One Home Two Worlds: Apartheid in Suburban Johannesburg

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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 *At Home With Apartheid* presents the stories and lives of female African domestic workers in Johannesburg, South Africa under apartheid in the mid twentieth century. She artfully weaves real life narratives with the close study of built spaces, including suburban homes, and the social dynamics within them, and connects them to the broader issue of apartheid as a whole. Ginsburg seeks to demonstrate that by examining the micro-system of domestic work, the larger issues

surrounding apartheid can be exposed. Ginsburg proves her argument with first-hand accounts of women working in the domestic field, the structural layouts of suburban homes, the suburbs themselves, and observations of the daily lives of African women living and working in Johannesburg. Her work is organized thematically by the different realms of both personal and work life, which vary from the rules of working in suburban homes to navigating the city and making personal connections. She takes the reader on a journey from women leaving their rural homes, to working in Johannesburg and finally of life in retirement and their return home. Ginsburg's writing flows between immersive and analytical with finesse. She has an ability to retell women's stories in such a way that she brings interviews to life. This is balanced by her use of interviews as a foray into proving her argument and assertions. In her more typically scholarly portions of writing, she uses examples of built spaces, social hierarchies, and racial and gendered expectations as supporting evidence for her argument. Ginsburg's work adds a new perspective to the study of African urbanism by demonstrating how the suburban home can mirror the larger scale of segregated built spaces under apartheid. The Johannesburg suburban home may appear to be a place of idyllic middle class sensibility from its jacaranda tree lined street, but Ginsburg reveals that not all is as it seems. While the sounds of tennis balls hitting

rackets echo from the backyard court, there is the deafening silence of a domestic worker scrubbing the stoep. It is within such moments that Ginsburg points us to the two-sided story, coalescing in a single space, of Johannesburg under apartheid.

In Ginsburg's *Introduction*, she touches on the lives of female African domestic workers in Johannesburg over the twentieth century. She intermingles the ideas of apartheid segregation, with both the social, legal and infrastructure aspects and consequences of an apartheid South African culture. The planning of suburbs, white owned homes' architecture, and the living quarters for domestic workers, separated from the main house and legally obliged to be a certain size and composition, are all indicative of the apartheid state.

In *Chapter One: Getting to Know the Corners*, she focuses on the journey of African women to Johannesburg to find a living as domestic workers in affluent white homes. With the growing number of African women going to Johannesburg to find work in white homes in the mid twentieth century, there is also a pattern of tribal run lands growing poorer under the apartheid government. In her work, it is easy to see the threads between the laws enacted by the South African government and the stronghold they had on the ever rising desperation of those living in the countryside. With enactments by

the National Party in the 1940s, they addressed the issue of an influx of African migrants into urban areas for work, not by offering assistance to tribal run lands, but by creating laws regarding the separation of whites and Africans. They instilled a system that subjected Africans to a lower status and separate from whites, but did not address the core issue. The Northern Suburbs are spaces in which Africans may enter but not inhabit themselves, and serve as a physical manifestation of wealth, power and superiority.

Chapter Two: The Tempo of Kitchen Life, looks at the working conditions for domestic workers in suburban white households and how they navigate white suburban neighborhoods. White home layouts suggest order, expectations, and prejudices, and the micro-systems within them create a certain kind of perdition for workers. In terms of the creation and use of space, the back rooms in which these women live are small, removed from the home, have no power or plumbing, and are only sparsely furnished. These spaces are designed to control and separate workers by forcing them to live in an environment that is subservient to their white employers. Backrooms are visible from the main house, and white owners follow the colonialist practice of keeping Africans under white supervision. The architectural set-up of white homes is divided and also mirrors colonialism. These homes are built for live-in help, and is a

product of apartheid and colonialist social ideology. Cleaning of homes was done largely through physical labor, as households would rather have their domestic workers perform tasks by hand than buy appliances. The required upkeep for domestic spaces was purposely made difficult, adding another layer to status and power. These women's lives are centered around the homes and lives of those they work for, and when they received time off, it was seldom they could do due to transportation. The layout of suburban Johannesburg, coupled with segregated public transport, negated their slice of freedom. Public transportation, however, can be seen as a means to mitigate the restrictions put upon them by the apartheid system.

In *Chapter Three: Children and Leaving*, Ginsburg touches on workers' relationships with their own children and the white children they care for. The tension between leaving one 's child to care for another is one that harbors a mixture of guilt and love for these women. While caring for white children could foster a connection, these were soon gone as children began to internalize apartheid expectations. African women inhabit a space between the suburban and rural realms. Their attempts to see their children are often hindered by the apartheid state at large and within the home. Public transport, passes and house rules cause many to seldom see their children. Women give up their own lives to serve

others, and are given another generation of apartheid indoctrinated children as a reward.

