

Book Review

Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama (2017) *Hostels in South Africa: Spaces of Perplexity*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. ISBN 978 1 86914 371 8. Softcover, 264 pages. ZAR375

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In this book Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama provides an in-depth look at the KwaMashu Hostel outside of Durban, South Africa, through which she argues that hostels in post-apartheid South Africa have become spaces of perplexity. The book is based on an ethnographic study of former single-sex hostels that have been transformed into Community Residential Units (CRUs) by the post-apartheid government. The author looks at hostels not as bounded space but in terms of Massey's (1994) notion of relational to the rural countryside and to township communities. Perplexity is captured in the different meanings that actors and stakeholders in former hostels exhibit towards the transformation of hostels into family CRUs. Male hostel dwellers complain about not being consulted by the government regarding what this transformation should entail. As a result, men associate the essence of this transformation as an invasion of their space. Women, on the other hand, see continuities of masculinities at hostels, in which they constantly have to struggle for their recognition.

The book is structured into three parts as shown below.

In Part One the author explores the history of hostels and provides an outline of the new community residential units. Chapter One outlines the history of the KwaMashu Hostel, within a broader outline of hostels and the history of capitalist accumulation in South Africa, in general using Goffman's (1961) concept of total institutions. The chapter could have expanded its outline of hostels as total institutions by including Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* on the relationship between total institutions, violence, abuse, punishment and criminality. For example, Qabula (2017) narrates his experience of dehumanisation, violence and abuse at hostels in the mines as well as in Durban, also covered by Moodie (1994).

Chapter Two discusses the conversion of hostels into CRUs, and the reservations and resistance to this transformation. It further highlights the complex processes of development of CRUs, shortcomings by the government and municipality in conceptualising CRUs, the provision of services like water and electricity, and revenue collection mechanisms. The chapter shows the playing out of political violence that ensued between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the National Freedom Party (NFP) after the municipal elections of 2011. It aptly demonstrates the interplay of politics, masculinity, seniority, headship, tradition, and how power is wielded, contested and resisted. The chapter is reticent in making a necessary critique of government's mechanical approach and simplistic assumptions that changing building infrastructure could immediately change the character of hostels.

In Part Two the author explores the ways in which livelihood struggles extend beyond the rural–urban divide. She depicts the multiple ways in which hostel dwellers mobilise livelihoods. Chapter Three looks at livelihood struggles and activities. Employment remains the primary

livelihood focus for men and women at hostels. Yet, men and women differ in their perceptions about the roles of women in hostels and livelihood struggles.

Most hostel dwellers continue to look for formal employment, while many do not consider their livelihood activities as work but called it *amatobo*.¹ Migrants continue to conceive of “work” as conventional, formalised employment.² The chapter navigates through stories of migrant dwellers at the hostel and the CRUs. Stories of men and women have similarities about hopes and dreams. For example, everyone wants free or cheap accommodation, but all are against crime, overcrowding and noise. Women in particular dislike violence and abuse. The hostel space is an interplay of contestation and negotiation through networks, gender, rural networks and so on.

Chapter Four looks at shrinking formal employment opportunities for migrants. It identifies ten livelihood sources for respondents, noting how these are utilised in multiple ways, individually, in combination, as well as in multiple and fluid ways beyond the rural-urban divide. This is an important conceptual and empirical point, because it shows that we have to go beyond the dichotomies in explicating livelihoods, beyond the formal viewed in isolation from the informal and beyond the “employment vis-à-vis livelihoods” dichotomies, to look at their relational content, especially the complex sets of activities, relations and articulations migrants engage in to mobilise livelihoods. The chapter looks at the persisting yet changing and diminishing role of both livestock and land as resources and livelihood activities, due to a number of factors. The factors range from the relationship between unemployment and reduction of land/livestock use, drought and the inability of rural communities to recover losses resulting from draught.

