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REVIEW ESSAY

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BOOK REVIEWED

Imagining the Edgy City: Writing, Performing, and Building Johannesburg

BY LOREN KRUGER

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xxv + 274 pp. ISBN 9780199321902 cloth.

In her latest book, Loren Kruger reconsiders visual and literary representations of the city of Johannesburg throughout its history. Her approach is a decidedly historical one, in contravention to the tendency of current literature about Johannesburg to emphasize its contemporary exclusiveness and ignore how it had been represented similarly for more than a century. Numerous books on the city of Johannesburg have been published during the 130 years since its foundation, covering the great narrative of the modern city in Africa to the world-class African post-apartheid city promoted by the current municipality. Recent books such as Lindsay

Bremner's *Writing the City into Being. Essays on Johannesburg* (2010) or Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall's special issue of *Public Culture* titled *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (2004) have been crucial post-apartheid attempts at understanding transitional Johannesburg on the backdrop of both its apartheid history and legacy and the contingencies and particularities evolving with its transition under the young democracy.

Kruger attempts to make an additional contribution to the existing literature by in fact reconstructing the modes in which Johannesburg had been represented over its lifetime. She criticizes the way the city has been and still is being narrated with gestures that "highlight the now and compress the then" and thus repeat the cycle "of amnesia and reinvention" (2) typical to claims of modernity. Her multi- and interdisciplinary approach, different from most previous publications (apart from her own essays), lends special attention to early and recent film production and various literary genres. Her analysis of selected literary, visual, and musical traditions over more than a hundred years refracts dominant narratives of the past and the present and looks closer at continuities of genres and socio-historical moments of urban representation.

She sources from "formal and informal archives, published history and fiction, interviews and discussions with family and friends, film, television, visual art, performance, and the urban spatial and temporal practices, actual and invented, official, public, or intensely personal..." (xi).

Although the author finds fault with uncritically adopted labels and metaphors of the city, Kruger herself does not step back from finding an adjective to represent its complex position between local and global history, social segregation and cosmopolitan integration, and modernist aspirations and charged histories. She opts for the *edgy city*: "*Imagining the Edgy City* argues that, contrary to some recent 'boosters' who present their celebration of the 'African world-class city' as a novel idea against an allegedly long tradition of fear and loathing, it is rather the

vacillation between the heights of enthusiasm and the depths of condemnation that has characterized commentary on Johannesburg by natives and newcomers alike since the upstart city first emerged from the mining camp more than twelve decades ago” (x). Trying to work against “the willful amnesia that has passed for memory in Johannesburg,” Loren Kruger thus hopes that the book “excavates the history of the city and builds new links among recurring themes and forms in the literary, visual, and built representation of the urban imagination...” (19).

With the term “edgy city,” she covers several aspects regarding Johannesburg. In an earlier essay, “Theatre, Crime, and the Edgy City in Post-Apartheid Johannesburg” (2001), she used the term mainly in relation to the nervous state of the town and its inhabitants in the face of “crime and grime” (3) during its “post-anti-apartheid interregnum” in the 1990s (23). By contrast, Kruger now redefines it, taking the productive and innovative side of edginess more into account while referring to the “literal as well as figurative shape of the city over the course of history” (3).

Although Kruger emphasizes this edginess as being shaped in a complex manner by contrasts and contradictions, she also makes clear that it is nothing exceptional, but, with Jennifer Robinsons words, “ordinary” (5). Neither exclusionary urban practices nor the claim for rights to the city are new or exceptional, rather are they typical to a city whose history is marked by migration. With Kevin Lynch’s book title *What Time Is This Place?* Kruger argues that the city, its history, and layout are experienced and produced through the recognizability of history at particular places and social and cultural practices related to them. Built environment, imagination, and performance thus come into a dialogue, whereby Kruger’s understanding of “performance” is very broad, including “embodied spatial practices that take in parades,

marches, and inaugurations” as an “embodied practice of imagination” (11). Cultural performance, according to her, reaches from formal theater to political demonstrations whereby imagination is shaped by fiction and visual representations that are read and seen by those “whose daily spatial practices produce the city they inhabit” (11).

