

Book review:***A City Imagined: Cape Town and the meanings of a place***Reviewer: *Emma O'Shaughnessy**A City Imagined*

Editor: Stephen Watson

Publisher: The Penguin Group (SA)

A City Imagined, a recent collection of essays about Cape Town, comes at a time when the investigation of space and/or place has become a popular vehicle for enabling ways in which to frame the human condition. Contemporary theory insists that we cannot separate the workings of history and society from how they operate within 'space'. Indeed, the twentieth century has witnessed a vigorous assessment of the urban condition in a variety of disciplines as well as a considerable production of novels and poetry that show the individual grappling with the physical landscape of the modern world.

If we turn our gaze from the global to the local, today's preoccupation with space reveals itself to be deeply polemical. A glance over Africa's past and present is all one needs to see how the appropriation and control of space was central to the implementation of colonial regimes of power. In South Africa, as we know, the regulation of space ensured the efficacy of the system of Apartheid. That being said, it is impossible to conceive of what space or place may mean in a modern context in Africa without a consideration of how these very concepts were, *and still are*, bound to the exercise of power.

Thus, Stephen Watson, editor of *A City Imagined* faces an interesting challenge, I believe, when he sets out to address, with this collection, the 'particular spirit of [Cape Town], the *genius loci* that is inalienably Cape Town's own and like no other on this planet.' Watson's fore- and after- words stress his engagement with the difficulty of such a project and assert his aim to disarm any 'myth' of Cape Town, pointing rather to it as a fractured urban space, bearing the traces of years of segregation, dispossession and inequality. At the same time, the reader is made well aware that the book is intended to be a series of *personal* interfaces between each writer and *their* Cape Town and that the strength of the collection comes from the variety of different, meaningful experiences that each writer has had with the city. From the start, the editor asks the reader to see that the diversity of content reveals the many ways in which Cape Town has been and can be 'read' as a city, past and present.

Essays like Damon Galgut's *My Version of Home* and Luke West's *Room with Open Window* present reminiscent relationships with the city that expose the particular nuances of the writers' sense of identity. In these pieces, the city functions as an arena in which the writer tests notions of 'home,' 'belonging' and ultimately, the 'self.' In others, the reader is asked to make more of an interrogation of the notion of spatial reciprocity as he or she reads the likes of Jeremy Cronin's thought-provoking 'Creole Cape Town,' Hedley Twidle and Sean Christie's 'Taxi on Main,' Mike Nicol's 'The City I live in' and Rose Innes' 'Five Sites' which stand out in their confrontation of the epistemology of spatial

practice and the legacy of Cape Town's spatial history. A touch of wit is welcomed in Michiel Heyns' 'On Graciousness and Convenience: Cape Cottaging 1960- c1980' which tells of clandestine sexual practices, facilitated by public men's toilets. Here the reader is offered a glimpse into a Cape Town that actually offers to rewrite the map of the city as we may know it. From P.R Anderson's 'On Common Ground' looking at the threshold of city and nature, to Mark Behr's, disconsolate 'Cape Town, my love' to Brink's 'Persistence of memory' which, like Mabandla's 'The Mist, the Wind and the Two Oceans' points to the fragility of memory, the essays in the collection are gentle reminders of what it is like to experience the push and pull of a particular place, the moment where we may or may not call that place 'home.' We are reminded that the present is but a layering of the past, that narrative serves to access memory. We get the sense from the entire collection that Cape Town has some kind of essential heart, that no-one can resist.

The questions one is compelled to ask are how the very *act* of writing about the city contributes to the way in which that city is perceived and whether the writers contributing these stories actually do represent the diverse and disparate aspects of Cape Town geo-social history or merely sustain an ideal notion of the place. The tone of the collection seems to be one of nostalgia or, generally, a wistful yet distant engagement with the terrain of the city as it is now. The reader is not incited to see the city as a 'stupendous, miserable city,' as Watson suggests, when quoting Pasolini, because very little real access is given to the nitty-gritty of life here. Rather, what appears to be affirmed is the very euphemism that pervades most readings of Cape Town and that Watson seeks to dispel: a place of beauty, despite the obvious social incongruities. One cannot help but ask: to what purpose does a collection like this serve in our current socio-political climate? This does not imply that literature should serve a political end. But, one must ask, how feasible is it to put together a collection that substantiates representations and perceptions of a place that themselves perhaps need to be problematised, considering the fact that the terrain of Cape Town's social geography- past and present- is yet to be properly addressed? Is it not more urgent to challenge the canon of those perceptions, in order to truly address the invisible, rather than visible, within the city?