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Rupture and Repair: Centering People and History in African Liberation

Geographies

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Narrating modern poverty is a fraught proposition. Scholars have been looking for workarounds to the “enormous condescension of posterity” for generations (Thompson, 1964, 12). Yousuf Al-Bulushi enters that conversation by extending a theoretically and methodologically creative invitation to think with Durban’s “shack dwellers.” *Ruptures in the Afterlife of the Apartheid City* offers a map to guide inquiry in inherently unequal settings in ways that neither glorify nor dehumanize the lived experience of people who make their daily lives on the economic, political, and housing margins of a thrumming city. This book documents the struggles of people who created their own housing in unzoned, unregulated spaces—colloquially called squatter camps—and their movement to assert and maintain rights to live in the city with dignity. The people of Abahlali BaseMjondolo, Al-Bulushi reports, “...insist upon their own ability to articulate profound ideas” (167). This book describes the beauty that’s possible when a scholar takes that premise seriously.

Al-Bulushi deploys Ngugi’s “globalectical imagination” to show how local South African debates about housing, urban planning, and “surplus people” need not be parochial; they are informed by global processes and, in fact, they are broadly and comparatively informative (Platzky and Walker, 1985). This analysis reveals what’s

specific and important about a liberationist geography of an African city. *Ruptures* is a richly detailed book about Durban, a careful gathering of evidence and cogent analysis that productively complicates race-based understanding of South Africa's recent past (South Africa has never been just about Black and white) and binary framing of politics in KwaZulu-Natal (it's not just Inkatha Freedom Party and Zulu ethnicity against the African National Congress and Xhosa identity).

These contributions matter to local scholarship entrenched in categories reified by Apartheid histories. *Ruptures* offers another way of framing South African communities, seen through praxis and grassroots organizing rather than starting with the prism of the state. The book also intervenes in South Africa's national historiography, where the pull of mining capital and the mainline of the anti-Apartheid struggle hold the center of scholarly gravity. Al-Bulushi provides a much-needed perspective from Durban and from the economic and social margins.

Ruptures investigates the Cornubia mixed-use land development on the outskirts of Durban—a project type that could be in many places. A public-private cooperation to create residential, commercial, and ecological spaces addresses both civic and capitalist imperatives; it's a model that seems to cajole private money to pay for some public good—while offering opportunities for profit. The specifics that brought together the sugar empire of the Tongaat Hulett company, attempts to squeeze commercial benefit from “unusable” land, and attempts to move people where it's most convenient for capital and government interests give Cornubia a particularly South African texture.

In this historical context, Al-Bulushi documents the ways in which Abahlali resists easy categorization as a community group, a political movement, or an NGO. This analysis situates Abahlali as a process that plays out on multiple scales: the extremely local in the differences between Cato Crest and Kennedy Road shack settlements; a local-regional interplay in the sprawling post-1994 municipality of Durban; the national stage of parliamentary political parties and the corruption of the ANC-led South African state; and global movements for human dignity. This deft use of scale—moving through clearly demarcated degrees of local and national to the global and back again—echoes Al-Bulushi's refusal to categorize Abahlali as one kind of thing. The fluidity and mobility of the object of study amplify the theoretical decolonization at the heart of the book.

By walking carefully through this scalar analysis, Al-Bulushi shows us something radically new in the South African context: people forcing the state to grapple with dignity, rather than just the usual state business of controlling land and exerting a monopoly on force—which the South African state utterly fails to do. Working in intellectual terrain shaped by sociology, anthropology, urban studies, and global Black studies, Al-Bulushi uses scale like a historian to show why the struggles of landless and economically marginalized people can't be divorced from the global. In Al-Bulushi's telling, Abahlali isn't an anomaly in South African resistance movements, contested land claims, or ongoing post-Apartheid renegotiations of political belonging. It's an intentional consequence of South Africans engaging in global conversations to achieve local outcomes in terms of resistance, land, and belonging.

Al-Bulushi's ability to think historically is a hallmark of this book. In the South African context, this is an important historiographical intervention that helps scholars

see long roots of oppression and resistance. *Ruptures* reaches back before the start of Apartheid legislation in 1948; before the national-level dispossession enshrined in the Native Land Act of 1913 or the founding of the ANC in 1912; before the entrenchment of global mining capital with the British victory in the South African War in 1902; even before 1834 and the start of Afrikaners' and their forced laborers' Great Trek as a foundational myth of the settler state. This deep historicization merits a moment of pause and recognition, followed by an invitation to think even further back.

The imperial politics of violently contested access to land and resources in southern Africa dates to 1498 (a turning point Al-Bulushi engages with), when Portuguese sailors inaugurated a repeatable return trip from Iberia to India. Al-Bulushi's un-layering of twenty-first century struggles over access to land and interrogation of communal identity evokes familiar framings of settler colonialism in South Africa as "Boer." This idea is old and enduring (van der Merwe, 1938). But the deeper foundations of what Patrick Wolfe (2006) calls "territoriality" are older still, older than nineteenth-century expressions of Afrikaner nationalism and the specific celebrations—and rejections—of this vision which still inform South African politics. Current scholarly and public conversations in South Africa about the country's past miss the kind of time-depth Al-Bulushi engages with. By connecting Abahlali with ante-Apartheid, ante-Afrikaner histories, *Ruptures* invites us to think more about South Africa's amnesia around pre-industrial histories.

Al-Bulushi also offers a clear exposition of theoretical and empirical engagement. His framing of a South-Africa specific black radical praxis allows *Ruptures* to explain

Abahlali BaseMjondolo without resorting to imperfect categorizations; to offer concrete points of comparison with other resistance movements historically and in the present in other places; and to invite further consideration of continuities in South African history. Connections between violence and poverty, along with race-based oppression and consequent resistance have outlived Apartheid. That's not surprising, since these features of colonial South Africa predated it. *Ruptures* makes these connections crystal clear.

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