Chapter Four: Come in the Dark focuses on the ways in which domestic workers, employers and law enforcement claim the command of properties. Backyards and back rooms are an avenue for workers to exercise power and skirt around the apartheid state despite being created by whites the apartheid state to serve their interests. By harboring guests and creating an underground railroad, workers lived and worked within the restrictions and expectations of apartheid, while secretly subverting them. The spatial layout of suburban areas combined with the women's knowledge of daily routines of her employers and their neighbors made harboring guests in secret possible. This also allows women to harbor connections of love, friendship and family through these otherwise hidden avenues. While raids by police are prevalent, and the power of the state is enacted, both workers and white employers mitigate this through ownership of space.

Chapter Five: House Rules focuses on the ways in which house rules created and enforced by white madams for their domestic workers reflect racial tensions and the hierarchy of the apartheid state. There is both a physical and subliminal separation of space based on social hierarchy within such homes. Within this one space are two forms: the white space and the

African space. The routines and expectations of both white families and domestic workers have clear definitions and separation within the larger space they inhabited. Uniforms worn by domestic workers were a physical manifestation of the division of space, status, spheres of the home and responsibilities of the worker. They also act as a physical marker of the apartheid system 'working'. The rules of the home act in a way that purposely monitors and suppresses workers, and subsequently highlights the broader scope of apartheid's hold.

Ginsburg ends her work in *Chapter Six: From Homes with Apartheid*, with a vignette of a typical day in a Northern Suburban home, where she culminates each chapter's purpose of highlighting the different aspects of domestic workers' lives into a singular storyline. She ends with talking about the retirement of domestic workers, the closing chapter of their careers, and so too the end of her book. A final interview focuses on one woman's hope for the future, one far away from Johannesburg (p.181). As she still hopes for freedom, it cannot be ignored that this was the hope of many Africans under apartheid: that one day, they will truly be free from the confines of apartheid.

Ginsburg uses the perspective of African women to see Johannesburg and apartheid as a whole. Ginsburg's close examination of a small part of the population illuminates one portion of the

effects of the apartheid state. This shows her research is done in such a way that it is not too broad, while still illuminating the larger issues regarding apartheid laws, government and culture. Ginsburg continually inserts first-hand accounts of female domestic workers as supporting evidence of her claims. She creates an observational series of narrative short stories of women she interviews. Her writing style doesn't dryly list what was said during interviews, but rather transforms them into small stories that artfully curate these women's lives. She uses a descriptive immersive language style that adds a personable and intimate aspect to her work. The stories of real women support her work and wider topic.

Ginsburg ends her work with a narrative of a typical white Northern Suburban home on a weekend afternoon, painting a scene of domesticity while intertwining much of her work's purpose (p.164-172). Highlighting the leisure of the family and the work of the domestic worker, we can see everything she has touched being acted out in real time. This scene demonstrates that the undercurrent of apartheid is always present. She demonstrates her argument from each chapter by tying together the people, physical home, layout, construction, spheres of white and African, neighborhood, and back rooms. This brings the focus of each chapter on different aspects of the

lives of domestic workers into a single storyline, and creates the final piece of her work.

Ginsburg argues African women undermined South Africa's policy of racial segregation by moving to cities to support themselves and their families in rural areas (p.137). This can be seen as an affront to the apartheid state and as playing into the system of African women serving wealthy whites. Rather than living in the extremes of this perspective, it lies somewhere in the middle. These women challenge the state's division of spaces, but are still victims and maneuver within its stronghold. In Chapter Five, the defiance of house rules allows workers to defy employers and enact forms of agency within the apartheid system. The home itself and the rules within them reflect the racial tensions and hierarchy of the apartheid state (p.153). Her claims that African women could find agency within apartheid are supported, but she is neglectful of the fact that it also burdens them and must navigate within it.

In conclusion, *At Home With Apartheid* offers readers a new perspective on apartheid that illustrates the lives of African women. Her poetic style captures real life situations and highlights the human condition. She deftly moves between scholarly articulation of built spaces as reflections of racial segregation to the suburban home as a kind of metaphorical battleground of apartheid values. This book

would not only serve those interested in topics related to African history, but also those in gender, racial and sociological studies. While her book focuses on the history of apartheid from the perspective of African women, the humanity and perseverance found within the book are one that many will surely learn from.

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