anxious about their position in the urban areas and thus tried to set down roots as best they could. The feelings of many African women are captured in the words of one of Lee's interviewees, who boldly said that 'black people don't like moving'. The experience of black women, regularly being forcibly removed and re-located, has affected their 'sense of place and belonging' and 'had a powerful influence on the urban African psyche'. Even after the end of apartheid, says Lee, 'Africans believed that they could never live in any other house, in any other way, in any other community' (2002:140).

### *Informal settlements and their growth in the 1980s*

Women found different ways around the formal housing regulations over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it was particularly in the 1980s that their presence in informal settlements mushroomed. While these processes followed different patterns across the country, women who migrated in a later period and entered into the shack-lands or the informal settlements mostly felt less secure than their counterparts who had migrated earlier. The new housing arrangements also shifted the nature of gender relations and the networks women were able to form in the city (Hunter 2010b:85). Relations with men became more fluid as securing housing was less dependent on marriage. At the same time as giving women more freedom from patriarchal control, living in informal settlements also placed women more precariously in the urban areas overall. For example, in Duncan Village, East London, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bank shows how migrant men who had abandoned their rural families often moved in with women living in informal housing, becoming the symbolic male head of the home. Women sought men's presence as a means of protection and in turn offered domestic services to these men, though this did not necessarily mean they had a sexual relationship (Bank 1999). But seeking such security simultaneously prompted these women – experiencing considerable vulnerability – to spread their risk and responsibilities by maintaining closer links to the rural areas where family were likely to support them (Bank 2001). Living in these informal settlements encouraged women to retain links to a rural home and construct more geographically expansive networks.

The channels through which women could access housing, and the relationships that certain housing arrangements engendered, thus clearly delineated the nature of networks women set up in relation to the urban and rural space.

## **Associational Life**

In 1954, Mia Brandel-Syrier of the South African Institute of Race Relations authored an urban-focused report into the 'Needs of the African women' (cited in Lee 2002:197). The key issue identified was urban African women's 'need' of women's organisations. In part what Brandel-Syrier was responding to was the visible ubiquity of urban women's organisations in the townships in the 1950s; a response echoed by many subsequent writings. However, the significance of focusing on African women's associational life goes beyond its presence in the historiographical literature. Studying women's associational life also breaks with the stereotypes of an earlier literature which have portrayed migrant African women (when discussing them at all) in relation to male migrants: either women are thought to migrate through and because of the path laid out by an earlier male kinsman, or they are seen as living their lives as prostitutes and beer-brewers, deliberately independent of men and away from patriarchal control (James 2000:47). The lives of female migrants were more nuanced than this. Elements of their identities, while gendered, did not always centre on men's presence or absence. Studying the associational life of women migrants highlights how women made connections which either reaffirmed their rural links or helped them settle in urban South Africa, as well as asserting their capacity for friendship, amity and sociable enjoyment in either setting. What comes to the fore is the many activities of women involved in dance groups, savings societies, burial societies and *manyanos*, the extraordinary time and effort invested, and the kinds of identity formation these associations have enabled (Lee 2002).

### *Connecting to a rural home*

Arriving in a new city in which harsh racist authorities held sway, despite being in the company of one or two kinsmen or associates (often male), was a very difficult experience for migrant women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many women missed their home, the family they had left behind and felt scared at the horrors of urban life. The literature best reflects this anxiety through an analysis of associational life of African women. In the 1990s, one of the present authors analysed the experiences of Northern Sotho migrant women dancing *kiba*, the female version of a classic male migrant music and dance form particular to some regions in what was then Lebowa, the Northern Sotho Bantustan. She picked up on the 'rural identities' that the group dancing of *kiba* affirmed and gave space to, arguing that, in joining these dancing groups, women were taking part in the active creation of a notion of a rural Sesotho home and language. Although, in reality, this notion was remote from the experiences they had had prior to migrating (James 2000:47), the connections and networks that the dance

group and the performance of a specific ethnic identity gave them were valuable in buttressing them against the difficulties of being in the city. These *kiba* groups and similar forms of cultural revivalism offered a flexible and appropriate tool to understand the intersection of ‘ethnic’ and ‘gendered identities’ (James 1999). Much earlier literature had hinted that migrant women were both beyond tribal identification and inherently traditional at the same time. In the face of these assumptions, a focus on *kiba* associations showed that most of these women were using the idiom of ethnicity to connect with other women in urban areas to form bonds and networks. Women’s ethnicity is thus made, and its meaning negotiated, in urban areas. These dance groups gave women a unifying sense of a rural identity and reaffirmed their connections to ‘home’, facilitating their continued migration (James 2000:61).

