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Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, eds. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. x + 200 pp. $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-6610-2.

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The Restless City

Contemporary, post-apartheid Johannesburg defies simple description.[1] It is a place where signifiers are ripped free of their original meaning, reinterpreted and adapted to ever-changing situations; a region where multiple codes compete for control in highly charged, urban landscapes. There, South Africans brush shoulders with migrants–from across Africa and beyond–as all go about the haphazard business of reformulating the vestiges of apartheid Johannesburg to fit increasingly complex post-apartheid realities. Fictionalized by Ivan Vladislavic in his masterful *The Restless Supermarket* and keenly interrogated in the edited collection *Emerging Johannesburg*, the quintessential modern African city has once more become the topic of scrutiny in the concise, creative collection of interventions that comprises this special edition of *Public Culture*.[2]

Edited by Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall, both of WISER (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg), the journal bears the marks of this institutional foundation. Interdisciplinary, creative, and thought-provoking, *The Elusive Metropolis* at times becomes mired in obscure theory. Yet, read in its entirety, it provides a textured snapshot of Johannesburg and its place in both African and global contexts that scholars of the city, country, and continent would do well to read.

In their introduction, Mbembe and Nuttall assert that the edition is less about Johannesburg or Africa per se, and more concerned with "Writing the World from an African Metropolis." Working against entrenched understandings of the continent, the editors make the case that the deliberate process of defamiliarization of cosmopolitan Johannesburg serves to shift understandings of cultural connectedness. Focusing on what they deem borderlands–or the in-between areas that unhinge reductive readings–Mbembe and Nuttall have assembled a range of works that write against simple explanations of the city as either an African dystopia, a vestige of European excessiveness, or an enactment of hollow, American-style consumerism. In their place, these pieces offer a nuanced portrait of the multitudinous aspects of the metropolis that is at once comic and tragic, simultaneously implicated in local and global narratives in a way that can only be termed–without contraction–both modern and African.

The edition is divided in two. The first part is comprised of academic investigations of Johannesburg. In the opening essay, Achille Mbembe brings the notion of superfluity–understood here as both quantity and the paradoxical mixture of indispensability and expendability–to bear on the city, past and present. This wide analytic lens leads Mbembe to several profound observations, such as the city's ability to mimic and mime–that is, both to reflect and to create–to the psychotic, delirious nature of apartheid urban space, and the metaphoric importance of the migrant and domestic workers whose movements, from city to township and countryside, defied the atomizing directives of the apartheid regime. The piece then shifts gear–

rather inelegantly–to critique two zones of contemporary mimicry and affluence, the fortified mini-city Melrose Arch and the extravagant gambling complex of Montecasino. Deeming both to be evidence of post-apartheid's architecture of hysteria, Mbembe concludes that they are enactments of the society's tendency towards forgetting.

AbdouMaliq Simone's piece "People as Infrastructure" examines the ways in which economic and social collaboration enable the mixed population of Johannesburg to negotiate and re-construct the inner city. Exploring the limitations and reach of ethnic syndicates as well as the related prevalence of xenophobia, Simone provides a window onto the tumultuous forces shaping inner Johannesburg. Sarah Nuttall's essay investigates the emergence of a new youth culture, termed the Y Generation–after the eponymous magazine–and centered in Rosebank, Johannesburg. Probing the ways in which this cross-cultural group stylizes itself–and particularly its bodies–through hair, clothing, music, and taste–Nuttall evocatively illuminates some of the complexities facing youth of all backgrounds in what she terms a "postracist" society.

In the final academic inquiry, Frederic Le Marcis maps the city through the journeys of those infected with HIV/AIDS. Supposing that the city looks different through the eyes of suffering bodies, Le Marcis traces the movements of the sick from home to clinic, hospice, and ultimately grave. Taking us–along with the sick–in search of multiple types of treatment–from western medicine to so-called traditional muti and everything in between–Le Marcis pulls back the curtain on parts of the city that are hidden, often criminal, and without doubt beyond simple explanation. Noting the prevalence of the anti-apartheid inspired toyi-toyi dancing at AIDS funerals, Le Marcis suggests that AIDS is the new struggle for the new South Africa.

