

BOOK REVIEW

Imraan Coovadia is a South African novelist, essayist, and academic. He is the director of the creative writing programme at the University of Cape Town.[1] He has taught 19th-Century Studies and Creative Writing at a number of US universities. His debut novel, *The Wedding*, published simultaneously in the US and SA in 2001, has been translated into Hebrew and Italian.

David Lurie *Undercity – The Other Cape Town*

Undercity – The Other Cape Town is David Lurie's fourth book on issues and crises around contemporary urbanisation. Moving away from pure documentary, he sees this work as "a visual essay and meditation on time, place, memory and personal history; a melding of journey and dream, bringing together...the political, the philosophical and poetic. Cape Town, for all its beauty and energy, is a city in crisis—a failed city that somehow works". It is reviewed by Professor Imraan Coovadia.

Barbed wire, power stations, railway yards, bicycle paths, building shells, housing estates, a car on blocks, six rusted-out hulks, a pile of unneeded tyres: David Lurie's camera in *Undercity* registers the presence of industrial and workaday infrastructure in scenes of Cape Town that have been for the most part cleared of human agitation and portioned in classical thirds. Panoramas are set in place from motorways and small hills, construing the city with a tough-minded but not merciless intelligence.

In the new volume's first plate, "Joe Slovo Park," a young man with bowed legs stands on a half-flooded path behind a barbed wire fence. An electricity tower looms over him, a bare-boned arrangement of triangles and rhombuses running

DAVID LURIE
UNDERCITY - THE OTHER
CAPE TOWN
Published by Hatje Cantz
Verlag, Germany
ISBN: 978-3-7757-4327-3
www.davidlurie.co.uk



into power lines on the horizon. The young man could be a representative of the country's predicament, and its uncertain path through a litter box civilization, but the scene has the impartiality of a certain kind of painting rather than any tendency to symbolisation. It is neither an allegory nor a study in incongruity, not quite a piece of existentialism and not exactly an experiment in mood. It might be best described as a tidy consideration of South Africa's untidiness, and is therefore dominated by the green undergrowth which is neither wild nor natural, and not cultivated either.

Perhaps the most impressive of the photographs in the volume, "Phillipi, 2013," pursues this strategy. The perspective on a section of half-claimed ground reveals itself as a spiral or an S-shape: the pond in the distance is joined to an intermediate space of mud and tin shacks which turns into a great heap of apparently abandoned tyres. The fence in the foreground, along with a sky bellying into cloud, suggests the classical and pastoral source of the photograph's inspiration.

David Lurie will talk reluctantly of his training in economics (or what used to be called political economy to indicate a broader scope) but there is an abiding interest in the useful and in the nature of use in this volume—a tripartite scheme of the useless, the useful, and the things which stand outside the domain of use. A boy makes use of a concrete wall to build a shelter in the centre of the city, in sight of a Samsung sign. Cranes and cement mixers bask on the whitened floor of a building site between office buildings and parkades. A woman with a red and white scarf, her feet turned in, has converted an embankment into a bench. A line of tan boulders stretch to her left while carpets of green vegetation creep towards one another in the parched inner-city scene. The caption identifies her as a Congolese refugee. It is not an accident that Lurie includes in one photograph the cement curve of Cape Town's notorious useless fragment of highway which connects to nothing and forms part of no thoroughfare; nor that his photographs register the presence of signs ("Cash Loans," "\$tay True," "Own Business Efficiency," "The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth") which place us inside the intertwined oppositions of wealth and poverty, usefulness and uselessness, industrial development and waste production.

The unworldly and unearthly also make a significant inroad into this collection. Two boats lie in a derelict building in Woodstock, waiting for an ocean that once flowed through this part of the city. They are no more useless than ghosts or memories. Over the trashland of Imizamo Yethu, reduced to rubble by a fire in 2017, hang black trees and sacrificial smoke. At Hout Bay the old municipal buildings are almost entirely buried in grey sand. In a remarkable photograph of a broken tree trunk on Tafelberg Road the scale has been adjusted to create a miniature forest in what might be smoke but is likely morning mist. Far away are the ghosts of several trees, nothing green in their branches.

The most fully realised spirituality in the collection comes in the double portrait of two worshippers of the Zion Church taken outside in Hout Bay. Suddenly, from a city of waste and industrial utilitarianism, David Lurie has coaxed an unashamed cosmic consciousness. If the mountains in the background are too low to propose an image of the sublime, if the cloud cover is too shallow and too

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light in places to indicate an oncoming storm, there is nevertheless something thrilling and unnerving in a foreshortened apocalypse. In the background, as anyone familiar with the city would know, are fish factories preparing the catch for overseas markets. It is no coincidence: on the previous page, in one of the many sequences which structure this volume, Lurie has placed two views of the fishing boats and factories in Hout Bay. To the categories of useful, useless, and transcendent, we may add a fourth category of the uses which the photographer makes of his views of the world, thoughtful and revelatory uses which turn up on almost every page of *Undercity*.