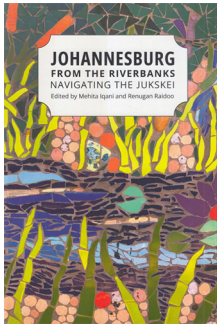




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Johannesburg from the Riverbanks:  
Navigating the Jukskei



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# Johannesburg and the Jukskei

Rivers have long fascinated writers. Whether the Snowy River in Australia<sup>1</sup>, or the Ouse in England<sup>2</sup>, writers and journalists have walked their banks, researched their histories, and told their stories. South African scholars and writers have likewise explored waterways, most notably Jackie Cock's magisterial biography of the Kowie River<sup>3</sup> and Sean Christie's account of walking the length of the Jukskei<sup>4</sup>.

Yet, as these texts indicate, narrating a river is a daunting task. How to encompass an ever-moving, multi-scalar phenomenon, involving anything from the physiochemical structure of its water to the human formations on its banks? The river that is the subject of this volume – the Jukskei in Johannesburg – poses further challenges as it is often reviled, at times as no more than a “filthy, forsaken trickle” (p. 222) (in the words of Romy Stander a key activist in attempts to rejuvenate the river). What stories might one tell of something so despised?

The cover of this volume includes a detail from a mosaic and signals its method. The artwork was fashioned collaboratively by the NGO Water for the Future and the Spaza Gallery in Troyeville, and features the point at which the Jukskei first emerges from the underbelly of storm drains and sewers into daylight. Mosaic-like, the volume offers a tessellation of perspectives from those involved with the river, whether artists, activists, hydrologists, botanists, ecologists, urban planners, ethnographers, journalists, policymakers or social scientists.

The book itself includes an introduction and five sections: Scientific Perspectives, Art and the River, River Politics, River Living and Urban River Management. The Introduction frames the book in terms of the concept of ‘riparian urbanism’ which

*offers an assessment of Johannesburg's history, development, and culture from the banks of the river that runs through it. Riparian refers to the interface between the river and the banks that define, direct and are eroded by it. Urbanism calls attention to those beings – human and nonhuman – who live at the aquatic-terrestrial boundary, how they use and manage the capricious river, and the city and urban landscapes that frame those interactions.* (p. 8)

Together, these essays offer multi-scalar explorations of how the Jukskei and Johannesburg make each other. As the Introduction notes:

*The river travels through, and carries with it, many of the features of the city and its socio-economic contradictions. Johannesburg's fractured and fractious urbanity has been forced into the Jukskei's riparian condition. ... While it is entirely changed by the presence of the city and its people, the river also does something to the urbanity of the city.* (p. 8)

This theme of fracture and contradiction runs through the essays which explore the disparities of wealth that characterise the communities that live alongside the river, whether wealthy golf enclaves, precarious informal settlements or the unemployed or semi-employed who make the river banks their home. Ethnographies and interviews provide detailed insight into the layers and contradictions within these communities. Renugan Raidoo and Ujithra Ponniah provide vignettes of high-end gated communities and their relationships to the cleaned-up portions of the river which runs through these estates. Savory Chikomwe tracks how switches in policy complicate the lives of those in Stjwelta, an informal settlement on the banks of the Jukskei. Sarah Charlton outlines a research project about those living alongside the river, disaggregating them from the blanket category of ‘homeless/vagrant’ and showing them to be the ‘working homeless’, using the river banks for ultra-low budget living.

These social contradictions ripple out in different understandings and epistemologies of water. For residents of upmarket estates, river frontage assumes a largely aesthetic function, with the water itself seen as a neutral substance. For many township residents, the river water is not empty but is home to water spirits and mythical snake-like creatures like *Mamlambo*. Actual creatures in the water hold different implications for different communities. Jamaine Krige, a journalist, tracked a hippo who wandered from its home in the Hartbeespoort Dam into the Jukskei: for residents of informal settlements who lack the sprawling lawns of golf estates, the hippo represented a more direct danger.

The Jukskei is certainly beset with problems, but the volume provides a vivid sense of the range of organisations and individuals attempting to address the pollution and toxicity of the river. Several of the essays are autobiographical testimonies by activists outlining how they came to be involved with the Jukskei. Paul Maluleke narrates how he worked to establish Alex Water Warriors, while Sibusiso Songweni, a dedicated member of the same organisation, tells of his involvement (sadly he passed away in 2023). Romy Stander, co-founder of Water for the Future and Special Projects Manager for Nando's, a committed funder of rejuvenating parts of the Jukskei, likewise tells how she was drawn into the river work. A photo-essay by Lungile Hlatswayo, director of Water for the Future, a social worker and committed activist who also sadly passed on in 2023, bears testimony to her work.

This sense of concern for the Jukskei is apparent across the essays, which speak to many different forms of ‘knowing’ the river. Antoinette Bootsma discusses the botany of the river (what it was, what it is now and what it might become). Kyle van Heyde, Kousar Banu Hoorzook and Atheesha Singh quantify different levels of pollution, whether macroplastics or bacterial contamination.

Another mode of apprehending the river is through visual art practice. Dunja Herzog transports techniques of bronze-casting from Nigeria to an installation close to the river. A conversation between Nina Barnett, Refiloe Namise and Abri de Swardt relays their hydro-related art practices and how these refract the river. Landi Raubenheimer and

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Jessica Webster analyse photographic and other representations of the river. These essays seek out complex aesthetic portrayals of the river, rather than superficial shock/horror genres.

The essays are alive to the politics of water. Sean Christie is one of the pioneers of documenting the river and has long drawn public attention to the state of the Jukskei's waters. In this piece he contrasts the state of the river with the growing 'ocean' fantasies in upmarket gated complexes replete with fake beaches and 'sea'. Nicky Falkof narrates an episode in which right-wing singer Steve Hofmeyr dumped ZAR5000 worth of U2 tickets in the Jukskei as a protest against the failure of the band to condemn the 'Kill the Boer' anthem.

A further political dimension of water is as a substance to be governed. Stuart Dunsmore and Ernita van Wyk discuss the Upper Jukskei Catchment Management Plan commissioned by the City of Johannesburg while Dieter Brandt considers river management systems in an age of climate change and ever-increasing urbanisation.

This collection constitutes an important contribution in several respects. It offers a rich set of methods and approaches for understanding rivers in a multi-scalar way. As a volume that draws on an impressively wide range of disciplines, it has much to offer researchers and teachers interested in the politics of rivers and water in South Africa.

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