

SOUTHERN SPECIFICITY OR SPECIOUS SEPARATION: PERSPECTIVES FROM SOUTHERN AFRICA

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Research on Southern African mobility has generated a field rich in history and global scientific impact. Foundational works on modernization and urbanization stem from its complex processes of urbanization, segregation, and displacement (see, for example, [Mayer 1961](#), [Bozzoli 1988](#); [Colson and others](#)). Exile from apartheid-era South Africa, and the region's independence, civil, and proxy wars have similarly generated extraordinary levels of displacement and robust scholarship ([Lubkeman 2008](#)). Now a space of relative peace and prosperity – by African standards anyway – it is characterized by an unusual mix of declining opportunities in industry and mining coupled with ongoing movements and urbanization. Documenting the social and political products of these movements raises real-world practical concerns (see [Landau, et al, 2013](#)) while providing fodder for conceptually transformatory academic intervention ([Kihato 2013](#); [Ferguson 1999](#); [Landau 2014](#)).

At the most fundamental level, the driving factors for these movements – overlapping quests for protection, profit, or onward passage – do little to distinguish Southern African migration from that occurring elsewhere on the continent or in other regions of the world: the movements of people are predictable and patterned; the motives are mixed; and the consequences are economically, socially and spatially transformatory.

Despite these evident similarities, distinctions are visible in ways that should reshape our epistemological and conceptual approach to mobility. Indeed, across Southern Africa, new immigrants and the recently urbanized increasingly co-[occupy estuarial zones](#) loosely structured by state social policy and hegemonic cultural norms. As people urbanize for the first time in an era of de-industrialization, we are likely to see patterns of movement, solidarity, and exchange that may look familiar but are unlikely to

settle into the kinds of socio-political formations seen historically in “the North”. Looking closely at these areas reveals cracks in the conceptual foundations on which discussions of migrant rights and integration debates are normally premised. The first crack is the host-guest dichotomy, framed as a distinction between nationals and non-citizens. In these sites, few consider themselves local, and nationality is but one axis of difference. The second is the mechanisms for and the desirability of claiming political rights; particularly the centrality of state laws and institutions, and migrants' goals of political membership in a place-bound community. The state continues to matter, but it is one of many actors. To be sure, its primacy is anything but assured.

The question remains whether accepting the necessity of specialized, spatialized analysis warrants a field (or fields) of inquiry delimited by distinctions of “South-South” or “Southern” migration? While we must be wary of Southern cases simply being treated only as deviations from a “Northern” norm, or case studies in global comparative projects, the intellectual and political risks of scholarly ghettoization are too high to draw firm boundaries.

Given the specific question or concern to be addressed, it may well make sense to consider the relationship between labor and mobility in Benin and Brazil, or to compare the management of cultural diversity between Singapore and South Africa. Yet there may be equally or even more compelling reasons to consider the securitization of migration across Africa as part of global trends emerging through the interactions of aid, norms, and interests across regions. Missing these connections –either by treating the “South” on its own, or as a derivative of “Northern” processes, misses the chance to identify universal trends and patterns or to test universalized claims of “global” theory developed largely from a limited set of OECD cases. Given that migration is by definition multi-scalar, any pre-ordained or geographic boundary is ultimately unjustified. For example, as “Northern” states increasingly work beyond the law, or as forms of difference are negotiated in ever more diverse “host” communities, we may ultimately see that Africa has – as the [Comar- rofs](#) suggest – become the site in which to observe the West's future.

There are also significant political consequences of working in ways that distinguish between Northern/global and Southern research and processes. In geographic terms we are likely to constrain Southern researchers, encouraging (or effectively demanding) that they study local or Southern migration patterns, if only because they cannot afford to conduct the global scoping or theorization valued in 'Western' universities. While this might help to create a kind of counter- or autarchic hegemony, it also *de facto* denies them a seat at the table where global theory is discussed. Inasmuch as they engage transregionally, Southern partners will increasingly have to trade their most valuable international resources – legitimacy, "street cred", and local insight – for financial resources, travel opportunities, and prestigious associations with northern partners. In the process they become native informants while allowing those in prestigious, well-resourced universities in the North to synthesize, analyze, theorize, and set the global academic and even policy agendas (see [Zeleva 1996](#); [Chimni 2009](#)).

I take it as self-evident that this relative absence of "Southern" voices in global debates not only diminishes our understanding of the world but allows a relatively privileged, geographically concentrated group of scholars to set global academic agendas. So while we know that the majority of the world's refugees and migrants are located in the South, Southern-based scholars are hard to find in the leading (i.e. most broadly cited) scholarly journals on the topic. Where they appear, it is usually through country case studies or as secondary authors. Rarely do they proffer multi-sited comparative studies, especially ones including multiple countries or regions. So while Northern scholars may struggle to justify work in the global South, Southern- (particularly African-) based researchers often do little but conduct local case studies and policy reviews.

This compromises one of Southern scholars' most significant comparative advantages: the ability to identify what might be invisible or inexplicable to outsiders or to those doing global comparison. (That said, we must be suspicious of relatively elite Southern scholars who make exclusive claims to "local" knowledge). [Schweigman and van der Werf \(1994\)](#) outline one of the dilemmas this raises, a situation they term the Ganuza dilemma, where the absence of a strong, Southern intellectual agenda (or the presence of a highly fragmented one), often creates the space/necessity for Northern partners to dominate decision-making and research directions. At an immediate level this may satisfy all involved, but it does little to overthrow Northern dominance of global academic discourse.

My conclusions are anything but conclusive or definite. Rather, they call for the complementary development of a conversation between Southern specificity and global theorizing. This can provide scholars and activists with the information they need to positively reform policies at the local or national level where it matters most. It will also strengthen Southern scholars' hand in affording them both invaluable local knowledge and the capacity to challenge, and potentially shape, global academic debate. Such an approach will demand a reconsideration of pedagogy and research epistemology, and a willingness to be both deductive and inductive in our concepts and causal inferences. Doing otherwise risks the political and theoretical gains for which we strive.

Loren B. Landau is currently exploring comparative perspectives on how mobility is reshaping the politics of rapidly diversifying and expanding communities; see his [publications here](#).