

BOOK REVIEW

Kerry Ryan Chance. *Living Politics in South Africa's Urban Shacklands*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. vi + 184 pp. Illustrations. Preface. Acknowledgements. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$30.63. Paper. ISBN: 978-0226519661.

In this illuminating study on the everyday politics of South Africa's communities on the fringes of society, Kerry Ryan Chance shows how the social relations of fire, water, land, and air intimately connect to power. These elements produce and regenerate energies that fuel the occurrences of different theories related to both natural and man-made events. In five chapters and a conclusion, the author analyzes how the impoverished residents of these communities collectively identify, employ strategies of resistance, define their material lives, and finally articulate how they conceive of democracy as a lived concept (18). Chance brings this story and its intersecting narratives together with a combination of observations (participant, hall, semi-furnished groups, interactions between officials and residents) and interviews.

Each chapter opens with a dispatch that sets the stage for the portrayal of the inner lives and everyday struggles of the shack dwellers who fight for basic social services in South Africa's densely populated, unelectrified, and water-strapped shack settlements in the popular touristic cities of Cape Town and Durban. Chance shows the division between urban migrants and state agents, and their formal organization *Abahlali*. Abahlali serves as part of the poor people's networks. It launches campaigns on behalf of foreign militants who engage in living politics to "[transmute] the boundaries between the home and the streets to make the poor seen and heard in the city through means that residents ground in their own communities and contrast to expert, elite, or technical languages of formal state institutions" (17).

Readers are drawn into the plights of these urban dwellers and how their access to electricity and other social services turns into racialized politics that continue to divide and stratify the haves and the have nots. The distinction between social classes clearly emerged when the state installed prepaid electricity boxes in Durban's Kennedy Road shacks for those who possessed jobs and could afford to pay (39). In spite of their lack of citizenship and their illicit connections to social services, the mute speak by using press releases,

court affidavits, street march memoranda, and new housing projects to amplify their voices. “We do not need electricity, but electricity is needed for our lives,” because it “connects people to a world that increasingly relies on energy to access into and participate in politics” (39). Abahlali-affiliated communities have incorporated cosmology into their daily practices of living to understand and explore how fire, air, water, and land are intimately connected to their core beliefs and collective identities. In this work, which bridges together African studies, urban studies, and anthropology, Chance charts exciting ground that situates the understanding of governmental policies from the bottom up. Shack dwellers explain the origin and the evolution of fire in different ways.

The author historicizes the use of fire throughout various episodes in South Africa’s political evolution. While fire serves as a source of heat and light, and is/was seen as a form of romanticism among Whites, it served another purpose when activists challenged the apartheid regime. The ability to buy matches readily and to transport them undetected made these everyday items a popular tool of militancy. During the 1952 Defiance Campaign, Nelson Mandela and his comrades publicly burned their pass books (identity documents that contained personal particulars, employment history, and fingerprints). The accessibility of matches, along with their portability and concealment, led to other forms of resistance. In the 1980s when South African activists engaged in resistance that made the townships ungovernable when they refused to pay for electricity and other social services, state collaborators faced major opposition. Activists sought out *impimpis* (informers or collaborators) and sentenced them to death when they necklaced (placed tires around their necks) alleged perpetrators and watched them slowly burn (30). Matches and stones represented weapons of the weak that activists used to carry out attacks on symbols of state repression—the schools, the beer halls, and the buses. This militance led to a clash between the Black and the White worlds, as the latter entered the townships and exhibited their might as they faced the subjects of their oppression. These strategies incorporated the old and the new, and were seen by the government as counterrevolutionary and criminalizing. Often retaliations took/take place in intimate spaces such as the townships and homes where social and biological reproduction occurred/s (31). Fires issue implicit threats to power, while water sustains life and obliges residents to interact with the state (45).

As a necessary vital force, water, like fire, has been used by shack inhabitants in their political struggle against the state. Government officials also allowed water, its access, and its utilization to serve as a barrier to economic and social freedom. In the mid-1980s, when campaigns of ungovernability dotted the landscape and township residents refused to pay for social services, water stood at the center of their disquiet. Officials deployed water as a tool of oppression, which allowed them to humiliate, control, and demoralize those in desperate need of its sustenance. Key to psychological warfare, water became part of the dominant culture’s reprisals for prisoners

when they waterboarded them, delivered them filthy water, or withheld the substance from them (50).


