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At Home With Apartheid


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).

Apartheid is known as a stain on South African history, and author Rebecca Ginsburg invites the reader to consider in *At Home with Apartheid: The Hidden Landscapes of Domestic Service in Johannesburg* the extent to which apartheid dealt with controlling movements in urban spaces, both in homes and in broader urban landscapes. Looking at spatial logics of domination and agency as well as built environments of middle class homes in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg, Rebecca Ginsburg invites the reader to “squint” at this area, and in doing so, understand how looking beyond initial readings

of space reveals uneven apartheid regulations and how the daily lives of domestic workers functioned. Domestic servants were a key feature of apartheid in practice in the middle class, so Ginsburg aims to show how city landscapes hold multiple realities and experiences: for those of domestic servants who assumed the more brutal aspects of apartheid, to the white middle class oppressors who perpetuated the system. Ginsburg uses her background as a historian of architecture to read into the spatial logics of the homes, neighborhoods, and uneven distribution of infrastructure and technology to synthesize how apartheid looked on the ground in the Northern Suburbs. Her spatial analysis is combined with snippets from oral interviews that she conducted with domestic servants to personalize the spaces based on the lived experiences of domestic workers to create overall narratives of general experiences and patterns. The blend of thematic, multi-faceted source analysis coupled with masterfully readable prose, while sometimes structurally limiting analytical clarity, provides a highly compelling glimpse into the system of domestic servitude and its historical implications in apartheid Johannesburg.

Ginsburg structures the text thematically with six chapters including a conclusory chapter which move through the life of domestic servants both spatially and socially. Chapters

one and two, “Getting to know the corners” and “The Tempo of Kitchen Life,” are concerned with introductions to both spatially navigating the city as well as introductions to domestic labor and their locus: the kitchen. For domestics, learning to navigate Johannesburg and the domestic servant scene required adopting mental modes to understand a city that made black movement very difficult. Ginsburg notes that maps and written descriptions of Johannesburg were not useful to African women, they did not consider their needs in urban survival (32). Mapping Johannesburg, for African women, had to do instead with understanding where was safe, where was not, and where people one could rely on was vital to not only tapping into the mutual aid network of domestic workers, but successfully acclimating to the city.

“The Tempo of Kitchen Life” is concerned with the introduction of domestic servitude in the Northern suburbs. Following acclimation into Johannesburg, domestics had to navigate how to create her working routine and navigate the challenges of domestic servitude over days and weeks: the demands of the families, the lack of technology, and the meager accommodations and resources. Ginsburg traces how the worker would interact with the home and the family while making do with hardly any resources. Ginsburg is concerned with reading the built environment of the home in this chapter, noting

that homes often were built, especially the kitchens, with the intention of centrally locating but isolating the worker.

Chapters three through six are thematically concerned more with how domestic workers acted as agents under colonial apartheid systems. Chapter Three, entitled “Children and Leaving” addresses the familial strain and trauma that was caused by apartheid and the pain women felt in leaving their families to work and the difficulties in returning home. Workers often played a prominent role in raising young children in the houses they were employed in, often a poignant experience as domestic workers were unable to raise their own children frequently. Ginsburg notes, “Successful acculturation into apartheid society depended on white children coming to be aware of themselves as white and on their acceptance of the racial hierarchies that underpinned law and custom” (94). This lack of control over childrearing and life’s circumstances is contrasted by the agency domestic workers exercise in their back rooms which is highlighted in chapter four, “Come in the Dark”, which describes how women had control over their back rooms and ‘modes of relating’ in both the relationships they conducted, whether romantically or with family members. Given the apartheid regulations, the utmost secrecy and care in sneaking people onto the property. Getting people into the back room was all a

matter of timing and domestics being an expert in their environment. Ginsburg highlights a contradiction in which, “The white family’s movements formed the basis of her guest’s, in an inverse manner, and it was the domestic’s strategic position as overseer of the one that allowed her to plan the other” (124). In back rooms, the domestics’ strategic position of overseer and coveted space in an urban area gave her agency and control of her own space.

