What Lies Beneath

Review of Rebecca Ginsburg's At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg

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Published on May 09, 2023

last released 2 years ago

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

At first glance, the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, South Africa appeared to be the pinnacle of progress and prosperity during apartheid's peak. These various neighborhoods, filled with middle and upper class white citizens, exemplified capitalistic success built upon racial oppression. From the outside, an uninformed observer may only notice the impressive architecture, success of the nuclear families, and economic freedom of the suburbs' residents. Through the normative gaze of a white observer, the cookie-cutter tranquility of the northern suburbs eclipses any deeper layers

of unsettling power dynamics and oppression. In her book, *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg*, author Rebecca Ginsburg seeks to take a deeper look at the northern suburbs to reveal the racial inequality and systems of control embedded in the household. Paying particular attention to female domestic workers in the homes, Ginsburg uses ethnographic methods including dozens of interviews to exfoliate the systems by which the suburbs' prosperity was built. Ginsburg's six chapters effectively reveal that human perception of reality is often quite different than what actually exists. Upon my reading and review of the book, I applaud Ginsburg's execution of her stated aims. Through Ginsburg's vignette-style approach to studying the apartheid-era city, she succeeds in unraveling the seemingly perfect neighborhoods to Johnaessburg's north. Ginsburg's writing style is engaging and easy-reading which helps to highlight the multifaceted ways of viewing these white-occupied communities.

In Ginsburg's introduction before her first paragraph, she leads by writing, "apartheid was good for no one, but there was nobody for whom it was worse than African women"(p. 1). Additionally, she embeds her thesis later in the introduction by writing, "this book is about the imperative of looking beyond the layers that flatter and seduce us and peering and squinting until new, possibly uncomfortable viewing of

the composition and order of our surroundings emerge"(p. 24-25). Synergistically, these two keynote statements contextualize Ginsburg's ethnography and argument. Her introduction also contextualizes the employment and living quarters of African women, an important background on the dynamics Ginsburg aims to reveal. For starters in her introduction, Ginsburg addresses the nomenclature of denoting these neighborhoods as suburbs. Contrary to the American connotation of midwestern suburbia, the townships in northern Johannesburg do not exist as separately autonomous towns. Rather, they exist under part of Johannesburg proper (p.4-5). And unlike the de facto segregation of cities in the United States after the civil rights movement, the homes in these neighborhoods were owned exclusively by white citizens by law. While America did have de jure segregation as well, high apartheid was significantly stricter in some regards. Nearly every home in the townships also employed African women as domestic help. Most of these women were migrant workers who moved to Johannesburg in search of economic opportunities and escape from the harsh realities of farm-life in the countryside such as in the Transvaal region. After some social changes in the early 20th century, white residents were all to provide housing for their workers, oftentimes these "back rooms" were situated on the flanks of the property or attached on the back of the homes. This spatial

dynamic is important as it meant that the workers were constantly on property.

Ginsburg's introduction successfully contextualizes her remaining chapters. The first chapter, "Getting to Know the Corners," focuses on the journeys from the countryside into Johannesburg which the women took on the road to employment. Ginsburg notes the herd mentality that drove many women to make this journey (p. 34). The incentives of economic opportunity, coupled with this groupthink led many women to travel to Johannesburg without fully considering the consequences. Among these inconveniences include apartheid travel restrictions, securing work, and logistical issues with housing until employment. Many women relied on friends and relatives to board with in Johannesburg until finding employment. In the case of Zinhle, for example, finding relatives to stay with was harder than imagined (p. 43). Ginsburg's interview with Zinhle proved that some women were homeless in Johannesburg before finding employment and boarding.

Ginsburg's second chapter, "The Tempo of Kitchen Life," focuses on the women once employed. Ginsburg pays special attention here to spatial movement within the home that the women would carry out on a daily basis. Despite the mundane and often degrading routines, the risk of losing employment encouraged women to check their emotions at the door and appear

pleasant and unbothered (p.61-62). As per the chapter's title, Ginsburg notes that the womens' day-to-day homebase was the kitchen. While certainly more incorporated into the house than the back rooms, Ginsburg embeds house layouts to show that even the kitchens were relatively isolated from the rest of the home's happenings. Due to the sheer time spent in the houses, these women were able to access private parts of the white lifestyle (p. 70). This points to a stark contrast between the public and private spheres. If these African women were in Johannesburg's Central Business District, for example, this existence in the private lives of white citizens would be impossible.