The second half of the edition is titled "Voice Lines." Breaking away from the confines of academic inquiry, this part uses interviews and short essays to capture more of the hues that color metropolitan Johannesburg. Here, as in the first section, the metropolis is understood to include both suburbs and townships, negating apartheid's spatial renderings. The section opens with an essay by famed South African journalist John Matshikiza called "Instant City." A series of vignettes that take the reader to nineteenth-century Witwatersrand, 1980s Dakar, Senegal, and back to contemporary Johannesburg, Matshikiza's impressions hinge on the narrative of exile. Paralleling the fact that many important players in the continent's liberation movements traveled to South Africa with the fact that many exiled South Africans found refuge in other African cities during the height of apartheid's repression, Matshikiza examines the ways in which both processes informed and de-mystified the other. Seeing Johannesburg, past and present, as the crossroad between South Africa and the rest of the continent, Matshikiza reveals his love–despite himself–for what he calls this ugly, strange place.

In this section's second piece "Soweto Now," Achille Mbembe interviews Nsizwa Dlamini and Grace Khunou, both doctoral fellows at WISER. Seeking to establish an ethnography of post-apartheid township life, Mbembe poses open-ended questions about everyday life in Soweto. As trained academics, Dlamini and Khunou bring critical eyes to the familiar, reading the township as text. Highlighting both the predominance of new aesthetic modes–embodied in such things as the cell phone–and the resiliency of old forms of community, the respondents see both change and stasis. Importantly, Dlamini and Khunou stress the movement that continues to characterize urban African life, describing routine oscillation between township and city that refutes definitively one separation myth upon which apartheid ideology rested.

An interview undertaken by co-editor Sarah Nuttall follows Mbembe's dialogue. In conversation with Mark Gevisser, a content consultant on the Constitution Hill project, Nuttall unearths the theoretical obstacles and inspirations that led to the creation of a permanent home for South Africa's Constitutional Court atop the ruins of an historic prison complex. Following this piece is Lindsay Bremner's account of the competition to design a memorial to commemorate the site in Kliptown, Soweto where the African National Congress held its famed Congress of the People in 1955. Both Nuttall's discussion with Gevisser and Bremner's essay explore the ways in which the post-apartheid state is attempting to memorialize the past as a means of nation building and attracting tourism. Both pieces focus on impoverished areas, in one case the desperately poor squatter community of Kliptown–on the outskirts of Soweto–and in the other, the dilapidated neighborhood of Hillbrow–in the middle of central Johannesburg. The two pieces investigate the complex ways in which the past is inscribed on the environment while exploring the challenges facing architects–political and physical–in the new South Africa. Taken together, these thought-provoking explorations into the deliberate re-making of the city from the top down form an intriguing counterpoint to the vol-

ume's other essays on haphazard transformations taking place from the bottom up.

The edition closes with a conversation between Sarah Nuttall and Johannesburg artist Rodney Place. Invited to discuss the symbolism behind his collection of Johannesburg-inspired artworks, Place explains the meanings that the city holds for him. Drawing on themes of exile and home, the country's relation to the African continent, the power of global consumer culture, and apartheid's impact on urban space (among many other topics), Nuttall and Place's discussion elegantly ties together the previous works in the edition. Reflecting on the nature of contemporary Johannesburg, Place leaves us on a wonderfully high note. "I think the modernist structures of Johannesburg," he narrates, "have become far more beautiful now they are detached from their original ideological aims and meanings" (p. 544). Cut free of its sordid, racist past, Place–and indeed this whole collection suggests Johannesburg is in the exciting process–unscripted and messy as it is–of becoming.

I highly recommend this edited collection of essays, interviews, and articles for scholars interested in the history of Johannesburg, urban space in Africa, and the relationship between South Africa and the continent it now proudly calls home.

Notes

[1]. This volume is a special edition of *Public Culture: Society for Transnational Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2004).

[2]. Ivan Vladislavic, *The Restless Supermarket* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001); Richard Tomlinson, et al., eds., *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City* (New York : Routledge, 2003).