

BOOK REVIEW

Constance Smith. *Nairobi in the Making: Landscapes of Time and Urban Belonging*. Suffolk: James Currey, 2019. x + 210 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$99.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781847012333.


In *Nairobi in the Making*, Constance Smith states that “the possibility of demolition and eviction loomed over” her research (56), producing a notion of a future that is both compressed and stretched out. Of the city residents, she states, “They do not know if or when their houses will be demolished: it could happen next week, in five year’s time—or perhaps never. This uncertainty generates an experience of the future that is simultaneously frighteningly immediate and always just over the horizon” (4). Like many places across the world, Nairobi is a city that is rapidly changing due to global investment enabled by neo-liberalism, but this change is fragmented and unpredictable, and for many, their place in the potential future appears uncertain. So, how do you negotiate inclusion in a future city? How do you retain the space of an alternative ending or dream? How do you make potential futures happen? What are your building blocks? And what do you “do, make and act in the meantime so as to make certain futures more feasible” (8)?

Nairobi in the Making strives to answer these questions, with careful detail to the accumulation of materialities in forms ranging from dirt and buildings to people, billboards, and words that assemble to form the neighborhood of Kaloleni in Nairobi. This delicious ethnography, full of familiar actions, turns of phrase, habits, and logics, pays close attention to minute details that repeat and accumulate and build mass, bumping up against the present in important ways. In the process, Smith forces us to reexamine some temporal concepts such as decay, memory, and disintegration to understand their generative qualities. For Smith, decay is not loss but rather accumulation or excess—excess that accumulates to make the fabric of the city, a felt fabric densely matted and entangled, held together through friction.

Smith contrasts visions of the future in media, billboards, and planning documents that present dramatic, glossy visions of skyscrapers, parkland, and shopping malls to Kaloleni estate residents’ own ideas of urban renewal and plans for the future. Essential to her analysis is the disconnect among the

promise of the plan, the apparent lack of implementation, the slow accumulative actions that transform landscapes on the ground, and the longevity of people and place. Smith looks at the materiality of urban renewal, its building blocks and intentions, by focusing her study on “making” as conceptual category and ethnographic process. In other words, she looks at how people produce the city.

As such, *Nairobi in the Making* seeks to understand change in the making of cities from the point of view of long-term residents. But it is also about things that refuse to change, that get stuck and leave traces. Smith argues that the result is “a landscape saturated with recalcitrant structures that refuse to disappear” and that don’t allow people to forget (133). These recalcitrant structures trouble easy narratives of planning or visioning as authorial of a city and are mobilized as building blocks of alternative visions. Smith argues that Kaloleni residents “perceive authority over the past to be key to the renegotiation of official visions of the future” (82). They scour the archives and they narrate their past through the built environment to make alternative claims, producing a minor history through the “performative accomplishment of a sense of property” (107). The making of history is thus entangled with making property and ownership. In so doing, the residents experience a simultaneity of multiple temporalities, of the city moving on, of being left behind, of inertia, of permanence juxtaposed with rapid change, of anticipation and speculation, of the future now and the continuous present. In these simultaneous multiple temporalities they “try to predict what horizons will remain open to them” (170) and to maintain a recalcitrant uncertainty that holds a space for their inclusion.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Chulek, Magdalena. 2020. “Hustling the Mtaa Way: the Brain Work of the Garbage Business in Nairobi’s Slums.” *African Studies Review* 63 (2): 331–52. doi: [10.1017/asr.2019.46](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.46).
- Gorham, M. Victoria. 2020. “Displaying the Nation: Museums and Nation-Building in Tanzania and Kenya.” *African Studies Review* 1–31. doi:[10.1017/asr.2020.54](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.54).
- Peck, RaShelle R. 2018. “Love, Struggle, and Compromises: The Political Seriousness of Nairobi Underground Hip Hop.” *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 111–33. doi: [10.1017/asr.2017.143](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.143).