The third chapter, "Children and Leaving,"discusses the duality between family and work lives. Many white residents of the suburbs hired African women to take care of their children. This tasked African women with a large role in essentially raising white children. The tension between a mother's protectiveness and want for help in motherhood raises an interesting dynamic between white women and African nannies. This dynamic was not always negative, however, as white children grew extremely close to their nannies which gave the African women a sense of purpose (p.101). The white employers often displayed balances between appreciativeness and self-conscious hatred towards their female staff. Similarly to the sense of a new family, Ginsburg's fourth

chapter, “Come in the Dark,”discusses the distance workers had from their male partners. Nighttime was often when women would feel most lonely and isolated (p.115) and would frequently sneak male guests inside (p.118). Routine police raids and inspections made this practice risky.

Ginsburg’s fifth chapter, called “House Rules,” further synthesizes the dynamics between the black and white “spheres” inside the household (p. 138). While each house had their own spin on expectations for their employees, Ginsburg noted general similarities across the townships. The benevolence some white families had towards their African workers (or, at least, thought they had) manifested a way of justifying the racially oppressive system at large. A motif of the book is understanding how a system so evil was able to exist. Personal experiences of white folks with the system can help explain this. Ginsburg’s final chapter, “At Home with Apartheid,”ties her argument together nicely. She argues that all of the systems and dynamics discussed in the previous five chapters can go under the radar when examining the townships with a normative lens.

Looking at Ginsburg’s scholarship alongside her stated aims for the book, I would declare her work a success. The first five chapters accomplish her goal to unravel and understand the power dynamics beneath the surface of

Johannesburg's northern suburbs. Under this umbrella, I'd like to point especially to Ginsburg's use of interviews and writing organization to commend her argument.

As laid out in her introduction, Ginsburg's ethnography includes over seventy personal interviews with various people living in Johannesburg during high apartheid. The inclusion of these interviews as vignettes is crucial to the success of Ginsburg's book. Each chapter included multiple stories of (mostly) African women which facilitated the book to read more like a story than a lecture, an important aspect to the engagement of her audience. Having real names and stories to read humanizes the societal plague which was apartheid. For example, I found the oral account regarding pets in the second chapter especially useful. Regarding a white woman in the house of an unnamed African worker, "the money she spends on dog food, cat food, and the other things she needs for the animals–is more than she pays me"(p. 75). I think this vignette highlights the underlying existence of an unjust system beneath the tranquility of Johannesburg's suburbia. In the eyes of the African woman, her livelihood and existence is seen as lesser by the white woman than that of her pets. As with all of the other interviewees (with the exception of first names), the woman here is unnamed. I appreciate Ginsburg's dedication to preserving the privacy of those she

interviews. While most of her book blurs the public/private lines of apartheid, exposing the identities of the oral accounts seems irrelevant to her argument. On a broader level, the implications of keeping identities private can serve as a suggestion that each person's experience in high apartheid may serve as a microcosm for the system as a whole.

Additionally, Ginsburg's writing style helped to argue her points well. The inclusion of vignettes, supplementing a stream-of-conscious writing flow continually shows just how much is really embedded beneath the surface of the suburbs. Ginsburg's constellation of data surrounding the individual experiences in apartheid fit into her prose seamlessly. Perhaps the fact that apartheid occurred on such an individual level, as opposed to solely a maco one, helps explain how the system persisted.

I would recommend *At Home with Apartheid* to anyone living in an area with a system of racial oppression, or a history of one. Going to school in North Carolina, I can see how one may be easily seduced by the beauty and tranquility of the homes. For example, the beautiful Graylyn Estate lies just outside of Wake Forest's campus. This property was originally the Reynolds' family estate and is a large display of the wealth accompanying the history of tobacco plantations. The history of tobacco in the Carolinas is one riddled with racial injustice

with systems not dissimilar to South Africa's apartheid. Because the Graylyn is now a hotel with public grounds, a visitor can easily be ignorant to all of the history in light of the property's beauty. Ginsburg's argument that perception is oftentimes different than reality is especially important for the study of areas with racially unjust histories like South Africa or the American South.

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