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# At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg

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Review By Nate Block

by *Nate Block*

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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* provides an engaging and in-depth analysis of

the lives of black domestic workers during South African Apartheid. Ginsburg's book aims to reveal undisclosed complexities within the home and the unique power dynamic between workers and domestic white families. Ginsburg's most crucial argument in her text is her opposition to the misunderstood narrative that domestic work provided these women with mobility and agency. Ginsburg argues that this narrative neglects to acknowledge the numerous atrocities that came with this work. Through her transparent and extensive research and interviews, Ginsburg's work reveals the racial discrimination, abuse, and mistreatment that these women endured. Through these interviews, Ginsburg is able to provide a unique insight into not only the lives of these domestic workers but also the junction between the lives of workers and employers. While her book does make many valuable claims, Ginsburg's work does lack some overall context. While her obvious intent is to look at Johannesburg specifically, the experiences of domestic workers outside Johannesburg may have proved very valuable in understanding the complexities of domestic work. Through the perspective of domestic work in other locations, we could potentially further appreciate the rarity of the experiences of the domestic workers of Johannesburg. Overall, Ginsburg's book is a dynamic and captivating text that challenges many misunderstood narratives of domestic work during the apartheid. Through her

detailed and nuanced analysis, Ginsburg does succeed in proving her claim that domestic work is not a site of humane and benevolent work but rather a site of oppression and mistreatment.

Ginsburg divides her work into six distinct chapters, each of which serves and provides a nuanced and detailed account and analysis of a different facet of the lives of domestic workers in Johannesburg. In the first chapter, "Household Workers and the White Bourgeoisie," Ginsburg provides the context of this domestic work and the political context of the apartheid overall. Throughout the chapter, Ginsburg further explains the concept of domestic work and discusses how these jobs were created as woman's jobs and how this was utilized to condone the exploitation of black women. In chapter two, "Women, Work, and the State," Ginsburg explores and explains the ways in which the government during the apartheid mandated and controlled the lives of these women. She provides first-hand examples of the control and power that the government had over these women as they passed laws further suppressing them and even required passports or identification in order to ensure their mobility. Ginsburg continues in chapter three, "Workers in the Home," as Ginsburg provides exact details of life inside the home that she recorded from these women's stories. She examines the unique relationships that these women had with not only their employers but

the children they cared for as well. Ginsburg continues by analyzing the uncommon power dynamic these workers had within the home and the ways in which these domestic workers negotiated for some freedoms and agency. In chapter four, "Spaces of Domestic Service," Ginsburg applies her nuanced analysis to the physical spaces of the home or domestic workplace. Through her study as well as the blueprints and illustrations of ordinary households, we see how these homes were explicitly designed to sanction domestic work. Ginsburg continues as she reveals the ways in which the spaces of these homes intentionally promoted racial and sexual oppression, as well as these women's attempts to combat this by redesigning their own spaces. In the fifth chapter, "The Legacy of Domestic Service," Ginsburg looks at domestic work on a far broader scale and discusses the impact that this work has had on the greater city area. This chapter not only provided the much-needed context of the effects of domestic work but also illuminated the ways in which domestic workers, at times, worked together for their mobilization. Finally, in the sixth chapter, "Memory and Heritage," Ginsburg again takes a wider angle in her investigation, as she discusses the ways in which domestic work is now seen in historical texts and museums. She reveals the ways in which domestic workers' contributions and oppression are almost always underappreciated and examined. Overall, each

chapter of Rebecca Ginsburg's *At Home With The Apartheid* successfully serves to represent a different aspect of domestic work during this era. While some more significant national or even global context would be helpful, overall, the organization and flow of each of her chapters support her overall claim.

Ginsburg's work is a very transparent and meticulous book that presents many valuable strengths in understanding domestic work during the apartheid; however, some areas could have been clarified or expanded upon alongside these positive attributes of her work. Ginsburg uses a variety of sources in order to assert her claim ranging from first-hand accounts to secondary sources, providing a very detailed and nuanced analysis of domestic workers.

Furthermore, she is very successful in using the convergence of racism and sexism to understand the complexities that these women faced thoroughly. Through her organization of the six previously mentioned chapters, Ginsburg covers a diverse array of experiences these female domestic workers endured in Johannesburg.

Thus, through the well-organized and thorough organization of the text, we are able to easily follow Ginsburg's claim as it progresses in the book. Another strength of Ginsburg's text is her ability to speak with these workers directly and provide a detailed analysis and description of the workers' experiences directly. Through her extensive and meticulous interview process,

Ginsburg allows the reader to see unique relationships, experiences, and explanations that were previously unavailable. By interviewing these workers directly and revealing the cruelty these women encountered, she reveals a significant contradiction to many of the existing theories of domestic workers' mobility within this workplace.

While Ginsburg's text does succeed in many facets, some areas of her work do lack some clarity and scope when looking at the apartheid from an external perspective. For example, while Ginsburg's apparent intent is to research and analyze black domestic workers, she fails to ever truly contextualize the existence of white as well as male domestic workers as well. While this may not seem crucial to her claim, these details provide much-needed broader and social ideas that help understand apartheid-era South Africa far easier. Additionally, while Ginsburg's text is very detailed in most chapters, there are some areas in which further explanation would further her argument. For example, in the early chapters, we learn about the commitment these women make by leaving their rural homes and families to work in Johannesburg. However, these chapters lack context into what these hometowns looked like and the lives that these women were living prior to domestic work.

Further, Ginsburg, at times, needs more clarity and explanation of the effects that this work had

on the families of these workers as well. Overall, while Ginsburg's work is a very effective and transparent representation of the actual reality of domestic work, her claim could be even more effective with more clarity and explanation of the broader scope of domestic work as well as further background information. A deeper analysis of the background of these workers, more information about Johannesburg as a whole, and a brief broad, scope description of the apartheid, would all support and further Ginsburg's overall claim. Although *At Home with Apartheid* does maintain areas of improvement, Ginsburg's work is very effective in its nuanced approach to proving her claim that domestic work did not provide these workers with mobility or agency.

Overall, *At Home with Apartheid* is a successful and essential study of female black domestic workers during the apartheid. Ginsburg's unique and nuanced approach to research and interviews proves successful in the overall argument she attempts to make. This text would be very helpful and applicable to anyone studying the history of human rights, more specifically, the research of labor rights. Additionally, this text would also be beneficial in the investigation of the impacts of Western society on South Africa. Furthermore, this text also proves to be very applicable to many of the political and social issues that exist within our world today. Ginsburg's research, more

specifically her attention to gender oppression and racism, is highly relevant today as our world continues to fight with issues of racism and sexism on a global stage. Through the application of Ginsburg's research on domestic work, we are able to reveal how many of the atrocities of this period still exist in our society today. In conclusion, Rebecca Ginsburg's *At Home with Apartheid* is a triumphant work that provides unique insight into the lives of apartheid-era domestic workers and sheds light upon many of our societal problems today.

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Nate Block, Wake Forest University

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