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Project Proposal "Spatialities of Survival: Zimbabwean Livelihood Strategies in Inner-City Johannesburg"

Johannesburg is South Africa's largest city and immigration hub. Accounting for thirty-eight percent of South Africa's GDP, Johannesburg attracts immigrants from all of Africa, especially Zimbabweans escaping the collapse of their home country. Zimbabwean's precarious situations often results in them entering the bottom of the socio-economic order. At the same time, Zimbabweans exhibit higher rates of entrepreneurship than South Africans.

Zimbabweans have formed a well-developed commercial enclave in Inner-City Johannesburg. There are claims that this enclave is weakly articulated to the South African economy and more connected to other parts of Africa. Others think it operates as a Zimbabwean exclave in South Africa. More importantly, we do not know a lot about the economic role of this area, the livelihood strategies of Zimbabweans and Zimbabwean's explicit spatial survival strategies.

Xenophobic attacks in South Africa in 2008 claimed 62 lives and displaced 80,000: Zimbabweans were disproportionately affected and many took refuge in Inner-City Johannesburg. Socio-cultural analyses indicate that Zimbabweans stand out in the streets: their body language, gait, conversation and style of dress are distinct. The xenophobic atmosphere means that Zimbabweans are scapegoats for others' economic and social troubles. Urbanists believe the xenophobic atmosphere results in intensified new spatial patterns of separateness of "other" Africans, mirroring the apartheid landscape.

In June 2011 I will undertake a comprehensive literature review on the Zimbabwean immigration context in South Africa. I visited the Forced Migration Studies Program at the University of Witwatersrand in summer 2010 as part of an international education experience and I intend to reconnect with these experts. I will travel to Johannesburg in July and spend twenty-one days in the field. Week one will be dedicated to interviewing university scholars and members of the policy and NGO communities. Week two will involve site reconnaissance in the Inner City enclave and meetings with leaders of the Zimbabwean community to secure their cooperation and support for my project. In week three, I will administer a short survey questionnaire to 30 Zimbabwean entrepreneurs and engage in 10 ethnographic interviews that will detail life histories, survival and spatial strategies for creating entrepreneurial and transnational networks.

During my time in Johannesburg, I will be working with Richard Grant, Professor of Geography, UM and Professor Loren Landau, the leading immigration expert at University of Witwatersrand. Professors Grant and Landau are collaborating on a National Geographic funded project and they have agreed to guide my summer study. Last year I participated in Dr. Grant's Study Abroad Program in Johannesburg and got first-hand experience of the city and immigration context. These faculty members will assist me in developing the survey questionnaire and in undertaking my ethnographic research. This beyond the book opportunity will enable me to build upon my academic learning in the classroom, my urban Africa field experiences and engage in a research undergraduate experience.