The book is structured in an introduction and five chapters, each of which is defined by intervals of twenty years. It thus leads the reader from the year of the Empire Exhibition in 1936, as a “first explicit claim for cosmopolitan modernity” by white and black urbanites (19), via 1956, the year of the Treason Trials and the decade of cosmopolitanism and alienation in Sophiatown, to the 1976 Soweto uprisings at a time when political disruption and cultural collaboration, modernist architecture, and the beginning of Johannesburg’s “greying” went hand in-hand. It continues with 1996 when the first post-apartheid city election took place and the transitional years at-large when Johannesburg’s inner city suffered heavy negligence by local authorities but also showed a new cosmopolitan face with migrants arriving from the continent and beyond. The last of the five chapters is dedicated to 2012, the year before the publication of the book and the centennial year of the ANC and the district of Alexandra, when authorities regained power over the fate of the city and introduced urban regeneration projects and promoted Johannesburg as a “World-Class African City,” largely backed by a neo-liberal policy of private-public partnerships and gentrification. As Kruger explains in a section of the introduction that sounds like a reading aid, the first and last chapters have a focus in spatial (qua architectural and performative) practices.

The first includes both the imperial parade and street demonstrations in 1936, while the chapter on the 2000s puts a focus on often ephemeral performance art and interventions in the public space of the inner city that aim at reactivating or reanimating urban life in the old city

center. Chapters two and four look more closely at cultural production in township contexts and their linkages to other international and local places and genres—music, literature, and film often inspired by the USA in the 1950s and the thriller as a gloomy genre of urban uncertainty in the 1990s that soon was followed by more embracing imaginaries including a new cosmopolitanism expressed in the *Sawubona* culture. Chapter three looks more closely at theater and poetry, especially in Soweto when apartheid activism gave birth to a “stark” and “naked” language in short-form genres (20) and to cultural productions especially in theater that crossed the color lines and activated places like the Market Theatre in the 1980s. Loren Kruger creates a dense web around these key events, mirroring the complexity and plurality of cultural production and urban imaginations throughout the entire history of Johannesburg. Remarkably, her choice of key dates ignores national key dates such as 1948 (election won by Nationalists), 1991 (Mandela released), or 1994 (first free elections) and instead emphasizes dates that are relevant for Johannesburg locally while bearing importance nationally. This is certainly one of numerous measures taken by Kruger to challenge the dominant national narrative and its propensity for selective amnesia and therefore also makes sense for the purposes of her book.

Imagining the Edgy City is a very dense, complex, and multifaceted book that succeeds in capturing the plurality of writing, performing, visual, and architectural practices that refer to the “edgy” city over the period of eight decades. Kruger’s primary achievement is to overcome narratives and imaginary typically attributed to Johannesburg, such as the narrative of the “rise, fall, and possible resurgence of Hillbrow” (ix), “all roads lead to Johannesburg” (x), the “European African city,” “the model apartheid city,” or the “City of gold.” Rather, she considers them part of a more diverse cultural narrative reflected in artistic genres. Her selection of works concentrates on literature, film, parades, artworks, and (documentary) photography. This alone is

a crucial reason to recommend this book to everyone interested in Johannesburg—scholars, pupils, cultural practitioners, and travelers alike. It is a major accomplishment to compile such an enormous amount and diversity of cultural production and discuss it in a smoothly readable book.

Kruger finds a good balance of literature and films of different genres and by diverse producers. Especially regarding literature, she demonstrates her excellent expertise and in many parts of the book the reader literally feels that she would have much more to say than she does. However, this is not the case with visual arts and especially photography. The oeuvre of David Goldblatt has crucially contributed to the imagination of Johannesburg and therefore deserves her attention. However, photography is a practice that perhaps more than any other visual medium, crossed racial boundaries. It was a very important medium for black photographers during the struggle and later in exploring the city center in the 1990s and 2000s. Santu Mofokeng (mentioned briefly on p. 212), Andrew Tshabangu, or Sabelo Mlangeni could easily replace the prominent position of Guy Tillim since they had dedicated far more of their life and engagement to the city of Johannesburg than he did with his single Johannesburg-related series *Jo'burg*. The same counts for post-apartheid literature based in the townships and other suburbs; while they indeed largely are ignored in the currently dominating narrative of Johannesburg, they do exist and their inclusion in the two last chapters would have contributed to a more balanced reflection of contemporary negotiations and reflections of the city. However, different to her chapters on 1956 and 1976, the chapter on 2012 lends too much attention to the city center and almost entirely ignores the townships as part of contemporary Johannesburg. In some sense, this mirrors the transmitted image of Johannesburg as being firstly the inner city.