These groups also gave women networks to help them find jobs and, significantly, join savings and burial societies. Rotating-credit societies – in which members contribute standard amounts at regular intervals throughout a cycle and take it in turns at successive meetings to receive the accumulated amount in cash, using this for expenditures normally beyond their reach – have been a feature of African migrants’ lives for decades, but these have been particularly and most usefully analysed in the past ten years, with an increased interest in the post-apartheid proliferation of credit, debt, and the financialisation of the economy. These have worked through various forms, from weekly collections of money, to the monthly buying of groceries. These forms of rotating-credit associations among urban settled Africans reaffirmed links to a rural home, often based on ‘home-boy’ or ‘home-girl’ networks (Bahre 2007). Thus, these rotating-credit associations often connected urban women’s identities to a notion of ‘returning home’. In addition to this, as James argues, they helped women ensure that once a month or once a year they were either remitting food, clothes, household goods or money to a rural family (2015a, 2015b). Keeping their obligations and maintaining these material ties to the rural areas again ensured that many women left the city to return ‘home’ and settled back in the rural areas at the end of their working life.

### *Surviving an urban life*

For some women, their organisational affiliation became a way of putting down long-term roots in the city. Many, particularly in the earlier period of women’s migration, joined a type of church-based group called *manyano* (unity) or ‘mother’s union’. These groups were closely connected to the church and encouraged sobriety, respectability and the active

practice of Christianity. As explained earlier in this article, and in much of the literature on women and migrancy, this value was core to the concerns of many rural women migrating to the cities to look for work. The churches had successfully set up and instilled notions of appropriate gendered behaviour which authorities and patriarchs – both black and white, and rural and urban – emphasised in their attempts to control the flow of women’s migration or regulate their lives once in the cities. Many women strongly identified with this value and strove to live a life in accordance with it, which meant marriage, children and, often, the obedient performance of women’s work in the domestic sphere. The South African literature emphasises a deep-rooted connection between domestic workers and *manyano* groups. In fact, the development of *manyanos* and domestic work in South Africa were intertwined. As Shireen Ally notes, the *manyano* meeting days corresponded with many domestic workers’ day off (Ally 2010:165). Within white suburbia, the image of domestic workers, dressed in their smart *manyano* uniforms on the way to church on a Thursday afternoon, is well known. These women’s groups also acted as ‘moral support networks’. As already explained, Christianity provided a specific moral framework for the ways in which many African migrant women conducted their lives. Most of the people who joined *manyano* or equivalent women’s groups already subscribed to these notions, in which femininity was defined in terms of respectability and often in contrast to masculinity and its opposed values, as a study by one of the present authors reveals. Men’s lack of involvement in the church, explained Kate Radebe, a resident of Hammanskraal and a former domestic worker in Pretoria during the apartheid era, can be accounted for by their love of ‘drinking and they [are] lazy to go to the church’ (Interview 2010). And by implication her involvement affirmed her moral code. Several other interviewees also spoke about the teachings they had learned in church and in the women’s groups, which further strengthened their convictions about their respectable moral identities. For example, Grace Modisane, also from Hammanskraal, said that:

They teach us nice things there ... Peace, like if somebody maybe hurts you must not quarrel [with] him. You must be polite to anybody. To ... anybody, teach us many things, nice things. I like it so much. (Interview 2010)

Outlining the situation for African women settling in Cape Town in the early decades of apartheid, Lee argues that these groups ‘were attractive because they helped women absorb and maintain a respectability based on order and domestic responsibility’ (cited in Lee 2002:205). Although not uniquely urban, these associations helped many African women settle and put down roots in town in a manner that they felt was ‘respectable’. They provided

the 'milieu', says Lee, 'in which first-generational women initially found animating breath as organisational beings in a new urban terrain' (Lee 2002:211).

