

HOSTELS IN SOUTH AFRICA: SPACES OF PERPLEXITY

by NOMKHOSI XULU-GAMA

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*H*OSTELS in South Africa: *Spaces of Perplexity* is the product of primary research at the KwaMashu Men's Hostel, undertaken by the author to understand the contested spaces that the apartheid-era hostels, constructed to provide accommodation for inner-city labour, present in a contemporary South Africa. It is an academic volume that asks why, despite the buildings themselves having a complex layer of stories of migration, alienation, independence and brotherhood, these complexes were always strongly gendered, with rooms accommodating a number of men, and access only allowed to men. Xulu-Gama notes that this has changed, and with it, a new series of perceived problems has arisen. Further, the (nominal) change from using the term hostel to community residential units (or CRUs) has brought with it an association of altered methods of operation and management, crime and filth, in addition to a breakdown in the internal society due to the different demographics of the residents who have recently arrived.

Thus, Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama presents cogent and sensitive insight into what she terms 'perplexity of space' found in the KwaMashu Hostel. She defends the idea of perplexity of space, indicating that it involves a multiplicity of conflicting issues, related to gender, generation and power among many other issues, as well as the different and contrary perceptions of the KwaMashu

hostels. In her introduction, she leads very telling and nostalgic stories related by residents of the hostel that reflect the generational shifts in expectation, the reluctance to accommodate women (which the hostels in the past never did), and the impact of the shift from hostel to CRU on the daily management and operation of the hostels. Using a mixture of quotation and discussion, the author is led into the problematic environment in which opposing opinions are presented. She pits the discussions of men about female residents against the discussions of women about male hostel dwellers, revealing a cultural disjunct that sits at the core of hostel society. Significantly, Xulu-Gama notes that the agency of women has increased in recent years, with the potential to offer domestic and sexual favours, together with access to government grants allowing for them to decide for themselves, rather than being dictated to.

In her first chapter, Xulu-Gama engages with the history of the hostels, necessarily positioning them in the labour history of KwaZulu-Natal. She leans heavily on secondary source material, which limits the understanding of the hostels being institutions that existed prior to the promulgation of the Native Areas (Urban) Act of 1923, given the segregationist policies that emerged in the Colony of Natal prior to Union.

Xulu-Gama then presents a coherent, if somewhat officialised, version of the move towards the production of CRUs

as part of the post 1994 democratic process. She then proceeds to engage with the impact of this for the residents of the KwaMashu Hostel, noting that there was a reluctance to understand what the new buildings were, and what their purpose was. The author continuously reiterates the feelings of the older residents; that the hostel is not a place for women and families, using the framework of gender, politics and generational chasms in order to understand this. Importantly, Xulu-Gama articulates the deeply politicised space of the hostels and the CRUs, in their construction, allocation and occupation, and the uncertain space that hostel and CRU dwellers face when addressing infrastructural issues they face every day.

Section 2 then addresses what the author terms 'Livelihoods'. Broadly, this addresses the means by which people exist, in times in which both the context of living in the city, and living in rural areas, has changed dramatically. This section starts off with the differences between the approaches and viewpoints of male and female migrants, emphasising both the gendered disarticulation, as well as the generational chasm. Chapter 3 examines the daily lives of seven people, both men and women. The ethnography is frank, sometimes a little irrelevant, and presents the informants as people each with specific challenges and specific outlooks. Chapter 4 discusses the inter-relatedness of living in the hostel and the 'stretched out' livelihoods connected to rural areas. While Xulu-Gama concentrates on the economic livelihoods of the hostel dwellers in urban areas in the previous chapter, this one concentrates on the lifeways around livestock and agriculture, her informants bemoaning

changed societies in addition to climate change. The section on livelihoods concludes with a chapter describing crime and sexuality, both as viable means of achieving an income. Of interest are the significantly changed gender relations impacted upon by both the social grant system, and the 'goods for sex and sex for goods' survival strategies, in which women are now becoming agents of their lives, and not fulfilling prescribed, traditional roles.

The final section of this work engages with the central theme: spaces of perplexity. Xulu-Gama begins by contextualising the discussion using a Marxian framework of alienation, disvaluation, disorality and degendering in order to position contested identities, belongings, gendered space and roles, and relationships both physical and metaphysical. Her discussion around the roles of churches, particularly the Shembe and the Zion Christian Church is of interest; their patriarchal approach strongly situates the male hostel dwellers as being strong traditionalists and thus tied into traditional orders of gender and space. This thread is continued in the penultimate chapter discussing gender, its tension and impact in the hostels, and the reforming of gender roles, in both urban and rural areas. Xulu-Gama notes that the traditional gender roles as understood in the rural areas may theoretically not exist in the hostels; but in reality they do. However, these are a-contextual and often contested.

Her final chapter engages with 'Household and housing dynamics' in which she explains the variety of different household structures that exist in contemporary KwaZulu-Natal, noting that this only adds to the complexity,

and perplexity, of space in the hostels. Xulu-Gama concludes what is a well-timed volume by reinforcing the vacuum of understanding of the rural-urban migrations in policy construction, and thus in the physical reconfiguration of the hostels and their associated CRUs.

What is an engaging discussion relating to KwaMashu Hostel and its residents could well have been supplemented by a few images and maps that would assist the reader in locating the

‘space of perplexity’ more tangibly, rather than leaving them to the imagination. In all, this volume is an engaging read for those interested in contemporary issues outside of the general public realm. It is also a valuable source book for academics working with gender, generation and post-colonial politics – and particularly those addressing contested and confusing spaces.

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