

Kwaito Bodies: Remastering Space and Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid South Africa. Xavier Livorman, 2020. Durham: Duke University Press. 35 illustrations b&w, glossary, bibliography, index, 288pp.

Kwaito presents us with a unique glimpse into what could be deemed the official soundtrack of post-apartheid South Africa: a popular music form that tells the Black South African story, in all of its shapes and forms. It is for this reason that studies presented on this subject matter provide us with a nuanced account of both socio-cultural and sociopolitical discourse for academic analysis. In the book, *Kwaito Bodies: Remastering space and Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Xavier Livermon presents readers with a radical approach to academic research on the topic. Through his prolonged, immersive ethnographic engagement with the genre at its zenith, Livermon grants his readers a front-row seat on his revisionary expedition into the embodiment of kwaito and its performance.

Through *Kwaito Bodies*, Xavier Livermon paints a picture of the multiple textures evident in post-apartheid South Africa. The writer argues for a ‘remastery’ of freedom, space and subjectivity, to encapsulate the multiple realities of the newly established freedoms as expressed and experienced through ‘kwaito bodies’. The book provides us with a retrospective look inside the sociocultural and political significance of kwaito, both in its performance; its contestation, and its navigation through notions of being in post-apartheid South Africa. Livermon’s radical approach to the politics of embodiment provide a distinguishable point of departure from what has already been established in kwaito-centered academic work. Through his focus on the politics of embodiment, Livermon allows for an expansive account of kwaito and its performance that considers “how the concept of freedom can be refracted through these bodies” (24). This approach allows for an alternative perspective that facilitates discussions concerning the often, overlooked element of pleasure within discourse surrounding historically oppressed communities.

In asserting the bounds of the term ‘kwaito bodies’, Livermon delineates it as representing both performers and consumers of kwaito who “came into adolescence and adulthood in the years following the demise of apartheid” due to them being “fundamentally important in defining the possibilities of post-apartheid South Africa for future generations of Black bodies” (30). The writer describes *Kwaito Bodies* as being “the first post-apartheid study of self-fashioning and the mediation of the body and pleasure that arises from the practices of popular performance and social dance” (11). This has been facilitated through his positioning of gender and sexuality adjacent to African Diaspora theory to locate kwaito as a vessel of Black pleasure in post-apartheid South Africa (19-20)—thus, making provision for accounts of kwaito bodies that break the heteronormative ground we so often see throughout academic discourse.

Livermon’s approach demonstrates an intersection between both consumer and interrogator, that allows for a comprehensive account of the social, cultural, political and theoretical aspects of his research. *Kwaito Bodies* presents us with a story-like analysis

encapsulating the multiple textures of the newly democratized South African society of the mid-1990s—shedding light on the multilayered discourse brought forward in and through the kwaito era. Through his writing, we contemplate the cracks in the freedom that was purported after 1994, and consider kwaito as an alternate politics for the remastering of heteropatriarchal norms.

What this book does, in contrast to many others on the subject of kwaito, is provide significant theoretical contributions to this area of research, and bring forward an account of potential developments of the genre through referencing the observed, contemporary futures associated with kwaito. The inclusion of an artist such as Babes Wodumo within the book's discussion of kwaito's possible futures has led to the contemplation of the expansion of a kwaito-centered analysis that goes beyond the Johannesburg nightlife scene and that speaks to the musical expression(s) that kwaito has birthed.

Throughout the book, I am consistently aware of two key factors that have produced limitations in the outcome of the research: the researcher's reflexivity and the scope of the research.

In the introductory chapter, the writer meticulously delineates the bounds of his research methodology. However, a noteworthy drawback that has been somewhat overlooked within the foundation of this work is the lack of consistent acknowledgment of the inherent power dynamics within the researcher's engagement with both his interlocutors and the spaces which they occupy. While he deems himself as included within the 'kwaito bodies' with which he speaks, he is also, perhaps more importantly, an American researcher conducting research on a cultural group in the Global South. This necessitates an awareness of the underlying power dynamics within his interactions. When discussing the legacies of colonialism in revisionary academia, it is necessary to acknowledge the inherent institutionalized power that researchers from imperialist countries, such as America, possess over post-colonial societies. Whether this has negatively or positively impacted upon this research has not been explored.

Moreover, there is need to provide grounding to particular discussions under consideration in this work by expanding the scope of the study. When considering the diversity within the book's analysis, one must ask whether we are truly able to gain insights into the bounds of the 'Kwaito Feminine' solely through dialogue about Lebo Mathosa, or of the 'Black Masculine in Kwaito' through Mandoza. Similarly, one must ask whether the spatial limitations presented have impeded on the work's ability to provide a comprehensive book that speaks to kwaito as a whole, or simply, a Johannesburg-centered discourse.

Through *Kwaito Bodies*, Xavier Livermon has made pioneering steps towards facilitating deeply engaging research which imparts indispensable theoretical resources for researchers. The writer's immersive research facilitates a depth that is crucial within academia, particularly for under-researched fields. While I would recommend *Kwaito Bodies* for its progressive perspective and nuanced approach, I would warn that it should be considered as foundational, and not an all-encompassing body of work that makes

consideration for all contexts and possibilities within kwaito as a cultural form. As such, it should be contemplated as a catalyst for what could be profoundly innovative work on kwaito in the future.

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