There is some question as to whether *manyanos* also offered women a political home. Deborah Gaitskell suggests that the form of protest taken against the requirement that women hold residential permits in Potchefstroom relied on 'typical *manyano* patterns of group revivalism' (1990:270). If so, in an earlier period, did *manyano* groups give women the confidence, 'as mothers', to take on the racist state? Speaking of a later period, Shireen Ally has argued, in contrast that, while domestic workers have generally failed to organise in their capacities as workers, organising and forming collective groups centred on their identities as mothers has been more prevalent and effective. Her research led her to conclude that *manyano* members as mothers had a collective identity that was more powerful than a political one. But some have been frustrated by the apolitical nature of *manyanos*. Gaitskell quotes Lillian Ngoyi, who criticised such groups. Trying to gather support for the anti-pass campaigns in the 1950s, she said, 'there is something very wrong, for after weeping nothing would be done. They all waited for some power from God' (Gaitskell 1990:270). However, women joined many other kinds of organisations that did not rely on Christianity or on the deep-seated ideology of Victorian-style femininity which the *manyanos* embodied. The women of Phokeng, for example, relied on 'home-girl networks' to secure a good job. Mmamatlakala Moje explained how she secured a position as a domestic worker:

There were many girls from our village who were working there already ... It happened one day before I could start working that one friend of mine approached me and told me that a certain white woman had asked her to help her to look for someone to work for her ... (Bozzoli 1991a:98)

Many of these groups made women's urban experiences more manageable. Connections of support both rendered urban areas bearable while at the same time reaffirming new identities within those areas. In some *manyano* groups, a rural home was idealised as the place to retire, while also giving women a way to affirm the morality of their urban presence. At other times, groups offered women networks of support while reaffirming a constructed urban identity. Over the period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nature of associational life has changed. *Manyanos*, for example, are less popular among present-day Cape Town African women than among their mothers, notes Lee. Despite these shifts, such groups and clubs still exist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in some cases have proliferated still further (James 2015a). They still serve essential purposes, albeit through varied mechanisms, as they did

previously. However, all these groups – whether helping women settle in the urban areas or reaffirming rural ties – were fractured and often proved to open up spaces of friction and splintering as much as they offered spaces of support. This fracturing often had unexpected effects. In some cases, groups split along regional lines, affirming even more dramatically rural links. In other cases, this led women to feel deep isolation and, in a particularly interesting twist, convert to Islam, which is seen by African women in Cape Town, Lee argues, as a less expensive religious choice than Christianity (Lee 2002).

The literature thus offers patchy but nonetheless well-researched insights into the experiences of migrant African women and associational life. While it gives some insight into the kinds of friendships and networks women construct, it seems to offer less clarity on how these might affect their movement: whether, for example, they predispose return to one's home or favour settling in an urban area. There is a suggestion that this ambiguity is intrinsic to migrant associations: women's ties to clubs and groups of friends can both help them feel more comfortable in their urban workplaces and reaffirm rural links. Clubs are neither simply about home nor merely town-linked; rather, to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall, they provide 'the ground on which the transformations are worked' (1981:73).

### **Recent Developments**

In 1994 it was assumed by many that the underpinnings of the migrant labour system would give way to its collapse. While the South African economy and labour systems had already begun to change noticeably from the late 1980s (Hart 2002; Hunter 2010b; Casale & Posel 2002), the migrant labour system has adapted to the economic and political shifts of the democratic era in some ways (Delius & Phillips 2014:13). Despite this, for many African female migrants, the formal changes to the system barely affected their day-to-day living experiences. For example, while there have been some substantial changes in the legislation governing conditions of work for domestics in the post-1994 period, few of these have been realised on the ground (see Dodson & Crush 2004). While there are far fewer 'live-in' domestic workers in the contemporary era, the discourse of 'rights' and the continued intimate and atomised working environment of many of them has meant they have not been in a position to shift the migrant labour system in any dramatic way (Ally 2010).

One of the most distinctive shifts in the system, however, and one which reflects in the historiography and concerns of scholars of urban life such as geographers, is the presence of migrants from the African continent in South Africa. For example, women migrants from Lesotho have flooded into South Africa at an unprecedented rate in recent decades,

responding to a range of economic and social shifts both on the South African gold mines and in household structures in more rural Lesotho (Crush et al. 2010:14). The lives and experiences of these and other African migrant women in Johannesburg are the subject of a study by Caroline Kihato. While their presence in South African cities is the product of a very different version of the migrant labour system to that which prompted rural South and southern African women to come to town in an earlier period, their experiences in the post-1994 period are similarly precarious in some ways, and have been negotiated with similar ingenuity. Attempting to counter their vulnerable position by constructing personal relationships with officials, their encounters with and attempts to negotiate the faceless bureaucracy of an inhumane system are reminiscent of the experiences of women migrants in that earlier period (Kihato 2007:407).