Chapter five, “House Rules” discusses the conventions and assumptions that allowed black domestic workers and white madams and house owners to coexist and be in the same rooms as each other at the same time- they were occupying the space in different ways. These rules hinged on African invisibility, and the rules were a result of white uneasiness. The most effective way to maintain two spheres was through surveillance, which usually was overseen by the madam. Of course, in moments alone, domestic workers would break rules, find time for leisure, and use items and time in the home to their own liking. Ginsburg ends the text with chapter six, “From Homes with Apartheid” by engaging in close reading of the environment to inspire empathy and engages in an informed imagining building on the ideas of the previous chapters. Ginsburg asserts that people move across spaces differently, what people see in an environment reflects how they function in it. “This means that our journey through the

Northern Suburbs is not complete with a fine-grained analysis of the nooks and corners of the houses and yards” (173). Studying perceptions of the environment and how people interacted with homes in the Northern Suburbs is vital to understanding apartheid in practice.

The thematic construction and multilayered employment of sources rendered *At Home with Apartheid* an incredibly compelling read that highlighted how apartheid was set up to perpetuate domestic servitude, and how domestic servants both suffered under the system and were able to act as experts in their roles in the Northern Suburbs under systems of oppression. In her introduction and first chapter, Ginsburg masterfully weaves multi-layered source interpretation with ample historical context. Ginsburg uses colorful prose with creative flairs that allows the reader to understand how environments present different realities for domestics, and white residents, for example. Ginsburg relays, “urban survival demanded paying close attention to the unique physical details of an area, such as the safest crosswalks for particular intersections, houses where particularly nasty dogs yapped and growled at the gate, and alleys that provided shortcuts and relief from police surveillance” (12). Use of language such as ‘yapping dogs’ and ‘safe crosswalks’ allows the reader to better understand environments and build empathy (26), an aim highlighted in the introduction.

Ginsburg weaves narratives together from different sources to create a collective idea of a typical day for a domestic servant, while still attending to the particulars of the women she interviewed. She notes in chapters like “House Rules” that certain women found different ways of breaking or following rules based on their particular employers that worked best for them. Ginsburg takes great care to attend to the particularities and maintain the integrity of their individual experiences, while also using those individual experiences to create a greater overall narrative of domestic servitude and how that practice revealed the unstable and uneven apartheid system, as well as the deep white unease at the time.

While only a minor note of criticism, one area where readability felt difficult was in sections where the thematic structure overwhelmed highly clear historical analysis. In texts, I crave source use that is broken up by explicit analysis that highlights the narrative crafting Ginsburg was enacting. For example, in “Tempo of Kitchen Life”, Ginsburg privileges explaining how the built environment functioned to make domestic workers visible yet isolated (64), and conveying the sources that reveal the ‘contours of daily life’ (54). The balance between explicating sources, creating narrative, and analyzing felt a bit unbalanced at points, with less emphasis on clarity of analysis, to the point where the analytical work the reader had to do

felt like it was based on inference rather than concrete statements. However, this text is firstly, a thematic text, but also text that is focused on the depth and breath of sources, and the reader does have the capability of making those inferences.

At Home with Apartheid is a text with high relevance to apartheid studies. Ginsburg's examination of the quotidian and the local sheds light on how apartheid affected South Africa in a variety of ways: the happenings in the Northern Suburbs had lasting effects on Soweto, on the Transvaal, and on greater Johannesburg more broadly. Through her broad and multifaceted source use, and her compelling thematic organization of the text, Ginsburg is able to achieve her aim of identifying how apartheid negatively affected domestic servants, how domestic servitude revealed the unevenness of apartheid, all while explicating the daily contours of domestic life and how domestic servants were able to act as experts in their lives under oppressive conditions. Considering that context, those interested in the gendered dynamics of apartheid should absolutely read this text. The text specifically takes a gendered view on domestic servitude which is an inherently female practice, which had lasting sociological and historical effects on South Africa on family dynamics for both African and white European families.

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