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At Home With Apartheid: A Review

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Rebecca Ginsburg, *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).

Rebecca Ginsburg's book intimately examines how apartheid operated within private homes, particularly through the experiences of Black domestic workers in white households. Rather than focusing solely on legal and political structures, Ginsburg emphasizes the domestic space as a key site for upholding apartheid's racial hierarchies. By incorporating oral histories and personal testimonies, she reveals how Black workers navigated constant surveillance, emotional labor, and restricted autonomy while also resisting their subjugation in subtle but significant ways. The book successfully uncovers the hidden dynamics of

domestic service under apartheid, illustrating how racial oppression extended beyond the public sphere into everyday life.

Ginsburg organizes the book around key themes that define the relationship between domestic service and apartheid. The introduction establishes historical context, detailing the legal and social conditions that pushed many Black South African women into domestic work. She demonstrates how white households functioned as sites of racial control, where employers closely monitored Black workers and imposed strict rules that reflected the state's broader apartheid policies. This framing supports the book's central argument: apartheid's enforcement did not rely solely on state laws and public policies but also depended on its deep entrenchment within the intimate, everyday spaces of white homes.

In the early chapters, Ginsburg analyzes the physical structure of white homes and how their design enforced segregation and control over domestic workers. She examines the separate quarters, hidden pathways, and back entrances that confined Black workers to designated spaces, ensuring their presence remained largely invisible unless needed. These architectural features directly reflected the broader segregationist policies of apartheid South Africa, where physical separation reinforced social and racial hierarchies.

Employers, neighborhood watch groups, and police officers actively monitored domestic workers' movements, revealing how the home functioned as part of a larger system of surveillance and control.

Beyond physical confinement, Ginsburg explores the psychological toll of life in white households. Black domestic workers endured constant scrutiny, as employers imposed strict behavioral expectations that extended beyond work tasks. Employers demanded subservience, required workers to suppress personal grievances, and enforced arbitrary rules designed to reinforce their inferiority. The emotional labor that domestic workers performed, particularly in their relationships with white children, also had a huge effect. Ginsberg used first hand account to show that these women often become primary caregivers, forming deep bonds with the children they raise. While children initially viewed their nannies as loving parental figures, they gradually absorbed the racial hierarchies of apartheid. As they matured, they began to treat their caregivers not as equals but as servants, mirroring the structures of oppression reinforced by their families and society. Through this process of socialization, racial inequality persisted across generations, and domestic service played a crucial role in maintaining apartheid's ideology. Yet, despite these oppressive conditions, Ginsburg highlights moments of quiet

resistance. Workers manipulated household routines, developed coded language, and deliberately underperformed tasks, asserting their agency in small but meaningful ways.

Ginsburg also explores the broader historical implications of domestic labor under apartheid. Even as political resistance movements gained momentum, society largely ignored the experiences of Black domestic workers. Apartheid-era legislation explicitly restricted Black workers' rights, but domestic service functioned within an informal system that remained difficult to regulate. Without legal protections, workers relied on white employers for housing and income, which left them vulnerable to exploitation. The book's final chapters analyze the lasting impact of apartheid-era domestic service on post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the formal dismantling of apartheid, many of its racial and economic inequalities remain deeply embedded in society. Domestic work continues to serve as one of the most common forms of employment for Black women in South Africa. While legal protections have improved, economic disparities and racialized labor structures persist. Ginsburg raises broader questions about the long-term effects of apartheid and whether true social and economic transformation has occurred.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its use of oral histories, which center the voices of

domestic workers and foreground their lived experiences. Ginsburg does not just recount their hardships, she allows their words to reveal the emotional and psychological toll of their work. For example, one domestic worker recalls how she had to sleep on the kitchen floor while the family dog had a bed, a stark reminder of her dehumanization. Another woman describes the humiliation of being denied access to indoor plumbing while working in an opulent home, forcing her to use a bucket outside. These testimonies make the book both emotionally compelling and historically valuable, ensuring that the workers' perspectives remain at the forefront rather than being overshadowed by abstract political analysis.

Another major strength of the book is its accessibility. Ginsburg's writing style is clear and engaging, making complex historical and sociological arguments easy to follow. She avoids academic jargon and instead presents her analysis through vivid storytelling, bringing each worker's experience to life. In Chapter 5, for instance, she describes the layout of a typical white household not just in architectural terms but through the perspective of a domestic worker navigating its restrictions: moving quietly through back doors, avoiding the front rooms unless summoned, and knowing exactly when to disappear from sight. These narrative choices make the book more immersive, allowing readers to grasp the lived realities of

apartheid without needing prior academic background in South African history.

Despite its strengths, the book has some notable limitations. The book had relatively limited engagement with broader political movements. While Ginsburg acknowledges that domestic workers resisted oppression in subtle ways, such as intentionally working slowly or forming secret support networks, she does not fully explore how these acts of defiance connected to larger anti-apartheid activism. She briefly mentions labor strikes involving domestic workers but does not analyze their significance in the broader struggle against apartheid. Many domestic workers participated in unions or clandestine resistance movements, yet the book focuses more on their individual struggles than their collective action.

The accountability of the oral histories presents another drawback. While the firsthand testimonies make the book deeply personal and engaging, Ginsburg does not always clarify how she verified these accounts. Without a thorough explanation of how she ensured their authenticity. This lack of transparency raises questions about whether the narratives reflect broader trends or if they are more anecdotal, potentially limiting their credibility as historical evidence.

To conclude, *At Home with Apartheid* reveals how apartheid operated within private homes,

making domestic service a key site of racial control. Rather than focusing on legal structures, Ginsburg highlights the everyday surveillance, emotional labor, and restrictions Black domestic workers endured while also showcasing their subtle acts of resistance. Through oral histories, she exposes the personal dimensions of apartheid, demonstrating how oppression extended into intimate spaces. This book is essential for those interested in African history, labor, and race relations. Its engaging style makes complex issues accessible, while its firsthand accounts offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of apartheid. By centering domestic workers' voices, Ginsburg provides a critical perspective on how racial hierarchies were enforced and sustained in everyday life.

-Ken

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