The Colon and the Colony: Agency under Apartheid

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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).

What Rebecca Ginsburg attempts to demonstrate in *At Home with Apartheid* is that on a human level, the attempts by apartheid authorities to achieve a neat and absolute separation were far from achieved. Ginsburg's writing draws our attention to a specific area and time within apartheid South Africa to both challenge and explore broader realities that existed under the system. The lives of female African domestic workers in the White middle-class Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg serve as the focus of her book. Her exposition of the human history etched within the apartheid

structures of urbanity does come with questions that are answered, but this is not the main aim of her book. Questions that "we are prone to ask of any system of social evil is, how could it have happened?" (22). It should instead be understood more so as Ginsburg examining "the layers of environments that flatter and seduce us" to reveal "new, possibly uncomfortable ways of viewing" reality (24-25).

Her study of the livelihoods and routines of these women and the social or urban landscapes that they traverse attempts to argue are broad examples of African agency, White complicity to apartheid, complicated routes of social mobility and emerging forms of feminism. What she shows, and what she is able to demonstrate convincingly though, differ at times. But while Ginsburg is able to strongly challenge conventional understandings of the racial separation within apartheid, and humanize the most discriminated members of apartheid society, her ability to convince you of the agency and autonomy of these domestic workers, and of their mobility using the framework that she does with the evidence that she does, falls short.

Bucking a more typical trend of academic books Ginsburg elects not to spell out any specific arguments in her introductory chapter and instead directs the attention of a reader to the foundations her book is built upon. That being the sources she relies upon, something she

delves into extensively. Ginsburg explains that she relied upon “oral histories, contemporary photographs and descriptions, floor plans, extant physical settings, secondary sources, and professional guides and journals” with a particular focus on interviewing both Black domestic workers and White household members (21). This proverbial peek behind the curtain that goes into historical research provides us readers the ability to situate the individual first in this history, especially the individual’s impact on the structures that exist around them.

Following this Ginsburg goes into a more traditional linear fashion in how she structures her book. Ginsburg traces the different experiences in the various stages of the lives of domestic workers in South Africa and how they interact with the apartheid system. Her first chapter, “Getting to Know the Corners” delves into how African domestic workers grapple with the change in their environment from the homelands to highly developed urban centers and how they utilize informal links of information to navigate and resist apartheid. Next, in chapter two “The Tempo of Kitchen Life” as the name implies Ginsburg gives us a window into what the daily routines were like for domestic workers, and how these were highly governed and ruled by not just the formal structures of apartheid and its enforcement, but by its social enforcement by White household

members. Chapter three, “Children and Leaving” is one that highlights the fraught nature of connections and relationships that apartheid South Africa both created and ruptured. The most sensitive perhaps overall, and certainly for African domestic workers, is that between them and their children. Their children, who are often the primary reason for their decision to exercise their ability to choose to take up employment in the first place, and often the source of their bereavement due to their separation from them.

“Come in the Dark”, chapter four of *At Homes with Apartheid* sees Ginsburg in some ways most actively demonstrate the different ways that African domestic workers resisted the apartheid, challenging the pass system, segregation and in the process the empowerment of individual women in their relationships with their male counterparts. Chapter five, “House Rules” centers on how over time, after being firmly established with many households and aware of the different dynamics in each, domestic workers would operate to reclaim and retain their humanity and dignity in response to the constant pressure of apartheid norms. Small acts of resistance served to undermine the dehumanization that apartheid attempted to impart upon Africans, and highlighted the agency that they still might possess.

However, while the preceding chapters traced in some ways the different aspects of working in White homes that workers interacted with across their time there, her last chapter, “From Homes with Apartheid” serves both as a conclusion to that timeline, and a conclusion of sorts to the book. By removing the workers from the background of the White home to their own home, and from their positions as domestic workers, to their dreams for retirement, it serves to highlight them as persons who both were shaped by and shaped their surroundings.

This level of constant humanization and re-centering of the story around female African domestic workers, as has been constantly alluded to, is one of the greatest strengths of Ginsburg’s book. Ginsburg’s writing shows both that the decision to journey to Johannesburg was a **decision**, an exercise of choice to achieve uplift for their family and for themselves. For many women “self-sufficiency was the immediate and urgent goal” (44-45) that could be achieved through employment. Their ability to learn how to navigate urban apartheid through their peers, the space, experience, and their interactions with Whites further highlights this. Overall, the highlighting of the experiences of African women, demonstrates “that apartheid’s planners enjoyed at best uneven success in keeping Africans in their place” (25) as they resisted most often for the sake of the ones they loved.

Similarly, Ginsburg's examination of Whites too, is an especially strong point as it shows how apartheid was only possible through the actions of human beings, particularly White South Africans, who both actively and passively propped it up in their interactions with non-Whites. Ginsburg emphasizes this by noting the repeated times that White South Africans adopted practices that perpetuated apartheid that were social norms rather than just legal obligations. In the construction of small sheds in backyards, and the putting in of enough effort to make the exterior presentable but leaving the interior to be a constant reminder of the racial dynamic (12).

And yet a closer reading can quickly make one question her claims surrounding this idea of agency. The examples that Ginsburg gives us about African women's agency seem to all be instances of navigation of systemic and social forces. The feeling of empowerment that African women might garner from being within a public space, is relative in nature. The ability to search for better employment and knowing how to create space for allowing guests or family members to come to your workplace (the White home) does not change the actual power realities or dynamics or for the most part. Consider even just their travel to work, where "all aspects of the trip were subject to racial restrictions. Train platforms, toilets, benches, station restaurants, waiting rooms, ticket counters, and staircases

were segregated" (81). The point being that these examples of autonomy or choice occur within defined and highly stratified social structures that in conclusion make one question how real the idea of agency is here. Agency, it increasingly feels, is an illusion within this context.

Much of what the second half of the last chapter, "From Homes With Apartheid" reveals are the lives that these maids live after leaving their jobs in White homes. Despite the illusion of choice or mobility or autonomy, in the end most of them have ended up back where they were socially and economically before putting decades of their lives into this work. Yes "no one tried simply to reproduce the house she had once worked in. These are not miniature "white houses"; they are domestic workers' homes" (178). But in the same way one can point towards the idea of imagination when considering something like the Ashante palace in Ghana, how much of these workers' imagination is reality?[1] Agency, in reality, is not absolute, but it is expansive. Ginsburg, it feels, does not show that to be true here though under apartheid.

In many ways one can help but feel that Ginsburg applies a framework that at times does not neatly fit into a South African dynamic. The idea of empowerment through employment, is an uncomfortably Western understanding of the role of feminism and the relation between her

family. Agency for oneself without agency for their family, who still have their access to greater levels of social mobility blocked, would not be considered agency at all for many.

Thus, with this in mind, it is pertinent to reemphasize that Ginsburg's book on balance is a commendable piece of literature that should be read by more than just students of urban or apartheid history. It provides important insight into the nature of post-colonial societies by examining that the notion of "post-colonialism" is a stretch, when considering its ingrained effects. Students of feminism and women's history would do well to pick this up as well to garner a deeper understanding of how Western feminism can at times not encompass the experiences of different women the world over. Finally, one might encourage both psychologists and sociologists alike to read Ginsburg, with her exposition on the fraught nature of both White and African relationships (particularly those of children) and how they underline apartheid being essential reading for any post-conflict society.

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