

BOOK REVIEW

Sharad Chari, Mark Hunter, and Melanie Samson, eds. *Ethnographies of Power: Working Radical Concepts with Gillian Hart*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. xi + 247 pp. 3 illustrations. Index. US\$20.00 Paper. ISBN: 978-1-77614-666-6.

Gillian Hart is a geographer renowned for critical ethnography with a view towards social change. The edited volume *Ethnographies of Power*, honoring her legacy in South Africa and elsewhere, celebrates her critical conceptualization of the socio-spatial complexity of economic and political processes. One of the contributing authors, Sharad Chari, writes that Hart “brought to her work lived and scholarly understandings of Asian and South African capitalisms” (55). Chari explains that Hart is capable of offering “powerful” critiques (55), testifying to Hart’s ability to engage other paradigms of thought and frameworks of interpretation ever since her earliest writings. Melanie Samson highlights how Hart’s research is grounded in long-term ethnographic work (217). Hart’s scholarship cross-cuts economics, politics, society, gender, and race across multiple scales, such as city and nation.

Structure-wise, *Ethnographies of Power* consists of a lead-in and nine substantive chapters. The editors, Sharad Chari, Mark Hunter, and Melanie Samson, introduce their “idea of collating concepts for radical critique” (1). The title is rooted in the notion that “scholars use radical concepts in social research in mutual relation to real-world struggles” (2). “Power” also means realizing social justice and bringing about social change. *Ethnographies of Power* exemplifies high-quality African scholarship published by a prestigious university press on the continent. The digital version of the book is openly accessible and is expected to benefit teaching, learning, and community advocacy. The writers’ affinities with Hart, either as thesis supervisees, junior colleagues, or avid readers, clearly show from their texts. For instance, Jennifer Greenburg was an undergraduate student in a “History of Development and Underdevelopment” course taught by Hart (142). Ahmed Veriava remarks: “Gillian Hart is my teacher, although I have never been a formal student of hers” (123). *Ethnographies of Power* stands out from similar products in the market precisely because of the personal touch, revelation of ethnographic details, and sharing of intellectual growth stories. Far from demanding uniformity, as Mark Hunter aptly puts it: “Anyone who has worked with Hart knows that she does not impose a strict methodological regime on her students” (78). The book pivots around South Africa with attention paid to countries in other continents, mirroring Hart’s own experience. It targets an interdisciplinary audience interested in human geography, political economy, and development issues. The book may also interest academics of gender and agrarian questions.

When Hart undertakes “critical ethnography,” she analyzes complex articulations, thereby expressing important critiques of capitalist logics. Originally from South Africa, Hart finds her fields of study in that country, but also South East Asia and North America. Chapter One, by Bridget Kenny, adopts Hart’s articulated epistemologies to understand worker politics. She conducts a local labor study in the midst of “contradictory, situated everyday relations” (44), connecting place and space. Chapter Two, by Sharad Chari, examines “racial capitalism” and micro-level, interlocking social and political relations. Advocating for fieldwork and innovative methodologies, Mark Hunter’s Chapter Three revisits a “relational comparison” of private schooling in postapartheid South Africa. Focusing on the subject of deforestation in Guatemala’s Protected Areas, Jennifer Devine’s Chapter Four utilizes Hart’s concept-method of “multiple trajectories of globalization,” finding a site of politics in local government (identified by Hart as “the key site of contradictions” in South Africa [106, emphasis original]). Chapter Five, by Ahmed Veriava, presents an incisive Gillian Hart who, “with a Gramscian eye on the political” (128), problematizes Thabo Mbeki’s “second economy.” Jennifer Greenburg’s Chapter Six borrows Hart’s concept of “D/development” to comprehend global militarism and the pervasive use of “stabilization” language in international operations, against the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks. Greenburg underscores Hart’s lessons on critical ethnography and her reminder for us to build concrete concepts out of it. Chapter Seven, by Michael Ekers, Stefan Kipfer, and Alex Loftus, is dedicated to Hart’s engagements with Gramsci and Hart’s gathered wisdom, especially for “those of us working in and on the imperial North” (179). Zachary Levenson’s Chapter Eight continues the Gramscian theme and elucidates how Hart has refined her ideas of articulations and rearticulations over time. To finish, Chapter Nine, by Melanie Samson, returns to South Africa. Hart’s insights on nations and nationalisms are of practical use when trying to understand reclaimers’ activities on landfills. According to Samson’s own research, reclaimers are “deeply linked into global circuits of capital,” while claiming their place within the nation is central to their daily praxis (232).

The book is strong in several aspects. To start with, it pays tribute to Gillian Hart while acknowledging the geographer’s critical dialogue with other thinkers, for example, Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, and Doreen Massey. The chapters are suitably interconnected to form one coherent text. The authors consistently refer to Hart’s works and regularly communicate between themselves. For instance, Jennifer Devine wants to “think alongside” Hart and her ideas of multiple trajectories of globalization, applying the approach to her own research on deforestation in Guatemala (99), while Melanie Samson performs a comparable “thinking alongside” Hart’s *Disabling Globalization* (217). This makes for a delightful, edifying reading experience. The book is written in accessible, jargon-free English. The narrative, storytelling writing style encourages reader engagement. As Zachary Levenson explains, because “politics cannot be read off socio-economic conditions” (209–210), Hart guides us to look at conjunctural processes and observe how politics is articulated and rearticulated on the ground.

The editors' intention is for the book to be "a living text," and they "invite you [the reader] to work with these concepts yourself" (3). *Ethnographies of Power* contains just under ten examples of how this can be done. As a public good, the book will be read by many more people—especially in Africa and other developing parts of the world—if it is effectively marketed and shared on digital platforms. Overall, *Ethnographies of Power* urges us to tackle contemporary socio-political challenges in such a way as to improve practice.

Kaian Lam 

University of Macau,
kaianlam@um.edu.mo
[doi:10.1017/asr.2024.214](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.214)