Outside of the prison walls, authorities continued to discriminate and used the geographical landscape to further their segregationist aims. QR is “a thirsty Cape Town settlement located on sandy, low-lying land in [a] township formalized under apartheid that ... is consumed by massive floods brought by cold water rains each year” (43). Because of the excessive amounts of water that inundate the area, residents jokingly and sarcastically refer to the QR as the waterfront, which is a far cry from the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, which lures tourists from all over the world to its feasts of various consumptive offerings. For visitors at the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront, the setting offers enduring hope and positive energies at its picturesque site against the backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean. QR dwellers, however, see water’s appearance differently, in terms of its destructive power. Like the candles and the illicit electrical connections that keep people warm in the cold winter months, water highlights another arena whereby the state’s inability to provide adequate housing and basic social services underscores the liquid geographies of the country’s colonial past (47). As Chance shows, the state played several roles in destabilizing the settlements by punishing those who participated in rent and service boycotts in the waning years of apartheid, by determining recipients for water connection and disconnection, and by making water an entitlement based upon race (54). These infringements explain the way in which residents understand how the government defines and articulates the construction of their living politics.

Yet, while Chance shows the state’s complicity, she also explores how urban fringe settlers interpret the cosmological energies that the elements produce. Many tent city residents believe that fires are caused by witchcraft, winter winds, drunkenness, lovers’ quarrels, or overturned candles; in actuality it is the absence of services which causes fires, along with saturated populations that strain the landscape, illegal connections, guerrilla electricians, and removals (35). By contrast, air contains scents, sounds, digital signals, and ancestral spirits that make each shack settlement unique according to the different compositions of the surrounding air. Like fire, which distinguishes people based on their ability or inability to access heat, to cook meals, and to bathe, air also divides people based on levels of geography. Hilltop settings, for example, allow the occupants of Durban’s mansions to breathe freely, whereas in the inundated cities of shacks, the congestion from overpopulation and the pollution of taxis which flood these areas makes breathing unbearable. Residents resort to “coughing out,” (*ukubhodla*) to liberate their lungs, and to liberate lives that allow them to endure pain, pleasure, cathartic activity, and joy (65, 69). They sing, pray, and speak in ritual spaces or at mass gatherings, and like air, networks are created that “give substance to collective solidarity between residents by breathing” (64) “the air of the familiar and the nostalgic in relation to the toxins that permeated their lungs inside the mine shafts” (71). This has occurred because land contains precious liquids, volatile gases, earthly organisms,

mineral compounds, and chips of stone that force the interaction between pollutants and purities are both destructive and vital to life forces (86).

Land provides another way in which migrants form spiritual and earthly networks. The communion between the soil and the ancestors is often disrupted by the state, which has the authority to seize land, as they tried to do in Kennedy Road, “a 40 year old settlement that consists of informal tenure where residents ‘own’ or ‘rent’ their homes and the land beneath them” (72). The authorities demarcate land into different spaces in layouts meant to control bodies and to monitor and regulate activities within the controlled areas, so that the movements of shack dwellers are legible and easily surveilled (89). This reifies the colonial past and romanticizes and pathologizes the urban poor and African cities through the reinscription of “antimonies between the modern and the traditional, the civilized, and the unruly, the cartographic and the terra incognita” (90). The past and the present meet when the South African Police (SAP) impose colonial-era “pencil tests” and elbow examinations to identify migrants and refugees and to usher them out of the cities where they seek citizenship, sending them instead to repatriation centers (14). When the past and the present meet, two worlds collide to create a combustible relationship not only between authorities and informal settlers, but also with the ancestors and the earthly spirits. Land and its properties become regulated terrains, fields of uncertainty, and spaces where inhabitants “cough out” or ingest its compositions. The earth sears imprints on the landscape which are carried by fire, by air, and by wind and are translated by the shack dwellers and the spirits that guide them.

In this study, which features cosmology, and its interpretation of fire, water, air, and land, Chance places the agency with the shack dwellers by showing how they use the elements to interpret the modern world around them. She reveals their impoverished state while at the same time illustrating their enriched lives through their protests and interpretations of the elements. Not only does the author connect the apartheid era with that of the liberated state, she also identifies the ways in which the African National Congress, the state, and the poor correlate. This analysis, which features how residents of Abahlali-affiliated communities interrogate “living politics” in cosmological terms, sets the stage for further examinations that treat the poor as empowered subjects who unravel their everyday experiences through the elements: fire, air, water, and the earth and the ancestral spirits that govern them.

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