

Review

Leslie J Bank (2011) *Home Spaces, Street Styles: contesting power and identity in a South African city*. London: Pluto Press; Johannesburg Witwatersrand University Press

Michael Whisson

m.whisson@ru.ac.za

This is an ambitious effort to provide an anthropological history of Duncan Village and the adjacent areas occupied overwhelmingly by Xhosa residents and migrants. The book follows the anthropological tradition of focussing on one ethnic enclave rather than on the city as a whole, the one, small-scale map indicating how small a territorial part the ‘township’ is in relation to the whole, and pays minimal attention to the shifts in economic opportunities provided within the greater urban area.

Bank’s distinguished predecessors provide a backdrop to the present work and enable the reader to see how the socio-political context constrains and influences fieldwork methods and outcomes. Monica Wilson had no difficulty in moving through the township as she followed the *amaPondo* migrants from their homes in Pondoland to work on the farms and in the cities in the 1930s. Not only was the township fairly small, it was also peaceful, and she had a leading cleric and founder member of the ANC as a friend to introduce her to the community. By the time that the authors of *The Xhosa in Town* trilogy reached the field in the 1950s, there had been serious riots which included the brutal murder and dismembering of a nun, and white people required permits to enter the area – those who had one were suspected of spying for the police, those who did not were liable to arrest. In the years which followed the publication of the revised volumes in 1970, permit restrictions and police surveillance, as well as increasing resistance from the young men in the community made research even more difficult.

Bank entered into the field as the apartheid regime came to its end with the townships something of a war zone, virtually ungovernable by the state as the 'comrades' took over. Bank's researches into those years are, of necessity, based largely on interviews conducted with interested parties up to 30 years after the events themselves, where presentation of self is problematic. Archival records of events over the violent phase of the struggle are, inevitably, both sparse and partial, although the *Daily Dispatch*, under a succession of courageous editors, did provide a continuous, if censored, record of events.

The diverse problems of access to the area and its people clearly affect Bank's efforts to identify the various groupings within Duncan Village and the, often subtle, changes in their status, power and style. The 'baseline' would appear to be a threefold division – between the 'fully urbanised'; the 'School' people who migrated as literate Christians from areas such as Alice where good mission schooling flourished; and the 'Red' people whose primary interest in the city was to make money to enable their families to sustain their traditional way of life – mainly in Transkei. Over time, these divisions have faded as 'School' people have become fully urbanised, and the 'Red' way of life has become less tenable even in the deep rural areas. Curiously, Bank does not explore in any detail church affiliation and funeral practices, which provide ritualised clues to people's deeply-held priorities. During the struggle, funerals often provided the only major opportunities for large scale political gatherings, especially when activists had been killed, and the choice of a gravesite often symbolises adherence to sacred space.

One great strength of Bank's work lies in his ability to identify and interpret issues which a less imaginative observer might well overlook. He explores the role and significance of various forms of heating – whether the coal which was provided for the migrants in their 'barracks' for a few years; the social significance of paraffin as a storable, divisible, negotiable source of energy; the variability and cost of the electricity supply which re-inforced the importance of paraffin – and the pathological forms of fire which destroyed swathes of shacks, or brought hideous ends to the lives of victims of 'necklacing'. The observations are comprehensive, the interpretation compelling.

More predictable, but no less impressive, is Bank's account and analysis of the changing roles of women over the past half century. In the relatively *laissez-faire* years prior to the imposition of apartheid regulations after 1950, there was something close to matriarchy in the urbanised community as

women often controlled the properties and managed the finances. With the development of a formal township, men were normally the registered householders, and it became much more difficult for women to operate in the informal economy. As control slipped away both from the municipality and the senior generation, so more children left home to literally ‘shack up’ – returning home when their shacks burned or their relationships soured. The ‘comrades’ were often fiercely patriarchal, taking the view that ‘men own property, women are property’. With the new democracy dedicated to gender equality, and the introduction of substantial grants and pensions, senior women are regaining much of their former status in new housing estates. The interplay of changing access to, and wise husbandry of, material resources; ideological emphases and state involvement is very well presented.

All in all there is much that is highly commendable in this contribution both to urban anthropology and to the on-going saga of East London’s famous suburb. Perhaps, above all, it demonstrates the value of anthropologists maintaining on-going relationships with their research sites as what may appear to be stable institutions and values during a year or two of intense fieldwork transform over time.