Two additional key points of interest are yielded by the literature from the post-1994 period. Firstly, the ‘feminisation’ of migrancy has been a particular concern of those involved in urban development and economic analysis. Over the past few decades, but particularly in the late 1990s, one of the most significant shifts in the labour supply in South Africa has been the increased participation of women in the labour market, as explained by Daniela Cassale and Dorrit Posel (2002:159). The concerns of academics and policy analysts have overlapped in highlighting this situation. The scope of research has been determined by a series of longitudinal datasets – such as that gathered in Agincourt in Mpumalanga – and has been used to track the increasing movement to town of women migrant labourers. Despite the important insights this data has yielded, Posel (2002:1) nonetheless noted that too many scholars treat women’s increased migration as an overall household strategy. Instead studies need to be complemented with in-depth interviews to gauge the complicated reasons for the rapid feminisation of labour in post-1994 South Africa, and to explore how and why women are migrating for work.

The effects of the feminisation of migrant labour have started to be drawn out by researchers attached to the Southern African Migration Project. Jonathan Crush and his co-authors hint that women migrants feel a lot closer to their rural homes, remitting more frequently and sustaining links with family there, than do their male counterparts (Crush et al. 2010). The development of the migrant labour system in the future seems likely to be closely tied to how women interact with their rural homes.

A related interest of development specialists, policy-makers and academics is the relationship between HIV/AIDS and the migrant labour system, an obvious and appropriate reflection of contemporary issues in South Africa. This literature has made a strong historical

claim for the significance of migrant labour in the rapid and devastating expansion of HIV/AIDS across rural and urban South Africa (Horwitz 2001). The broad sweep of the argument suggests that the migrant labour system has broken down family ties and social networks, resulting in men and women having multiple (and often transactional) sexual partners. The expansion of the literature, like the urban-focused literature of earlier periods, has been predominantly sociological, concerned with the outcomes of surveys in the hope of influencing policy (Vearey 2012; Scorgie et al. 2013). Posel (2002), Hunter (2010a), and others note that male migrants have been the main focus of this work, at times to the exclusion and detriment of women. This has skewed the picture that we have of the relationship between migrancy and the spread of HIV. A few correctives however do exist, including the work of Suzanne Camlin who, writing from KwaZulu-Natal, shows that women's health is affected by other factors than simply that of the return of migrant men (Camlin et al. 2010).

This interest in disease has also built on, and intersected with, earlier work on African women migrants. A particular slant in some research has been that concerned with understanding the relationship between urban women, HIV and migrancy. Here, rather than (or in addition to) exploring how the family breakdown and social fragmentation associated with migrancy may have played their part in helping to spread the epidemic, a Foucauldian interest in bio-politics and the (self) government of persons has been prevalent. To some degree this has picked up on earlier historiographical interests in the relationship between women, cities, governance and disease, and added insights from cultural theory and discourse analysis (see Jochelson 2001; Fassin 2007). 'Women and disease were linked notions,' observes LeClerc-Madlala in the case of HIV in a Durban community:

These linkages seemed to form a 'symbolic chain' with parts existing in a synergistic and changing relationship to one another. Along with pre-existing notions of female pollution, changing perceptions of women based on the negative way people viewed some of their contemporary activities also contributed to and reinforced symbolic constructions of women as 'dirty' and dangerous. (2001:42)

We seem to have come full circle, with women once again identified as the fulcra where social chaos, dirt and disease converge: whether in the eyes of the authorities or of African men and patriarchs 'back home', or both.

Despite this growth in the literature, it would be useful to know more about how experiences of disease by women (and in a different way, by men) have shaped a system of

migration that was already in flux. As women have streamed into cities at an even greater rate in the post-1994 period, how have their experiences of gendered disease influenced their decisions to settle in urban areas, leave cities and change the terms under which they engage in labour? Mark Hunter's *Love in a Time of AIDS* offers some suggestions. In discussing 'the materiality of everyday love and sex,' he says that 'Residents' most common explanation for why money and sex are linked in Mandeni is that "factories have closed", rendering women more dependent on men' (Hunter 2010b:179). Despite the increased 'materiality' of sexual interactions, he suggests, there were not great numbers of prostitutes in Mandeni. This seeming paradox, he found, lay in the difference between selling your body and commodified 'boyfriend/girlfriend' relationships. Despite the weakened economy and high rates of unemployment, women's dependency on male earnings did not take the form of prostitution. Infused with notions of morality heightened during the era of HIV/AIDS, a post-1994 language of rights, and a nostalgia for 'tradition', women – and men – have been opting for a range of material sexual relations that constitute something other than simply 'selling sex'. There are signs that what Bozzoli called domestic struggle, or at least domestic negotiation, is continuing to shape the terrain, in ways that highlight the importance of experience – and ideas of morality – rather than simply structural factors.

