

Claudia Gastrow. 2024. *The Aesthetics of Belonging: Indigenous Urbanism and City Building in Oil-Boom Luanda*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 220 pp.

Aesthetics and their politics matter, and very much. That is the key message of Gastrow's ethnography, which illustrates how the city is a place of struggle. Here, different parties struggle to realize their agendas. In such a setting, what the city looks like matters, not only for its aesthetic value but because, as Gastrow concludes, "the aesthetic is also the power to shape the political and socioeconomic future of the city" (p. 182). Her ethnography is therefore a relatively small book, but with a big remit.

The setting for Gastrow's study is Luanda, which has gone through considerable urban change and at speed because of Angola's oil boom. In such a context, she is correct, and rightly so, to situate her claim as being one that speaks to a specific time period. At the time of her investigation, Angola was attempting to turn its back on war and look to the future. The questions that intrigue Gastrow also engage us as readers. What sort of future, and for whom? What should a Luanda on an upward trajectory actually look like, as capital of a country that is embracing the future? The author takes us through different neighborhoods of Luanda, bringing a city to life in considerable diversity. This is a city that is subject to forces of change and modernization that impact people in different ways in the name of modernity and future building.

The politics of this urban change, which are underpinned by the theoretical aspects of citizenship and belonging in urban space, along with its winners and losers and their everyday struggles, are the subject of this ethnography. Bookended by an Introduction and a Conclusion, the book comprises five chapters. The Introduction launches the reader into Luanda. We learn about the city's history, and some vital history of the conflict. This is expanded in Chapter One, where Gastrow puts the state firmly into the discussion on aesthetics and the politicization involved. This chapter is vital because it interrogates the promises of building what is billed as a world-class city. Chapter Two takes us into the world of Luanda's *musseques*, or informally constructed urban areas. Gastrow uses this term because, as she notes in the Introduction, the base notion of informal and informality just does not capture the "sense of urban belonging, community, and political rights" (p. 2) that are integral to Luanda's *musseques*. This chapter brings the urban politics that form this book to life, and we see cooperation but also rejection of prevailing visions of change. In Chapter Three, Gastrow outlines urban change through the perspective of social relations, specifically between residents and state institutions. This chapter outlines not only the building of the city but also the demolition of what has been deemed undesirable. Chapter Four returns more solidly to politics, specifically around questions of rehousing, and how this reproduced pre-existing differences. The final chapter then deals with notions of resistance and dissent, and how urban aesthetics became the basis for disagreement with the regime, expressed through the medium of aesthetics.

For this reviewer, the strongest aspect of this book emerges early, at the start of Chapter One, where Gastrow takes up the challenge of working with the government slogan of "solving the people's problems." This slogan speaks to a political agenda that entrenches regime power through pursuing particular directions of change. But as Gastrow shows throughout, who are "the people," exactly? In trying to solve the problems of some, we see also that this creates

problems for others. So then, who belongs where, really? Who is benefiting and who is not? As Gastrow shows, this is not binary, and it is entirely possible to win in some ways and lose in others but still hope for a better future.

Gastrow's book results from careful, long-term research. She is careful not to overstate her case, and the extent to which what she describes in Luanda can be generalized is worth keeping in mind. The book's analysis of the Marxist scholar and geographer David Harvey's work is crucial and beneficial to many readers both in academia and beyond.

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