More Than A Domestic Worker

by Jacquelinne Marroquin

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

At Home with Apartheid by Rebeca Ginsburg is a very engaging and well-written book that takes place in Johannesburg, South Africa during the apartheid era between 1960-1975. Ginsburg chooses to write about African domestic workers employed by white middle and upper-middle-class white families in Johannesburg. The author aims to dive into "the kind of work that [these] women performed on white's properties and how they conducted themselves on their own time" (p. 22) Ginsburg also explores and analyzes the spatial and racial segregation, oppression, and dehumanization

that most domestic workers underwent to feed their families and children whom they were forced to leave behind in their hometowns. Additionally, Ginsburg makes the final claim that all the suffering, humiliation, and exploitation, in the end, led to the empowerment, independence, and individual agency of these domestic workers. The author collected data and first-hand accounts by doing field work and conducting explanatory interviews where she collected "eighty oral histories, about sixty of which were Africans" (p.14) *At Home with Apartheid* is made up of six chapters each one explores and narrates different experiences and significant issues that most domestic workers had to deal with while also illustrating how apartheid regulations shaped households and domestic worker's lives.

Chapter 1, "Getting to Know the Corners," explores and analyzes what the domestic worker's journey to get to Johannesburg looked like and what usually happened after their arrival. Ginsburg explains how these women would leave their rural towns due to financial needs, and how once in Johannesburg it was not an easy adjustment. The author explains that "the very organization of urban space took getting used to, as the layout differed markedly from the arrangements that pertained in small towns and the countryside" (p.48) Therefore, domestic workers had to rely on other people like friends or family to seek jobs, get to know

the city, to start connections, and have a place to stay.

Chapter 2 “The Tempo of Kitchen Life,” explores the domestic worker’s life once she had been hired. It focuses mostly on the living conditions, different work routines, experiences within and outside of the house, responsibilities, and what working in the kitchen entailed and meant to these women. Ginsburg explains that the domestic worker’s quarters were found in the house’s backyard and were called ‘backrooms.’ These backrooms were incredibly small and could only fit “a twin bed, wardrobe, and stool” (p.11) These backrooms testified to the white families’ apathy towards domestic workers and shows they only cared that backroom’s “paint color or window trim could match that of the main house” (p.11) Ginsburg makes the point that working for these middle-class white families was difficult, dehumanizing, and humiliating. Domestic workers had to endure long hours, daily acts of mistreatment, abuse, and isolation.

Chapter 3 “Children and Leaving,” this chapter focuses on “the brutal irony that in order to provide for her children, a woman often had to leave them” (p.91) Domestic workers had to provide for their kids back home, and that entailed leaving them and taking care of someone else’s kids. It also emphasizes that these women became nannies to their

employer's kids, therefore, being essential in the kids' lives and well-being until... they grow up. Ginsburg does a great job of pointing out that once these kids grew up they "eventually internalized the principle that people could be and should be classified and that skin color correlated with status and worth" (p. 94) which could have prolonged apartheid's regulations and existence. Unfortunately, one of the most difficult challenges that most women faced was not being allowed to bring their kids. The domestic worker's kids were not entirely welcomed nor allowed to stay for long periods of time. This chapter does a good job of pointing out these deciding factors and the people who encouraged women to push through and to make their stay "a temporary condition" (p.34)

In chapter 4 "Come in the Dark," Ginsburg exposes what domestic workers would go through at night "one worker described the emptiness [...] another cried in her room at night, unused to the solitude [...]" (p. 115) Therefore, the author makes the claim that domestic workers, especially, "desired and sought more intimate relationships" (p.115) someone they can spend time with at night. Along those lines, this chapter brings up the four types of visitors that could stop by the backrooms which are 'homegirls' or 'homeboys,' children, female strangers, and male lovers. It was important for Ginsburg to explain that having visitors and friends whom domestic

workers loved and appreciated was essential to their mental well-being, and it was a sort of fuel to keep pushing through knowing they were not alone. Unfortunately, these visitors had to sneak in and come in through the back door to avoid being seen. Of course, let us not forget that hosting someone came with difficulties and worries which are also explained in this chapter.