In sum, in this post-1994 period, the evidence points in contradictory directions. If women in some settings, no longer able to find wage work, are increasingly relying on men but finding morally sanctioned ways to transact sex; and if migrant women workers, in others, are finding work in urban centres across the country as part of a rapidly feminising workforce (a fact that would seem to speak of growing dependencies in the opposite direction, with men needing to rely on women for resources), what do these developments tell us about the way important emotional and material connections of long-term significance are being made, which serve to reconstitute women's role inside and beyond their former rural homes?

## **Conclusion**

We return to Mark Hunter's (2010a) mention of a male-bias-model in migration studies: a model which, in part, had its roots in Wolpe's (1972) seminal article where the 'cheap labour' thesis was laid out. Wolpe and other structuralist Marxists were fully cognisant of women's role in reproduction, and of the need for patriarchy to barter and control women's labour power via institutions of marriage while young men left home to work in industry (Meillassoux 1981). But it was only through a perspective combining feminist and Marxist

analyses (Bozzoli 1983) that we became able to recognise how such gendered relations, and the patriarchies they challenged or reasserted, were not set in stone but were the outcome of ongoing 'domestic struggles'. Putting such recognition into practice through detailed research is an ongoing project: we have pointed to some areas where this might be further pursued as circumstances change.

To acknowledge women as workers, both within and beyond the domestic sphere, means unsettling earlier certainties about where the private and public, or domestic and the work spaces, begin and end. Here, recent research on international migrants yields insights which parallel the South African material to a remarkable degree. Even where women have freed themselves from marital and domestic constraints to become single mothers, their dependence on relatives at home often means that they remain shackled to ideologies of female dependency in some measure (Gutierrez-Garza 2014). And matters may be compounded once they arrive at their destinations. As workers who provide 'affective labour' by caring for children, or who do paid housework or sex work – jobs in which their 'intimacy' is 'purchased' or 'commodified' (Constable 2009; Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2004; Zelizer 2009) – they become entangled in deeply entrenched gendered structures which both enable them to earn a living yet also constrain their ability to do so. Even their work as hard-hat labourers in industry or construction (Shah 1996; Suri 2000) can place them vis-à-vis male workers in a manner which, deriving from the intimate domestic space of the household, entrenches convictions about what is the right work for men and women to undertake. In some ways, then, the South African migrant system – an early case of what has become a global phenomenon – is now just one instance among many. Yet it also has a very particular shape and structure.

Starting from the premise that domestic struggle is foundational, and that migrant labour has complex determinants and effects, ranging from the intimate level of the household, village, informal settlement and township dwelling, all the way to the economy and state policy, we have considered migrant women's experiences of working life, housing access and associational life in post-1994 South Africa. Such experiences, initially in rural but increasingly also in urban areas, have shaped how migrant women have continually renegotiated the terms of their labour, found shelter, and put down roots in the city and/or reaffirmed village connections. Their experiences, in relation to those of their male counterparts, are constitutive of the migrant labour system, and thus have shaped (as well as being shaped by) the character of the South African state – and the society which it has endeavoured, with often uneven results, to regulate and govern.

## Note on Contributors

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Works such as (Hellmann 1948; Longmore 1959) led to a later problematising of 'official' perceptions of urban African women. For an international literature on this topic, see (Barnes 1999; White 1990; Walkowitz 1980).

<sup>2</sup> There exists much more of this literature about male migrants' political struggles as workers in the urban areas and how these shaped the nature of the labour system. There are also a range of other works which deal with the links male migrants made in the urban and rural areas. See Sekibakiba Lekgaothi's article in this Special Issue, for example.

<sup>3</sup> A similar approach, referred to as 'the structuration model', '... privileges neither structure nor agency as explanatory factors but their complex interaction' (Wright 1995:771).

<sup>4</sup> For other settings see Viviana Zelizer (2009), Barbara Ehrenreich & Arlie Hochschild (2004), Ana Gutierrez-Garza (2014) and Nicole Constable (2009).

<sup>5</sup> This offers one way to read the questions that arise out of studies on the experiences of women during the period of industrialisation and de-industrialisation in the 1980s and 1990s.