

# BOOK REVIEW

**Christine Hentschel. *Security in the Bubble: Navigating Crime in Urban South Africa*.** Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. ix + 166 pp. Introduction. Notes. Index. \$25.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8166-9432-7.

In *Security in the Bubble*, Christine Hentschel sets out to explore what she defines as the aesthetic, affective, and inclusionary spatialities of security governance. This focus, the author claims, goes against the grain of the contemporary urban space as a dystopian landscape of violence, crime, and segregation through the establishment of gated communities and private security guards. The Durban the reader is presented with is a state of being where nothing can be left to chance; where the inhabitants switch between security-friendly designs and atmospheric tricks to contracting the right security package or listening to the crime news on the radio. Security as well as insecurity is instant and always temporal, something that must be achieved everyday anew, and the responsibility is not placed in the hands of public authorities, but instead it is an individual responsibility (118). This is a responsibility that can be managed, navigated, and negotiated, and it can be bought, but it is not collective, even if the individual can be assisted by devices and agencies that promises instant infallible solutions. This is a fascinating book, theoretically rich and innovative, but it also leaves this reader wanting more.

The author takes a novel approach, conjuring up an intriguing imagery to pull the reader into this regimented space. Drawing on the perspective of governmentality, Hentschel conceptualizes two types of spaces that she claims represents the softer, affective, and communicative techniques of security. The first is “Handsome Space,” which aims at making places pretty, charming, and attractive, and thereby hopefully safe. This is a practice that Hentschel defines as “flirting through space.” The second is “Instant Space,” which aims at capturing the techniques used by urban residents when moving through the city of Durban, trying to avoid the worst consequence of the insecurity of the city. All of this is innovative and interesting, and it results in novel conceptualizations that are theoretically rich. However, this is also where this reader is left wanting more from the book, because apart from a couple of empirical encounters, we are left guessing and making up our own thoughts about how this actually plays out. We meet a bar owner who has established a popular and expensive bar in a notorious part of the inner Durban city.

The aesthetic of the bar is explained, but how the bar owner actually operates the place and navigates the surrounding environment to keep himself, his bar, and his customers safe is not a part of the story that Hentschel tells. We are told that his bar only plays jazz and that everybody is welcome as long as they can pay, but how he dealt with the “Nigerians” who used to sell drugs around the premises of the bar is a story untold. Yes, there are a couple of sentences where the bar owner claims that he just spoke to the drug dealers and told them that they were welcome in his bar as long as they paid and did not sell drugs in or around it. This does not seem very likely. There must be more to this story. Likewise, we are also introduced to Joe, an informal car guard in a parking lot in the Durban South Beach area. Here, he watches cars for the owners and takes care of the surfers’ valuables, along with a number of other acts of personal property security for his clients. Joe is an interesting subject, but again there must be so much more to this story. How did Joe gain the trust of his customers? How does he manage to keep the car keys, wallets, and other valuables of his surfer clientele safe in an environment of high crime if he operates on his own and is unarmed? Obviously he and other informal car guards must have some sort of protection arrangement with other forces, be it the police, private security guards, or other criminal actors.

There must be an ethnography behind both the theorizing and the short briefs of the case studies that we are presented with. This book is not urban ethnography, and this reviewer clearly respects an author who wants to write theory. However, as much as the theoretical backbone of governmentality helps the author to make theoretical advances and come up with innovative conceptualisations such as “handsome” and “instant space,” this is also an approach that makes the micro-political environment of these sites in Durban and the Durbanites who inhabit them go blank. This is a pity, as it also makes it more difficult for the book and the author to engage more fully with such important dimensions as race, class, and gender. These dimensions clearly must have an impact on who has privileged access (and how they have it) to the spaces that can help Durbanites negotiate their daily security.

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### For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Diphoom, Tessa. 2016. “‘Surveillance of the Surveillers’: Regulation of the Private Security Industry in South Africa and Kenya.” *African Studies Review* 59 (2): 161–82. doi: [10.1017/asr.2016.31](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2016.31).

Dobson, Nathan. 2019. “Private Security in Nairobi, Kenya: Securitized Landscapes, Crosscurrents, and New Forms of Sociality.” *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 30–48. doi: [10.1017/asr.2018.53](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.53).