Book Review: At Home with Apartheid

CITE [#]

SOCIAL

DOWNLOAD

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

by Jack Sabatini

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).

The Apartheid Era in South Africa dominated society in the second half of the 20th century and produced a myriad of different environments and relationships between different societal groups. Rebecca Ginsburg, the author of *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg*, is a professor at the University of Illinois and a scholar of African history (specifically South Africa). This text is broken down into seven

main sections, an introduction, and six chapters. Her main aim of this text was to "reconstruct the everyday identities of the Northern Suburbs and the variables that bore on whether, how, and to what degree individual households adhered to or altered these patterns," (p.22). She aims to highlight the narrative that many black women in South Africa experienced, even though for the most part it has not been as covered throughout historical recollection and analysis of the Apartheid.

In this text, Ginsburg mainly attempts to portray an accurate representation of the domestic relationships between the middle and upper-class white South Africans and the black South Africans who worked for them. She strives to add an uncommonly studied perspective to the topic of Apartheid in South Africa. She makes several claims throughout the text and argues that the female domestic workers In Johannesburg worked tirelessly and covertly pushed back against public Apartheid laws in order to create better lives for themselves and their families. Although some of her claims may be subject to contention, she provides a substantive base of information and solid claims that support her overall argument.

Chapter 1 of Ginsburg's text, *Getting to Know the Corners*, outlines where the black domestic workers of Johannesburg would come from and why they wanted to go there to work. In the

suburbs and farmlands of South Africa, the number of opportunities for both women and men was slim. She says that a main reason for women to move to Johannesburg is that, "Family and friends who had already made the move assured them that they would be able to support themselves in Johannesburg…[one of Ginsburg's interviewees stated] ''You always think of gold and money when you see Johannesburg…Maybe if I go to Johannesburg, I can have the same,'" (p.35). The multitude of opportunities was desirable in order for these women to create better lives for themselves and their families. She concludes this chapter by saying that although Johannesburg may have been daunting to these women, they were surrounded by other black South African women in the space and were not subject to the same Apartheid treatment other groups of people were (e.g males) due to their employment status.

Chapter 2, *The Tempo of Kitchen Life*, covers the physical space that the black domestic workers were given for living quarters as well as where they mainly operated in the upper and middle-class white South African households. The living quarters for these women were usually quite bare, mostly containing minimal furniture, such as a bed, nightstand, bench, wardrobe, and cupboard (p.57). These rooms were also usually in obscure, removed locations in the house. On the other hand, "The kitchen is placed in a central location, allowing the domestic

convenient access to key points of the house that require her labor, including the dining room, living room, and work yard. At the same time, walls isolate the kitchen from its surroundings, turning it into an enclosed cell" (p.64). This aspect of location emphasized the importance of women concentrating on service to others, rather than as members of the family.

Chapter 3, *Children and Leaving*, outlines the complex bonds between the domestic workers and the children of the families they worked for, as well as how they fit into the family after working for them for numerous years. These relationships were complicated because the workers would often spend a significant amount of time with the children while their parents did not. Ginsburg states, "Some white women sometimes admitted to learning from the nanny. [One mother stated the domestic worker] would talk to [her] child whenever she passed by, whether she was sitting or crawling. [The mother] never did that [herself] until [she] noticed her doing that," (p.92). Although children came to understand the difference between the workers and their own families, many women stayed with their families due to a loyal bond that was formed over many years (p.108). This complicated the relationship between the two parties and blurred the lines that Apartheid attempted to create.

Chapter 4, *Come in the Dark*, outlines the relationships that occurred between domestic workers and their friends and male counterparts. In Johannesburg, working males were housed in rooms with fifteen to twenty others living in them (p.118). This forced them to travel to their girlfriends'/wives' houses, where they were employed, to see them (and were forced to use alternate methods of sneaking in the house and hope they would not be caught). This chapter touches on movement as a whole within Johannesburg during Apartheid and discussed how white South Africans vs black South Africans had unspoken, metaphorical turf wars not only within the city but in the household.

Chapter 5, *House Rules*, Ginsburg develops the idea of a complex household between upper/middle-class white South Africans and the black domestic workers, as they relied heavily on them. She states, “Workers also needed a high degree of intimacy with the home itself, learning the corners, crevices, and ceilings of each room…At the same time, dominant white attitudes and a rash of other considerations led whites to try to keep Africans at a distance…Whites also responded to the challenge of keeping a ‘white house’ whose maintenance depended upon black,” (p.138). Ginsburg follows this with the idea that white South Africans wanted to see their black servants as ‘invisible’, despite their reliance on

them. This odd relationship was a point of contention between the two groups and caused the climate of the household to be uneasy.

Chapter 6, *From Homes with Apartheid*, discusses how different narratives are important when researching and analyzing Apartheid in Johannesburg. Ginsburg writes about how different members of the upper/middle-class white South African household interacted with their environment differently. She says this perspective can be extended further to the rest of the Apartheid society, as, "After pulling apart the layers of behavior and perception that constitute any given site, then, it is good to try to see the whole or, at least, to sketch its complexity" (p.170). She ends with a discussion of the household as permanence, and how the domestic workers made (relative) peace with their lifestyles in order to provide better lives for their children.

Ginsburg has several strong assertions throughout her book. One assertion in particular I believe is strong and key to understanding her argument is from chapter six, with the above quote from page 170. This text, from start to finish, highlights several different aspects of Apartheid from the perspective of black domestic South Africans working in upper/middle-class houses, and each different aspect Ginsburg touches on helps illuminate a separate aspect of that perspective. From the

layout of the house to the relationships with the children and relationships with lovers and friends, to the strangely complex relationships between worker and employer all help shape the narrative of who these women were and what their experiences were like. She uses first-person accounts to convey this idea and it strongly adds to her overall aim. This claim backs up her aim to help construct an encompassing account of these women's experiences during Apartheid in South Africa.

One claim of Ginsburg's that I believe is weaker comes at the end of Chapter 1, when she asserts the claim that "[black South African women's] relative freedom in the public realm was a function of their status in the private; their social position as 'nannies' supported African women's challenge of the state's efforts to control urban space," (p.53). This claim is not as strong to me because they did not have a significant amount of freedom in the private space. Although their status in the private home life was important to the families they worked for, as they ran the household, they were never truly free to do as they wanted. They were forced to live in the smallest, grungiest rooms away from the rest of the house and were forced to work primarily in the kitchen as it was the most effective way to provide service to the family. Their freedom in the public realm is also debatable because, despite the fact they were allowed to work and live in the upper/middle-

class sectors of society (in this text the Northern Suburbs), it was not real freedom. The "challenge of the state's efforts to control the urban space" is also contestable, because at the end of the day, the white families still controlled the household and if they wanted to abide by the state's Apartheid laws, they could. They just chose whether or not to relax them.

Nevertheless, Ginsburg's text provides quality evidence to support her aim to create a comprehensive narrative of black South African women who worked for upper/middle-class families in South Africa. People who are interested in learning about how domestic life operated in times of oppression should read this text. It sheds light on how although whites in South Africa during Apartheid desired to completely separate themselves from black South Africans, it was never actually possible because of their reliance on them in the intimate household setting. This is important to these scholars because it demonstrates how that separation was much more idealistic than realistic, and that idea could be used to find similarities and differences in other historical periods of oppression.

-Jack Sabatini, Wake Forest University

COMMENTS • 0

Login to discuss

No comments here

Why not start the discussion?

READ NEXT • One Home Two Worlds: Apartheid in Suburban Johannesburg