Chapter Five focuses on hidden livelihood sources as an interplay between criminality, the sexual economy and social grants among hostel dwellers. The sexual economy was a common aspect of survival strategies, especially among young black women, restructuring traditional notions of sexuality and control, which previously only saw men as having a right to multiple sexual relations. Young and unmarried women could now have multiple sexual interactions intermitted in different ways towards survival. The findings of this research corroborate the earlier work by Mosoetsa (2011) on the role of social grants as a source of livelihoods and survival for poor households.

Part Three expands Sitas’ (1984, 2004) cultural formations approach, arguing that the hostel represents a space of perplexity which is produced and reproduced by both internal and external forces. Here experiences, meanings and perspectives of hostel dwellers are both complex and contradictory.

Chapter Six presents an expanded conception of cultural formation. The significance of this contribution is to expand Sitas’ notion, and to include gender as a dynamic in the conception of the cultural formations approach. Xulu-Gama here expands the concept through the four aspects Sitas (1984) identifies with cultural formations, and her work brings out the different gender experiences and meanings of hostel life.

¹ This is a translation of “togt work”. Taken from the Dutch, it can be loosely translated as casual labour.

² Work, the notion of securing formalised employment, continues to frame existential identity (hopes and dreams) of migrant hostel dwellers against the reality of the employment crisis in South Africa. Xulu-Gama found that both men and women continue in search of “work”, reducing their current livelihood activities to *amatobo*. Earlier research by Barchiesi (2011) and Mosoetsa (2011) corroborates contradictions among the working-class poor in this regard. PhD research by Sefalafala (2018) explores this contradiction through ethnographic research, highlighting the feelings and experience of loss of self and human actualisation resulting from proletarianisation in the age of wagelessness.

Chapter Seven shows the production of perplexity through gendering spaces at the hostel and in the countryside. It shows the contradictions of continuing masculinisation of hostels, and continuing struggles of women to belong in the hostels. Contestation for space plays out in common areas, CRUs and attached informal settlements.

In Chapter Eight the author depicts households and household dynamics in the lives of hostel migrants across the urban–rural divide. She furthermore demonstrates the integration and disintegration in the life stories of hostel dwellers and the family members linked to them.

Xulu-Gama’s book makes two important contributions to scholarship. First, its theoretical contribution is in coalescing seminal scholarly contributions – Sitas’ (1984, 2004) cultural formations approach as well as Massey’s (1994) conception of space as unbounded and relational – in theorising hostels as spaces of perplexity. Here it depicts the confluence of complex, contradictory, multiple meanings and ways in which people create and make meaning, but also the different sets of relations in which the hostel as a space is engaged, in ways in which power is exercised but also contested. Second is the commitment of her research process and its contribution to methodology. Her use of critical ethnography, expanding on Burawoy’s (1991, 2000) extended case method and Hart’s (2002, 2006) relational comparison approach, was quite refreshing. But also, the sheer guts and commitment to qualitative research, which took her to spend almost two years living at KwaMashu Hostel, is telling.

I think the book could have positioned itself more closely in a critique of capitalist accumulation regimes. Such a critique would be significant in locating the history of hostels and compounds to the accumulation regime in South Africa. It would also help to locate changes – in the constitution of hostels, changes in the post-1986 era (growth of informal settlements) and the change into CRUs – within shifts in the accumulation regime, especially the shifting of workers from the rural countryside as a reservoir of cheap labour. KwaMashu Hostel is a microcosm of the post-apartheid transition, especially the post-1996 “class project. Its articulation of commodification with provision of housing and municipal services represents what Harvey (2003) calls accumulation by dispossession (articulation of neo-liberalism to sets of determinations of what hostels became as residential units).

The discussion in the livelihoods section could have begun with locating livelihood struggles in hostels in a macro-economic framework of shifting accumulation, the growing employment crisis in the labour market, shrinking jobs and rising unemployment. This is important to foreground the intensity of struggles for livelihoods in a context of capitalist accumulation without wage work.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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