Kruger's proposal to look at the imagination of Johannesburg through "performance" rather than through images is not new but important. It helps to overcome powerful representative traditions that keep the city at a distance to its actual users and onlookers. Performance, instead, suggests a corporeal investment; an exploration of the city by means of the entire body and through very particular modes of commotion. In this interaction of body and built environment, the actual urban space can take place and be experienced. Many artists like Athi-Patra Ruga, Donna Kukama, or Anthea Moys have exemplified this in their work. However, Kruger's conception of "performance" and "enactment" (27) at times poses difficulties. A more articulate theoretical conception would have been most helpful for the reader as well as for the book itself: it would have strengthened the implicit understanding of representations of the city as *enacted* representations and as part of human and cultural agency. This would have better helped to understand the relation between social and spatial practice, political and aesthetic performance, and the city as a cultural, political, and built environment. In a few instances, a hint of such an approach shows up, for instance, in Kruger's discussion of Maja Marx's adaptation of Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Her analysis of the work shows a sensibility for the actual use and everyday functions that such art interventions may have and the social and (per-)formative implications it may bring to those using these steps.

Loren Kruger demonstrates a strong sensibility for language. Repeatedly, she comments on various languages used in particular theater and music pieces, refers to the "boosterish" language of city promoters, comments on what social, political, and cultural role the choice of languages have in performances and literature of any kind. While in the great narrative of South African resistance, languages are often treated as distinct and in conflict (especially isiZulu and Afrikaans), and as signifiers for both race and class, she emphasizes the quite free use and

switching between all national languages depending on the producers of the pieces, their assumed and factual audiences, and the issues to which they intend to speak. Within languages, she also observes the “fine differences” (Bourdieu) between middle-class and proletarian English or between rural and urban Afrikaans (169). Language, thus, becomes a golden thread in Kruger’s book that contours the conflicts and separations in South Africa as much as it shows the cultural, political, religious, social, and performative complexities and purposes of its use. In some instances she also recognizes a “foretaste of post-apartheid bureaucratic jargon” (133) and thus, as in her entire book, gives a sense not so much of rupture but also of continuity between imperial, apartheid, and post-apartheid South Africa.

The awareness for continuity is one of the major strengths of her book. Different from the dominating post-apartheid narrative of a rupture between apartheid oppression and post-apartheid democracy, Kruger regularly offers the reader important insights regarding the continuity of or recourse to genres and narratives in cultural production and imaginations of Johannesburg over several decades. Doing so, she also offers an alternative narrative to the dominating nationalist perspective on history and its consequences in the present. While never openly criticizing the current commemoration policy of Johannesburg’s urban stakeholders, her frequent allusions to it seem to be a call to look more at the history of today’s underrepresented groups currently “eclipsed by the official history of the anti-apartheid struggle” (47).

Although at first sight, the book may appear quite strictly segmented by the chosen key years, Kruger regularly brings events and characteristics of these different years in relation to each other and thus also creates links between the different stations of Johannesburg’s history as a city represented in texts and performances. One of these reappearing elements is the city authorities’ aspiration to world-class status that was as relevant at the 50th anniversary Empire

exhibition in 1936 as it was in the regeneration of Newtown as a cultural precinct in the 1980s and later in the claim as a “World-Class African City” in the early 2000s. At the same time, such official narratives were regularly contested, as for instance in 1986 when the oppressed population continued anti-apartheid protests even during the centennial celebrations. She also draws the attention to the fact that Johannesburg has a literary tradition in the strictest sense of the word and that more recent productions often take up older works and genres, such as the *Sophiatown* play in the 1980s that referred to literature and plays from the 1950s with *Sophiatown*’s historical role as an “integrated urban culture” (61).

It is quite obvious that Loren Kruger had a non-South African audience in mind, while, however, catering also for the needs of an interested local audience. This address to an international audience is most palpable in her nine-page-long abbreviations and glossary section that explains many terms that are familiar to most South Africans but not necessarily to a foreigner.

While this glossary together with the index and the bibliography at the end of the book are very helpful, the Johannesburg map by Zafrica Cabral in the beginning of the book leaves more questions than answers. It serves as a basis for the sight-seeing tour she undertakes with her reader in the preface and the introduction, where she leads us first to her childhood in Hillbrow and then to diverse places and historically shaped landmarks in other neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the author does not explain who Zafrica Cabral is and why she preferred this map to all other maps that exist from Johannesburg. It is an extreme miniaturization of the city grid and the only useful references, even for someone who knows the city, are the designated neighborhoods. It is a somewhat useless map. It remains open to speculation if this was a purposeful act to irritate transmitted images of the modernist city grid or if it simply was a rather

unlucky decision. However, this in no way reduces the richness and thoroughness of Kruger's research reflected in this book and I can highly recommend it not only to people interested in the cultural history of the city of Johannesburg, but in urban representations, images, and narratives in general.

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