

Review

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Women in South African History: Basus'iimbokodo, bawel'imilambo/They remove boulders and cross rivers. Nomboniso Gasa, ed. 2007. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

The combination of state funding with a history project often produces truly awful results: narrow, pompous hagiography, awash with airbrushing. How refreshing to find a project and resulting volume that have none of these attributes. According to the editor, this book was the brainchild of the then-Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture, Brigitte Mabandla, was funded by the ministry, and was meant to be produced for the official celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Women's March. Gasa's introduction is resignedly apologetic about the fact that the book was not, in fact, ready in March 2006. For those of us not wedded to specific output dates, however, this scarcely matters. *Women in South African History* brings together a rich, challenging and significant group of essays by leading social scientists and social activists who (with two exceptions) are based in South Africa. It should be on the bookshelf of everyone teaching and researching South African history. If every university history student in this country had a copy, it would be even better.

Can the historical experiences of women be captured in the historical categories that have been dominated by the images and preoccupations of men? Are there sufficient commonalities across time, space and race for the category "woman" to have meaning? How dependent are historians becoming on the quest to find "agency" in women's lives? Questions like these are stimulated by reading any and all of the 18 chapters of this book – and this is to its credit. Sometimes edgy, sometimes provocative, sometimes deliberately over-the-top – these are no bedtime, sleep-inducing stories. It is also worth noting that the book comprises histories of a range of ethnicities and races (although interestingly, Indian women's experiences do not specifically feature); and authorship is more racially representative than one finds in many edited collections on South African history; six of the chapters are written by black women. At a time when some are announcing the virtual end of the historical profession in South Africa,¹ these essays demonstrate

that out here on the margins, though admittedly still in a precarious position, history is doing fairly well.

Gasa's introduction to the volume makes it clear that the contributors were not required to adopt any one tone or theoretical canon. She writes openly of having to embrace concepts of ambiguity and contingency in order to bring the essays together under one roof. Each chapter must therefore be read in its own conceptual context.

Jennifer Weir's chapter on, chiefly, women and women in leadership in pre-colonial Africa could have been one of those shallow, dry recitations of facts about Queen this followed by Queen that. Thankfully, Weir takes her task to be the conceptualisation of women as leaders and the presentation of the little that we know about how men might have selectively incorporated symbols and discourses of feminine-defined social power into their ruling repertoires. Weir also forces us to look again at what we do know about women in the pre-colonial period. For example, was the extended mourning period indulged in by Shaka in Zululand in the early 19th century on the death of his mother a sign of his emotional immaturity, or of her high social standing? Did she have a role in decision-making, and if so what was it? Or, what happens to our understandings of rural society and architecture if the homestead is seen as a set of structures where co-wives lived and worked together in a woman-dominated community rather than as a harem huddled around a patriarch? Undergraduate students will especially enjoy the mental *frisson* that is produced by Weir's turning such received categorisations on their heads.

Pumla Gqola's chapter on slave women's subjectivity forces the reader to think carefully about choice, agency and voice in history. Although they were officially denied all three of these means of expression, Gqola argues that innovative feminist/womanist readings of the sources – such as Gabeba Baderoon's work on Malay cookbooks – allows us to begin to hear traces of stories of “survival, subversion, resistance, isolation, innovation and other modes” of slave women (2007: 38). How then does one theorise the dialectic between slave women's acquiescence and agency? As their learning to speak, in a phrase Gqola borrows from US scholar David Dabydeen, “three languages in one mouth”?

About ten years ago, Helen Bradford's work on the tragic events and processes in Xhosaland in the mid-18th century blew conventional, androcentric “frontier history” decisively out of the water. Here, she employs a much fuller palette than historians usually use, in trying to explain both the larger and smaller contexts of the world of Nonqawuse, millenarian prophetess, of the 1850s. Bradford departs

into art, literature and poetry, and reads the androcentric sources conclusively against the grain in order to argue that the Nonqawuse episode was exactly that: an episode in a series of bitter struggles for understanding, land and resources over the course of many decades – rather than, as has been portrayed, a single chain of events precipitated by the individualist ravings of one lone, misfit teenager. Historians would do well to ponder whether Bradford’s widening of both the historical source base and of the actual linguistics of historiography are requisite for the conception and production of a new generation of historical work. This is a “must-read” chapter. I only hope that academic historians will find it in this book, which will probably have a more limited circulation than digitally-available and -indexed journal articles.

In the middle section of the book, Luli Callinicos and Iris Berger present textured updates of their main bodies of work on migrants and women trade unionists, respectively. Berger’s chapter and Pat Gibbs’ focused study on labour-oriented organisations in the Port Elizabeth area fit together nicely. In her critique of the political historiography of African women, Nomboniso Gasa takes strong exception to the idea that defence of the family under apartheid from a motherist position was a conservative choice.

The third section, on armed and mass struggles, is one of the book’s important contributions. Deconstructing war and violence as male-only pursuits has been a great achievement of feminist history, and here Raymond Suttner, Jacklyn Cock, Janet Cherry and Pat Gibbs examine a range of ways in which organised violence was a woman’s experience in South Africa in the pre-1994 period. Somewhat short on empirical data, Suttner’s chapter is mainly a cry for further research into the ways in which the ANC’s exiles participated in clandestine activity along (or not along) gendered lines. Cherry takes some issue with the idea of sidelined women in urban struggles, and chronicles “some of the varied ways in which women did participate: as leaders, as organisers, as activists, as aggressors and as defenders” (2007: 312).

Finally, the collection moves into the post-1994 era with examinations of women’s struggles to do with land, housing, disease and knowledge. The strongest chapter here is Nthabiseng Motsemme’s thoroughly-researched piece on the ways in which young urban women negotiate, understand, speak and act out their inner lives in spaces which surround them with multiple insecurities. Motsemme is especially clear that violence in these young women’s lives is not an event; it is like water in which they are forced to swim. It has shaped their very lives and it does not simply appear and disappear;

it is an integral aspect of their pasts, present and futures, and their choices for life and love cannot be understood without considering it.

Over the past 15 years, Sheila Meintjes has written about and produced a short film on the protests of homeless women in Dobsonville, Soweto in 1990. Here, she relates the protests to the wider contexts of housing struggles by civil society organisations and the women's movement. This is a particularly tricky task since the Dobsonville women demonstrated their desperation and contempt by protesting naked in front of the police. Their embodiment – literally – is difficult to interpret and to represent sensitively. In this piece, Meintjes gives the protests a non-sensationalist rendering.

The final piece in the book, by Yvette Abrahams, presents a deeply illuminating exploration and reflection on the necessarily complex positioning of a feminist researcher/writer/historian in contemporary South Africa. This chapter is a longer, fuller version of a chapter published under the same title in *Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy* edited by Reitumetse Mabokela and Zine Magubane (Unisa Press, 2004). In both, Abrahams argues that the historic abuse of a Khoekhoe woman in the 18th century still resonates with ambiguities and complexities in the 21st. Her task is to think about how to write the moral history of a degraded subject in such a way that colonial epistemology is not reinscribed on her own body. This question lies at the sharp edge of feminist historiographical practice and will confront us for a long time to come.

Women in South African History is supplied with a CD containing searchable PDF files of the entire text, which are also available for download, free, from the Human Sciences Research Council Press, publishers of the book, at www.hsrcpress.ac.za.

I hope the HSRC will work very hard to give this book the market it deserves. *Women in South African History* should be widely read and used in South African universities and beyond.

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, Hans Erik Stolten. ed. *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2007.