The fifth chapter "House Rules" is very self-explanatory. Ginsburg acknowledges that rules, especially in these households "supported whites' efforts to situate themselves comfortably within their homes, their neighborhoods, and even globally during a period of great social stress for white South Africans" (p.139) Therefore these middle-class houses depended greatly on house rules to control, manipulate, and promote invisibility. There was a huge range of house rules that went from wearing a uniform, to what spaces were domestic workers allowed to be in and when, as well as how to behave.

Chapter 6, the last chapter of this book, is titled "From Homes with Apartheid," Ginsburg argues that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and "when the work was finished, it was time to leave" (p. 176) Leave these jobs, leave behind the suffering, humiliation, and oppression that domestic workers went through. At the end of the day, being a domestic worker lead to agency, stability, empowerment, and independence

resulting in owning their own house, “a home of one’s own on land that cannot be taken away” (p.181) This chapter also narrates the day in the life of a white middle-class family and of their domestic worker and how both of their worlds, activities, and chores end up creating a “complex whole, not a collection of cleanly and neatly delineated parts” (p.172) Furthermore, a claim is made about how there is always more to the story and how not everything is as it looks from the outside “houses and apartments no longer appear as settings of serene and gracious family living, but simultaneously as sites of race and class conflict and ideological struggle” (p.173)

One of Ginsburg’s strengths in this book is her ability to constantly emphasize that every domestic worker’s experience was different, their routines, responsibilities, and even the rules they obeyed. Ginsburg’s research methods had allowed her to collect enough data, testimonies, and personal experiences from African women and former domestic workers which provide testimonies and accounts for every situation. There are tons of examples that reflect the difference in each household and therefore the different experiences that domestic workers had. An example can be found in chapter 3 where Sophia, a domestic worker, was prohibited from taking care of her sick son who arrived from her hometown. On the other hand, Ginsburg uses Melanie’s account to demonstrate an opposite reaction. Melanie’s

employer did allow Melanie's son to come to visit and to even interact with their kids. Furthermore, another major example is found in Chapter 2 where one can read about the different tasks and routines of domestic workers and how they all depended on the employer's habits and family routine. Ginsburg's inclusion of diverse accounts in this book eliminates generalization and stereotyping which provides broader perspectives and points of view on apartheid, segregation, built environments, relationships, etc.

The author does a fantastic job of strengthening her arguments and objectives as much as possible. On the other hand, one of Ginsburg final arguments is focused on the 'after retirement' point in life and, how these women who were oppressed and mistreated for so many years, after they retire, are able to obtain individual agency, power, self-sufficiency, independence, etc. Sadly, the author seems to end the story too quickly leaving many questions about 'after retirement life' and 'after the apartheid era' unanswered. Ginsburg's argument could have been stronger if she had finished the story. She started with strong arguments and evidence of women's journey from rural towns to Johannesburg, to working with white middle-class families, to an unfinished story of what happens next. What happened after these women settled back in their hometowns now that they had a safe roof

over their heads? What happened to the women, their behavior, thoughts after the apartheid era? Those are the questions that Ginsburg slightly addresses but that need more support and space to be elaborated.

At Home with Apartheid by Rebeca Ginsburg is a book that deserves to be read, analyzed, understood, and appreciated by anyone who is not only interested in gaining academic knowledge but also for anyone who wants to understand life, its difficulties, and how there is always hope–nothing is never-ending. This book is easy to read and follow along, it is written in a more novel-like style where the stories flow but you still get a major sip of history. This book is perfect for whoever is interested in rethinking life, humanity, the mistakes the world has made while adding a bit of history and personal opinion to it. This is a book worth your time.

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Jacquelinne Marroquin, Wake Forest University.

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